

**CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE: MEDIATING THE  
NEW(S) POLITICS OF BLACKNESS IN THE OBAMA MOMENT**

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines ways in which the myth of meritocracy, notions of America as post-racial, and instances of colorisms are articulated through CNN (Cable News Network) during the rise of then-Senator Barack Obama's bid for President of the United States in 2008. For White and middle-class groups, Obama's candidacy seemingly advanced their mainstream American society's lift-yourself-by-your-bootstraps/no-excuses values. I consider that CNN's *Black in America* (2008) series was released during a time in which many Americans detrimentally perceived Obama's nomination as an accurate measurement of how far removed America is from its race problem. While using a framing analysis to deconstruct its two episodes ("The Black Man" and "The Black Woman and Family"), I draw attention to how stereotypes of blackness pervade news media – a media genre often construed as an objective platform.

Furthermore, I explore how some of its narratives reinforce false notions of Black people freely living in a race-free utopia, thus inevitably discrediting all of their socio-economic challenges dictated by the American White status quo. By exploring narratives placating to the American delusion that its society is now void of racism, while also employing color hierarchies and the myth of meritocracy, I will demonstrate how modern racism permeated news media during the Obama Moment.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to

Bird.

I love you...

For sentimental reasons...

I hope you do believe me

I've given you my heart

-Nancy Wilson

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First, I give all gratitude to my Higher Power for fulfilling all of the promises. I yield to my mother, who always made a way when there was NO way. My only hope is that I've made you very proud. We did it! I must thank my little brother, Kindred, who is also my favorite artist. I love him for always innocently reminding me to "just get the C and graduate already!" I am thankful for my grandparents, Nina and Dick French, for their encouragement. I am forever indebted to my partner, Sashai, for all of your love, support, and protection throughout this process. I love you. I must also give a special round of applause to Anita Baker for being THE best singer in world.

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## **CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES**

### **Contributors**

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All other work conducted for this dissertation was completed by the student independently.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	ii
DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES.....	v
CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION .....	1
Historical Background.....	1
Problem Investigated.....	10
Brief History of the Problem .....	12
Research Questions .....	13
Goal and Significance of the Study .....	15
CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW .....	16
Race as a Social Construction .....	19
Whiteness .....	22
Blackness.....	24
Controlling Images .....	29
Modern Racism .....	30
Black Feminist Thought .....	33
CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY.....	37
CHAPTER IV “THE BLACK WOMAN AND FAMILY” .....	48
Ruby Steen and Martha Rand.....	51
Frame of Reconciliation .....	52
Ira Johnson .....	57
Frame of the Black Woman and Social Imposition .....	58
Maryann Reid.....	68

	Page
Frame of Black Womanhood and Religious Codependency.....	75
Whoopi Goldberg .....	76
Myth of Meritocracy .....	81
 CHAPTER V “THE BLACK MAN” .....	 83
James “Butch” Warren .....	83
Frame of Reconciliation .....	91
Jonathan Warren .....	93
Frame of Racial Transcendence .....	94
D.L. Hughley .....	100
Frame of the Black Man Versus the Justice System .....	106
Michael and Everett Dyson .....	107
Frame of the Black Man Versus Intra-Racial Hostility.....	116
 CHAPTER VI CONCLUSION .....	 120
Findings .....	120
Limitations of Research.....	126
Suggestions for Future Research.....	128
 REFERENCES.....	 130

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

During the 2008 Presidential campaign of then-Senator Obama's campaign, race and racism appeared to be the main topic on almost every major news station and newspaper. International and national media were obsessed with race regarding possible outcomes of a Black man holding the country's most powerful position for the first time in history. Countless constituents worried about Obama's racial loyalty, imagining that if elected president, he would politically abandon White Americans while only catering to the needs of Black communities. Revived discussions on what defines a Black person emerged because after all, Obama self-identified as a Black man but was conceived by Black and White parents. With all of these concerns of what it means to have a Black man as President of the United States, mainstream news media continued to have a tsunami of extensive interviews and roundtable debates with sociologists, historians, and politicians in order to comprehend America's centuries-old race problem. The new political fixation on what Black people were doing is what made the release of *Black in America* a rather predictable docu-series.

#### **Historical Background**

Before going any further, I must explain that *Black in America* began filming in 2003, five years prior to Obama's acceptance of the Democratic Party nomination. I do not see this docu-series as a direct response to his candidacy. However, I do think that Obama's image and his campaign complimented the film for various reasons. As I later discuss in detail, *Black in America* does not offer anything new content-wise, especially

too many people within Black communities. If we consider the thousands of anti-Black violent crimes that were committed in 2000-2008 alone, a film about being *Black in America* could have easily addressed any one of those injustices. For instance, the Jena Six controversy in 2006 generated nationwide attention regarding interracial hatred. However, Obama and his campaign seemingly offered the best platform for this docu-series' release date because its narrative appeared to better reflect America's complex psyche surrounding race.

It is also important to note that I do recognize the show business aspect of *Black in America*, in which the main objective of its producers, writers, executives, etc. is to generate the highest ratings possible. It is unlikely that any major network is willing to altruistically explain what Black people are doing to their mainstream audiences (which I assumingly identify as predominantly White and middle-class) during prime-time hours. And their depiction of blackness proved to be well-worth the financial investment. According to Nielsen Media, "The Black Woman and Family" episode attracted 2.1 million viewers (966,000 of them between the ages 25-54 demographic), while "The Black Man" episode generated 2.6 million viewers when it first aired July 23-24, 2008. The docu-series was so successful that CNN released subsequent episodes following the same format such as *Black in America 2* (2009), *Latino in America* (2009), *Almighty Debt* (2010), and *Black in America: The New Promised Land-Silicon Valley* (2011). Therefore, while *Black in America* is not a byproduct of the 2008 campaign, it is significant to point out that the documentary debuted in the midst of the Obama Moment, a specific time that aroused mainstream curiosity of how Black people live.

I also primarily use Obama and his candidacy as this project's backdrop in order to further contextualize mainstream America's thoughts around race, class, and gender. From all ethnic and racial groups, Obama was a sort of Goldilocks regarding these identities. He was either too Black, half-Black (translation: not Black enough), too aggressive, too passive (translation: White), etc., therefore making it impossible for him to ever be "just right." Even though Obama repeatedly self-identified as a Black man, many others tried to make sense of, or sort out his racial description. Some voters were confused about his identification as a Black man because his mother was a White woman and his father was a Black man. Conversely, other people yielded to the historical one-drop rule, the theory that "no matter how White looking or White acting someone of mixed ancestry is or how little blackness is in a person's genetic makeup, that person is considered Black" (Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 2013, p. 17). The point is that whatever varying opinions constituents had about Obama's identity, blackness was a hot topic from all racial, ethnic, and political groups.

Obama's campaign drew attention to how colorisms remain prevalent in both Black and White communities. Tracing the origins of the term "mulatto" from the end of the Reconstruction period into the First World War, William B. Gatewood (2000) explains:

Whites tended to view mulattoes as more intelligent than Blacks but not equal to the Caucasians. Because mulattoes were intellectually superior to Blacks, with whom they were racially grouped, they were leaders in every line of activity undertaken by Negroes. On the negative side, Whites believed that

‘mixed bloods’ were hybrids, morally weak, and physically degenerate. (p. 153-154)

A derogatory and offensive term, “mulatto” was replaced with the more politically correct description, “biracial.” Though the descriptors have changed, economic and social preferences are still given to Blacks with light skin and Eurocentric features than those with darker skin and Afrocentric features (Banks, 2000; Joseph, 2012). In the contemporary, popular culture seems to embrace, and even outwardly celebrate the benefits that come with this specific type of discrimination. Angela P. Harris (2008) notes:

To put it bluntly, the ambiguous/mixed look is now ‘hot.’ Celebrities such as Tiger Woods, Mariah Carey, and The Rock discuss their mixed background with pride; television, catalog, magazine, and newspaper advertising is full of adorable light-brown children with flowing locks that are not quite nappy, not quite straight; and mixed race. (p. 52-53)

Because Obama’s candidacy ignited countless discussions on the so-called varying degrees of blackness, the theme of colorisms played out through much of his media coverage.

Obama’s campaign is also a useful framework to deconstruct *Black in America* because it reiterated ideas that racism had somehow vanished as a thing of the past. Described as the Obama Moment (Bonilla-Silva and Ray, 2009; Wingfield and Feagin, 2009), it was the instant in which America appeared to have finally solved “the race problem” or the racial divide because of one specific experience. The Obama Moment

gave false impressions that the United States was a social utopia void of any racism (Andrews and Tuitt, 2013; Bush and Feagin, 2011; Carbado and Gulati, 2013; Dyson, 2016; Tesler and Sears, 2010; Wise, 2010; Zamudio and Rios, 2006). Particularly through White lenses, Obama's candidacy symbolized the end of America's centuries-old dependency on race and racism for the preservation of its status quo. Essentially, the Obama Moment functioned as social amnesia, an ideology that encouraged believers to pretend that institutions such as slavery, Jim Crow, systemic and overt racism, etc. were merely erasable events of the past. Tim Wise, author of *Between Barack and a Hard Place* (2009), reflects on its absurdity:

In truth, such a proposition (that victory of one person of color signifies a victory over racism aimed at nearly 90 million) is very nearly the definition of lunacy. And note, it is the kind of proposition one would never make regarding sexism in a place like Pakistan, just because Benazir Bhutto was twice elected prime minister of the place; or in India, Israel, or Great Britain, by virtue of all three having elected women as the heads of their respective states. Surely, had Hillary Clinton captured the nomination of her party and gone on to win in November [of 2008], no one with even a scintilla of common sense would have argued that such a result as this signaled the obvious demise of sexism in the United States. (p. 27)

Obama Moment served as a contagious ideology, swiftly convincing much of the world that *anyone* can break down oppressive institutions *anywhere*.

Some scholars suggest that the Obama Moment is an extension of colorblindness,

an illusively progressive stance that a person does not characterize others according to race, or the thinking that we have transcended the race problem (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, 2011; Esposito and Finley, 2009; Robinson, Gates, and Kitwana, 2010; Simpson, 2008). A residue of the Civil Rights Movement, colorblindness is also a characteristic of modern or new racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick, 2004). I incorporated Bonilla-Silva's explanation because he concisely dissects how the colorblind mentality inadvertently nurtures racist thinking. In *I Did Not Get That Job Because of a Black Man...': The Storylines and Testimonies of Color-Blind Racism*, (2004), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Amanda Lewis, and David G. Embrick explain:

The main frames of this ideology are the denial of the centrality of discrimination ('Discrimination ended in the sixties!'), the abstract extension of liberal principles to racial matters ('I am all for equal opportunity; that's why I oppose affirmative action'), the naturalization of racial matters ('Residential segregation is natural...'), and the cultural explanation of minorities' standing ('Mexicans are poorer because they lack the motivation to succeed'). But ideologies are not just about ideas. To have salience and currency, ideologies must produce narratives that explain the world in ways that make sense to people, that convey its major frames...I didn't get this job because of a Black person. (p. 560)

Their description of colorblind racism is not a drastic departure from "traditional" racism— overt racial practices like cross burning on a yard, refusing housing because of race, use of racial slurs, etc. (Zamudio and Rios, 2006). A mentality that we are finally

living in a post-race society, colorblind racism resulted in the inability to see that celebrating Obama as a rarity simply because he is “such an articulate” Black man (further viewed through the White racial frame as atypical because Obama is a college educated man of color, is wealthy, is married to the mother of his daughters, etc.) is essentially racist. For example, the Iowa supporter whose car donned a bumper sticker that read, “Obama '08: ARTICULATE AND CLEAN!” (Henry, 2008) may not even be aware that this slogan is blatantly racist; and yet again, it is communicated that Obama is a dynamic oddity because he is an unusually effective communicator and presentable man of color.

Colorblind racism is also a fantasy or a delusional ideology for those claiming not to see race. It enhances the belief that they are vastly different (perhaps even more sophisticated) than traditional racists stereotypically assumed to be uneducated or regressive. However, the two paradigms are equally problematic. Paradoxically, outspoken racists who are very clear about their disdain for people of color (in this context, a Black man becoming President of the United States) create the same social drawbacks as people who supported Obama only because he is Black. In some circles, Obama represented the finality of racism for many Blacks and Whites, whereas in other circles, his disruption of America’s political tradition actually inflamed racial animosity. As Tim Wise (2009) laments on the 2008 presidential campaign, he states, “it was never about Obama, and it isn't now” (p. 13).

While reifying impressions that American society was now a racial utopia Obama’s image also solidified beliefs in the myth of meritocracy. The meritocratic

principle, “defined by Whites and biased in favor of the status quo” (Simpson, 2010, p. 151), argues that anyone can become successful if they “work hard enough” (McNamee and Miller, 2013); It succumbs to notions that race, class, and gender are minor hurdles that anyone can overcome, and that these factors are just overused, unfounded excuses used by minorities from accomplishing their goals. Popular culture icons like Bill Cosby and Oprah Winfrey are often frequently referred to through White lenses as examples of “if they can make it, then so can you.” In Darnell M. Hunt’s, *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America* (2005), he extensively discusses multiple audiences’ reception of the myth of meritocracy on television. He states:

For many Whites...the few successful African Americans act as an index of the decline of White racism, and they therefore extend into their understanding of the ‘failure’ of the majority. White television shows the successful Black (Cosby, Oprah, Magic Johnson, Clarence Thomas) and on the news particularly, the unsuccessful—the criminal, the teenage mother, the drug abuser, the welfare leech, the homeless man. The two are opposite sides of the same figure. There were Black viewers of Cosby, however, for whom the figure’s double-sidedness meant something different. Jhally and Lewis’s study showed that Black audiences of Cosby were much more likely to point to the contrasts between the two sides of the figure than were whites. They were so pained by the constantly negative pictures of Blacks on the news that they welcomed any representation of the successful Black, because of both rarity and its contradiction of the more normal public image of Black failure. (p. 112)

Hunt's discussion reinforces the argument that because news media are so inundated with negative depictions of blackness, many viewers will continue to gravitate towards shows with sharply contrasting images even if they too are not realistic.

From a fictional point-of-view, there are many sitcoms based on colorblind and post-race motifs (e.g. *Diff'rent Strokes*, 1978-1985; *Gimme a Break!*, 1981-87; *Silver Spoons*, 1982-1987; and *Webster*, 1983-1987). The myth of meritocracy was a prominent theme in shows like *The Jeffersons*, 1975-1985; *The Cosby Show*, 1984-1992; *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, 1990-1996; *The Bernie Mac Show*, 2001-2006; and *Blackish*, 2015-present. Sitcoms like *Sanford and Son*, 1972-1977; *A Different World*, 1987-1993; and *Martin*, 1992-1997 have all provided episodes based on colorisms. American pop culture has also made several efforts to describe Black experiences through the form of more serious documentaries. For instance, Black irrationality is a news frame that became centralized in a one hour 1965 CBS documentary, *Watts: Riot or Revolt?*; this film entails White-American correspondent Bill Stout critiquing the legitimacy of Black responses during the infamous week-long revolt in Los Angeles, California (known as the Watts Rebellion). The theme of Black failure (Gray, 1989) surfaced in a two-hour CBS News documentary entitled *The Vanishing Family--: Crisis in Black America* (1986), in which White-American correspondent Bill Moyers broadcasts what dysfunctional Black families look like in New Jersey. Every main news media aired specials about the 1992 Los Angeles Black population's reaction to the police brutality against Rodney King (most correspondents were White-American men). True to news media's pattern, it was therefore foreseeable that a documentary like *Black in America*

would emerge in the early 21st century, particularly during Obama's historical journey to the White House.

Regardless of the genre, blackness appears to be a convoluted reality in media that many White viewers compulsively try to comprehend. Stephanie Greco Larson's, *Media & Minorities: The Politics of Race and Entertainment* (2006) explains:

The media are the primary sources of information about the world outside of our immediate surroundings. It helps make sense of the things we do not experience and the people we do not know. Entertainment media, as well as news, teach us about society by repeatedly showing us certain types of people in certain types of roles. These patterns encourage us to see others and ourselves in certain ways. We learn who and what to value and who and what to dismiss. This seeing influences how we treat each other. Scholars refer to this as the 'politics of representation.' The media do not create these representations out of thin air; they are a part of a cultural discourse that reinforces a racial hierarchy found in society. This hierarchy privileges Whites. (p. 14)

Drawn from W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) inquiry of how it feels to be a problem, along with an example of news media's cyclical attention to African Americans, I closely analyze how some narratives in *Black in America* employ colorisms, post-race perspectives, and lift-yourself-by-your-bootstraps principles.

### **Problem Investigated**

While news coverage during the Obama Moment reintroduced a fixation on America as a society now free of racism (though still emphasizing colorisms) and

irrational myths of meritocracy (Jeffries, 2013; Metzler, 2008; Tesler and Sears, 2010; Wise, 2009; Meyers, 2013), news media reflected this hybridity through many of its news storylines. This research will focus on how news media merged all of these elements together in 2008 (a year defined by racial politics) because it is a space where viewers presumably turn to for supposed facts. Unlike situational comedies or movies, in which racial images are all too often dismissed as “just entertainment,” the news is usually regarded as an informational source of neutrality and objectivity.

CNN (Cable News Network) serves as this project’s case study for a number of reasons. Compared to its main competitor Fox News, news coverage from CNN is commonly described by many of its viewers as more progressive and more diverse. Aesthetically, CNN appears to be more progressive and diverse due to its relatively higher number of Black correspondents compared to competitors Fox News and MSNBC. CNN’s lineup included prominent reporters of color like Soledad O’Brien, Don Lemon, Donna Brazile, T.J. Holmes, and Isha Sesay. However, CNN’s news content invites many to question its advancement as a great deal of its news coverage excessively pairs blackness to criminal behavior, sexual irresponsibility, and poverty (Dates and Barlow, 1993; Dixon, 2008; Dixon and Azocar, 2007; Dixon, Azocar, and Casas, 2003; Entman and Gross, 2008; Entman and Rojecki, 2000; Gray, 2004; Hunt, 2004; Squires, 2009).

While there is an abundance of research explaining how Blacks and blackness are represented in mainstream news media, it is still important to continue to explore how blackness is framed in a purported post-race society (Feagin, 2006; Feagin 2013;

Moore, 2007). An understanding of how news media frame blackness is useful when also looking at ways in which post-race rhetoric (via the myth of meritocracy) and colorisms are used in contemporary news media. Closely analyzing this CNN's docu-series, one in which its sole correspondent Soledad O'Brien described as "...a raw and intimate look at stories that everyone will be able to relate to" is essential because viewers do form ideas about race, class, and gender from a text that is marketed as truth. Consequently, these visual representations influence how people personally relate to one another (Dixon, 2007; Gray, 2004; Hunt, 2004), the social programs that they vote for/implement (Hancock, 2004), who they hire (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick, 2004), etc.

### **Brief History of the Problem**

Modern or new racism is a term that describes the existence of insidious White supremacy in contemporary United States over marginalized groups compared to more blatant historical practices (Feagin, 2006; Moore, 2007; Wallis, 2016). This study explores how modern racism pervades the two episodes of *Black in America*, and its research is significant in terms of thinking about the implications of framed narratives in everyday life (Dixon and Azocar, 2007; Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, and Behm-Morawitz, 2009). For example, excessive televised images of Black men as criminals and Black women as welfare recipients often become real life expectations or prototypical to many viewers (Dixon, 2008; Entman and Rojecki, 2000), thus continuing to intensify racial tensions. Without a critique of how blackness is framed, news narratives promoting color hierarchies, meritocracy, and America as post-race (McDonald, 2009; Reason and

Evans, 2007; Roediger, 2007) remain static. Travis Dixon's research on news media and stereotypes extends a broad body of literature on racial imagery in Communication studies while also offering a contemporary analysis of the work of these representations post-Civil Rights Movement. My analysis pushes this conversation further by exploring how *Black in America* relies on colorisms, the myth of meritocracy, and American post-race rhetoric.

### **Research Questions**

With *Black in America* serving as a case study, this dissertation explores how modern racism permeates news media by promoting the myth of meritocracy and emphasizing color hierarchies/colorisms. Jennifer L. Hochschild and Vesla Weaver (2007) explain:

Skin color is associated with individuals' preferences as well as their outcomes. With some expectations, most Americans prefer lighter to darker skin aesthetically, normatively, and culturally. Film-makers, novelists, advertisers, modeling agencies, matchmaking websites all demonstrate how much the power of a fair complexion, along with straight hair and Eurocentric facial features, appeals to Americans. (p. 644)

Colorisms are also used to enhance stereotypes, which are mental misconceptions that an individual or group may have about other social groups (Macrae, Stangor, and Hewstone, 1996). Prominent examples of stereotypical images related to blackness in all media are that of Black women as hypersexual or mammy-like, or Black men as criminals or irresponsible fathers (Allison and Alameen-Shavers, 2016; Bogle, 2001;

Guerrero, 1993; Meyers, 2013; Ward and Harris, 2015). Racial stereotypes in media exist as a way to reaffirm one's racial or cultural beliefs (Scheinder, 2005; Stangor, 2000). In order to explore representations of blackness through *Black in America* I ask:

- 1) How does the two-part news series frame the so-called Black experiences by using colorisms?
- 2) How does contemporary rhetoric of post-race encourage the myth of meritocracy?
- 3) How does the series display the ramifications of Blacks not assimilating to White supremacist, capitalistic, patriarchal expectations?

All of these inquiries stem from the idea that there remains a limited body of research exploring how color hierarchies are used by news media to frame blackness. With the first question, I discuss storylines seemingly influenced by colorisms. Communication discourses offer an abundance of research on racialized images on television. However, there still remains a need for more literature further examining news media's division of blackness via color hierarchies. The second question investigates the post-racial lift-yourself-by-your-bootstraps ideology. And the third question explores how *Black in America* displays the consequences to Blacks who do not yield to traditionally White heteronormativity. Altogether, this trifecta aims to encourage constant and deep probing of the production of representations of blackness, inquiries of why the text was made when it was made, and perhaps an even further discussion on who exactly the text was produced for.

## Goal and Significance of the Study

Besides exploring and building on the body of literature on contemporary racial representations, this interpretive study also intends to update Communication scholarship in three ways:

- 1) It will extend the ways in which we look at how the rhetoric of race is used to reify illusions of an American utopia (Bonilla-Silva, 2012; Carbado and Gulati, 2013; Norwood, 2013) by analyzing post-race narratives.
- 2) It will extend discussions of race, class, and gender so prevalent in news media (Abraham and Appiah, 2006; Smith-Shomade, 2002) by interrogating ways in which the documentary displays the participants' intersectionality.
- 3) It will extend discussions of modernized controlling images used to convey Black imagery to presumably White and middle-class audiences (Bogle, 2001; Entman and Rojecki, 2000; Larson, 2005; Lee, 2010) by investigating how *Black in America* frames Black femininity and masculinity.

In all, it is my hope that the deconstruction of racial representations will show how race remains an important organizing concept in the contemporary. By closely interpreting the film's narratives, I explore ways in which CNN's *Black in America* inadvertently responds to Du Bois' question of how it feels to be a social imposition posed over a century ago.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Television has and continues to produce countless programs based on the so-called Black experience, usually designed for White and middle-class audiences. I start this discussion by considering reality television's dominance in the 1990's to present-day, in which there are dozens of shows that provide scripted notions of Black femininity and masculinity to particular groups. Interracial (both romantic and platonic) relationships were presented in the then-brand new reality show, MTV's *The Real World: New York* (1992), *The Real World: Los Angeles* (1993), and *The Real World: San Francisco* (1994). The series is now on its 29th season, and due to its consistently high ratings, spin-off shows such as *Road Rules* (1998-2007) and *The Challenge* (2008-present) emerged. The premise of *The Real World* episodes is to show real life experiences of at least 7-8 strangers (comprised of different races, religious beliefs, sexual orientations, etc.) living together for a few months in a network-financed, fully furnished posh mansion/loft in a major city. The majority White heterosexual cast members usually include one or two Black people, often portrayed as unjustly angry, violent, or hypersexual roommates. As the White characters are filmed experiencing break-ups, drug use, and job searches, they are also portrayed as the barometers of ideal values and morals. More often than not, a dramatic racially charged fight or argument arises between a Black and White roommate. Then the following episode typically reveals how the roommates were able to resolve all of their issues in 50 minutes, and

resume life in their newly established racial utopia-like home.

*The Real World* ushered many reality shows marketed as a source to entertain White and middle-class audiences while employing stereotypes of blackness. Contemporary cable shows like Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008-present), *Married to Medicine* (2013-present), and VH1's *Love & Hip-Hop* (2011-present) attract millions of viewers every week as they all concentrate on successful Black participants with lucrative careers living in affluent neighborhoods. However, these shows still succumb to ubiquitous Black stereotypes of the sassy homegirl, the resentful baby-mama, the unfaithful male playa, the non-communicative husband, etc. The conveyed implicit and explicit message is that despite one's white-collar career, higher education, and privileged class status, Blacks are morally bankrupt, dysfunctional, combative, and uncontrollably loud objects.

These fictional and scripted storylines sharply contrast factual based documentaries that organically examine a myriad of Black experiences throughout different time periods. For instance, Spike Lee's *4 Little Girls* (1997) examines the 1963 racially-motivated bomb explosion in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The film includes interviews with friends and family members of the four African-American girls killed in the attack, probing into their experiences during the Civil Rights Movement and the trauma of living during the John Crow era. The film does not centralize controlling images such as the jezebel, the mammy, the welfare queen, the coon, the buck, or the pickaninny (Bogle, 2001). Rather, it concentrates on narratives shared by different types of Black people with various backgrounds without

any crafted plots or storylines.

Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) supplies an in-depth look at several Hurricane Katrina victims and survivors. While traveling through New Orleans, the documentary focuses solely on the individuals' recollections while revealing images of flooded schools, dilapidated houses, and stores. There are no fixed or hyped up conflicts between the participants, there are no lingering cliffhangers, and there are no scripted romantic, soap-operaesque relationships between the participants. Rather, the film is vested only in the participants' memories and their responses to the interviewer's questions.

Within television, news media (an outlet generally assumed to be fact-based) have an ample supply of documentaries purporting to reveal different Black experiences to multiple audiences. As I mentioned earlier, news-based documentaries like *Watts: Riot or Revolt* (1965) and *The Crisis of Black America: The Vanishing Family* (1966) were films seemingly concerned with showing mainstream audiences the trials and tribulations that many Blacks faced during the Civil Rights Movement. However, both films used crafted stereotypical images of dysfunctional and disorderly Blacks, reiterating racist rationale of why Blacks ought to be treated like second-class citizens.

News media have always been influential in molding our understandings of race (Behnken and Smithers, 2015; González and Torres, 2011; Larson, 2005; Lind, 2009; Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao, 2012; Winter, 2008), class (Bissler and Connors, 2012; Descartes and Kottak, 2009; Holtzman, 2000; Kendall, 2011), and gender (Allan, Branston, and Carte, 1998; Stabile, 2006, van Zoonen, 1994). With sources ranging

from political cartoons (Zurbriggen and Sherman, 2010) to radio programming (Keith 2008), news media also shape many of our social, political, and economic beliefs. With the increasing prominence of social networking and the internet, television is still the most dominant medium. Therefore, news media are distinct because they attract the most audience members, and consumers are more inclined to make assessments based on what they see as opposed to the content that they hear (Clawson and Trice, 2000).

### **Race as a Social Construction**

Prior to talking about colorisms, the myth of meritocracy, and America as a supposed post-race society, focusing on scholarship that provides a definition of race is imperative. A major cornerstone of this research is the position shared by many communication (Dines and Humez, 2014; Durham and Kellner, 2012; Lind, 2012) and sociology (Bell, 2005; Feagin, 2013; Jeffres, Atkin, Lee, Neuendorf, and Jian, 2011; Jenkins and Dillon, 2012; Lipsitz, 2011; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008) scholars that race is a social construct. Though socially constructed, Howard Winant argues that race is "an allusion that does ideological work" (Winant, 1994, p. 15). He also recognizes that "within North American race thinking, it can be accepted without major objection" (p. 15).

Identifying race as a social construct diametrically opposes sciences such as phrenology (Hamilton, 2008) or craniology (Jahoda, 2009) claiming that race is a biological fact. Popular throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, these anthropological sciences were devoted to proving that racialized inferiority is predicated by the size of one's skull. Describing the work of pioneering craniologist Carl Gustav Carus, Jahoda explains that he "regarded humans as being divided into races of unequal endowment

determined by different cranial formations. He put forward a quaint typology of Daylight ([W]hites), Nocturnal ([B]lacks) and Twilight (intermediate shades) races” (p. 38). Retrospectively, many race scholars or cultural critics might find Carus’ description of White people as “Daylight,” Blacks as “Nocturnal,” and “the Others” as “Twilight” easily dismissible because of its adolescent categories.

Similar to Carus’ race labels, contemporary American descriptions of race are equally problematic, yet purposeful. Race scholar Howard Winant maintains that race was designed to support White superiority within America’s caste system tracing back to slavery (Winant, 1994). With very narrow racialized labels identifying a person as White, Black, Brown, Yellow, or Red, Winant considers its drawbacks:

But of course, many people do not fit anywhere. Where should we classify Arab-Americans, for example, or South Asians, or Brazilians? What about people with more than one salient racial characteristic, for example, [B]lack Puerto Ricans? Are they ‘African-Americans’ or ‘Hispanic’? Such questions can be multiplied indefinitely. (p. 3)

Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2014) draw attention to the fact that race was established/is required to maintain White superiority and Black inferiority (Wise, 2008; Wise 2011). Adia Harvey Wingfield and Joe R. Feagin (2009) explain:

The racial formation theory argues that racial thinking is not only a central organizing principle of society, but that racial thinking is imbedded in the legal and political system, which they argue plays a significant role in shaping racial

interactions at the macro level. Racial formation theory refocused sociological attention on the ways ‘race’ exists as a societal concept distinct from ethnicity, and one shapes interaction in a myriad of ways. (p. 5)

I do believe that race is a social construct that has real life consequences, often resulting in many people of color trying to pursue *any* resemblance of whiteness. Proof of this pursuit is evident through the rising sales of Blacks purchasing skin-bleaching products and still in demand hair relaxers. And race not only has real life consequences for racialized minority groups, but it impacts Whites as well. For example, in 2014 Jennifer Cramblett (a White woman from Ohio) sued the sperm bank that mistakenly gave her a specimen from an African-American donor instead of a White donor. While one issue is that Cramblett did not get the product that she paid for, it is conceivable that the main grievance is that her White privilege remains forever interrupted by having a biracial child. Overarchingly, *Black in America* offers a slew of examples in which the concept of race is challenged, while also displaying the consequences associated with resisting race expectations.

Additionally, I see race as an evolving identity, one that not only describes a person, but also their assumed lifestyle. Though problematic in many ways, there is an assumed understanding within many African-American communities of what it means when a Black person is described as “acting White” (articulate, excessively prim and proper, voicing ideals mostly expressed by White people), or when a White person is perceived as wanting to be Black (uses urban slang, can dance or rap, and socially aligns themselves mostly Black people). In essence, this project defines race as “beliefs,

attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliation” (Clark et al., 1999, p. 805). And though race is an illusion, the disproportionate percentage of Blacks facing unemployment or incarceration (compared to Whites) makes race a social fact. Because Omi and Winant extensively talk about how race was constructed to legally and socially distinguish those who have power (Whites) from others (non-Whites), a review of literature on whiteness theory is important.

### **Whiteness**

With race as a social construct in mind, whiteness theory aids in further illuminating how White privilege and systemic racism permeate media (Bernardi, 2007; Feagin, 2006; Lewis, 2015; Vera and Gordon, 2003). There is a sizeable body of research on whiteness and White privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2012; Carter, 2007; Chidester, 2008; Daniels, 1997; Hutchison, 2012; Jensen 2005; Kendall, 2013; Lipsitz, 2006; Oh, 2012; Rothenberg, 2015; Wallis and Stevenson, 2016; Wise, 2008). Danielle Endres and Mary Gould (2009) explain:

Whiteness is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity. In other words, people often go about their day-to-day lives without critically reflecting on the power associated with their identities. Possessing or performing whiteness is simultaneously an enactment and a masking of power and privilege.

(p. 419)

Endres and Gould's description of whiteness as a delusional and fictional identity enhances Winant's position that race is a social construct. Furthermore, they also extrapolate Winant's argument of how whiteness is internalized within all races. His argument compliments whiteness (and White) scholar Peggy McIntosh, in which she lists twenty-six specific examples of whiteness and its advantages in "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (McIntosh, 1988). She states:

Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of my financial reliability [#10]. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race [#20]. [And] I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race [#22].

McIntosh's personal examples are significant because they further underscore the fact that despite race being a social construct it produces very real outcomes. Whiteness dominates the American legislative system (Bell, 2005; Bell, 2008; Delgado and Stefancic, 2012), the educational system (Picower, 2009), and its political system (Lipsitz, 2006; Olson, 2008; Pinder, 2011).

It is all too often assumed by many people from all races that whiteness, White privilege, or White superiority is an exclusive experience shared only amongst White people. Quite the contrary, whiteness is an ideology that can also exist in the Black body. Referring to W.E.B. Du Bois' contribution in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), his

double-consciousness theory describes the "two-ness" of living both as an American and a Negro – two conflicting entities – in the dark body. Double-consciousness is experienced by a person of color living within the White racial frame (Feagin, 2013), and processing what it means to be both American and marginalized. Contemporary scholarship explores how whiteness even mandates cultural expectations for the ethnic other (Feagin, 2009), even down to the "proper" or "correct" way of speaking (Bayor, 2009; Bonilla-Silva, 2012).

### **Blackness**

If whiteness theory is useful in talking about privilege, dominance, and benefactors of the American status quo, then literature on blackness is valuable because it identifies what many Whites strive to maintain distance from and superiority over. As Adia Harvey Wingfield and Joe R. Feagin (2013) maintain that "racial thinking is imbedded in the legal and political system" (p. 5), it is important to consider legal measures that are used to divorce blackness from whiteness. One method of separating White identity from blackness is the United States' adherence to the one-drop rule. Still legally recognized today, the law of the one-drop rule (Koditschek, Cha-Jua, and Neville, 2009; Post, 2009; Sweet, 2013) mandates that a person is considered Black if they only have one drop of "Black blood" in their ancestry. In "If You're Half Black, You're Just Black: Reflected Appraisals and the Persistence of the One-Drop Rule" (2010), Nikki Khanna explains:

With the reality of miscegenation, mulatto children posed problems to the strict color line separating [B]lack and [W]hite. Where did they belong? Free or

enslaved? To deal with the growing number of multiracial children, an informal one-drop rule was born in the South—anyone with any known trace of [B]lack blood was considered [B]lack. Thus, mulatto children of enslaved mothers were classified as [B]lack and remained slaves, which provided an economic asset to [W]hite slave owners. Because slavery was built upon the assumption that [W]hites were a superior race and could not be enslaved, the one-drop rule also became increasingly important to justify the enslavement of a growing number of slaves with [W]hite skin and appearance. (p. 98)

Khanna's historical context of the one-drop rule illustrates measures that this country uses to preserve White privilege. In addition, the one-drop rule reifies in the collective American psyche that blackness is an undesirable, disruptive inheritance. Concisely speaking, the one-drop rule views blackness as an identity that only taints the purity of whiteness. Though White American law considers blackness as an entity that dilutes whiteness, in many regards, blackness is also seen as a social imposition (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Massey and Denton, 1993). In the era of affirmative action, Blacks are deemed as the face of "reverse racism," socio-politically depicted as undeserving recipients of scholarships, college admissions, or benefactors of mortgage loans and employment. The work of Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick (2004) explains why this thinking is illogical:

The core of this story is the idea that less qualified minorities (mostly referring to [B]lacks, although occasionally to women) are getting into college or taking jobs

that more qualified [W]hites deserve. However, as we will illustrate, this story does not involve concrete experience or knowledge and requires little evidence; the mere presence of a minority person in a particular setting allows [W]hites to ignore the possibility that they are not qualified for a job, a promotion, or admission to a college. (p. 567)

Whereas whiteness tends to be synonymous with hard work, merit, and responsibility, blackness is frequently equated to laziness, negligence, ignorance, and immorality (Coover, 2001; Cottle, 2000; Feagin, 2013).

Regardless of the complexities of race, television programming predictably gravitates towards stereotypes in order to frame notions of blackness for its audiences (Bryant, 2009). This reality holds especially true in news media. Despite statistical inaccuracies, blackness is generally associated with poverty (Dixon, 2008; Johnson, Dolan, and Sonnett (2011). Communication scholars Rosalee A. Clawson and Rakuya Trice (2000) explain, “Blacks make up less than one-third of the poor, but the media would lead citizens to believe that two out of every three poor people are [B]lack” (54). Though there are high numbers of college educated Blacks who have never committed a crime, news media tend to equate blackness to criminality (Dixon, 2007, Dixon, 2008; Covington, 2011; Markowitz, 2011). Bill Yousman (2009) explains:

Several studies have found that U.S. news tends to focus on African American and Latino/a criminality in particular, while downplaying crime committed by [W]hites. At the same time, there is a tendency to feature [W]hite victims of crime while neglecting victims of color. (p. 41)

Historically, news media aired blatant images that only portrayed the dangerous, unruly, hypersexual Negro; today's news coverage presents images that are slightly more refined in effort to pathologize Blacks as social deviants. Darnell Hunt (2005) explains:

In place of explicit references to the [B]lack body and the use of overtly derogatory terms like 'nigger,' we are now more likely to find the casual use of code words like 'crime,' 'welfare,' and 'quotas' to invoke images of a [B]lack culture that breeds dangerous, lazy, and ignorant [B]lacks. Whiteness, in contrast, has become an unspoken proxy for goodness. 'Good' schools and 'good' neighborhoods are 'good' directly in relation to the presence of whiteness – the more the better. Whiteness represents the cultural norm, the implicit standard from which blackness deviates. (p. 4)

There are many communication scholars whose research focuses on the negative social impact of media's excessive use of stereotypes (Covert and Dixon, 2008; Dixon, 2009; Entman and Gross, 2008; Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000; Melican and Dixon, 2008; Merskin; 2010; Ramasubramanian and Oliver, 2007; Ross and Lester, 2011; Tan, Zhang, Zhang, & Dalisay, 2009). George Gerbner's (1976) cultivation theory suggests that excessive television exposure nurtures a more negative world perspective with viewers than those who do not watch it as often. He explains:

...consider how likely television characters are to encounter violence compared to the rest of us. Well over half of all major characters on television are involved each week in some kind of violent action. While FBI statistics have clear limitations, they indicate that in any one year less than one percent of people in

the U.S. are victims of criminal violence. Accordingly, we have found considerable support for the proposition that heavy exposure to the world of television cultivates exaggerated perceptions of the number of people involved in violence in any given week, as well as numerous other inaccurate beliefs about crime and law enforcement. (p. 185)

Cultivation theory is useful in terms of thinking about the implications of racist television images in the everyday life (Dixon and Azocar, 2007; Entman, 2007; Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, and Behm-Morawitz, 2009). For example, disproportionate televised images of Black men as criminals and Black women as welfare recipients (trying to get over “the system”) become real life expectations or prototypical to many viewers (Dixon, 2008; Entman and Rojecki, 2000). An unbalanced quantity of sexist, racist, or criminalizing images have lasting effects even when the television is turned off, therefore influencing how many viewers perceive and relate to others.

Contemporary racialized images have the ability to breed racial animosity between Whites and Blacks. Discussing Black representation in local news media, Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki (2000) explain:

The racial stereotyping of Blacks encouraged by the images and implicit comparisons to Whites on local news reduces the latter’s empathy and heightens animosity, as demonstrated empirically by several experimental studies. To the extent local television news thereby undermines the fragile foundations of racial comity, it could reduce apparent and real responsiveness of White-dominated society to the needs of poor minorities, especially Blacks. (p. 91)

Though Entman and Rojecki address the impact of racialized images in local news, their sentiment is also applicable to national news (Dixon, 2008; Dixon and Azocar, 2007).

### **Controlling Images**

Because this project examines how blackness is framed in contemporary news media, identifying controlling images aid in pointing out how modern racism prevails. Controlling images are stereotypical impressions used by media-makers; for Black women, media caricatures of us include the jezebel (a hypersexual, immoral woman), the mammy, the welfare mother, and the matriarch (Collins, 2008; Harris-Perry, 2013; hooks, 2006; hooks, 2008; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Ward and Harris, 2015). Sexual scripts that Black women are typically assigned in media of any genre also include the diva, the gold digger, the baby mama, the dyke, the freak, the gangster bitch, etc. (Stephens and Phillips, 2003). For Black men, news media disproportionately depicts them as murderers, rapists, entertainers, uneducated, unemployed, etc. (Dixon and Azocar, 2007; Entman and Rojecki, 2001). An understanding of how controlling images work, especially in today's news media, is necessary because voters, lawmakers, educators make lasting decisions simply based on what the news airs. As Windsor, Dunlap, and Golub (2011) explain:

Powerful controlling images perpetuate misguided messages about impoverished African-American women that contribute to the oppression these women endure. These images inform policies and behavior that create and maintain structural barriers such as lack of access to education and meaningful

employment further marginalizing oppressed individuals. (p. 290)

Recalling Herman Gray's earlier sentiments, White (and even Black) news writers, editors, and producers easily gravitate towards controlling images because they almost always guarantee high ratings. Though controlling images are part of a larger lucrative industry, infinite inaccurate portrayals of Blacks do contribute to the group's assigned status as American second-class citizens (hooks, 2008; hooks, 2014; Stephens, 2003; Wallace-Sanders, 2008).

This idea is especially true for media's depiction of Black women (Kretsedemas, 2010). While Phillip Kretsedemas explores controlling images such as the mammy and the jezebel, communication scholars Jill Quadagno (1996), Rosalee Clauson and Rakuya Trice (2000), and Nazeen Mehta (2009-2010) discuss how news media tend to generalize what welfare recipients look like. Mehta contends, "The image of the U.S. welfare queen [is] characterized as lazy, irresponsible, and uncontrollably fertile" (Mehta, 2009-2010, p. 65). She is the hyperbole of a poor, uneducated single-mother, unable to provide for her children. As Khiara M. Bridges (2007) notes, "within the hegemonic bipolarity of White supremacy in the U.S.... she is the archetype of

unconstitutional and blackface now considered too controversial for mainstream audiences, the 21<sup>st</sup> century racism has assumed a different aesthetic.

### **Modern Racism**

Modern (or new) racism is a term that describes the existence of insidious White supremacy in the contemporary United States over marginalized groups, compared to more overt historical practices (Feagin, 2006; Moore, 2007). Hunt's description of the

coded language employed by media is an example of modern racism, because it masks underlying racial hatred towards people of color. Within news media, modern racism presents itself in seemingly more non-threatening, passive, and almost undetectable ways. Modern racism is also the foundation of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2003, Bonilla-Silva, 2009). A consequence of the Civil Rights Movement (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Forman, 2004), colorblindness is the contention that a person does not characterize others according to race (Esposito and Finley, 2009; Nilsen and Turner, 2014). Colorblind racism departs from traditional racial practices (i.e. literal signs that segregate housing, restaurants, employment, schools, etc.). But the colorblind mentality is still problematic because its rhetoric is used to justify the removal of social programs that provide valuable resources to all people of color.

In order to make better sense of how colorblind racism works, Margaret M. Zamudio and Francisco Rios (2006) describe four different clusters of racism. First, they identify traditional racism as the *no doubt racism* because “there is likely to be very little disagreement that the instances described are undoubtedly racist” (p. 490). Examples of no doubt racism include cross-burnings, racial epithets, etc. The second form is *segregationist racism* in which Whites aim for distance from people of color. They explain that “this distance may be either physical (staying away from the Other) or psychological (distancing oneself from becoming too close to the Other emotionally or psychologically)” (p. 493). Examples of segregation racism include anti-interracial relationships, poorly treating a customer of color in order to discourage them from returning, giving preferential treatment to White students over others, or choosing not to

hire a qualified employee of color). The third racial cluster is referred to as the *revisionist racist narrative*. In short, revisionist racism narratives are racial comments that are often excused and widely excused or rationalized (i.e. a Black athletic male jokingly labeled as a Mandingo; jokes related to a person of color's skin tone, etc.). Revisionist racist narratives lean more towards color-blind racism – the ideology that racism is an obsolete problem – which “include denial (racism as not real) and minimizing racism” (p. 495). The fourth cluster is identified as the *equal opportunity racism*. This frame suggests that a program like affirmative action exclusively benefits people of color, leading Whites to feel unfairly treated. Therefore, many Whites' perception of unfair treatment from social programs helps them rationalize their resentment towards Blacks. Identifying this concept and referring to a participant in their study, Zamudio and Rios (2006) state:

The popular mythology about the unfair advantage afforded to people of color serves to perpetuate popular stereotypes while at the same time denying [W]hite privilege. M.U., a nineteen-year-old [W]hite female, captures this point: ‘A man in class said ‘Blacks have it easy. They’re good athletes, everyone feels sorry for them, and now they have affirmative action. I wish I was [B]lack.’ (p. 497)

Equal opportunity racism promotes the deception that people of color are somehow now in power, and have turned the socio-economic/political tables by oppressing Whites. Much like media portrayals of Black criminals versus White targets, the rhetoric of equal opportunity racism allows Whites to act as sole victims. Colorblind racism is connected to whiteness, controlling images, and colorisms because it more accurately describes a contemporary perspective shared by many Whites, particularly media

makers and audience members.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Patricia Hill Collins' Black feminist thought (2008) offers an alternative way of discussing race, gender, class. Because this project examines the framing of blackness in news media, Black feminist thought is an appropriate lens useful in critiquing how Black femininity/masculinity is portrayed across various class lines. Furthermore, this theoretical framework offers a unique perspective even within the spectrum of feminist studies. Mainstream feminist studies have often focused on ways in which White womanhood is depicted on television (Dow, 1996). However, Black feminist studies offers a more probing way of analyzing how media specifically present women (and men) of color. Rearticulating everyday experiences of Black women, while also challenging the dominant White racial frame (Feagin, 2013; hooks, 2014), Collins explains:

Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms, articulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African-American women and stimulate resistance. (p. 36)

Within Communication discourses, literature based on White masculine ideologies dominate much of its discipline. However, Black feminist thought offers a countering perspective because it centralizes racial and gendered experiences faced by those sidelined within the White racial frame.

Intersectionality is a common term that has been shared within feminist circles for decades (Collins and Bilge, 2016; Dottolo and Stewart, 2008), but it is also a paradigm cogitating the “lived experiences within intersecting oppressions of [a Black woman’s] race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and religion” (Collins, 2000, p. 12). Rather than seeing race, class, and gender as independently separate or parallel entities, intersectionality sees them as interlocked realities (Dill and Zambrana, 2009; Ken, 2007; Pinderhughes, 2008). Without this self-awareness, it seems that there will forever be contempt between the haves and have not. Ignoring how intersectionality functions ultimately homogenizes everyone’s experiences. In fact, overlooking this concept can result in a matter of life or death. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) explains:

Where systems of race, gender, and class domination converge, as they do in the experiences of battered women of color, intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles. Such was the case in 1990 when Congress amended the marriage fraud provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act to protect immigrant women who were battered or exposed to extreme cruelty by United States citizens or permanent residents these women immigrated to the United States to marry. Under the marriage fraud provisions under the Act, a person who immigrated to the United States to marry a United States citizen or permanent resident had to remain ‘properly’ married for two years before even applying for permanent resident status, at which time applications for the

immigrant's permanent status were required of both spouses. Predictably, under these circumstances, many immigrant women were reluctant to leave even the most abusive of partners for fear of being deported. (pgs. 1246-47)

Crenshaw illustrates what happens when systems disregard the significance of intersectionality in various cultures, races, classes, etc. Despite race, class, and gender working as social constructions, marginalized groups endure real consequences when intersectionality is altogether ignored. For instance, many lawmakers and voters make ill-informed decisions about educational programs, affirmative action, and welfare reform (Edmonds-Cady, 2009; Steinbugler, Press, and Dias, 2006) because of their assumptions of who primarily benefits from them. Again, traditional and modern racism constantly marries blackness to social and economic impositions. Awareness of the interviewees' intersectionality throughout *Black in America* was applied throughout this dissertation because it aided in extensively discussing why they had particular views regarding law enforcement, integration, marriage, and other issues.

In conclusion, this dissertation depends on various theoretical frameworks and ideas to discuss how *Black in America* simultaneously promotes the myth of meritocracy, employs colorisms, and advances the illusion that America is post-race. Used as a case study, this docu-series is a valid focal point to discuss how news media frame blackness, conceivable because this approach often results in high profits. Additionally, scripted and distorted notions of Black identity arguably help racist and sexist benefactors of White privilege to maintain America's status quo. Therefore, it is

essential to continue examining how television portrays blackness, because its images can escalate racial tensions amongst all groups.

### CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This study will explore the ways in which news media advance the myth of meritocracy, portray America as post-racial, and employ colorisms. It aims not only to identify frames that exist within the narratives of *Black in America*, but also strives to explore how these frames are developed. As mentioned earlier, an examination of how news media (especially in the midst of a presidential election) present race and race relations is significant because of the potential negative effects that these images may have on the viewer. Whereas racialized messages from other television genres (i.e. a situational comedy, drama, or action) might be justified as fictional entertainment because all races and ethnicities are fair game, news media is a purported outlet for neutral, un-biased information. On a macro level, it is a resource where many voters obtain information on who they will vote for, what laws ought to be enforced, and which government programs should be discontinued/developed. On a micro level, it is also a source in which its seemingly scripted messages can breed racial animosity in the viewer's personal life through intra and inter-racial relationships. It is not this project's intent to claim that *all* news media aims only to exploit and condemn *all* Blacks. Rather, its main purpose is to point out instances in which the complexities of race (specifically blackness) appear to be over simplified and dangerously generalized to possibly make the topic more comfortable for White and middle-class audiences.

Because neither an audience analysis of how multiple audiences perceived *Black in America*, nor a quantitative analysis on the significance of its high ratings were conducted, it is imperative to clarify that I do not believe that every single White and middle-class viewer internalized *Black in America* in the same exact way. On the contrary, this project yields to the notion that different audience members may have different interpretations of the docu-series. However, I am operating with the notion that many viewers watch news media for similar purposes, i.e. information on politics, the environment, conflict between groups or individuals, and social events. Media scholar Beretta E. Smith-Shomade (2002) contends:

Local television...tends to deal with those issues that affect us personally: our communities, schools, personal disasters, and personal achievements...National programming [on the other hand] ...is more educational in the sense of explaining and highlighting major national and global happenings and issues. It is the voices of our national leadership telling us what's going on, what it means, and where it is leading. (p. 111)

Smith-Shomade's sharp distinction between the objectives of local news versus national coverage is noteworthy because it speaks to the magnitude of how influential an international news station like CNN is over its millions of viewers. Also noteworthy is her suggestion that when a viewer tunes in to a station like Fox News or CNN, they are watching with the expectation of getting a specific type of information from its reporters. Unlike local news coverage, national programming provides influential images of race, gender, and class all over the United States.

Robert M. Entman (2004) identifies two classes of framing: substantive and procedural. This project will depend on the former as he explains:

Substantive frames perform at least two of the following basic functions in covering political events, issues, and actors:

- Defining effects or conditions as problematic
- Identifying causes
- Conveying a moral judgment
- Endorsing remedies or improvements

Though Entman suggests that substantive frames perform at least two of these tasks, this project seeks ways in which the docu-series demonstrates all four of these elements.

Quite beneficial while searching for answers to the aforementioned research questions, each of these characteristics shaped the ways in which I watched and internalized all of the narratives in *Black in America*. For instance, when considering the docu-series' defining effects or conditions as problematic, I identified the disproportionately high numbers of unemployment, imprisonment, fragmented families, poor education, and lack of community resources in Blacks communities as its recurring predicaments.

Identifying causes appeared to rest solely on the shoulders of Black Americans. To be more specific, exclusive accountability of why so many Black are treated as second-class citizens seem to be directed towards specific types of Blacks (both aesthetically and socio-economically). When thinking about the docu-series' conveyed moral judgment, this aspect encouraged me to pay attention to its spoken/unspoken values. In other words, I remained cognizant of how exactly *Black in America* defines

*family, success, failure, and progress*. It also propelled me to be ever mindful of its dominant religious ideology (while examining if the docu-series discussed other religious dogmas). Lastly, the endorsing remedy aspect required me to not only identify the participants' obstacles, but to also pay equal attention the docu-series' implied solutions. As a direct response to the identifying causes, many narratives arguably contend that cultural assimilation or adherence to White heterosexual patriarchal expectations is the answer to *every* Black person's problems.

This project also employed Entman's cultural resonance and magnitude concepts.

He explains:

The words and images that make up the frame can be distinguished from the rest of the news by their capacity to stimulate support or opposition to the sides in a political conflict. We can measure this capacity by cultural resonance and magnitude. Those frames that employ more culturally resonant terms have the greatest potential for influence. They use words and images highly salient in culture, which is to say *noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged*. Magnitude taps the prominence and repetition of the framing words and images. The more resonance and magnitude, the more likely framing is to evoke similar thoughts and feelings in large portions of the audience. (p. 6)

With cultural resonance and magnitude in mind, I selected images, themes, and terms that are used repeatedly throughout "The Black Woman and Family" and "The Black Man" episodes to express implicit/explicit messages to the viewers. Complimentary to George

Gerber's cultivation theory, these concepts encourage the researcher to pay close attention to possible redundancy and salience in both the docu-series' rhetoric and imagery.

This project does not view framing as synonymous to agenda setting (Bryant and Oliver, 2009; Bryant and Thompson, 2012; Tewksbury and Scheufele, 2009). Rogers and Dearing (1988) define agenda setting as a "process through which the mass media communicate the relative importance of various issues and events to the public" (p. 556). Karen S. Johnson-Cartee (2005) explains, "While agenda setting and priming deal with how news may promote issue prioritization or increase issue accessibility, media-framing research examines how news content influences and affects news consumer" (p. 25). Agenda setting and priming addresses how news may promote issue prioritization or increase issue accessibility, as media-framing research examines how news content influences and affects news consumers. Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997) explain that news media frame certain issues as it is a way to "... declare the underlying causes and likely consequences of a problem and establish criteria for evaluating potential remedies of the problem" (pgs. 567-568). Bertram Scheufele (2000) maintains, "Framing influences how audiences think about issues, not by making aspects of the issue more accessible, but by invoking interpretive schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information (p. 309). In addition to using Scheufele's take on framing, this project shares Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, and Ghanem's (1991) definition of a frame as "a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and

elaboration” (p. 11). Altogether, these definitions assist with looking at key concepts that are both emphasized and ignored throughout the docu-series.

In order to conduct a framing analysis, I watched the entirety of *Black in America* on three separate occasions. For the first viewing, I invited a small group of friends (all Black graduate students with various backgrounds) to watch it during its debut. Using a DVR, we frequently paused the film several times whenever a narrative, participant, or setting were considered pathological. After its completion, the group and I had a lengthy discussion on whether or not *Black in America* “got it right” in terms of conveying updated and accurate portrayals of Black people. Posing questions like, “Who was this piece made for, because I already knew a lot of this stuff?” and “How did they choose their subjects?” resulted in my independently watching it again with the hopes of being able to answer those questions.

While individually analyzing the docu-series the second time, I initially categorized its participants based on their stated or presumed socio-economic status. Because many of the narratives provide some context for the participants’ status, I was able to group many of them as either being part of the working class or middle/upper-middle class group. There were, however, instances in which participants did not have a fully developed storyline. Based on their occupation, they were then categorized within the class often associated with their careers or circumstance. For example, a medical doctor briefly commenting on health disparities in Black communities, or an educator concisely talking about school curricula were both placed in the middle/upper-middle class group. Conversely, a single father of two facing eviction, or a mother of four

struggling to pay her utility bills were placed in the working-class group. Environment and location played a factor in assigning the participants' socio-economic status.

Homeowners living in affluent neighborhoods (sometimes seen driving luxury cars) were separated from those living in more impoverished areas. Extensive notes on the shared commonalities and differences amongst members of each respective group were recorded.

Within the working class vs. middle/upper-middle class group categories, I then observed narratives referring to the lift-yourself-by-your-bootstraps theme. Also known as the myth of meritocracy, this category included all participants who attributed their success to hard work and dedication. Through this classification, it was highly noticeable that only narratives from members in the middle/upper-middle class group address the myth of meritocracy. It was also very apparent that many of the participants who talked about this principle were those who had themselves experienced economic hardships prior to their gaining upward mobility (as oppose to this message coming from participants who had inherited their status). Often times, these participants pinpoint a major transformative event (i.e. violence, raising a child, etc.) as the catalyst to seeking upward mobility and financial security (via education or better employment). There are no participants in the working-class group that refer to the myth of meritocracy in order to explain their socio-economic status.

After separating the participants based on their socio-economic status, I also made note of which participants appeared to represent mainstream American ideals. To compile a list of traditional values, Ning Kang's (2009) research on America's belief

systems shaped this analysis. He identifies individualism as a core value, stating that America “places great value on self-reliance” (p. 149). American democracy (civic duty) is highly regarded, as well as American’s national character; this value is the “acquiring of wealth through hard work and thrift” (p. 150). Kang also considers education as a major staple in American culture. In context, this project identifies “successful” narratives as those in which the participants are either 1) college-educated; 2) homeowners; 3) married (heterosexual couples); 4) nurturing well-establishing and lucrative careers; and 5) a member of the upper-middle class. On the other hand, “failure” refers to narratives in which the participants 1) have only attained a high school diploma; 2) do not own their homes; 3) struggle with obtaining/maintaining employment, and 4) are part of the working class. These categories are quite complex because there are instances in which the “successful” participants are not college educated or are single. Despite these entanglements, they aided in offering a basic start to describe how many of the narratives are framed.

With the third viewing, attention was given to the physical features of all of the participants. It is clear that all of the participants are African-American (as opposed to having some Black people that are Trinidadian-American, Haitian-American, Jamaican American, etc.). Nonetheless, all of the participants were separated by either having Afro-centric features (broad nose, full lips, a darker complexion, and kinky hair); there is little to no questioning on whether or not they are from African descent. This group diametrically opposes the other group with strong Eurocentric characteristics. With a thin nose, thin lips, a fair skin tone, wavy or straight hair, these participants are often

considered racially ambiguous. It is safe to assume that more often than not, these participants are often asked to identify what they are “mixed with” and are usually perceived as having some immediate White ancestry. After segregating these two groups, observations were made regarding what type of narratives were prevalent. Within the Afro-centric category, an overwhelming majority of the narratives revolved around economic hardship, inadequate education, single parenthood, and incarceration. Though there are some exceptions, disproportionate amounts of participants with Euro-centric features are college-educated, law-abiding experts in different fields, married, and financially secure.

With phenotypes in mind, I observed narratives that explicitly or implicitly identify America as post-race. Post-racial narratives are storylines in which the participants identify racism as a minor social obstacle, or as a historical experience no longer relevant to today’s experiences. Also incorporating the colorblind ideology, these narratives tend to focus more on racial harmony in the contemporary while altogether ignoring the still-prominent racial dissention that exists. Interestingly, post-race sentiments only come from participants with Eurocentric participants in the upper-middle class category.

Using Johnson-Cartee’s (2005) concept of faceless sources, a method used by journalists when they may not have all of the facts needed for an assigned news story, or they may not be able to find anyone willing to provide information for attribution,” (p. 227), I closely analyzed moments when *Black in America* cryptically identifies the

sources of its information. Faceless attributions to be mindful of are information prefaced with statements such as:

According to official sources

- According to unofficial sources
- according to usually reliable sources
- According to well-informed resources
- According to unconfirmed reports
- According to best available information

In addition to these faceless attributions, she noted that journalists refer to the ‘Mr.

Ubiquitous It’ as an authority with statements like:

- It was learned
- It appears
- It is reported
- It is unconfirmed
- It is known
- It is suspected
- It is thought

Considering these nebulous disclaimers, extensive attention was given to all narratives to see how blackness is rhetorically framed.

*The Black Women & Family* is made of about 15 storylines/brief interviews, whereas “The Black Man” episode is comprised of 18 storylines/brief interviews.

Relying on four extensive interviews from each episode, I observed instances in which Black participants are polarized either as social deviants who seem to be the antithesis of White cultural expectations, or as assimilationists who yield to the White, masculinist, and privileged ideals. Overall, these particular narratives demonstrate how modern racism was advanced through the myth of meritocracy, colorisms, and depictions of America as post-race.

## CHAPTER IV

### “THE BLACK WOMAN AND FAMILY”

With CNN's *Black in America* serving as this project's primary text, a framing analysis was conducted to illustrate an example of how mainstream news media present blackness to White and middle-class audiences while employing colorisms and advancing the myth of meritocracy. Divided into two sections, each segment debuted on different days: “The Black Woman and Family” first aired Wednesday, July 23, 2008 at 8:00 pm; “The Black Man” followed the same time slot on Thursday, July 24, 2008. In respect to the sequence in which the docu-series was aired, I will discuss its content in that same order. Both segments offer an eclectic cast of Black American educators, famous actors, radio personalities, political activists, and regular citizens sharing their personal experiences. Many of them also offer their perspectives on topics ranging from racial profiling and high incarceration rates to unemployment and higher education. Closely analyzing the narratives of four different women, I will discuss how one framed story revolves around colorblind/post-race ideology while the other storylines are based on the consequences of not adhering to heteronormative expectations (thus inadvertently centralizing the myth of meritocracy).

Maria de la Soledad Teresa O'Brien is the film's only reporter, as well as one of its executive producers. Because of her roles both behind and in front of the camera, it is important to identify some key facts about her positionality. O'Brien's credibility is a key factor because after all, she functions as a type of tour guide for perceived outsiders

interloping on the so-called Black experience. Born to Australian and Afro-Cuban parents, O'Brien grew up in a two-parent, middle-class household. Harvard-educated, she is also a married mother of four and self-identifies as a Christian. My research began with an interest in how other viewers received O'Brien's presence throughout *Black in America*, so I analyzed various blogs to make note of their reviews. On one blog, Bossip.com (a site primarily interested in Black popular cultures and news events), viewers expressed their opinions. Some comments state:

**Jackie:** I know that ish [sic] hurts her to the core, being that she loves White people so very much.

**Chocolatecitycom:** (response to Jackie): She is Cuban and Anglo Saxon (another way to say white : ) LMAO....So, Are White people not supposed to question why this White-Cuban woman is hosting "*Black in America*"? lol Considering African Americans history in this country - (those other Blacks in America) .....It was and is Bull SHHHT...I'mma ride with the white critics.

**Dominicangawd:** F\*ck them racist whites hate when other people that aren't White talk about race. we gotta continue to talk about it because race is still an issue in this country. thank god for soledad o'brien black and latino documentaries

**Chocolatecitycom:** (in response to Dominicagawd): Until this country and powers that be decide they no longer have an issue with AA representing themselves...maybe we don't need such documentaries. Soledad...probably didn't spend one day of her life with anyone she encountered thinking she was "black" in America... that's what really makes it F'd up. you know. Another website, bmiawordpress.com (a site focused only on

feedback related to *Black in America*), had an abundance of criticisms on O'Brien's performance. Two bloggers state:

**Rel:** My opinion? I personally believe that CNN should not have had a host with a family full of Harvard University graduates, a father who worked as a Mechanical Engineering Professor, and a mother who was a French and English Teacher. I wish they would have had an African-American intellectual who has lived through the life of an average African-American in today's society. No offense to Ms. O'Brien, but I'm sure they have someone else within CNN who could tell the story from OUR perspective in a way that isn't too aggressive and would educate others a little more about ourselves.

ALL IN ALL, I can't really complain too much. Unfortunately, it's better than anything we'll ever find on BET now a days. Especially since the network was sold, the "E" in BET stands for Exploitation. UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL. I Love Ya'll

**JefftheInterpreter:** Soledad, sold out. Sorry sista girl but "you must not know 'bout me!!!!"

As mentioned earlier, an audience analysis would be better suited to examine how different viewers perceived O'Brien and the docu-series itself. However, it is crucial to pay close attention to O'Brien's presence because her role seemingly accomplishes many goals. She never identifies her racial or ethnic background with any of the participants or to the audience. Yet, O'Brien ultimately personifies "the good Negro." With Eurocentric features and light skin, making her look racially or ethnically ambiguous, these characteristics could give audiences the impression that O'Brien is

safe. She is not too dark, too ethnic, or too Black for the film's target audience. She is just the right temperature of blackness needed to satisfy White and middle-class audiences. Paradoxically, O'Brien's physical traits allow her to be Black enough to legitimize her social ties with the Black participants, but not too Black whereas to alienate the comfort and journalistic trust of White viewers. Perhaps strategically, O'Brien serves as a racially impartial investigator. With her physicalities aside, it is worth bearing in mind that O'Brien's personal values may have influenced the type of questions that she posed to the participants. As a Christian, heterosexual, married woman, she embodies mainstream American ideals, making it conceivable that some of her inquiries on various subjects were inspired by her own personal beliefs.

### **Ruby Steen and Martha Rand**

*Black in America* initiates its discussion on race by focusing on the Rand family. A large African-American family with over 300 members, relatives from all over the United States are filmed while attending their family reunion in Atlanta, Georgia. The audience is first introduced to the Rands by watching them travel, pray, and sing together with the day culminated by them taking their traditional family portrait; oddly, the docu-series never explains why exactly the Rands are used as a template for the typical Black family. Cameras shadow some of its members throughout their nationwide hometowns for more than a year.

The first interview conducted by O'Brien is with Ruby Steen McGee, an elderly (possibly in her 60s) fair-skinned Black woman. Set in Lodi, Texas, Ruby Steen describes herself as the Rand family historian as she explains the family pictures hanging on her living room wall. She also flips through huge family history photo

albums while sitting next to O'Brien on a couch. Now face-to-face with O'Brien, she then relays how she discovered an interesting fact of the Rand's history.

Ruby Steen expounds on her discovery of having White ancestors to O'Brien after doing an extensive internet search of the Rands' family history. As O'Brien narrates part of the events, the audience is shown a brief reenactment of a chained slave dressed in tattered clothing. With family roots tracing back to London, England, O'Brien's voiceover mentions that some of Ruby Steen's ancestors migrated to Virginia as soldiers in the Revolutionary War. With this background information, footage is then given to a still black and white photograph of William Rand, a White ancestor. After combing through family records, she learned that William had seven children with his White wife Sally, while also fathering six children with his Black mistress Ann. Upon further investigation, Ruby Steen discovered her cousin Martha Hicks, William's White great-great granddaughter.

### **Frame of Racial Reconciliation**

Prior to analyzing the dialogue in Ruby Steen's segment, it is imperative that I identify the specific type of frame that is used throughout her narrative. In this section, I identify the use of the frame of racial reconciliation. Within the frame of racial reconciliation, Blacks are not necessarily color-blind nor do they proclaim the inability to judge a person based race. The difference between the frame of reconciliation and the frame of transcendence (which I will later explain with another narrative) is that within the reconciliation, Blacks are cognizant of race and racism, along with the historical and contemporary conflicts that have existed for centuries. However, this particular frame

indicates that this type of blackness is unique because despite racial tensions, they are still able to reconcile with Whites and simply move on.

Again, drawing upon Entman's substantive class of framing, the racial transcendence or racial reconciliation frame accomplishes three main goals. First, the implicit condition that is problematic is that all too often most Blacks (and not Whites) live with racial resentment towards Whites; Blacks who are incapable of "just getting over it" have a one-way animosity directed towards Whites. Ruby Steen identifies the relationship with her cousin as "an example of progress." With this description in mind, the implicitly conveyed judgment is that their ability to transcend race (or reconcile) should be the template for others who are incapable of overcoming the race problem to follow.

Another goal that the frame of racial reconciliation achieves is its suggested remedy of Blacks romanticizing a traumatically oppressive history with Whites. During the conclusion of their conversation, it is noteworthy that neither Ruby Steen or Martha identify their Black ancestor who connects them together as a slave. Instead they more identify the Black woman as a "mistress" of their great-great grandfather. In other words, through this frame, the solution to some racial problems is to soften the brutal harsh reality that countless Black people had to endure by White supremacists. In this case, one way to accomplish that objective is through selective semantics.

Living 400 miles away in Kerrville, Texas, Martha and Ruby Steen corresponded through several letters. O'Brien seated in front of Ruby Steen, inquires Martha's first response:

**O'Brien:** What did she write?

**Ruby Steen:** And she said: Now, we are cousins and you either call me Martha or cousin.

**Martha:** She won me over right there.

**O'Brien** (now facing Martha): So there's a White branch to the Rands, which you're part of. And the Black branch of the Rands.

**Martha:** Right, right.

**O'Brien** (voiceover): In a lot of ways, the story of the Rands is the story of American families.

When in Kerrville, O'Brien interviews Martha in her home. Facing Martha, she asks:

**O'Brien:** Have you met your Black cousins?

**Martha:** Not yet.

**O'Brien** (voiceover images of Martha and her family taking a road trip on a highway en route to Lodi ): That was about to change. Two days later, we arrange for Martha, her cousin Carl, and their granddaughter Natalie to meet their Black cousins in Lodi.

With several of Ruby Steen's family members waiting for Martha to arrive, the cousins finally meet and happily embrace one another.

**Martha:** Oh, look at you!

**Carl:** Hi, cuz, how you doing?

**O'Brien:** What was that moment like?

**Martha:** I wanted to cry. I really did.

**Ruby Steen:** That's how we feel.

**O'Brien:** Officially kissing cousins as they say.

**O'Brien** (now facing Ruby Steen and Martha): Before I met you, I wasn't sure if you were going to be excited about having Black cousins. There are a lot of people who...that would not be good news.

**Ruby Steen** (with her arm around Martha's chair): It would not have happened 40 years ago. I think we've made quite a bit of progress. It's an honor for us to be an example of progress.

Celebrating their happiness, the family members smile and hold hands while walking with each other,

**Martha:** Yes. Well put, well put.

The united family members gather for a family picture, even including William Rand's framed picture held between Ruby Steen and Martha. In reference to the picture, one Black member says, "What a handsome guy."

**O'Brien** (voiceover): The Rands, a heritage born from a family tree with Black and White roots.

**Ruby Steen:** A Kodak moment.

End of interview.

Ruby Steen and Martha Hicks' storylines function as this analysis's first example of how *Black in America* conveys messages of America as post-racial. Providing only one of two references to slavery throughout the docu-series' duration, *Black in America* glosses over centuries of slavery as a trivial or miniscule fact in the Rand family history.

While downplaying the irreversible ramifications of slavery, this narrative strives to beautify the byproduct of a well-off landowner and a Black mistress by showing their descendants joyfully reuniting. Ruby Steen speculates that Ann (the Black mistress and mother of William Rand's six other children) was not William's slave. However, the dynamic of that relationship resembles that of President Thomas Jefferson's master/slave relationship with Sally Hemings (a connection that many historians claimed was based on mutual love and desire rather than ownership and captivity).

*Black in America* ostensibly bypasses any detailed analysis on how slavery might have shaped the Rand family. Simply stating that Ann lived close to William's family gives the skewed impression that they also had a close relationship, one that reconcile race and class during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. O'Brien's reference to Ann as William's possible mistress to audiences, rather his property, makes the uncomfortable historical fact of Whites exploiting Blacks more tolerable to its mainstream audiences. By omitting racial oppression as any potential factor between Ann and William, possible White guilt surrounding slavery is curtailed. The more soothing, and therefore preferred ending, is one with a jubilant interracial reunion.

Moreover, representations of the happy, joyous, and free meeting between Ruby Steen and Martha overtly reifies messages that we are living in a post-race society by only revealing footage of the Black and White family members embracing each other and taking pictures (specifically with William's framed portrait in the center). Soon after, O'Brien describes Ruby Steen and Martha as kissing cousins. The conclusion of this narrative offers a feel-good ending to a reality that conceivably stemmed from

racial oppression. Color-blind racism and post-race ideology are presented to audiences because they are asked to overlook a traumatic racialized past, and instead focus only on this present-day wonderful, racial utopia moment. Ruby Steen's contention that their reunion "would not have happened 40 years ago" further extends the myth that America, particularly the American South, is finally past its race problem.

Without further discussion, Ruby Steen's sentiments seem to normalize her reunion with her White family members to the audiences, thus leaving audiences with the ill misconception that all long lost Black and White relatives in the 21st century are simply able to overlook their past and completely ignore any racial differences. In short, this segment simplifies the complexity of race in 19th century Texas to audiences by overarchingly describing Ann as a woman who lived close to William's family; considering that the Rands were slave owners, it is likely that Ann was his slave. Post-race ideology is further advanced by displaying Black and White family members instantly accepting each other without any discussions regarding race. This revelation invites audiences to see Ruby Steen and Martha's instant love for each other as the barometer of how divorced America is from its race problem.

### **Ira Johnson**

Before deconstructing Ira Johnson's narrative, her storyline reflects the frame of the Black woman and societal imposition. There are a number of overt and subtle messages presented throughout *Black in America*, drastically demonstrating what happens when Black women do not (for whatever reason) adhere to White supremacist, heteronormative expectations. For instance, this frame highlights the ways in which the

docu-series arguably uses a contemporized image of the struggling Black and single mother living in despair. Pathological images significantly concentrate one aspect of Black femininity as an economic burden. Furthermore, this frame highlights Black women who are facing (or have faced) with little to no hope of overcoming her circumstances. Her constant portrayal of Black women as an economic hardship reiterates the ubiquitous image of the welfare queen who is exploiting government assistance financed by hardworking taxpayers. Considering the work of Donald Bogle (2001), Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki (2001), and Beretta E. Smith-Shomade (2002) , it is plausible that some media makers portray Black women as financially and sexually irresponsible to justify their inferior treatment in America's status quo.

### **Frame of the Black Woman and Social Imposition**

Through this fame, the Black woman has created her own misery destined to live an undesirable, destitute, and miserable life because she does not “have a man.” Depicted as a desperate woman who is willing to go to any lengths to no longer being single. The frame of social imposition tends to only recognize heterosexuality. As for education, she stereotypically has never attended college. Assuming that she is not a high school drop-out, she is satisfied with attaining her high school diploma or a GED. The frame of Black womanhood and imposition contends that due to poor academic choices, she is relegated to a life of self-manufactured misery destined to experience mental issues and suicidal aspirations.

In summation, *Black in America* arguably relies on the frame of racial reconciliation. I also identify a second frame used to portray Black womanhood to mainstream audiences. The Black womanhood and imposition frame has three main

characteristics needed to perpetuate stereotypes in news media. The first quality of the imposition frame is its overt and covert description of Black womanhood as synonymous to poverty. Through this frame, she is imprisoned by the cycle of poverty, with little to no chance of ever obtaining financial security. She is depicted as a socio-economic burden, or the ever used identity as a welfare queen, who exploits government assistance programs at the expense of hardworking taxpayers.

Complimenting her economic demise, the second characteristic of the imposition frame is that the Black women are hopelessly and helplessly single. This element of this frame portrays single Black femininity as an undesirable, wretched, and destitute experience, one inevitably destined to have without a husband. Though she is single, this frame leans on the idea that the Black woman has created her own financial misery because she chooses to irresponsibly conceive children out of wedlock. This frame tends to gravitate towards narratives of heterosexual Black women, often marginalizing the realities of women with different sexual orientations. The third aspect of this frame is that Black women are presented as subjects with no regard for higher education. As mainstream American ideals still consider obtaining a college education as a staple of success, this frame depicts Black womanhood as the antitheses of academia. The frame of imposition illuminates narratives of Black women who may or may not have a high school diploma.

In essence, the portrayal of Black women in the frame of imposition is that unmarried Black woman intrusively and irresponsibly make deliberate decisions to have children out of wedlock. Because she is not financially secure, her choices require the

financial support of others. The identifying cause appears to be her inability, or supposed unwillingness, to get married before conception to help prevent generational poverty.

Additionally, the moral judgment is that single Black women are compulsively hypersexual, immoral objects. Ultimately, this frame's endorsing remedy is heterosexual marriage and Christian values to help end the cycle of poverty.

The second narrative is based on Ira Johnson, a single Black mother appearing to be in her 40s. Now located in The Fifth Ward Church of Christ in Houston, Texas, she is first seen standing in front the congregation and asking church members for their prayers. Ira is not a member of the Rand family, but her pastor is related to them.

O'Brien's voiceover describes Ira's background as viewers is shown still photographs of her as a teenager as well as images of her mother and father. Set in her living room of a modest apartment, Ira's interview goes as follows:

**Ira** (facing O'Brien): I was out of the church for a few years. I was lost, depressed, suicidal. I can't go back to that.

**O'Brien**: How hard has it been to be a single mom?

**Ira**: Sometimes, like, I need a break. I need a breather. I need to walk away from that situation and put everything in perspective and say, OK, we're next.

Now appearing in a small kitchen with her four teenagers, Ira sings the Happy Birthday song to one of her kids while serving them cookies and ice cream.

**O'Brien** (voiceover as Ira prepares the kids to go to school in the morning, and while she is at her job): Ira struggles to provide for her large family, working two jobs as a real estate agent and a licensed massage therapist. Her day begins

before sunrise, making sure the kids get ready for school. Then she's off to work making cold calls to drum up business and showing houses to potential buyers [she's now seen showing a house that is for sale to a client] well into the night.

**Ira** (voiceover): I can't stop. I push myself more now than I ever have. There are times, especially the summer time, I didn't come home until like 8:00 at night sometimes.

**O'Brien** (voiceover while showing the kids getting ready for school): Her life is one of constant juggling with no easy choices. Does she pay the phone bill, does she keep the lights on, does she get the kids something they need or ask them to go without? Ira's life is the rule, rather than the exception, in Black America, as the number of women who are raising children on their own is skyrocketing.

At this point, O'Brien shares statistics with the audience regarding single Black motherhood. Tracing back to the mid-1960's, O'Brien explains, "25 percent of all Black children were born to unwed mothers, an alarming statistic. But consider this. Today, that's jumped to nearly 70 percent."

Now interviewing Bishop T.D. Jakes, the pastor of a 30,000-member congregation in Dallas and *New York Times* Best-Seller author, Jakes explains the consequence of girls growing up without fathers. He says, "...it's dangerous because they're enamored with male attention, to the degree that they will do anything to get the love of a man that they should have gotten at home."

**O'Brien** (voiceover as the audience is shown more still photographs of a younger Ira while pregnant, and her parents): That's exactly what happened to

Ira Johnson. Her mother died when she was just 16. And, while her father lived at home, Ira says he was seldom home there, leaving her to raise her baby brother. So, when an older man pursued her, she was more than flattered by his attention.

**Ira** (facing O'Brien): He would have to be in his early 30s at that time. I was young and wanted to have fun. Then after I got pregnant, I was like, OK, maybe this is something that I should start thinking about, because I didn't use any protection, no contraceptive, nothing. And I got pregnant.

**O'Brien** (voiceover a picture of Ira's children as babies/toddlers): By the age of 29, Ira Johnson was a single mother to four children by the same man.

**O'Brien** (facing Ira): Why not get married? I mean, 'cause it's not like you had one kid (chuckling). You had four of them. What was the decision-making process in your head?

**Ira**: There wasn't one. I was...at that time, I was young, but I also was depressed, because I didn't know about depression, but I knew something was wrong with me. And I just didn't tell anybody.

**Ira**: It's everything by myself. Income, it's my income. If I don't make it, guess what. We don't have it.

**O'Brien** (voiceover as O'Brien walks next to Ira in a working-class suburban neighborhood): Today, Ira is still unmarried and bears the responsibility of raising her large family on her own.

End on interview.

In subsequent scenes, Ira is filmed while riding in her brother's car because she cannot afford the repair costs of her own vehicle, and is lastly seen packing up the boxes in her home because she faces eviction. Visually speaking, seeing O'Brien and Ira facing each other seems to exemplify notions of the "right-thinking" Euro-centric wealthy versus the backward-thinking Afro-centric poor motif respectively. For instance, if we consider their attire, the women seem to be worlds apart. Colorisms and elitism manifest in one scene as fair-skinned O'Brien is dressed in a tailor-made white blazer, a black skirt and boots, professionally applied make-up and press-styled hair, frequently showing a smile made of straight white teeth. In contrast, dark complexioned Ira is dressed in a dull sleeveless tan shirt, and jeans. Unlike O'Brien, she wears little to no make-up, has a hairstyle that she might have combed herself, and has a smile of yellowing, crooked teeth. Whether they are walking side by side or facing each other, O'Brien and Ira's appearances emphasize how much these two women of color starkly contrast each other. One possible interpretation of their differences is that Ira's less appealing presence symbolizes economic disparity, whereas O'Brien's sharp appearance further cements her identity of someone from the upper-middle class.

Beyond attire, colorisms also seem to further divide O'Brien from Ira. Through the questions that O'Brien asks and information that she shares (i.e. "How hard has it been to be a single mom?" or "Why not get married?"), it is clear that O'Brien does not identify with many of the docu-series' participants. In this case, it may not be a coincidence that O'Brien (with the privilege of having pronounced Euro-centric features) is the one asking Ira (with the obstacle of having Afro-centric features) to

defend her decisions. Through physical contrast, it appears as though O'Brien's closer resemblance to whiteness represents one who is closer to high morale, values, and ethics than *the other* with darker skin whose life appears to be unmanageable.

The framing of Ira's story is worth mentioning because it elevates the modern racist notion that single Black mothers are poor. *Black in America* does not provide any countering storylines of an economically secure Black woman happily raising her children independently without any hardships. In fact, Ira is just one of many narratives used to re-emphasize images of the struggling Black mother fighting to barely make ends meet. Her narrative offers no hope, leaving audiences to think that despite her best efforts she will never succeed.

A major problematic element of this narrative is that it sends a very loud blame-the-victim message to the audience, starting with O'Brien asking, "Why not get married? I mean, 'cause it's not like you had one kid... You had four of them. What was the decision-making process in your head?" This inquiry alarmingly suggests that Ira is to blame for every socio-economic setback in her life. Inadvertently, the audience is left to work with these assumptions because they are not given any information about her past relationships nor her own personal thoughts on marriage. However, Ira does talk about the father of her children. She generally describes her past as a depressed 16-year-old living in a very fragmented household. Feeling as though there was no one who Ira could talk to, especially about sex, she became sexually active with a man in his 30's. So O'Brien's accusatory question of why Ira did not marry the father of her children ultimately directs the audience to overlook the fact that Ira was sexually molested as a

child. Instead of asking why Ira's perpetrator was never arrested for rape or child endangerment, O'Brien's question promotes the mainstream belief that marriage (even if it means marrying the man who sexually violated or statutorily rape her) would be the answer to all of Ira's economic problems.

O'Brien's question to Ira not only obsessively treats marriage as the only solution to her socio-economic drawbacks, it also ignores alternative ideas that could possibly place her in a better financial position. As Collins (2000) explains, the disciplinary domain of power's goal is to create "quiet, orderly, docile, and disciplined populations of Black women" (p. 299). Instead of asking Ira why she never pursued entrepreneurship, a career change, or a college degree (*any* alternative suggestion that could help her gain upward mobility), O'Brien only asks why Ira did not marry the father of her children. Therefore, the explicit message sent to viewers through Ira's account is that without marriage, single Black women face severe socio-economic consequences if they choose not to live within the traditional, nuclear family model.

Furthermore, O'Brien's statistics regarding the rates of single Black mothers do not address instances in which Black women are increasingly deciding how they want to develop their own families. The statistic is presented under the fallacy that all Black women strive to follow the order of first getting married and then conceiving children. By stating that almost 70 percent of Black children are born to unwed mothers does not reflect the experiences of women who actually do not want to get married, but were ready for motherhood. It also fails to consider women who are co-parenting with alternative relationships whose commitments to each other are not legally recognized,

nor does it account for unmarried heterosexual couples that are living together. The statistic does not include couples who eventually get married after a child is born.

Reflecting on Johnson-Cartee's (2005) faceless attributions idea, it is noticeable that O'Brien does not verbally identify the sources of her statistics. There are moments in which the sources are displayed in small font for just a few seconds, however they are instantly eclipsed by the changes of scenery. O'Brien's questionable decision not to voice where the skewed statistics are derived from leaves their validity left open to interpretation.

*Black in America* does not attempt to counterbalance this type of information with more positive images. And any optimistic rhetoric used to portray blackness in a less depressing light is overshadowed by the documentary's heavy supply of negative images. Herman Gray (1989) addresses this concept in his research regarding the many ways in which Blacks are criminalized on local news nations. Referring to the drawback of the film, *The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America* (1986), he states:

Since Blacks dominate the visual representations that evoke images of crime, drugs, and social problems, little in the internal logic and organization of the documentary supports this contention. Even when voice-over data is used to address these issues among Whites, it competes with rather than compliments the dominance of the visual representations. (p. 380)

In other words, audiences watching *Black in America* are more likely to be in tuned with the film's pervasive images, even when statistical data is presented on the screen.

Another taxing component of this segment is Bishop T.D. Jakes' generalization of girls raised in households without fathers. Noting "...they will do anything to get the love of a man that they should have gotten at home," Jakes argues that *all* girls raised only by their mothers are destined to have an emotional void that can only be filled by another man. His prediction does not keep in mind the countless types of influential relationships that girls might have with other authoritative role models, such as grandfathers, brother, or uncles. Without any contextualization, Jakes' sentiments portray a very dark and sorrowful depiction for girls whose families do not align with Christian-based, patriarchal, heteronormative expectations.

In order to further understand O'Brien's criticism of Ira having children outside of wedlock, it is necessary to deconstruct how *Black in America* employs the frame of Black women and religious codependency. Within this particular frame, the notion is that Black culture (as a whole) heavily rely on their religion, even to the point of seemingly making logic and productivity unnecessary. For example, Ira's storyline begins with footage of her attending a Black Christian church. As the audience is able to see footage of Ira asking the church to pray for her family and subsequently her praying with her family before eating dinner, she also explains to viewers that the church "quite literally saved her life." Because the church plays such an integral part of Ira's reality, it is critical to think about how this specific institution shapes her ideology. Interestingly, she makes significantly more references to her religious beliefs as opposed to sharing her plans to obtain a more financially rewarding job, or any consideration of seeking higher education to place her in a better position to have an

established career. In essence, the frame of Black women and religious codependency echoes the idea that Black use religion to eclipse other ways in which they can accomplish their goals.

Reflecting on Patricia Hill Collin's matrix of domination, the hegemonic domain of power revisits where and how Black women are taught to be treated as second-class citizens. Collins (2000) explains, "school curricula, religious teachings, community cultures, and family histories have long been important social locations for manufacturing ideologies needed to maintain oppression" (p. 303). Throughout Ira's narrative, audiences can see that Christianity is a major influence in her life as she says her prayers in church and grace at the dinner table. While there is nothing wrong with believing in Christianity, it is necessary to think about how the church could serve as a major source of irrational judgment and excessive interrogation of women. This concept is especially true for many gay Black Christian women facing homophobia (Griffin, 2006; Stanford, 2013) and women of any sexual orientation who experience sexism in Black churches (Pinn, 2002). These are realities that too many Black women have to deal with whenever they do not succumb to White, patriarchal demands (Gorham, 2013).

### **Maryann Reid**

Ira's segment demonstrates how *Black in America* employs colorisms and advances the modern racist notion that single Black mothers are dysfunctional, poor, and unable to take care of their families. It demonstrates the frame of the Black womanhood and religious codependency as Ira only refers to her faith as the answer to rectify a mountain of socio-economic issues. By contrasting O'Brien via phenotype and attire,

the two women are depicted as socio-economic and moral opposites. Ira's narrative also reveals to us how the docu-series accentuates modern racism because it only shows one aspect of Black motherhood. Her storyline functions more as a warning to multiple audiences of what happens when a Black woman fails to adhere to America's White masculine

ideals. With O'Brien's message of marriage as the only palpable solution to Ira's economic downfall, attention is now given to Maryann Reid to further reiterate how the frame of Black women and religious codependency work within the institution of marriage.

Maryann's segment begins with her dressed in a purple and teal gown while giving a speech presumably at a wedding reception. Cameras pan to her website, [marryyourbabydaddy.com](http://marryyourbabydaddy.com) (as of today, [marryyourbabydaddy.com](http://marryyourbabydaddy.com) is not available on the Internet). The inside of the church is then shown with hanging banners stating, "God is Able" and "Jesus is Light"; rose petals lay on the aisle suggesting that a wedding is about to take place. Throughout this interview, the theme of colorisms or racial hierarchy between Maryann and O'Brien resurfaces. Similar to Ira, Maryann is another brown-skinned woman with a broad nose and hair that she might have styled herself. She wears a blue and white polka dot blouse with black slacks. Wearing a red dress with a white belt, O'Brien's make-up and hair are flawlessly done. And like Ira's segment, marriage is also a main topic. The interview goes as follows:

**O'Brien** (voiceover as Maryann peruses her website): Maryann Reid is the creator of a relatively new program called Marry Your Baby Daddy Day.

**O'Brien** (facing Maryann): How many have you married since 2005?

**Maryann**: I have married 40 baby mamas and daddies.

**O'Brien** (voiceover while the inside of the church and signs are shown): The term baby daddy means a father who is not married to the mother of his child.

**Maryann** (facing O'Brien): I love that term. I have no problem with that.

**O'Brien** (voiceover as Black brides walk out of a limousine): The goals are ambitious to create more stable communities in the Black community through marriage.

Footage now shows Maryann and O'Brien smiling and walking next to each other on a busy New York City sidewalk.

**O'Brien** (voiceover as Maryann talks on the phone and various images of marrying couples appear): Maryann was raised by a single mother. At 33, she's never been married and has no children. She's just one woman hoping to reverse the trend in her New York Community, 10 couples at a time.

**Maryann** (smiling/facing O'Brien): In a community where you have just women raising children, it's not always the most stable community, because I believe fathers are a vital part of our social ecosystem. I mean, we need them.

**O'Brien** (voiceover as a groom dances down the aisle and a bride prepares herself in a hallway): The program is much more than pomp and ceremony. Couples go through a rigorous selection process. And if chosen they must agree to three or four months of premarital counseling. Then it's an all-expense-paid wedding.

Footage of an excited couple exchanging wedding vows and also cutting a piece of a wedding cake is now shown.

**O'Brien** (facing Maryann): The clergy must have loved this. I mean, didn't the churches open their doors and say, this is fantastic? Black couples who already have kids marrying; wow, this is great news?

**Maryann:** No.

**O'Brien:** Not at all?

**Maryann:** No.

**O'Brien:** Resistant?

**Maryann:** Yes.

**O'Brien:** Really?

**Maryann:** Yes.

**O'Brien:** Why were they so resistant, do you think?

**Maryann:** There are some negative connotations with the word "baby daddy." Is it going to be ghetto and crazy? And it was not even like that. It was so nice, so fun, just love.

End of interview.

O'Brien's interview with Maryann employs modern racism in a number of ways.

First, it perpetuates the racist notion that single motherhood is an exclusively Black experience. For instance, the terms "baby daddy" and "baby mama" are important to break down in order to understand how language strengthens this misconception.

Neither Maryann nor O'Brien mention that this colloquialism is used in other

communities to describe unwed mothers and fathers, therefore leaving audiences to only associate Black men as “baby daddies”. Maryann briefly mentions that “there are some negative connotations with the word ‘baby daddy’” by acknowledging that other members of the clergy probably thought that the event would be ghetto (or tacky). Through this description, she singlehandedly racializes and assigns a specific class to the term. Left ignored, Maryann’s use of “baby daddy” placates to the modern racist notion that Black fathers are just mere appendages within poor families.

Alternatively, O’Brien could have further probed for a more candid explanation that a baby daddy is widely assumed by many people to be an irresponsible, immoral, and a hyper-sexually distant father with loose parenting skills. While it is possible that O’Brien or Maryann provided an in-depth explanation of the stigma associated with the label baby-daddy prior to editing, the final cut leaves this term open to racialized interpretations. Furthermore, explaining that Marry Your Baby Daddy Day offers an all-expense paid wedding presents the delusion that unwed mothers and fathers are only from low-socioeconomic realities. The only participants engaging in this event are Black brides and grooms, therefore perpetuating misconceptions that unwed parents are a Black race and working class epidemic.

Maryann’s narrative leads to more observations that Christianity is the only religious faith discussed throughout *Black in America*; there is no inclusion of Black Muslims, Jews, etc. Altogether ignoring at least one “alternative” denomination that many other Blacks believe in inevitably presents Christianity as the one legitimate religion that they follow (or ought to). Because marriage and Christianity are themes

prevalent in both Ira and Maryann's narratives, the implicit message conveyed through both narratives is that "good" Christians get married regardless of the circumstances.

In some respects, Ira and Maryann appear to be very different women; the former is a struggling impoverished mother of four children, while the latter is a childless woman whose organization is financially able to finance weddings for new couples. However, it is arguable that Ira and Maryann both embody the contemporized racist notions of Black women existing as mammy-like figures. Historically speaking, the mammy was usually portrayed as a loyal caretaker of her White masters' family, even breastfeeding/raising her owners' babies. With her brown-skin, overweight size, full lips and a broad nose (she was never a light-skinned woman) she was never a threat to White woman because she was considered asexual and undesirable. Often wearing a bandana, shabby clothing, and a worn out apron for her domestic responsibilities, the mammy lives with internalized beliefs that Negroes are indeed inferior to Whites. In fact, she has little to no patience with those field slaves who have yet yield to their masters' morals, religion, values, etc. as she considers herself a model example of how the Negro should behave. She is, in essence, whiteness in a Black body.

Popular culture has also shown us how the mammy figure has evolved over time. For instance, Aunt Jemima served as the quintessential face of pancake flour and syrup for over a century now. One transition of the character went from a brown round-faced character wearing a bandana and plaid red/black apron, to Aunt Jemima (still smiling) with a curly hairstyle and pearl earrings. The point that I am making here is that even though the brand has softened the offensive slave markers of Aunt Jemima, she is still a

slave character used for marketing purposes in the present-day.

This phenomenon is applicable to both Ira and Maryann. If we remove the bandanas, aprons, and overbearing White masters, her raising of White babies, the framing of these women arguably enhances modern racist notions of Black women as the mammy-figure. For instance, Ira seems to have internalized ideas that marriage could resolve all of her economic problems. Much like the traditional mammy, she also succumbs to her internalized Christian beliefs that she should be married, even if it means questioning why she did not regretfully marry the over-aged man whom impregnated her as a minor. Throughout her interview, she smiles while living as an economic slave facing eviction. She also talks about how “short” her money is, as she works at her underpaying job, and as she talks about her battle with depression. This imagery is not far removed from historical mammy figures throughout popular culture presented with a happy countenance while in the midst of personal devastation.

Maryann’s narrative also conveys updated racist notions of Black femininity in a number of ways. Unlike traditional, exploitive portrayals for Black women, Maryann is not overweight and is not singlehandedly raising several children. On the contrary, she wears business and formal attire (indicating that she may be part of the middle-class), and is very articulate. These characteristics diametrically oppose the collective imagination of what a mammy figure looks or acts like. However, similar to the traditional mammy figure, Maryann gives audiences the impression that her internalized values are superior to those “lost” Blacks in serious need of counseling and guidance. And like the mammy figure she is not married, but with the Marry Your Baby Daddy

Day program, she is able to implement White Christian mainstream beliefs of what a family ought to be made of. It is noteworthy that Maryann is not coordinating these weddings for single Whites, other people of color, or members of the GLBT communities. Through the interpersonal domain of power, she only endorses marriages aligned with her own Christian beliefs – as opposed to Black Muslims, Jews, Atheists, etc. She focuses only on curing the so-called epidemic of a very specific type of dysfunctional Black mother and father.

### **Frame of Black Womanhood and Religious Codependency**

Ira's narrative demonstrates the consequences of not adhering to heteronormative expectations of having children after marriage. By using colorisms, *Black in America* presents a brown-skinned single woman as the face of struggle. Due to her assumed hyper-sexuality, she now raises several children on her own through poverty. Her storyline also illustrates how the disciplinary and hegemonic domains of power function throughout her life. In addition, Maryann's narrative perpetuates new racism as an updated mammy figure determined to fix other Blacks' problems. Colorisms prevail yet again as the audience is presented with another image of a single brown-skinned person not living up to White Christian patriarchal ideals; she is arguably framed as an incomplete woman because she is childless and unmarried. However, Maryann's supposed redeeming quality (insidiously mentioned) is that she is at least helping others to meet those expectations. Maryann further extends the Black woman and religious codependency frame by using Christianity as a justified reason to marry the baby mamas and baby daddies. She is not concerned about marrying other couples of various faiths. She is not interested in marrying couples in alternative relationships. In

the name of her codependency on to Christianity, she may be marrying couples who chose not to get married in the first place.

### **Whoopi Goldberg**

Extending the discussion of life as a single Black mother struggling to raise her children, *Black in America* provides a narrative based on Whoopi Goldberg's past experiences. An Academy, Tony, Grammy, and Golden Globe winner, Goldberg is internationally known for her role in films such as *Ghost* (1990), *Sister Act* (1992) and *Girl, Interrupted* (1999); she was currently a co-host of the popular talk show *The View* (2007-2016). Before O'Brien interviews her, the women talk while contentedly walking down the hallway of a private screening room. O'Brien wears pearl earrings and a pearl necklace, a black blouse with purple suede jacket, a black skirt, and black suede boots. Standing to her right, Whoopi wears a dark pair of shades, layered long-sleeved green and white shirts, jeans, and white sneakers. Similar to Ira and Maryann, Whoopi's physical appearance opposes O'Brien's; her signature natural dreadlocks contrasts O'Brien's relaxed straight hair, the former's brown skin and pronounced Afro-centric features are radically different from the latter's Euro-centric features and fair skin.

While the women walk, O'Brien explains:

**O'Brien** (voiceover): Someone who knows Ira's dilemma all too well is comedian Whoopi Goldberg. Before the fame of Hollywood, Whoopi was Caryn Johnson, a divorced mother who, in 1974, was trying to raise a daughter on just \$300 a month.

As the women sit down next to each other, audiences are shown a black and white

photograph of Whoopi as a much younger woman smiling.

**O'Brien** (now facing Whoopi): How difficult was it for you to be a single mother with a 1-year old in California by yourself?

**Whoopi**: It wasn't difficult at all. Thank God for the welfare system, because the welfare system helped me unbelievably.

**O'Brien**: How so?

**Whoopi**: It allowed me to take a breath. Take care of the business at hand, which was the kid, and really get myself together.

**O'Brien** (voiceover displays of pictures of Goldberg lobbying in the White House): Her experience led her to Capitol Hill in 1995, where she credited part of her success to the welfare system. And today, she continues to advocate for single mothers.

**Whoopi** (facing O'Brien): What these people need is, they need some dignity. They need a job. They need a job that they can do. And they need some supplemental dough, so they can do what needs to be done in their lives. That's what they need.

End of interview.

Whoopi's discussion with O'Brien accentuate three main ideas. First, her narrative reinforces new racism by revolving around the myth of meritocracy. With the "if they made it, then so can you" notion, the lift-yourself-by-your-bootstraps principle contends that anyone can become successful if they simply work hard enough. It maintains that race, class, and gender are mere hurdles that anyone can overcome, and that these factors are just overused excuses to accomplishing goals. In only one minute,

her framed narrative offers a simple rags-to-riches story void of any accounts related to sexism, racism, or classism. Her God-thanking gratitude of the welfare system portrays this resource as a ramp used to gain access to upward mobility, rather than as institution based on systemic racism generally designed to keep people of color socio-economically displaced.

Even with the frame of imposition and the frame of destined failure, Whoopi's experience as a single mother on welfare is complex because she, by several accounts, is very successful. A perspective that one could have is that her narrative defies modern racism because she is a Black woman that overcame formidable odds of getting off of welfare to become a millionaire. Without the advantages of colorisms afforded other actors (i.e. Halle Berry, Thandie Newton, Zoe Saldana, or Vanessa Williams), Whoopi is the epitome of determination, resilience, and hard work. However, I argue that her narrative offers very subtle racist messages regarding misunderstandings of Black women receiving government assistance. It seems as though *Black in America* celebrates Whoopi as an extremely rare case in which a Black person appropriately used her financial assistance. In other words, the storyline is not just about how Whoopi was once poor, received welfare (hence the frames of imposition and of destined failure), and then became wealthy. The covert message is that Whoopi is particularly special because she is not like those *other* Black people stereotypically known for abusing the welfare

system, specifically “the welfare mother [who] lazily collects government checks and reproduces poverty by passing on her pathologies to her many children” (Stephens and Phillips, 2003, p. 9).

Whoopi’s narrative offers yet another feel-good story of a single welfare mother (who once lived off \$300 a month) turned famous actress/White House guest, giving audiences the impression that she easily and swiftly accomplished her goals without any opposition. *Black in America* omits any discussion about the lengthy list of socio-economic drawbacks that too many welfare (especially Black) survivors have to deal with (Davis, 2006; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001, Quadango, 1996). Equally important, it also treats Whoopi’s success as a famous and wealthy actor as an everyday experience. By focusing on Whoopi upward mobility as a former welfare recipient, it fuels the White dominant ideology that if she can do it, then there is no excuse as to why others cannot follow her example.

The second main point is that Whoopi’s description of welfare as a valuable resource that a person can use to “take care of the business at hand” is a great segue into how the structural domain of power works. Collins (2000) explains:

Historically, in the United States, the policies and procedures of the U.S. legal system, labor markets, schools, the housing industry, banking, insurance, news media, and other social institutions as independent entities have worked to disadvantage African-American women. For example, Black women’s long-standing exclusion from the best schools, health care, and housing illustrates the

broad array of social policies designed to exclude Black women from full citizenship rights. (p. 295)

Welfare is another social institution that has widely worked to disadvantage African-American women because it systematically keeps them relegated to inferior medical care, education, and housing (Hancock, 2004; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001, Quadango, 1996). In fact, the American welfare system places its emphasis on employment as opposed to education. Because impoverished women are not encouraged to pursue higher education, they remain stuck with a low socio-economic status with minimum wage paying jobs. Despite *Black in America* using one atypical success story about a welfare-recipient turned movie star, an overwhelming majority of Black women on welfare remain ever trapped within this structural domain of power.

Third, this segment encourages a close analysis of how her physical presence continues to reinforce the controlling image of the typical welfare queen. Yes, *Black in America* applauds Goldberg's experiences because she responsibly used government assistance. However, colorisms surrounding stereotypes of what the welfare queen looks like remain intact throughout the storyline. Along with Ira, the audience is shown the ubiquitous image of a brown-skinned woman (with pronounced afro-centric features) associated on some level with economic disparity. The docu-series never examines a light-skinned woman who is financially troubled, nor does it display a Black woman who shares the same features as O'Brien talking about her experiences as a welfare survivor. Similar to the interviews with Ira and Maryann, O'Brien's seating arrangement with Goldberg continues the light-skinned vs. dark-skinned dichotomy.

## **Myth of Meritocracy**

Goldberg's narrative reiterates the myth of meritocracy because her rare accomplishments as an ex-welfare recipient convey the message that all Blacks ought to be able to lift themselves by their bootstraps regardless of their circumstances. It also advances conversations on how the welfare system serves as a major structural domain of power in the lives of countless impoverished Black women. Finally, this story's compulsive association of a darker-skinned and welfare recipient demonstrate that color hierarchies and the contemporized image welfare queen are present in *Black in America*.

In summary, my findings indicate that "The Black Woman and Family" episode offers narratives that portray America as post-racial, reiterates the myth of meritocracy, and employs colorisms. Through Ruby Steen and Martha's demonstrates of the frame of reconciliation and frame of racial transcendence. With their jubilant reconnection and insistence that their colorblind interracial reunion would have been a problem 40 years ago, the docu-series perpetuates the illusion that America is now void of racism. My findings note that Whoopi's narrative not only advances the myth of meritocracy, but it also implies that America is now free of racism because there was no attention given to any racial obstacles that she may have endured as a Black woman in the White male- dominated entertainment industry. Whoopi's life as a single parent on welfare in the 1970s speaks to the frames of imposition and destined failure. Ira's impoverished reality as a single mother of four in 2008, my findings suggest that *Black in America* seemingly displays the negative consequences of Black women who did not adhere to White Christian patriarchal expectations. Along with Maryann's storyline, Ira also stresses the Black woman and religious codependency frame.

Despite *Black in America* arguably utilizing messages of a post-racial America, my findings further indicate that the docu-series paradoxically employs the use of colorisms and updated controlling images by associating many of the brown-skinned women with afro-centric features with economic distress and/or sexually irresponsibility (i.e. Whoopi as a welfare recipient, Ira as a single mother of four facing eviction). The contemporized mammy-figure manifests through Maryann, another single brown-skinned woman committed to getting unmarried Black women and men with children to adhere to White Christian mainstream beliefs of what a family should look like. Collectively, these narratives demonstrate the number of ways in which modern racism pervaded news media during the Obama Moment.

## CHAPTER V

### “THE BLACK MAN”

This chapter offers an extensive look at how the second episode, “The Black Man”, employs colorisms, controlling images, and promotes the myth of meritocracy by deconstructing five male participants. Altogether, these concepts strengthen the argument that this docu-series’ supposed intent of centralizing issues plaguing Black communities was actually counterproductive because it reifies false preconceived notions of blackness.

#### **James “Butch” Warren**

The first narrative derived from “The Black Man” episode focuses on James “Butch” Warren. Now set in Little Rock, Arkansas, cameras follow Butch as he reflects on his experiences as a well-off Black entrepreneur residing in an affluent, predominantly White neighborhood. Butch’s immediate family includes his wife, Joy, and three sons: Justin, Jamie, and Jonathan. Aligned with the mainstream ideas of having a traditional family and entrepreneurship, I examine how Butch’s framed story conveys messages supporting the myth of meritocracy, colorisms, and America as post-race. Butch’s story begins with him giving a tour of one of the schools he monitors with O’Brien. He is also seen driving his black Mercedes Benz to various locations: his neighborhood, a construction site that he is managing, and to Maumelle Middle School (MMS). Butch is then seen walking side by side with O’Brien on Little Rock’s Central

High School (LRCHS). Known as the first school to implement *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) with pioneers, Little Rock Nine, LRCH is also Butch's alma mater. Butch has fair skin, is bald, appears to stand at 6'2 tall with a medium-sized frame, and mostly dresses in business attire. His first outfit is comprised of black slacks, a buttoned-up shirt, a grey sports coat, and a black baseball cap, signifying that he is part of the upper-middle class. O'Brien wears a white blouse and black slacks with a Black coat. His interview goes as follows:

**O'Brien** (voiceover as he walks throughout MMS's halls and greeting others): James "Butch" Warren is making his daily rounds.

**Butch** (pointing to the ceiling's water stain): What happened here? We got a brand new school here.

**O'Brien** (voiceover as Butch investigates the campus's condition): As an executive for the Pallasky County School District, he oversees 40 schools in Little Rock.

**Butch** (referring to the basketball court): These are nice.

**O'Brien** (voiceover as Butch photographs what he sees in MMS): At 58 years old, Butch is financially secure and not shy about his success.

**Butch** (pointing to a large plaque including his name): I am very proud of that. Sometimes people go on an entire lifetime and never see their name on a plaque.

**O'Brien** (voiceover presentations of black and white still photos of LRCH's Little Rock Nine walking to school, and White soldiers with guns): Since Little Rock Central High was integrated 50 years ago, countless Black men like Butch

Warren have broken through barriers to take the work force by storm.

Images of a modern-day Black men using a cell phone along with another Black man with a brief case briskly walking are presented.

**O'Brien** (voiceover): They've watched their power and their incomes grow.

**O'Brien** (conversing with Butch while walking side by side on LRCH's campus): This is such a pretty campus, isn't it?

**Butch:** It really is.

**O'Brien** (voiceover images of the University of Arkansas sign, a photo of a young Butch with an afro, and photos of the developing Warren Construction Company): After graduating high school, Butch earned a sociology degree at the University of Arkansas. He started his own business in 1976, the Warren Construction Company. Twenty-five years later, he decided to make a career move.

**Warren** (joking with a group of Black boys attending MMS): Get those leg muscles built up. OK?

**O'Brien** (voiceover footage of Butch conducting business in his office, and happily thanking the cafeteria employees): Today, Butch earns six figures as an assistant school superintendent. The Warren family is part of a growing Black middle class. (Viewers can now see large houses with well-manicured yards in a prosperous community)

**O'Brien** (voiceover): Since 1960, the percentage of Black households earning \$100,000 or more has increased by about 50%.

**Butch** (while driving his Mercedes): A lot of people can't wait to get out of their jobs or they can't wait to go on vacation. I can't wait to go to work.

**O'Brien** (voiceover as the Warren family enjoys a picnic/BBQ with Black and White relatives): And success has carried over into his home life.

**Butch** (while seated in a living room setting): As corny as it sounds, but I used to watch *My Three Sons*, *Andy Griffith*.

Still images of these sitcoms are shown while Butch speaks.

**Butch:** You would see great father figures, you know, with these kids. I used to tell my friends all the time I was going to have three sons.

**O'Brien** (now standing with Butch in his driveway showcasing his luxury car and vast home): Do you think you relied on White role models to be successful, in a way?

**Butch:** White and Black. Both. Everybody. I tried to take the best from everything that I saw and put it together.

**O'Brien** (voiceover to image of Justin playing his guitar, a picture of Jamie holding his daughter, and Jonathan working in a courtroom): Butch has his three sons, 21-year-old Justin, a college student and aspiring musician, 32-year-old Jamie, a barber and father of four, and 35 year-old Jonathan, a deputy prosecutor in Arkansas.

**O'Brien** (voiceover): Like his father before him, Butch pushed his kids academically (a black and white picture of Butch as a boy with his father

appears). He coached little league and signed all the boys up for the Eagle Scouts.

Pictures of Butch coaching a multi-racial baseball team and posing with a scout in front of a tipi are displayed.

**Butch** (now seated in a living room setting): I got criticized by people who told me, said you know, they didn't like the way I was raising my sons. I was raising them too White folks was asking, only White kids do scouting. Why you got them in the woods?

**O'Brien** (voiceover to footage Jonathan enjoying a meal with his Black and White friends, presumably in Jonathan's kitchen): Butch also says he's been chastised by Black friends who don't approve of his son's relationships. His oldest son Jonathan is married to a White woman.

Jonathan's wedding picture with his wife are shown. Another picture is of Justin, Butch's youngest son, posed next to his White girlfriend are presented.

**O'Brien** (facing Butch in the driveway): Is it strange to you that your daughter-in-law is White?

**Butch** (pausing before answering and smiling): It's not strange.

**O'Brien**: Your younger son is dating a White girl. A lot of people would be angry about that.

**Butch**: We made sure that everything we did they were around White kids and Black kids so they could make their own choices.

**O'Brien** (voiceover to footage of an impoverished neighborhood): The

Warrens' success was their ticket out of the ghetto. In 1998, they left this street, a poor, mostly Black neighborhood near Central High.

**Butch** (walking on a sidewalk with O'Brien): My house had just gotten shot up by some gang members who came by. We had bullet holes on the house. Joy [his wife] said, it's time to move.

**O'Brien** (voiceover to footage of Butch's large home): And so they did. The Warrens built this 6,000 square foot home in one of Little Rock's most exclusive and mostly White neighborhoods. But the move had some uncomfortable moments.

**Butch** (while walking with O'Brien): It's been quite an experience.

**O'Brien** (voiceover more footage of Butch's neighborhood): Like the time Butch was driving around in his new neighborhood and neighbors called police.

**Butch** (standing in his driveway with O'Brien): Next thing I know, cops pull up. They jump out of the car and they say, what are you doing in this neighborhood? I said well, it's because I'm building THIS (he points to his home) house and THAT sign there happens to be me. I said, that's why I'm here. He said, oh, I'm sorry. We got a phone call that there were some people, some strange people in the neighborhood.

**O'Brien** (voiceover panoramic footage his neighborhood): Butch says other than the occasional stare, most neighbors have been friendly. But three years ago, the unthinkable happened.

**Butch** (seated in a living room setting): This is one of those things that's

hard to talk about.

**O'Brien** (voiceover as images of Jamie's mug shot and blown-up legal documents are displayed): Butch's son Jamie was arrested after shooting and wounding a man at a drug dealer's house.

**Butch** (with the cameras now showing his home with fast and shaky movement to convey a sense of urgency): Eight U.S. Marshalls showed up at my house on a Saturday morning. All the neighbors out in the neighborhood. Everything came to a complete stop. (A police car is displayed). It was embarrassing. It really was. It was quite embarrassing.

**O'Brien** (voiceover with an image of a newspaper clip exposing Jamie's case): Jamie was convicted of first-degree battery. He was sentenced to five years' probation. His family says he was in the wrong place in the wrong time and acted in self-defense (a black and white picture of a happy Warren family appears). Jamie won't talk about that night. His father hates to talk about it too (footage of a racially blended Black and White family members praying around the picnic table emerges).

**Butch** (voiceover as his wife prays): I think everybody pretty much still thinks we have the Cosby-type family. Thank God it didn't turn out differently.

End of interview.

Though lengthy, Butch's narrative is valuable in demonstrating how *Black in America* promotes the myth of meritocracy, employs colorisms, and portrays America as post-race. This storyline is crafted similarly to Whoopi's experiences. His professional

and personal accomplishments are painted as the result of a solid hardworking ethic and his professional career is presented as one void of any racial or class obstacles. For instance, O'Brien explains that Butch graduated from high school, then graduated from college to eventually become an entrepreneur now earning a six-figure salary income as an assistant school superintendent. Seemingly, Butch's interview simultaneously reflects the post-race mentality and myth of meritocracy because it does not offer an in-depth discussion about some of the racial obstacles that he likely experienced as a Black man in college, as a business owner, or as a leader in education in Arkansas. Like Whoopi's storyline, the presentation of Butch's career path echoes a message that any Black person can also earn six-figures if they would only lift themselves by their bootstraps by getting a college degree or starting a business.

Outside of his career, Butch does share moments in which the transition from a low socio-economic neighborhood into an affluent neighborhood has "been quite an experience." For example, he describes being pulled over by a suspecting officer who questioned Butch's presence in the neighborhood. He even admits that he gets "the occasional stare" from his neighbors. However, neither Butch nor O'Brien further contextualize these encounters as overt racial experiences. It is plausible that their lack of candor (i.e. descriptively saying that "*White* cops pull up..." or "*White* neighbors give the occasional stare") was an approach used to ensure that White audiences not feel guilty when hearing about White oppression. Nonetheless, Butch's minimal description of racial stares and unjust inquiries from White officers explicitly conveys the notion that America has solved its race problem. Despite Butch mentioning that he does get

unwelcoming glances, he ultimately downplays that reality by letting audiences know that “most of his neighbors have been friendly.” The idea here is that America has finally solved its race problem, or that racism in this country is not really *that* bad. Furthermore, the insidiously stated meritocratic principle is that if Butch can live unaffectedly by these encounters and still live triumphantly, then so should all Blacks who are interrogated by police or suspected by neighbors in affluent communities.

### **Frame of Racial Reconciliation**

In many other ways, Butch’s narrative parallels the same frame as Martha and Ruby Steen. Again, the frame of reconciliation is used to market America as a harmonious racial utopia. When he reflects on his racist experience with White police officers, he gives audiences a happily-ever-after ending (much like Martha and Ruby Steen) by referring to a conflict that occurred in front of his house with his name on it. Recalling a time in which police officers interrogated Butch on why he was in the predominantly White neighborhood, he explained to them that he was the homeowner of the 6,000 square foot house. He smiles and laughs while talking about that moment, but similar to the previous narratives, Butch’s reality fails to thoroughly describe what happened. Similar to ways in which Ira’s segment dances around the fact that she was statutorily raped, his narrative never bluntly identifies this interrogation as racial profiling. Again, these softening of facts arguably nurtures the comfort level of White and middle-class audiences by not making the issue of race too intense.

Within the frame of reconciliation, Butch’s description of how he raised his sons also points towards the direction of a post-race American society. A key moment during Butch’s interview is when he explains his inspiration from the White patriarchs in

White-cast only sitcoms like *My Three Sons* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. While some may question a Black man patterning his approach to fatherhood after White masculinist ideals, Butch further explains that he drew inspiration from both White and Black role models. With Butch emphasizing that his idea of how to raise a family encompassed both White and Black ideals, his story further promotes the post-race fantasy by concentrating only on the positive outcomes of incorporating whiteness into his life.

As the docu-series' portrayal of post-race prevails again, we can also see an example of the frame of reconciliation when O'Brien asks Butch about his White daughter-in-law. For instance, when O'Brien asks Butch if it is strange to him that his son's wife is a White woman, he says that it is not strange (after taking a moment to pause and think about his answer). When O'Brien probes even further by mentioning to Butch that his youngest son is also dating a White woman, she addresses the fact that a lot of people would be angered by their relationship. Butch continues to highlight his ability to *reconcile* his solution to the race problem by stating that he raised his own children around Black and White kids. Because this interview lacked an extensive conversation about the inter/intra-racial hostilities still directed toward White and Black couples, White and middle class audiences could easily interpret Butch's views of racial togetherness or so-called reconciliation as the norm.

A central argument presented throughout this project is that *Black in America* advances modern racism by employing color hierarchies. It ostensibly links wealthy/success stories to lighter-skinned Blacks, whereas most of the poverty/criminal-based stories are associated with darker-skinned participants. On the surface, the docu-

series' reference to Jamie (Butch's fair-skinned middle son) being convicted of first-degree battery appears to offer a counterargument to this position. There are hardly any storylines throughout *Black in America* in which light-skinned Blacks discuss their experiences as criminals. However, Butch (not Jamie himself) recalls the night that U.S. Marshals came to his home in search of his son; Jamie was arrested for shooting and wounding a man at a drug dealer's house. Besides Butch's speedy reflection (lasting only 1 minute and 23 seconds), there is absolutely no dialogue with Jamie about his life as a convicted felon. In fact, Jamie is never interviewed by O'Brien about his crime, and Butch avoids further conversation by saying that it is "one of those things that's hard to talk about." Furthermore, Jamie's actions are even justified when O'Brien explains that the family believes he was at the wrong place at the wrong time, and that he acted in self-defense. Yet, because his criminal past is downplayed as one acting in self-defense, or as one with a poor sense of timing, the softening of Jamie's narrative only solidifies how color hierarchies work. In order to make sense of a lighter-skinned Black man committing a crime, the docu-series seemingly opted to rationalize his choices. Therefore, while news media tend to pathologize darker-skinned Blacks as irrational and unruly law-breakers, violent acts committed by lighter-skinned Blacks (due to their physical proximity to whiteness) are more likely to be framed as justifiable acts of self-defense.

### **Jonathan Warren**

Butch Warren's narrative assists with showing how the myth of meritocracy, rhetoric of American as post-race, and colorisms permeate this new-based docu-series.

Sharing parallel views, Jonathan's segment compliments his father's narrative. Resembling his father, he is a fair-complexioned, bald, clean-shaven man mostly dressed in professional business attire. Like Butch, Jonathan also has a white-collar career as a public servant in Arkansas. They are both homeowners residing in predominantly White neighborhoods, are the patriarchs of traditional nuclear families, and express thoughts that racial injustices are not as prevalent as they once were in the past. Like Butch, Jonathan celebrates mainstream markers of success: a nice house, a wife with a traditional family, and an established career. With these connections in mind, Jonathan's interview will be used to continue to examine how the theme of America as post-race reoccurs throughout *Black in America*.

### **Frame of Racial Transcendence**

Though there are similarities between Jonathan and his father Butch, there is still a major distinction between their storylines. Whereas Butch's narrative fits into the frame of *reconciliation*, Jonathan's story compliments the frame of racial *transcendence*. I refer to the frame of transcendence to Jonathan's experiences because as is indicated through the conversation between the Black and White relatives, racism (and all of its byproducts such as slavery) are often depicted by mainstream news media as historical, irrelevant, extinct practices in the contemporary. The racial transcendence frame reiterates that a modern-day Black person, or the "new Black", is not impacted by racism and does not consider race as a socio-economic obstacle in today's society. In many instances, Jonathan's indication that he transcended or overcame racism is accentuated by the racial color-blind perspective.

Jonathan's story begins with footage of him walking through the corridors of the

police department conducting business. Dressed in black slacks, a blue business shirt with a yellow tie, audiences are instantly shown clips of Jonathan busily working from his desk (comparable to footage of Butch working behind his desk as a superintendent) filing papers, talking on the phone, and writing notes. The storyline goes as follows:

**O'Brien** (voiceover footage of Jonathan working): Jonathan Warren is a district attorney in Sherwood, Arkansas. He lives in a middle class community in North Little Rock.

Viewers can now see Jonathan talking on the phone in his kitchen as his wife walks around him.

**O'Brien** (voiceover): He's worked hard to get where he is today.

**Jonathan** (facing O'Brien): I live in a nice house. I am blessed. I have a great wife. I have a great family. I have a great job.

**O'Brien** (voiceover while Jonathan and his White wife host a multi-racial get-together for their friends; they are shown talking and laughing): He shares many of the same values as his White neighbors. Still Jonathan says he knows where he comes from.

**Jonathan** (facing the camera, dressed in a blue business suit, blue shirt, and red tie while standing in front of a building): I can identify with people who live like I do and see life like I do. I think it's more of a class issue than it is a racial issue. I know what I look like in the mirror. I'm Black. I'm an American.

**O'Brien** (voiceover while Jonathan prepares for a case in the courtroom): In fact, Jonathan is one of only two Black district attorneys in his county.

**Jonathan** (now seated, facing the camera): I treat every case the same, whether the person is Black, White, Red or Other.

Images of one Black male and White male defendants in the courtroom appear.

**Jonathan:** When there's a defendant standing in front of you, you can't help but notice what color they are.

**O'Brien** (voiceover while different young Black men appearing to be in their 20's approach a small panel of White law enforcers to plead their cases):

Jonathan sees himself as a prosecutor in the war on drugs. At least a dozen Black men are convicted in this courtroom each week.

The audience can now see Jonathan in the courtroom, as the judge has granted him another victory by declaring the defendant guilty.

**O'Brien** (voiceover): And that means having to defend a criminal justice system that he says can be unfair to Black men.

**Jonathan** (seated, facing O'Brien, dressed in a casual tanned-colored sweater, while O'Brien is dressed throughout the interview in a black business suit, holding a pen and paper on her lap to indicate that she is taking notes): I can see how people would look at me and think I'm part of the problem and not the solution. I try to do the best that I can.

**O'Brien:** Do you ever feel that you're sort of pulled in both directions?

**Jonathan:** There was a Black man who was in my court. He was charged with possession of a controlled substance. And he claimed that the police officers set him up and put the marijuana in his waist band. He was found guilty of

possession of a controlled substance. He was sentenced. He turned to me and looked at me and very adamantly said, man I was set up. I didn't do this.

**O'Brien:** How do you feel about that?

**Jonathan:** It may have had some validity to it. I mean, just like I said, I don't believe it in this particular situation. Does it happen? Of course it happens.

Mentioned later in another segment:

**Jonathan:** Does this justice system need twerking? Yes. Is it inherently sometimes unfair towards Blacks? Yes.

**O'Brien (voiceover):** Jonathan understands that doing his job sometimes means sending young Black men into a cycle of incarceration.

End of narrative.

Jonathan's segment underscores the frame of racial transcendence. Within this frame, the docu-series reiterates the post-racial theme in a number of ways by serving as an extension to Butch's storyline. His narrative begins with intimate moments of Jonathan hosting a casual dinner party comprised of White and Black friends, dining and laughing with each other. A photograph of Jonathan and his White wife is first shown in Butch's story, but in this particular segment viewers can actually see the couple interacting with each other. Though Jonathan acknowledges that he is Black and American, O'Brien's explanation that "he shares many of the same values as his White neighbors" stands out. Reflecting Butch's insistence that "most [White] neighbors have been friendly," Jonathan strives to transcend race by focusing on the commonalities he shares with his neighbors, his choice of friends, and even with his spouse. Rather

than identify some cultural differences that do exist between White and Black communities,

Jonathan's focus on their universality enhances the delusion that such distinctions do not exist at all. Consequently, viewers are left with false impressions that all Black and Whites people are unified.

Jonathan's most alarming statement that "...it's more of a class issue than it is a racial issue" can possibly be attributed to his personal background and reifies the frame of racial transcendence. He was raised by two parents with professional careers (his mother is a circuit judge and his father is an entrepreneur/educator), grew up in a well-to-do neighborhood comprised mostly of Whites, and played with children with different racial identities. With higher education and success as a prominent attorney, Jonathan has been able to gain upward mobility and reside in a prosperous community. *Black in America* offers no in-depth racialized discussion as to why Jonathan is "one of only two Black district attorneys in his county." There is no extensive dialogue about any racialized experiences Jonathan might have encountered as part of an interracial marriage in the South. This questionable omission advances the notion that racism is now extinct. And because it is a Black man professing that racism is no longer a problem, countless White and middle class viewers could use Jonathan (a Black man) as a legitimate reference that we are beyond the race problem.

In addition to escalating notions of a post-race society, Jonathan's storyline further advances modern racism with his colorblind ideology. Stating that he treats "every case the same, whether the person is [B]lack, [W]hite, [R]ed or [O]ther" appears

to be yet another search of universality as a Black prosecutor. By relaying his supposed capability of treating all defendants the same, regardless of race, Jonathan wants audiences to know that he is a professional, objective lawyer - one that is not allegiant to any race. But the more implicit message appears to be that that he is a safe, trustworthy, and non-threatening ideal Negro because Jonathan makes it clear that he does not show favoritism.

Considering Jonathan's role as a Black prosecutor offers a great segue into discussing how the structural domain of power permeates the life of all Black men. Collins (2000) explains:

Historically, in the United States, the policies and procedures of the U.S. legal system, labor markets, schools, the housing industry, banking, insurance, the news media, and other social institutions as independent entities have worked to disadvantage African-American women. For example, Black women's long-standing exclusion from the best jobs, schools, health care, and housing illustrates the broad array of social policies to exclude Black women from full citizenship rights. (p. 295)

Though Collins employs the matrix of domination as a socio-economic political frame shaping Black women's experiences, her analysis coincides with the realities of Black men too. Ruminating over the film's footage of young Black men defending their cases to a panel of White lawmakers, in extension to Jonathan's admission that Black men are sometimes set-up by officers, it is clear that both instances are simply reifying the structural domain of power's functionality. Presumably, many of the defendants shown

in *Black in America* are unable to afford a private attorney that could provide them with better counsel (unlike the socio-economic privileges granted to his brother Jamie). Partially due to lackluster representation, the Black defendant is likely to be found guilty, and therefore be unable to find a viable source of income (possibly offering insurance to tend to health care), permanently unable to vote (though they still pay must taxes), and find housing with a criminal background. Jonathan's segment ultimately initiates thoughts on how the legal system structurally oppresses many Black men.

### **D.L. Hughley**

Following Jonathan's story, *Black in America* profiles D.L. Hughley. An internationally-known comedian (he became a household name as one of the main acts in 2000's blockbuster hit, *The Original Kings of Comedy*), actor (he starred in a semi-autobiographical 1998-2008 sitcom, *My Wife and Kids*), and author (*Notes From the GED Section*, (2006); *I Want You to Shut the F\*ck Up* (2013)). He is currently the main voice of nationally syndicated radio show, *The D.L. Hughley Show* which discusses highly charged political and racial controversies. Hughley's controversial material regarding racial animosity recently landed him a role as CNN's guest political correspondent. Despite being rich and famous, Hughley's experiences and attitudes towards law enforcement polarize Jonathan's perspective. Whereas Jonathan's segment is shared from a prosecutor's vantage point, Hughley's narrative comes from a perspective of someone who has experienced the police racial profiling him throughout his life.

Prior to revealing his story, audiences are initially presented with horrific

portrayals of South Central Los Angeles during the 1980s. Specifically revealing televised images of violent protests surrounding the infamous Rodney King police brutality verdict in 1992, the clips include footage of looters, gang members throwing up their signs, dilapidated neighborhoods, and burning buildings. O'Brien's voiceover uses these scenes as D.L.'s childhood foundation. She explains:

**O'Brien** (voiceover): It's where actor and comedian D.L. grew up. He was a gang member in the notorious Bloods.

Set in his home's living room in front of a piano, D.L. is casually (and meticulously) dressed in a brown polo shirt while sporting a matching brown Kangol newsboy cap. Unlike Butch and Jonathan, D.L.'s arms are covered with tattoos, but, he is also accessorized with diamond earrings and a diamond watch. Altogether, his attire and jewelry reflect his wealth. D.L. is a brown-skinned man, whose afro-centric features are comprised of a broad nose and a full-grown twisty afro. Seated in front of O'Brien, he explains:

**D.L.:** I never felt more part of something, more connected, more powerful than I did when I was with this group from my neighborhood that was all about us looking out for us.

**O'Brien** (voiceover image of ambulance in an urban area): But Hughley got out when murder took the life of his cousin.

**D.L.** (voiceover images of gang members standing on street corners, police cars driving by): He lived in a Crip neighborhood. Then some cats killed him who happened to be Bloods.

**D.L.** (facing the camera): At that point, I realized I didn't want to die and I didn't want to kill anybody. And this wasn't real for me. This wasn't a real option for me.

**O'Brien** (voiceover various photos of D.L. performing or posing in designer suits while sporting his afro): Today, D.L. Hughley has achieved great success. But he believes as a Black man, he's always a target of the police.

**D.L.** (facing an unseen interviewer): When you're Black, your skin color is always in the equation.

**O'Brien** (voiceover footage of a police officer interrogating a Black man in his car): An equation, Hughley says, where it doesn't matter how rich you are or how famous you are. It's something he tells his son Kyle daily.

The film now shows D.L. jovially laughing with his son in in their luxurious, pool-equipped backyard. Like his father, Kyle is a brown-skinned young man who shares the same afro-centric features as D.L.

**D.L.** (facing the camera): He already knows and he has learned from the time he was 12 years old how to speak to the police, what to say, what not to say, to view the police differently than everybody else.

**Kyle** (standing in the kitchen, and casually dressed with a maroon-colored t-shirt): If they ask me a question that I'm uncomfortable answering, I say officer, I respect your job, but I would appreciate you if you would just call my parents and I'm not saying anything else.

**D.L.** (standing next to Kyle): And it's sad that I've had to have these conversations.

**O'Brien** (voiceover as the camera zooms in for a close-up of Kyle's face): Hughley tells the story of sending his son on an errand to a local jewelry store.

**D.L.** (facing the camera): The security guard pulls a gun on my son. The jeweler calls me and said, I'm sorry, we didn't know who he was. We had just got robbed. There were people that came in and they looked the exact same way. My son was doing exactly what I told him to do. He didn't do anything wrong. He's not a bad kid. That's how it happens, just like that.

End of interview.

D.L.'s storyline is significant because it further demonstrates how *Black in America* utilizes colorisms. Following the film's first father and son experiences shared between Butch and Jonathan, it is important to consider how some of D.L. and Kyle's perspectives contrasts the Warrens'. As previously described, Butch and Jonathan are advantageously fair-skinned Black men with Euro-centric features, whereas D.L. and Kyle are darker-complexioned men with Afro-centric features. Their physical features are noteworthy because this distinction could possibly explain why the couples have drastically different point-of-views regarding race. For instance, Jonathan maintains that social problem in America is "more of a class issue than it is a racial issue," but D.L. believes that "when you're Black, your skin color is always in the equation." Butch seemingly conveys a post-race imagination because he mostly spoke of welcoming neighbors in a predominantly White community, offers a happily-ever-after ending

despite an officer falsely identifying him as a criminal, and he embraces his sons' inter-racial relationships. However, D.L. appears to be more aware of both overt and systemic racism within the White racial frame.

On opposite sides of the spectrum, Jonathan's thoughts around law enforcement diametrically oppose those of D.L. (a former gang member) and Kyle's. While he acknowledges that the set-up of a Black defendant "may have had some validity to it," Jonathan still maintains his stance as a loyal-to-the-system prosecutor. On the other hand, Kyle (without the color hierarchy advantage of having light skin) shares his reality as a victim of police racial profiling. Through their narratives, *Black in America* reveals the polarity of the light-skinned law enforcer versus the assumed darker-skinned law-breaker. In the end, it is striking that within this circle of men, D.L. (a former gang member and the wealthiest amongst the group) and his son are more emphatic about negative experiences with police officers than their light-skinned counterparts are.

Besides offering a participant's candid argument that race is always a focal point within American law enforcement, and beyond highlighting how colorisms remain prevalent in the contemporary, both D.L. and Kyle's narratives fit neatly into the matrix of domination's structural domain of power. Despite D.L.'s wealth and notoriety, he and his family continue to live with the same racial profiling that he experienced in his childhood neighborhood (countering claims that racism is now eclipsed by classism). White police brutality towards innocent Black men is increasingly becoming a practice with little to no legal consequences. Take for example, the February 4, 1999 instance in which 24-year-old Amadou Diallo (an immigrant from Guinea) was shot 19 times by

police officers in New York City. All four police officers that murdered Diallo were acquitted of the crime (Fireside, 2004; Roy, 2009). Or the May 22, 2003 death of unarmed Ousmane Zongo (with no criminal background), whom was shot 4 times in New York City by an undercover officer dressed as a mailman. Though the officer was found guilty of conviction of criminally negligent suicide, he was only sentenced to 5 years of probation and the loss of his job (Levitt, 2010). Or the November 5, 2006 execution of 23-year-old Sean Bell, who along with two of his friends in Queens, NY, was shot at 50 times during the morning of his wedding. Like Diallo, Bell was also unarmed; the officers responsible for Bell's death were found not guilty (Gabbidon and Greene, 2012). And most recently, George Zimmerman (a White neighborhood watchman) was found not guilty by White jurors after shooting unarmed teenaged Trayvon Martin to death in February 2012. Subsequently, Darren Wilson is a White Ferguson, MO police officer who was not even indicted on charges for killing unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown in August 2014. Therefore, D.L. "training" Kyle how to communicate to officers is the residue of the ever-growing scroll of Black men who continue to die at the hands of police officers every day.

As Collins (2000) notes "...the disciplinary domain manages power relations" (299), this particular domain also relies on surveillance to maintain its structure.

Referring to Black women, Collins explains:

Surveillance now constitutes a major mechanism of bureaucratic control. For example, within prisons, guards watch Black female inmates; within businesses, middle managers supervise Black women clerical staff; and within universities,

professors train ‘their’ Black female graduate students within academic ‘disciplines.’ The fact that prison guards, middle managers, and professors might themselves be Black women remain less important than the purpose of the surveillance. Ironically, [they] may be watched by wardens, business executives, and university deans. In these settings, discipline is ensured by keeping Black women as a mutually policing subordinate population under surveillance. (p. 200)

Her idea of how surveillance permeates Black womanhood is also applicable to Black men. While Jonathan works as a Black man who prosecutes other Black men, it is plausible that he too is under the surveillance under his White supervisors. Her surveillance notion only reiterates the point that one’s class does not prevent Black men from living under surveillance. Regardless of their high socio-economic status, accomplished or privileged men such as Butch, D.L., and Kyle remain vulnerable to racial profiling by White officers simply because they are Black (Davis, 2005; Moore, 2010; Noel, 2007; Russell-Brown, 2008).

### **Frame of the Black Man Versus the Justice System**

Altogether, D.L. and his son Kyle exemplify the frame of the Black man versus the justice system. While Butch and Jonathan downplay the countless acts of police brutality and killings Black men have endured through the legal system, D.L. and Kyle draw much emphasis to their fear and resentment towards law enforcement. The Black man versus the justice system frame makes a clear distinction between the police against Black men of any age. With this distinction in mind, this frame validates the fear and hate that many Black men have towards the unjust and rigged American justice.

This frame also refutes any idea or rhetoric that we are living in a post-race society. Because the frame of the Black man versus the justice system revolves around blatant racism, there is also no regard for the idea of the racial color-blind concept. From Jonathan (a prosecutor) mildly intimating that there *may* be some truth of Black men getting prosecuted of a crime they did not commit, to D.L.'s (a former gang member) perspective that Black men are the innate target of police, "The Black Man" versus the justice system explains why the two viewpoints diametrically oppose one another.

### **Michael and Everett Dyson**

The last narrative derived from "The Black Man" episode offers yet another example of how news media advance modern racism through color hierarchies and reiterate the myth of meritocracy. While examining the dichotomous close relationship between two brothers, I wind this discussion down by also considering how their stories coincide with the matrix of domination's interpersonal and hegemonic domains of power. Through their narratives, Michael and Everett's experiences will be deconstructed to display themes of intra/inter-racial hostility, therefore dismantling the overall theme of *Black in America* that we are living in a post-race society.

The final narrative in *Black in America* concentrates on Michael Eric Dyson, Ph.D. An author of several books, the Detroit native is a Georgetown University professor and a Princeton graduate. A pastor and prolific activist, Michael routinely makes his rounds to media outlets like NPR and CNN. Michael's narrative begins with him delivering a sermon in a large Christian-based church in Detroit. Its choir and congregation are singing gospel songs, and shortly after, Michael begins to speak. A

statuesque man appearing to be in his 50s, Michael's light skin compliments his other Euro-centric features of thin lips, a narrow nose, and wavy black hair. Standing behind the pulpit wearing his signature wire-framed glasses, he is also dressed in a professional business suit; he is rarely seen dressed in casual attire. His interview goes as follows:

**O'Brien** (voiceover footage of Dyson speaking at different venues): When Reverend Dr. Michael Eric Dyson is speaking, he gives voice to an epic American struggle. He's become a preacher and a teacher and a controversial social critic.

Walking throughout his childhood economically-challenged and crime-filled neighborhood, Michael appears to be deep in thought as he looks around.

**O'Brien** (voiceover): Leaving his impoverished Detroit neighborhood in order to earn a Ph.D. from Princeton, he's come with a lot to say.

O'Brien, dressed in a red blouse and black slacks, interviews Eric while walking next to him on the sidewalk. The community has a number of houses with boarded up windows, unkempt yards, and trash-filled streets

**O'Brien:** When you lived in this house, what did you think you would become?

**Michael** (facing a white modest two-story home surrounded by a fence): Well, this is the house where I began to speak in public at the age of 11, and a lot of opportunity was offered to me. And I had dreams and aspirations of being a writer. You know my nickname as a youth was The Professor (pictures of a

younger Michael in his 30s, dressed in a business suit and full-sized afro standing in front of a church sign now appear). That's what kids used to call me, Professor. So I guess they talked me into my profession since I am a professor right now.

**O'Brien:** I was going to say, that's right, Professor (chuckling).

**Michael:** Very prophetic. See, not all epitaphs hurled at young Black kids turn out to be bad.

In a different setting, Michael is now at a book signing where he greets, thanks, and takes pictures with his supporters. Well-wishers express to Michael that he is an inspiration for them to write their own projects. And in return, he responds by saying, "God Bless You."

**Michael** (voiceover images of dilapidated houses, police cars, teenagers walking towards a neighboring landfill): When you look at the reality of being poor and Black, it is psychically depleting; it is spiritually exhausting; it is emotionally enervating; and it just does something to your morale. It's a wonder that more poor people don't misbehave.

Soon after this remark, cameras now reveal a man (supported by two crutches) in a different location walking through clear sliding doors. Escorted by a guard, he slowly walks towards Michael.

**O'Brien** (voiceover): In Black America, one man makes it, too many don't. Often in the very same family.

Standing in the prison's lobby area, Michael shakes hands and embraces his younger brother Everett. An inmate currently serving a life sentence term for murder, Everett is

dressed in a prison-issued dark blue long sleeved shirt and pants, whereas Michael wears a grey sports coat with a tailored black suit. Though both men have greying facial hair, some viewers might find it difficult to believe that they are half-brothers due to their lack of resemblance. Everett's dark brown skin, broad nose, full lips, and thick flowing dreadlocks counters all of Michael's physical features. Everett extends his hand to O'Brien as the three prepare for the interview. It goes as follows:

**O'Brien** (with a stack of white pages on her lap indicating that she is taking notes, facing the brothers who are seated next to each other): Two brothers. Your average person would say, OK, for the most part, they were given similar opportunities. They were raised in the same house. They had a mother who loved them. They had a father who was tough.

**Michael:** Right.

**O'Brien:** A little abusive, but he also loved you both. How did you end up one here and one there?

**Everett** (seated with his arm around Eric's seat): Choices. We make them every single day. I've not always made the best of choices. And therefore, I must suffer the results thereof. I've learned that.

**Michael:** I did make some better choices, but I was allowed to make those better choices. I was encouraged to make those better choices, because I was given a vocabulary to express those choices in a way.

**O'Brien** (voiceover images of barbwire and the prison yard): Whatever led these brothers down different paths, Everett Dyson will likely spend the rest of his life in this maximum-security penitentiary.

**O'Brien** (facing the brothers): What do you think when you look over at your brother? You're in a jump suit, and he's in a jacket. And he's a college professor, and you've served 19 years of a sentence for murder.

**Everett**: When I see Michael, it becomes a testament to the fact that I could have done this, that, or the other. It becomes a testament to the fact that I can still do this, that, or the other.

**O'Brien**: Even with a sentence of life in prison?

**Everett**: Especially with a sentence of life in prison.

**O'Brien** (voiceover pictures of Michael receiving a trophy, immaculately dressed throughout his youth, while pictures of Everett only smiling or posed next to his bike are shown): As kids growing up on Firewood Street, Michael Dyson attracted a lot of attention. Everett was just a regular kid.

**Michael** (facing O'Brien): At 12-years-old, I'm on the front page of *Detroit News* saying, "Boy's Plea Against Racism Wins Award." I remember a teacher very specifically saying, "Oh boy, you just took all the talent out of the family."

**Everett** (facing O'Brien): I'm riding mini-bikes and playing in the dirt, bicycles and things. I'm not articulating anything great. I'm not talking about saving brotherhood.

**O'Brien**: You're just a regular 12-year-old kid?

**Everett:** That's all I am.

An older picture of Michael smiling, and a more serious looking Everett (with his arm over Michael) appear. Soon afterwards, an image of a younger Michael (dressed in a business suit) with a little boy sitting on his lap appears; another picture of his smiling son as a little boy sitting on a couch is shown. O'Brien explains:

**O'Brien** (voiceover): Life was equally unkind to both brothers. By the time he was 18, Michael was raising a son in poverty, relying on welfare for support.

Now back to the setting in which Michael and O'Brien are walking side-by-side throughout his neighborhood, they discuss:

**Michael** (loudly mimicking the voice of an inquisitive person and O'Brien laughs): Have you been looking for work?

**O'Brien:** Is that what people say to you?

**Michael:** Oh my God. And it was so loud. And 'Are you working? Are you trying to work?' He solemnly answers himself: 'Yes, I really am.'

The audience is now shown images of a shovel picking up snow, a pair of hands sodding, painting a fence, and a Burger King restaurant. Footage is given to a collage of Michael (appearing to be in his late 20s) casually dressed in jeans and a shirt, various pictures of his younger son in different locations, and students attending a college course emerge.

**Michael:** I shoveled snow. I did sodding with my father. I painted houses. I worked as a manager trainee at Burger King, and I did everything I could to make ends meet. And then finally, I decided I've got to go to school. My son

has to have a better way of life.

**O'Brien** (voiceover live image of marching Marine boots, pictures of Everett in his uniform, some in which he smiles while flexing his muscles): Everett figured the Marines might be his way out of poverty. But he was discharged after going AWOL and found himself back on these same streets (now showing Michael and Everett's childhood home), selling dope.

**O'Brien** (now back in the prison lobby setting, facing Everett): You were helping destroy the neighborhood. You were the drug dealer in the neighborhood.

**Everett:** Yes.

**O'Brien:** Before you got incarcerated for murder.

**Everett:** Now... isn't that sad? That I had to come to prison to learn this?

**O'Brien** (voiceover pictures with Michael dressed in professional attire seemingly in his 30s, giving a speech behind a podium and holding a book): Michael Dyson went to college. He gathered degrees. He tasted sweet success. But Everett went a different way.

A speeding police car, an ambulance, and a blurry yellow-taped crime scene appears as O'Brien starts to talk about Everett's crime.

**O'Brien** (voiceover): In 1989, Everett says a wounded man stumbled from a drug den. Before the man died, he uttered Everett's name. Everett says that dying declaration led to his conviction for murder. Twenty years later, both brothers still insist Everett is innocent.

**O'Brien** (asking Michael): Does it break your heart? Did you ever even imagine in your wildest dream that this would be where he is and this would be where you are?

**Michael** (with his eyes closed as though processing the question): Yes, it's heartbreaking, sure.

**O'Brien**: He's your little brother.

**Michael** (now crying as Everett rubs Michael's shoulder to comfort him): Right. And um, you know, it is... it is absolutely... absolutely dispiriting to have to endure that.

**O'Brien**: Is it hard for you to watch your big brother torn apart by the fact that you're here?

**Everett**: Of course it is.

**O'Brien** (voiceover as the camera zooms very close to the brothers' faces): So why is one a prisoner and one a Princeton grad.? The answer might be staring us in the face.

**Michael** (voiceover the same picture of a smiling Michael standing next to a more serious Everett shown earlier. In the picture, both men are wearing white button-up shirts. It is unclear if this photo was taken during a prison visit, but Everett's locs are shoulder-length, and both men appear to be in the mid to late 40s): I saw how the differential treatment was afforded me, a little curly-top, yellow Negro child.

**Michael** (facing O'Brien): I'm not dissing any yellow Negro children. That's who

I am. I'm saying that being a dark-skinned Black man has a kind of incriminating effect to many people. And I'm not even getting to White brothers and sisters yet. I'm talking about within Black America. And I'm saying to you, many darker-skinned Black children don't get the opportunity. I'm not suggesting every dark-skinned Black person...

**O'Brien** (interrupts): Plenty of dark-skinned Black children are very successful.

**Michael**: Of course, I understand that.

**Everett**: It takes a keen eye to look beneath, the rough exterior of a person and see the beauty that's within.

The interview concludes with Everett and Michael hugging each other and saying their goodbyes. With his crutches in tow, Everett walks through the sliding doors to return to his cell.

**O'Brien (voiceover)**: That day, Michael heads off to a book signing in Canada. Everett heads back to his cell.

**Michael** (voiceover as Everett walks pass security): That's the genius of Black transformation, that we take stuff that is meant to harm us and use it to help us.

End of narrative. End of film.

Of all the storylines presented throughout both episodes of *Black in America*, Michael and Everett's narratives stand out in a number of ways. First they arguably provide some of the docu-series' more candid discussions on how race and racism remains a permanent fixture in American society. There is no message that one's class status has completely obliterated their racial identity. Michael's success story challenges

the docu-series' "lift yourself by your own bootstraps" by his admission that aesthetics contributed to his success. When audiences are told that Michael leaves for a book signing after visiting his brother, there is no feel-good/happily-ever-ending because viewers can see Everett returning to his cell. One of the main objectives of this project is to examine how mainstream news media portray America as post-race to White and middle-class audiences since Obama's first presidential campaign. However, both Michael and Everett's segment outwardly demonstrates how prevalent race is. They also demonstrate that through colorism and racial hierarchies, a Black person having near White physical features can have more opportunities than their darker counterparts.

### **Frame of the Black Man Versus Intra-Racial Hostility**

One identifiable frame here is the frame of the Black versus intra-racial hostility. Michael's interview includes his outspoken thoughts on racism that Black people experience from other Black people. Departing from typical conversations analyzing how far White and Black relationships have come, his story redirects the attention to Black-on-Black racial animosity (Smith and Jones, 2011). Interestingly, it is not until the very last segment of the series' last narrative in which it illuminates Black versus Black hatred (coupled with inter-racial tension) sculpts the lives of too many people in Black communities. Recalling Jennifer L. Hochschild and Vesla Weaver's (2007) contention that "...people attribute higher status and grant more power and wealth of one complexion, typically light skin, within the groups designated as non-[W]hite (p. 646), Michael receiving preferential treatment over Everett from their loved ones exemplifies this point. When he acknowledges that he was "encouraged to make those better choices" as well as the "differential treatment that was afforded [him], little curly-top,

yellow Negro child,” Michael is explicitly referring to how due to colorisms, intra-racial hostility contributed to his accomplishments and Everett’s drawbacks.

Furthermore, their truths heavily align with how Collins’ interpersonal domain of power works. It is not unusual for the “yella-boned-girls-with-good-hair” to attract more favorable attention from other Blacks than darker skin-toned women. And it is also typical (as was the case for Michael) that expectations are raised higher for the “yellow-curly-topped boys” than those with brown-skinned, kinky-haired. Collins (2000) laments:

Although most individuals have little difficulty identifying their own victimization within some major system of oppression...they typically fail to see how their thoughts and actions uphold someone else's subordination. (p. 306)

Intra-racial hostility, or one's derision for members of their own race, can have emotional and psychological effects (Glenn, 2009; Golden, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 2013) because of the frustration of being unwelcomed by White and Black circles. Michael describes his many blue-collared jobs needed to feed his son, which is what inspired him to go to college. However, he makes it a point not to ignore the fact that "many darker-skinned black children don't get the opportunity." Therefore, his acknowledgement that other Blacks favoring his Eurocentric features contributed to his success demonstrates the interpersonal domain of power; though this special treatment benefited Michael, it simultaneously impeded Everett’s social progress.

The interpersonal domain of power within the frame of the Black Man contending with disdain from other Black people allows us to consider possible ways in which some Black people oppress others in their own communities. Michael primarily shares what and how other Blacks treated him, noting that he is “not even getting to White brothers and sisters yet.” On the other hand, it is the hegemonic domain of power that grants a larger view of how colorisms and in-group hatred were developed from White supremacist ideology. When Collins (2000) lists school curricula (usually dictated by privileged Whites), religious teachings (specifically those used to justify racial and gender subordination), and community cultures (celebrated holidays whose origins excluded or delayed Black progression (i.e. Independence Day, Juneteenth, etc.), she is essentially referring to how White supremacy pervades all areas of Black communities. Therefore, the contempt that some Blacks have for other Blacks conceivably stem from historical and contemporary White resentment towards Blacks.

This chapter aims to accomplish three main goals. The first objective is to deconstruct two narratives that demonstrate how news media promote the myth of meritocracy and depictions of America as post-race (via Butch and Jonathan Warren). Secondly, through D.L. and Kyle’s experiences, it pays close attention to two countering narratives emphatically stating that racism is very much alive between Whites and Blacks due to their experiences with law enforcement. By exemplifying the frame of the Black man battling intra-racial hostility in both Michael and Everett’s narratives, attention is given to the advantages and crippling effects of colorisms, racial hierarchies,

and the hatred some Black people have against other Black people, therefore cancelling out the docu-series' perceived attempt to frame race as an obsolete issue.

By adhering to the frame of racial reconciliation, Butch Warren's story offers crafted insight on how his upward mobility afforded him a home in a predominantly White space. Despite being interrogated by the police inquiring his presence in the neighborhood, and the occasional unwelcoming stares from his neighbors, Butch believes that he has reconciled the race problem because he accepts everyone with various racial backgrounds – even his sons' White significant others. As for the frame of racial transcendence, Jonathan (Butch's son and Black law enforcer), provides a storyline in which he explicitly states that class matters have now replaced racism, while also exhibiting how the structural domain of power works. In contrast, both D.L. and Kyle Hughley's storylines demonstrate the frame of the Black man versus the justice system when they acknowledge that “color is always in the equation.” Through Michael and Everett Dyson's interview, intra-racial animosity and color hierarchies guided the brothers' fate. With the former as an ivy-educated professor, and the latter an inmate serving a life-sentence, their realities illustrate frame of the Black man struggling with intra-racial hostility, along with how the interpersonal and hegemonic domains of power can apply to Black men.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

#### Findings

The first question used to conduct this project's analysis inquires how a two-part news series frames blackness, and by extension Black American people, to assumed predominantly White and middle-class audiences. A recurring approach visible throughout both of the episodes, *Black in America* arguably frames blackness as a dichotomous experience. With its surplus of either/or narratives that construct blackness as an extremely narrow identity, a significant number of the storylines appear to overly simplify the complexities of Black experiences.

In order to answer this question, I categorized the docu-series' portrayal of Black people with its glaring use of color hierarchies because a vast majority of the narratives explicitly use the divisive theme of light skin Blacks (positive storylines) versus darker skinned Blacks (negative storylines). After observing all of the narratives in *Black in America*, storylines in both "The Black Woman and Family" and "The Black Man" episodes that saliently discuss the meritocratic principle, American as post-race, and colorisms were deconstructed. For instance, darker-skinned participant Ira is presented to the audience as the embodiment of economic and social failure from the White racial frame's perspective. She is unmarried, faces eviction, financially struggles to raise multiple teenagers on her own, is often in a quagmire about which bills she should pay first, etc. Additionally, Everett (a participant with darker skin, lengthy dreadlocks, and pronounced Afrocentric features) is put on display to viewers as a

prison inmate currently serving a life sentence for murder.

Some viewers could challenge this observation by referring to other brown-skinned participants, like Whoopi Goldberg or D.L. Hughley (also with Afrocentric features, with kinky or locked hair) that are wealthy and successful. However, many of these participants are associated with having been some sort of social deviant or socio-economic burden at one point of their lives. Even with their rags to riches stories, these participants remain connected to pathological stereotypes of darker Blacks that once lived as an American imposition. For instance, Whoopi's narrative (which immediately follows Ira's) is based on her reflections as a former welfare mother who raised her daughter in the midst of poverty. D.L.'s narrative starts by him recollecting his days as a law-breaking Crips gang member. Collectively, these narratives continue to reify notions that browned-skinned people are/were socio-economically irresponsible or violent at some point in their lives. Furthermore, my findings also note that the handful of darker-skinned participants (i.e. Whoopi and D.L.) is successful because they are entertaining to mainstream audiences. Their otherness appears to grant them wealth and upward mobility when it is presented in a feel-good comedic context. The framing of Whoopi and D.L.'s narratives appears to suggest that Blacks with Afrocentric features can become successful *if* they are able to appeal to multiple audiences with laughter.

Conversely, most of the lighter-skinned participants are depicted as the more skillful, family-oriented, and fiscally responsible group. Butch Warren, a fair-complexioned participant, is an accomplished entrepreneur/educator; his son, Jonathan,

serves as only one of two Black district attorneys in his county. Ironically, Jamie (his brother with a light skin tone) was arrested for gun violence near a drug house. However, his narrative still upholds color hierarchies by suggesting that his actions were in the name of self-defense. Claiming that Jamie was protecting himself rationalizes why his type of blackness would commit this type of crime. Jamie never goes to prison for his actions, perhaps due to his family's connections and support. His outcome sharply contrasts the reality of other darker-skinned participants in the docu-series who served time in prison because they did not have the same financial resources, legal representation, and family support as Jamie. Michael Eric Dyson's story offers yet another example in which a participant with light skin and Eurocentric features is aligned with success. With a reality that is sharply distinct from his incarcerated brother's, displaying Michael's existence as an Ivy-educated professor and author re-emphasizes misconceptions that only a particular type of Black person (one with a lighter skin tone) is deemed more acceptable through White lenses. Altogether these images seem to convey the message that unless they provide some sort of entertainment to mainstream audiences, only a select group of college-educated Blacks with physicalities close to whiteness can obtain success.

This concept is also applicable to the film's independent variable – Soledad O'Brien. Audible or visible in almost all of the scenes, O'Brien never identifies herself as a Black woman. Therefore, her racial ambiguity rendered her as the docu-series' neutrally safe tour guide through blackness; she was never too Black, or too White, she was aesthetically just right for presumably White and middle-class audiences.

Essentially, the news-series repeatedly frames blackness as an either/or experience dictated by the White racial frame with its extensive use of colorisms.

The second concern of this project inquired how contemporary rhetoric of post-race encourages the myth of meritocracy. As discussed earlier, Barack Obama signified a number of mythologies during his 2008 presidential campaign. In some aspects, many people saw Obama's unprecedented success as a legitimate barometer used to measure the instantaneous end of racism. Others commonly referred to his historical accomplishments as the quintessential lift-yourself-by-your-bootstraps example. Though Obama's strides were (and still are) revered by many in African-American communities as the revival of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s foundational work during the Civil Rights Movement, his nomination arguably heightened racial insensitivity. The no-excuse mentality resulted in many of those with privilege and power enforcing their beliefs that if Obama can do it, then all minorities should be able fulfill the so-called American dream.

However, just like most of the other light-skinned cast members throughout *Black in America*, Obama represented a specific type of blackness. He essentially embodied all of the ideals of the model Negro dictated by the White racial frame. Presented by many news media outlets as an extremely rare type of Black man, Obama was often depicted as the ideal Negro because he was 1) a heterosexual man with seemingly traditional nuclear family values; 2) Ivy-educated, and; 3) a career-oriented lawyer turned Senator. However, it is feasible that his phenotypic proximity to

whiteness also contributed to his accomplishments (Glenn, 2009; Russell and Wilson, 2013).

Impressions that we are living in a post-racial society appeared to be associated with skin tone as well. For instance, the first segment is based on Ruby Steen (a fair-skinned woman) joyfully reuniting with her White cousin, Martha. The notion that slavery could have been a part of their family heritage is overlooked. Showing Ruby Steen embracing and taking pictures with her White relatives signifies the illusion that we are now living in a post-race society. It is not a coincidence that Butch and Jonathan Warren's stories (both participants with lighter skin tones) echo post-race rhetoric based on their personal relationships. Butch's description of his multi-racial paternal influences, his sons' exposures to all races as kids, and his acceptance of his White daughter-in-law all seem to represent racial progressiveness. Airing footage of Jonathan's dinner with his White wife and a multi-racial group of friends also appear to represent America's graduation from its race problem.

On the other hand, the participants with darker skin appeared to be more detached from the idea that America is void of any racism in the 21st century. For instance, Hughley (despite his fame and wealth) emphatically believes that when you are Black, skin color will always matter. Reminiscent of his son Kyle being accused of stealing from a jewelry store in an affluent neighborhood, D.L. explains why he had to teach Kyle the generational lesson of how to conduct himself around police officers. It is also important to note that the other participants with darker skin - Ira, Whoopi, Maryann, and Everett – never mention any beliefs in a post-racial/colorblind society.

The final research question of this project addresses how *Black in America* displays the ramifications of Blacks not assimilating to White supremacist, capitalistic, patriarchal expectations. The docu-series frames Ira's narrative in a way used to demonstrate an extreme case of what happens when a woman "chooses" to have children out of wedlock. As a single, darker-skinned Black woman who had multiple children by the same man (several years her senior) as a minor, Ira's storyline entails her facing eviction, dealing with unaffordable car repairs, and having a job that can barely meet her financial needs. Explaining to O'Brien that she is often forced to decide which bill she should pay, Ira's depressing economic struggles serves as a caricature of the consequences Black women live with whenever they live outside of the social parameters designed by White patriarchal supremacists (hooks, 1996; hooks, 2000; hooks, 2014).

Disregarding the countless number of single, financially secure Black mothers living fulfilled lives –void of economic struggle- *Black in America* gives audiences the false impression that *all* Black women will suffer like Ira if they decide to have children outside of marriage. And in Ira's case, O'Brien inquiring why she did not marry a man who statutorily raped her suggests that this idea is a more viable option than to independently raise children on her own. In Whoopi Goldberg's case, the theme of social punishment for women having a child outside of wedlock resurfaces. Whoopi became a welfare recipient while struggling to raise her daughter with minimal income living in California. Though she speaks with gratitude about how welfare was a valuable resource that allowed her to get financially on track, her story still pathologizes the

misconception that all Black women will suffer a major financial downfall should they opt to raise children without a husband. In all, the docu-series portray these women as America's Black Hester Prynne, forever socio-economically branded for not adhering to White, Christian, patriarchal mainstream ideals of what a family ought to look like.

*Black in America* also reveals extreme cases of what happens to Black men if they choose to raise children as a single father. For instance, Jamie Warren's experience sharply contrasts the reality of his other family members. Unlike his married father and married brother depicted as model citizens in their communities, Jamie is an unwed father of multiple children. And unlike his relatives (consisting of a circuit judge, a school administrator, and an attorney), Jamie briefly appears to be the black sheep of the family; he was arrested for gun violence and now has a career as a barber. Jamie's story implies that his life is drastically different from his father and sibling because he did not submit to societal expectations of going to college, getting married, raising children within that marriage, etc. Describing his minimum-wage paying jobs and the public embarrassments of raising a child as a single father, Michael's storyline also shows the ramifications of a Black man living outside of White patriarchal values.

### **Limitations of Research**

There is no shortage of research concentrating on stereotypes (Abraham and Appiah, 2006; Entman and Gross, 2008; Hutchison, 2012; Jeffres, Lee, and Neuendorf, 2011; Merskin, 2010; Schneider, 2005; Stagnor, 2000), America as post-race (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, 2011; Carbado and Gulati, 2013; Milsen and Turner, 2014; Wise, 2010), colorisms (Banks, 2000; Glenn, 2009; Harris, 2013; Herring,

Keith, and Horton, 2003; Hochschild and Weaver (2007), and the myth of meritocracy (McNamee and Miller, 2013; Simpson, 2010; Reed and Louis (2009). This project strives to re-examine ways in which contemporary rhetoric of race in mainstream news media reify illusions of America void of racism (while paradoxically employing colorisms to seemingly associate specific types of blackness to particular socio-economic classes). This project also aims to extend discussions of how the myth of meritocracy permeates news media while also examining how Black femininity and masculinity are framed to multiple audiences.

Emphasis should be drawn to the fact that this research does have a number of limitations. *Black in America* is a valuable text to closely analyze because it established the precedent for subsequent docu-series purporting to offer an objective, in-depth look into the lives of marginalized groups. During the conception of this dissertation, it was the only modern, mainstream news-based docu-series revolving around blackness during Obama's candidacy. Despite the legitimacy of *Black in America* as a promising starting point to discuss the aforementioned concepts, a major limitation is that this analysis relies solely on one docu-series from one news station as its case study. This research does not offer a comparative analysis on how any other docu-series frames blackness, reiterates the myth of meritocracy, and employs colorisms. Therefore, it is impossible to conclusively state that *all* (or even most) mainstream news media *always* present these messages when addressing Black culture.

Another major limitation of this research is that its analysis only considers the influence of televised news media. I regard cable television as a legitimate mode of

communication to multiple audiences because of its presence in millions of homes. According to the CEA (Consumer Electronics Association), in 2013 “most TV households (83 percent) receive television programming through traditional pay-TV services (cable, satellite, or fiber to the home)” (Ellis and Cassagnol, 2013). Though this project only examines a docu-series derived from a cable network, it does not consider or assume) the ways in which other visual outlets such as newspapers, magazines, or the Internet present blackness to its audiences. Again, by only focusing on one specific source of news information, this research makes it challenging to generalize the ways in contemporary rhetoric of race permeate news media.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Because *Black in America* attracted millions of viewers, it has since ushered in newer more docu-series following the same format. Its franchise now includes *Black in America 2* (2009), *Almighty Debt: A Black in America Special* (2010), and *Silicon Valley: The New Promised Land* (2011). CNN also released films centralizing other sidelined groups such as *Gay in America* (2010), *Unwelcome: The Muslims Next Door* (2011), and *Black in America: Black & Blue* (2014). All of these texts offer more opportunities for further research entailing a cross-textual analysis of how the frames of one marginalized group compare frames in another docu-series. For instance, a deconstruction of how *Black in America* and *Black in America 2* (with narratives that are mostly Christian-based) compares and contrasts to its newer addition of the CNN franchise, *Unwelcome: The Muslims Next Door*, may provide a broader discussion of how the still-taboo issues of race, class, religion, and gender are presented to multiple

audiences. Equally important, this research may possibly attract more valuable attention to how mainstream news media present the complexities of race and religion to multiple audiences.

Another suggestion of future research is an audience analysis for any of the docu-series in the CNN catalog. For example, a qualitative study comprised of interviews with Black and White viewers relaying their interpretation of a race-based docu-series could greatly expound on whether or not America is progressing towards a post-race society. Regarding the practical value of this research, additional research projects could probe into whether or not constant visual exposure docu-series like *Black in America* influences the social policies (i.e. welfare reform) that voters support or reject, the type of candidates that privileged employees hire, and dictate the types of interpersonal relationships that viewers have outside of their race.

In all, it is my hope that this dissertation's framing analysis of racial representations via colorisms and racial hierarchies has demonstrated how race remains an important organizing concept in the contemporary. Though much of mainstream media arguably signified the Obama Moment as an indication of America's post-race society, I closely interpreted how narratives throughout CNN's *Black in America* inadvertently respond to Du Bois' question of how it feels to be a social imposition.

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