Black Culture: A Societal Problem

Quamesha Brown
Washington University in St Louis
Black Culture
A Societal Problem

Quamesha Brown
Washington University in St. Louis
BFA Candidate
Sculpture
5/1/15
Abstract

American society, regardless of what history has been told, has never been a society that is truly free of social prejudices especially for its black community. The many depictions of black people in America has caused a number of psychological and physical difficulties for black communities. In this paper, the main topic is the ways in which black culture is portrayed in American society and how that representation has affected the black community and the black experience. Although there are common experiences shared between people in the black community, the black experience is highly individualized; there is no singular definition of the black experience, each one is different. Many components of the black experience are heavily influenced by most, if not all, America’s social institutions which could affect the individual either positively or negatively. These means of controlling the narrative of the black experience in America has inhibited societal growth and understanding of its minority citizens. The main institutions that impact the black community will be discussed in this paper; those institutions are social, educational, and judicial.
For all of the babble that America is a post-racial society because of the election of a black president in 2008, there are many variables that are inhibiting actual progress towards a post-racial ideal. Since the election of Barack Obama, hate crimes and racial injustices have not decreased at all; if anything those unjustified crimes have increased and become more subverted. I believe that a major factor in the continuation of racism in America is the representation of other cultures in the media and the psychological damages caused by those representations. If we as a country are to reach a post-racial ideal we must expose the truths about our society that is hidden from plain sight. Since we are a nation that thrives on visual aides to help us understand uncomfortable topics, the best way to expose truths is through visual arts.

Representation

Many Americans would say that we live in a post-racial society and that racism and prejudices are no longer a part of society; however, pretending that racism does not exist, does not make it go away. The myth of post-raciality only allows for justification of racial crimes in America be it physical or psychological; it inhibits our society’s ability to move forward, past social inequalities. A crucial instrument in the belief that America is a post-racial society is the appropriation of black culture into mass media. By dictating the narrative of black culture, America has strategically embedded racism into many aspects of society without the knowledge of its citizens.

As black culture is admired in America, black people themselves remain abused and unwanted (Dawson). When seen on television, black people are often portrayed as some kind of degenerates or overall unsavory individuals who are materialistic,
inherently violent, and dangerous; this image of black people that is continuously glorified only perpetuates negative black stereotypes. The degenerate portrayal of a black person frequently showcases a darker-skinned individual with natural hairstyles such as dreadlocks. Another common representation of blacks in the media is the Uncle Tom; the black person who is passive and would do anything for his white counterparts even if were detrimental to other blacks. Uncle Toms are also considered to be individuals who have been whitewashed, meaning that they believe that they have been fully incorporated into white society. This particular representation of black people are often seen as lighter skinned individuals clothed in business attire. These portrayals of blacks have become so ingrained within society that people subconsciously expect media representations to be the norm amongst blacks (Baptist).

Due to the media’s influence, on a subconscious level there is always a preconceived notion of how a black person should act when a person interacts with black people (Myers); using this knowledge, I gathered information on what people initially thought about myself, a black female attending a highly regarded academic institution. I found that, true to form, people assumed that I had a combination of characteristics of an Uncle Tom and a Mammy, which is a subservient black female who is good-natured but overly loud. Utilizing the gathered data, I created a self portrait entitled
Society’s Boxes For Me (Figure 1). The sculpture has a minimalist aesthetic, consisting of three intersecting rectangular prisms sitting precariously on the ground. The positioning of the hollow steel prisms displays the delicate but concrete social standards placed upon a person. Inside the boxes there are multiple steel cable connecting the center of the sculpture to the outer corners; the high tension between the steel frames and the cables symbolizes a person’s struggles to break the expectations of society. With this piece I, as a black female, broke some societal standards of art; by appropriating a style in art that is considered predominantly used by white males, I attempted to reveal that physical characteristics do not attest to who or what a person is capable of. The ideal location that this piece would be placed in, which is a gallery type setting, further showcases the white paradigm that is art institutions which primarily house art created by white males.

Representation to Profiling

Since the conception of this country, race has been an issue and continues to be by denying justice to victims of systematic racism, even attempting to demoralize them. The most effective way that America has continued racism is through mass media which reinforces and perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices through the imitation of black culture. While black culture has been appropriated and commodified, the prejudices evoked from the representation of black culture has endangered the lives of America’s black community regardless of their social background. The representation
and appropriation of black culture in the media has been a tool that has strengthen misconceptions of the black experience.

Due to the representation of black people in the media, many people confuse the black experience with black culture in America. To be clear, black culture is businesses or corporations profiting off of a glorified version of what supposedly happens in urban America. For example, many antagonists in movie plots are often muscular men with “urban tendencies” such as drug usage, an extensive use of profanity or slang, or having a gang-like lifestyle. While black culture glorifies being a degenerate, the black experience is getting first hand view of how unjust america can be and continuously living through it. Although certain aspects of black culture can be a part of the black experience, the black experience is all about survival in the white paradigm; this could be helping children achieve higher educational opportunities, developing a strong sense of community, or other positive actions. The media, however, only amplifies all the negative aspects of black experience, many of which are blown out of proportion, and fails to capture anything that would exhibit american institutions as anything but the victims of black “crimes.” It has caused many Blacks to embrace the misconceptions from mass media, condemn one another, and cause them to lose themselves to White America (Dawson).

Negative depictions of black people in the media has caused racial profiling of black people, especially black men. Simply walking through a predominately white area as a black male could be grounds for murder because the man looks suspicious due to his attire and skin tone. For years mass media has illustrated black men as physically
Brown

large, overly aggressive individuals (Higginbotham). A prime example of racial profiling that has lead to the murder of a black man is the killing of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson on August 9th 2014. Officer Wilson claims that “he was frightened by Brown's size—the 18-year-old was 6-foot-4 and nearly 300 pounds—and aggression. At one point, Wilson says that Brown's facial expression made him look ‘like a demon.’” Wilson’s description and supposed reaction to Brown, as well as Wilson's supporters, shows that there is still a subconscious level of racial intolerance in America.

As a response to the continual murders of black people without justice, I created a design for t-shirts that is a physical representation of how mass media has painted a large target on the backs of black people. Targeted (Figure 2) is a design for t-shirts meant to be used during the protest of racial injustices; however, the design can be used for the considerable amounts of social injustices in America such as gender equality or religious tolerance. Unlike typical signage of public protests such as the I Am A Man signs of the Memphis Sanitation Strike in 1968, the t-shirts places the imagery onto the bodies of the protestors; allowing them to become the physical manifestation of the actions social injustice. Also having a tangible object like a t-shirt
place more value on the live of the individuals wearing them than a sign that is likely to be thrown away immediately after the protest is over.

Looking at Hank Willis Thomas’s print series *I Am A Man* (Figure 3), I have come to realize that labeling who an individual is has limited the social growth in America because each label a person takes on has preconceived societal notions that come with every label. For example, when Willis states ‘I Am a Man’ or ‘I Am a Woman’ a person would immediately think of what constitutes masculinity or femininity. In order to combat preconceived notions that come from labeling, the *Targeted* t-shirts plainly state 'I AM;' simply stating that a person is than what a person is seen as. By doing this, *Targeted* shows that each and every person in American society is liable to be a victim of profiling due to medial representations.

Educational

The United States of America, a great and powerful nation, has been mark with thousands of ugly, unsightly scars that it has tried to conceal from all knowing eyes; it has done so by manipulating history, including anything that glorifies but burying all that condemns in lies and half truths. One of the greatest blemishes on the face of America
is racism. As a country founded during slavery, ideologies from that era have been so deeply ingrained in American society that many do not realize it, and although buried deep, racism is still very much present in all aspects of modern society. However this concealment of the dark side of American history has left many open sores on the black population in America; caused them to be cautious of their surroundings and especially the people that surround them.

While so much of Black history has been consciously concealed and falsified in written texts, many Blacks know little to none of their actual history; instead of relying on modified texts to teach black youth, many parents have continued the custom of verbal teachings to prepare their children for the struggles and hardships they will face as adults (Baptist). Many of the lessons taught are from older generations of blacks that have first handedly seen the blatant racism in society and warn the younger generations of what to expect in life. Lessons Learned (Figure 4), a series of photolitho prints, expresses a few of the many teachings black parents have taught their children. Since all of the lessons are educational, not necessarily academic, I figured that the format of the prints to be representational of inspirational educational posters that are often seen in elementary school, especially since many of the lessons are taught to black children at a young age.
Pulling from my personal familial history, I took lessons that have been passed down from my great grandparents to my grandparents to my parents to me and simplified them into short quotes that are ambiguous in whom the lessons are meant for. To showcase the passage of time of the lessons throughout many generations, one image which is a group of majority white friends is repeated continuously in *Lessons Learned* with varying levels of visual clarity. The level of ghosting on each print of the image from the most clear to least corresponds with quotes from specific lessons to more vague lessons. For example, the quotes ‘They never forget and neither should you’ and ‘Give them nothing’ speaks directly towards the subverted nature of prejudices in modern day society; whereas the quote ‘Never get too comfortable’ so ambiguous that it could be interpreted multiple ways. It could be a warning for black children not to cozy in White America or warning for everyone to be wary of their surroundings or so much more.

While many of the lessons are in direct correspondence to social injustices faced by black people, some reinforce the value of black lives and the emphasis on teaching black youth to value themselves in a world that does not value black lives (Grier). Black culture, be it fashion, music, etcetera, is highly appreciated and appropriated by the white majority but if black people participate in attributes of their own culture it is viewed as unsavory. An excellent example of how America values black lives is the overwhelming obligation of police forces to incarcerate blacks for petty crimes that often leads to the unnecessary death of black people (Higginbotham). The faces on the print that says “Momma told me… ‘Know your worth’” (Figure 5) are golden signifying the
value that is placed upon non-black individuals in America. Self worth is a lesson that all black people must learn otherwise they will idealize whiteness while rejecting their own blackness (Grier).

Idealizing whiteness has been a problem in the black community since the demolition of segregation. Since America is a country that relies heavily on physical attributes to determine if a person is worthy of value, black people have had to change qualities about themselves in an effort to have the nation place more value in them (Bois). For example, the standard of beauty in the black community has been warped from a natural black look that celebrates beauty from the homeland to a more white washed version of blackness that attempts to imitate physical qualities of white people; some of those qualities being an attempt at lighter skin tones, straighter hair, and makeup that covers the natural sheen of black skin tones. Mass media has amplified the need for blacks to be closer to the white ideal of beauty by having idols who are near to it such as the well-known singer Beyonce. The print “Momma told me… ‘You are beautiful’” (Figure 6) expresses the more unbecoming side of wearing makeup by having a matte foundation running down the non black faces in the image. In direct
opposition to the running makeup, the black face are pure and unmarked by the artificial beauty that is advertised by mass media.

Together the prints from Lessons Learned discuss the double consciousness that black people take on in order to survive and thrive in American society. One of the central teachings to black children is that there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ in the black population; people who will use and abuse you and people who are there to help you improve yourself (Bois). The trick to learn is how to navigate who is who and how to act accordingly; meaning that blacks have had to learn how to see through the facades of people. So rather than placing the masks on the faces of the black people in the images, I placed them on the white majority in the images; each mask varies in the saturation of the color yellow to correspond in some way to the statement that is paired with the image. By doing so I revealed that not only black people take up a different persona when in the company of the other.

After all of the social injustices that have been occurring since the new year, America does not have the right to call itself a post-racial society; if anything the nation is at a stand still where segregation is illegal but the notion of equality for all is still a fantasy that makes America look superior to the eyes of the world. We, the people, need to start a dialogue of what is truly happening in our communities to begin to heal the ugly scars from the past and move forward. As a young artist, I strive to create an understanding of the black experience through visual art that will evoke empathy from its viewers rather than the viewer feeling as though what black people experience is something completely different than what white people experience. To make people
realize that there is truly no difference between different ethnic groups other than the hate that has been embedded in our technological nation. Hopefully one day there will no longer be an ‘us’ or a ‘them’ but a ‘we’.
Bibliography


List of Figures

Figure 1: Society’s Boxes for Me, Quamesha Brown

Figure 2: Targeted, Quamesha Brown

Figure 3: I Am A Man, Hank Willis Thomas,
http://www.hankwillisthomas.com/WORKS/Mixed-Media/1/

Figure 4: Lessons Learned, Quamesha Brown

Figure 5: Lessons Learned: Momma told me… ‘Know your worth,’ Quamesha Brown

Figure 6: Lessons Learned: Momma told me… ‘You are beautiful,’ Quamesha Brown