

THE RACIALIZATION OF DRUGS TRANSCODED INTO MEDIA

Scholarly Essay by Karina Rodriguez

March 14, 2022

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**"SINCE THE OBJECTS OF
IMITATION ARE MEN IN
ACTION... IT FOLLOWS
THAT WE MUST REPRESENT
MEN EITHER AS BETTER
THAN IN REAL LIFE, OR AS
WORSE, OR AS THEY ARE."**

- Aristotle's Poetics, 350 B.C.E

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STOP & SMELL THE BIOPOLITICS!

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It is not difficult to recognize that the racialization of drugs has found its way into the literary, audible, and visual content of today's media environment. This can be seen in the countless fictional media portrayals where people of color play either antagonistic, low-income drug users and criminals, or as glorified exceptions of success and "impossible role models." [i] In addition to these fictional depictions, the prejudice has also seeped into news spaces. This delusion of truth through the bias shown against people of color is most apparent in the countless recounting of criminal acts— one being the 2020 murder of yet another black man, George Floyd. [ii] During the trial against the murderer, Derek Chauvin, the news shows the white officer being protected by bulletproof police vehicles and an entourage each day they went to court in Minnesota. [iii] Meanwhile, George Floyd, already dead, was being remembered across media for having marijuana in his car, and for attempting to pay with a counterfeit bill right before the incident. [iv] In watching the horrifying video where Floyd takes his last breath under Chauvin's debilitating knee, the atrocity is indisputable. So then, how is it that the news – meant to offer comfort by informing the public about such atrocities – is constantly choosing to highlight irrelevant matters during what should be an opportunity to address the lack of justice for minorities?



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This tradition of both conscious and unconscious bias has contributed to what Thomas Cripps calls “the commercialization of primitive weakness.” [v] This is to say that systemic racism, upheld by a capitalistic economic infrastructure historically favoring white, upper-class consumers, has allowed racist ideologies and narratives to be transcoded into and distributed across various media. You know it. I know it. We all know it to be true and yet the justification for such racialized portrayals continues as a basis for public debate. Amid pandemic-induced economic chaos and rising social distress in Ukraine, during what feels like the early days of a potential third world war, [vi] it is not only important, but imperative to discuss how to best eradicate this long-standing tradition of white supremacy in the United States and its use of media to promote the racialization of drugs. The only debate here, then, is how we must go about to negotiate such harmful portrayals, establishing a sustainably diverse media environment and therefore a more tolerable society through oppositional readings and productive discourse.



Preceding the world wars, the radio, television, and motion picture industries emerged within the United States as a commercially integrated system. For films, this system allowed atrocities like *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Jazz Singer* to popularize despite their use of blackface and racist recounting of American histories. For television and radio, this meant that advertising agencies bought airtime and programming was thus a result of their sponsorship. With this model in place, programming catered to a ‘mass audience’ that rarely (if at all) included women and people of color. Then, following America’s entrance into the second world war, the media industry consolidated itself further and directed all programming efforts towards war activity. [vii] It was not until the civil rights movement and the emergence of a working ethnic class that representation on the screen, and over the air waves, began to diversify. However, these programs, while they attempted to include audiences of a new set of demographics, depicted those audiences with “maddening oversimplicity.” [viii] The madness came from portrayals that kept ethnic minorities in demeaning or inferior roles.

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People of color were often cast as criminals or drug addicts and sellers, with lifestyles and neighborhoods only demonstrating the negative consequences of urbanization and mass incarceration. That said, programs such as *The Jack Benny Show*, or *Amos n Andy*, along with contemporary films like *12 Years a Slave*, or *Django Unchained*, have been met with mixed receptions over the years as the white Hollywood press continues to claim their increasing efforts towards cultural diversity and inclusion, while organizations like the NAACP continue to combat the repeating of certain racialized ideologies within these established media infrastructures. Celebrities and public figures have addressed this double-edged sword on numerous occasions. Snoop Dogg, for example, has posted videos of himself on social media, condemning such depictions of black communities for the way they “keep beatin’ that shit in our heads of how they did us.” [ix] While his statements mainly work to diminish the often-repeated narratives about how black communities have been historically marginalized and mistreated, he also encourages a more innovative way of storytelling that demonstrates the success of black people and the positive contributions ethnic communities make to our society on a daily basis. In other words, he argues that only creating content about these racialized traditions, while helpful in offering a more accurate and holistic view of the past, in turn prevents a more equitable future where these traditions are eradicated.



I relate Snoop Dogg’s words with those of Lymon Bryson, back in 1941. As the director of CBS at the time, Bryson once made a statement about the radio industry’s influential nature, saying that “radio is as flexible as the flexibility of its users.” [x] While he was speaking about the medium’s ability to shape a mass audience’s perspective, this statement also emphasizes the agency of those audiences and their ability to shape the medium through their engagement and participation. While the two messages differ in that they come from men of two different time periods and races, they are comparable in that they both call attention to what we can do as media consumers and social activists.

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To put it differently, it is up to us – all of us. It is up to both the traditionally racialized minorities as well as the historically racist system of media production, to take matters into our own hands. It is up to us to ridicule the stereotypical representations that persist in the media today using our purchasing power and social condemnation, but it is also up to us to respond to such racialized depictions by creating content that works to challenge those depictions while also offering an evolved image of what it is like to be a minority in this country. Oscar Micheaux did this back in the 1920s. In recognizing his agency as a human being and as a filmmaker, he set out to create the film, *Within Our Gates*, [xi] along with other “alternative depictions of black manhood.” In doing so, he reminds us that progress cannot be made through complacency. bell hooks, an author and social activist, also reminds us of this while explaining how progressive action can come in many forms. In her essay, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks introduces the power of developing an “oppositional gaze.” [xii] She uses this term to explain how we must not only consider the information given to us by media, but synthesize it critically, and with negotiation. As a black feminist scholar, hooks’ work is primarily interested in the way media has historically failed to address the specificity of female blackness while also advising against the grouping of other minority groups. To do so, she claims, would be to mitigate the complexity of culture and the invaluable richness of ethnic diversity.

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And so, I say again, **it is up to us.**

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It is up to us **to knock down** this crumbling infrastructure where racist ideologies still manage to slip through the cracks. It is up to us **to develop an oppositional gaze** that sees Juliet as a damsel willing to disobey her father in pursuit of her own desires, rather than one in distress. It is up to us to see how the incarcerated person of color is a byproduct of a racialized system rather than a threat to society. It is up to us to allow progress to inspire, and at times, recede - for the same reason an ocean must ebb and flow, so to do the tides of globalization. It is up to us **to speak out** about what is acceptable; and **to listen** to what is not. It up to us **to stay informed** about policies set in place just as much as it is up to us **to keep open minds and elastic hearts** in order to change them. In an age where information is plentiful, and media are unavoidable, we must stop complaining and start doing. **Start negotiating.** This piece is a reminder to **#StayWoke.** Start supporting the success of minorities. Stop associating whiteness with wealth. Continue acknowledging race as both a debilitating force against social justice in the past, and as an empowering symbol for **diversified excellence** going into the future. With this approach, we can begin blurring the lines of socioeconomic stratification without erasing the cultural potency that bleeds across them. This world that I have proposed is one of peace, but also one of **vigor and tenacity.** This is the world we should want to live in. This is the world I choose to live in. **Ready to join?**

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[i] Gerald R. Butters, Jr. , "Homestead to Lynch Mob: Portrayals of Black Masculinity in Oscar Micheaux's Within Our Gates.," The Journal for MultiMedia History 3 (2000), <https://www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol3/micheaux/micheaux.html>.

[ii] CONTENT WARNING: Video of the Arrest of George Floyd in Minneapolis, YouTube (YouTube, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEZh0C-pmaw>.

[iii] Derek Chauvin Wore Body Armor and Took Bulletproof Cars to Trial, YouTube (YouTube, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RcPYARmhqE>.

[iv] Derek Chauvin Sentenced To 22.5 Years In Prison For George Floyd's Death, YouTube (YouTube, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvpZm0QAKLc>.

[v] Cripps, Thomas. Hollywood's High Noon: Moviemaking & Society before Television / Thomas Cripps. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

[vi] "Russia Invades Ukraine Live Updates: Biden Announces New Sanctions," NPR (NPR, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/live-updates/ukraine-russia-invasion-putin>.

[vii] Charles E. Lewis, "Hays Cites Industry's Part in the War," Showmen's Trade Review, Inc., 1942.



[viii] Morreale, Joanne. *Critiquing the Sitcom: a Reader* / Edited by Joanne Morreale. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2003.

[ix] Snoop Dogg ANGRY about "Roots" Remake, YouTube (YouTube, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEAy1KcLJvk>.

[x] Frank E. Schooly, ed., "Fall Convention to Wisconsin," n.d., <http://archive.org/details/naeb-b110-f10-22/mode/2up?view=theater>.

[xi] Butters, Jr. , "Homestead to..."

[xii] hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation* / Bell Hooks. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992.

WATCH LIST

to

#STAY WOKE

- 1 Selena (Gregory Nava, 1997)
- 2 The Color of Friendship (Kevin Hooks, 2000)
- 3 Remember the Titans (Boaz, Yakin, 2000)
- 4 The Blind Side (John Lee Hancock, 2009)
- 5 The Help (Tate Taylor, 2011)
- 6 La Juala de Oro (Diego Quemada-Diez, 2013)
- 7 Instructions Not Included (Eugenio Derbez, 2013)
- 8 Moonlight (Barry Jenkins, 2016)
- 9 Hidden Figures (Theodore Melfi, 2017)
- 10 Just Mercy (Destin Daniel Cretton, 2019)
- 11 Coded Bias (Shalini Kantayya, 2020)
- 12 Summer of Soul (Questlove, 2021)
- 13 King Richard (Reinaldo Marcus Green, 2021)

WATCH LIST to #STAY WOKE

1 Selena (Gregory Nava, 1997)

The success of musical sensation, Selena Quintanilla, took the world by storm during the nineties. While this was before my time, her impact on Mexican-American identity will live on forever. As a woman living within this cultural intersection, she would blur the socioeconomic boundaries with her music for generations to come. The film highlights the harsh realities of being both a minority and an American public figure, and how her success was considered a threat to many who could not appreciate her rich ethnic heritage. Watch alone or with family – either way, the heartache of watching her downfall will be met with the longevity of enjoying her renowned talent.

2 The Color of Friendship (Kevin Hooks, 2000)

3 Remember the Titans (Boaz Yakin, 2000)

For being both one of the most criticized and one of the most beloved institutions, Disney sure knew what they were doing when releasing these two films. The Color of Friendship showcases some of the incredible racial disparities between a contemporary South African town and America's Washington D.C. as two young girls participate in a school exchange program. As a child, I remember the impact this movie had on me, especially as I became best friends with a girl whose family was from Nigeria. As for Remember the Titans, this movie made me aware of just how far we had come when it came to equal treatment within the realm of sports. As a young athlete, this film emphasizes the way players used to segregate themselves out of mere ignorance and societal pressures. At the same time, it demonstrated the unifying power of sport and healthy competition – no matter the complexion of one's skin. Despite some of the outdated language used in these films, these family-focused pictures work to bring cultural tolerance at the forefront of relationships in an increasingly globalized world. In other words, leave judgement and unconscious biases at the door, and watch these movies to take the first steps in learning how to have meaningful conversations about race.

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The Blind Side (John Lee Hancock, 2009)

Tear-jerkers like *The Blind Side* tend to hurt, but only with the intention to heal. This film grew popular for its thoughtful rags-to-riches portrayal of football player, Michael Oher. While some may argue that the film's exceptionalism of Oher maintains that his success (and the success of black men alike) be seen as rare, other critics praise the film for depicting the exception, nonetheless. In it, assumptions about race being associated with morality are met with ridicule and social condemnation. This film considers the challenges that face multiracial families while also providing a push-back attitude towards a system meant to continue silencing the voiceless. Grab the tissues and meet us on the football field for this Sandra Bullock spectacular.

5

The Help (Tate Taylor, 2011)

In middle school, I thought books had given me an idea about the racialized atrocities of the early American south, but none had made it so visually accessible as the stories included in *The Help*. Without depicting the horror of whippings or lynchings, this film describes the dirty south from the perspective of maids in 1960s Mississippi. The humor and wit imbedded within the film and its characters leaves audiences feeling disgusted at the mistreatment, yet empowered by the fact that the maids have their own lives and agendas beyond housekeeping. Watching as a white journalist risks her own safety in being an advocate for these women of color is invigorating. Watch this one frequently and unapologetically.

6

La Juala de Oro (Diego Quemada-Diez, 2013)

7

Instructions Not Included (Eugenio Derbez, 2013)

Regardless if you speak Spanish or not, these two films translate a pool of emotions and give a taste as to the potential for non-American films to succeed in an American marketplace. *La Juala de Oro*, or, *The Golden Cage*, follows the touching migration story of 3 preteens. In their journey towards the American border, the kids secretly hop on a train from Mexico and through Guatemala. During their travels, we see prejudice in the rawest sense between the children themselves, and from the scary people they encounter along the way. Meanwhile, *Instructions Not Included* also has themes of belonging and searching for meaning in a new life. After a playboy must take responsibility for a daughter he did not know existed, he begins questioning his selfish behaviors and their place in this cruel world, for now he realizes that his child lives in that world, too. If you want to be torn down in order to rise up, these two films get the job done with tragic comedy, tenacity and the power of perseverance.

WATCH LIST to #STAY WOKE

11 Coded Bias (Shalini Kantayya, 2020)

While 2020 kept audiences in their homes and away from the subtle inequalities woven into the fabric of contemporary society, this documentary brings those subtleties to the screen to eradicate them. Watch this exciting dive into the world of artificial intelligence and follow along as a black engineering student from MIT discovers how technologies are only as innovative as their designers make them to be – and how even in 2020, the pool of such designers and engineers, is limited. As a role model encouraging young people of color to pursue careers in the STEM fields, Joy Buolamwini and her research work to stimulate conversation and mobilize action towards a future that considers programmed technological bias.

12 Summer of Soul (Questlove, 2021)

Many music lovers know of the 1969 three-day, rock n' roll concert that took place in New York, known as the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, but are ignorant as to the fact that just 100 miles away, The Harlem Culture festival also took place. With around 300,000 attendees a year, this annual festival showcased black artistry in all its glory, but viewers did not have the privilege of seeing this amazing archival footage until now. The concert film therefore offers spectacular performances from the talents of B.B. King, Nina Simone, The Fifth Dimension, and a young Stevie Wonder – to name just a few. When planning to watch this one, invite over those who care to dance in solidarity with the fine folks of Harlem, and who commit themselves to a life where such footage is shared and celebrated rather than suppressed and left on the shelf collecting dust.

13 King Richard (Reinaldo Marcus Green, 2021)

As the most recent release on this list, King Richard showcases a world where talent and dedication are rewarded, and racial prejudice cease to exist amidst the presence of greatness. This biopic follows the inspiring story of the Williams family as their two daughters become two of the most influential athletes to ever compete across the globe. With a focus on familial support and the ways in which external forces tend to dilute minority success, this film demonstrates how far society has come in terms of cultural diversity and acceptance. In this film, Venus and Serena Williams are honored, not merely as black female athletes, but as forces of nature that excite and inspire audiences of all backgrounds.