

Black Entertainment Television: Impact of Corporate Ownership on Black Media

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In 2001, CEO and owner of Black Entertainment Television (BET) Bob Johnson, sold majority ownership to Viacom with much controversy. Many people in the black community questioned the appropriateness of a network that claimed to represent black life being under the defacto control of a white dominated corporation. This study seeks to assess the impact of the change in ownership upon the way African Americans are represented in BET's programming. The study begins by placing black popular cultures roots in the minstrel show and shows how that form of media continues to plague American popular culture, and indeed, BET, today. The study then undertakes an interpretive textual analysis to show that BET shows and programming, under the ownership of a white corporation is used as a mechanism of white imperialistic ideological domination.

Keywords: Race, media, sociology, racialization, minstrelsy, corporate interest

Black Entertainment Television (BET) is the number one cable network among black households in history, it is the most watched cable network among African Americans age eighteen through thirty-four, and is distributed to over 87 million households in the U.S., Canada, and the Caribbean (BET 2008). The BET network has plans to expand around the globe, and has recently launched on K209 in the United Kingdom, reaching over ten million homes (BET 2008). BET's corporate mission statement claims that it: "the pre-eminent entertainment brand serving African Americans and consumers of Black culture globally" (BET Corporate Fact Sheet 2010). Although BET claims to be a leader of black voices on television (BET 2008), the rising popularity of a network claiming to be the voice of African Americans, yet owned by a white corporation, raises questions about how African-Americans and ideas of blackness are being represented in the different forms of mass media. Legendary rapper Chuck D said in 2001, while discussing the Viacom buyout of BET, "I can see the white paint glowing around the lips." ¹ (D, Chuck). Chuck D discusses the fear many African Americans have that a white corporation owning a station purporting to be the preeminent brand of black culture will reduce it to the structure of the minstrel show. That is, white men parodying black culture while dressed in blackface. The symbolic meaning of a white corporation controlling a black station certainly harkens back to the day of the minstrel show.

The reason this study focuses on BET as opposed to the many other networks that show black people in the media is twofold, first, BET is not only the most watched cable network by black households in America, but it has also been said to be the only "true

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voice” of African Americans on television, as implied by its name and corporate mission statement. And secondly, the sheer dearth of African-American characters on other networks and the glut of African Americans on BET allows for a greater representation and analysis of how African-Americans are portrayed in the media, especially since many of the shows and movies shown on BET were produced by other networks. Furthermore, although there is widespread literature on African-Americans in popular culture, few have focused on BET (Smith-Shomade 2008: XV). In many respects, BET has received a pass from the black community because it was black owned and operated. Because BET is so popular in America, and so often portrayed as the true representation of African Americans, this study seeks to discover what types of hegemonic representations about blackness BET’s programming portrays.

As NAACP Chairman Julian Bond professes, “In a still segregated society, people get their ideas about other groups from what they read, see and hear” (Bond quoted in Felicia Lee 2007), and these images can have a lasting effect on individuals. The sheer repetition and mass dissemination of racialized images construct a type of reality for the viewers (Arkes 1990), and viewers may internalize these images and ideas. The questions for this research project are: (1) How does the ownership change in BET affect the way African Americans are represented in its programming? And (2), what types of hegemonic representations about blackness does BET portray in this post racial era? I argue that BET, under the control of a predominantly white owned and controlled corporation will not be much different from the minstrel show of the past and will reveal itself as an ideological mechanism of racialization in our post-racial era. That is, BET will present stereotypical racialized notions of African Americans that suit white-superiority hegemonic interest.

Minstrelsy and the Racialization Project

In order to understand the seeming paradox of a black television station being owned by a white corporation it is imperative to situate this circumstance within the historical context of the minstrel show. The minstrel show originated in the days of slavery and was the first original form of American entertainment. Minstrelsy was a form of entertainment meant to dehumanize African Americans (Nowatski 2007); and was performed by white men that rubbed burnt cork on their face to appear black (blackface). Post-civil war many minstrel shows were performed by black men in blackface. Minstrelsy comprised musical numbers, dancing, and variety sketch comedy (Abdul-Jabbar and Obstfeld 2007). Ironically, this became the launching ground of black popular culture, and set precedence for the whole of American popular culture (Abdul-Jabbar & Obstfeld 2007). Most black popular culture literature revolves around one resounding theme, perpetuating ideas of blackness that objectify African Americans in demeaning and stereotypical roles radically unsuited for modern life. The Loyal Toms, Carefree Sambos, Faithful Mammies, Savage insatiable Jezebels, Grinning Coons, Savage Brutes, and Wide-Eyed Pickininnies have been the staple of black representation in America ever since (Riggs 1986). Blacks in minstrelsy were portrayed as lazy, stupid, and indolent, while the next minute illustrated as savage, hypersexual, and dangerous. This contradictory statement is the result of the shifting of social relations in America, and the uses of characterization to influence social thought.

Historically, minstrelsy dictated the tone of racial hostilities in America, yet it is also important to note that this form of entertainment was shaped by, mirrored, and reflected the growing concerns of perceived black competition for social power within the landscape of America. Therefore, minstrelsy, in addition to being a form of entertainment, was also a

medium of racialization. According to sociologists Omi and Winant (2005), racialization (or racial formation) is “the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (195). Racial formation results from the evolution of hegemony in a particular society and the use of “racial projects” to redistribute resources and power along distinct racial lines. This particular racial project utilizes the power of the media to define and create attitudes needed to justify racism and inequality. The evolution of the minstrel show is the evolution of this struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Sambo, Zip Coon and Antebellum Era

According to legend, Thomas Dartmouth (T.D.) Rice (the original Jim Crow) saw a crippled black man dancing, exaggerated the dance, and took the Jim Crow buck-dance on the road as the first black faced minstrel. Although Rice’s performance was a radical characterization of black dance, it was seen by whites as a true and often accurate depiction of slave life in America. The first white man to perform in blackface, T.D. Rice changed the history of popular entertainment and the history of America forever. Jim Crow laws were the epitome of minstrelsy’s effects on American society; this is because minstrelsy’s characterization not only influenced, but also justified legalized racism. Eventually, Jim Crow became the symbol of racial segregation in the south (Riggs 1986).

Minstrelsy took off during the rise of the abolitionist movement. As people were fighting to abolish slavery from America, others were working to exaggerate the portrayal that defined blacks in minstrelsy. Minstrel characters mirrored the prevailing belief that slavery was good for blacks, since blacks were naturally inferior. Two characters emerged that will forever be ingrained in the consciousness of America: Sambo and the Zip Coon. The myth of Sambo became the ultimate justification for the relations of slavery. Sambo, the classic portrayal of black men in popular entertainment, was ill-suited for much anything other than slavery. His laziness, indolence, ingenious, happiness and childlike contentment made him the perfect model for the ideal slave, who was subject to the control of what was believed to be the vastly superior race. In reality, however, the economic system of slavery could never have operated with lazy and indolent workers. This rationale did little to undermine the Sambo stereotype (Riggs 1986).

As the American civil war approached and the slavery debate grew more heated, minstrel shows turned their attention to freed blacks in the north, thus bringing about the Zip Coon. The Zip Coon, a character portrayed as an idiot and a buffoon, was the result of allowing blacks to be free. Ensuing from blacks’ supposed intellectual inferiority, Zip was not able to cope with the demands of freedom. This was implied in his ludicrous attempt to be white and in his bumbling and awkward speech. Not unlike Sambo, Zip’s behaviors reinforced the idea of black social and intellectual inferiority, and helped to perpetuate the idea that slavery was necessary in order to control black people. The Sambo and Zip Coon served as a double-edged defense of slavery (Riggs 1986).

Jezebel

The minstrel character of the jezebel further served to reinforce the notion that black people needed to be controlled. The Jezebel was a harlot in manner, and ravenously sexual. The half-white Jezebel combined the white skinned facial features of a white woman and the sexual promiscuity of the African woman. She was both beautiful and lustful and she was a commonplace target for the male characters in the show. In contrast to puritan white

women, who were the models for purity and goodness, black women were presented as lustful, impudent, and sexually uncontrollable; this justified the rape and commodification of black female bodies (Littlefield 2008). These notions of black womanhood became the basis on which African-American women were measured.

Savage Brute, Urban Coon and the Great Black Migration

The abolition of slavery and subsequent reconstruction changed the notions of how blacks were to be portrayed in minstrelsy and greater popular culture. Freedom gave rise to a new type of hate and a new character in minstrelsy, the Savage Brute. The prevailing ideas of the time were that without the safeguards and systematic control of slavery, blacks would undoubtedly resort to a life of cannibalism and naked savagery. During the slave days, blacks were seen as docile and lazy; however, in the period of post war-reconstruction, the common consensus was that freedom was a terrible mistake. The first blockbuster film in history, D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) set the stage for the animalistic Savage Black Brute. According to white racist historians at the time, *Birth of a Nation* chronicled the heroic actions of the Ku Klux Klan as they struggled to establish order in the post-war south (Littlefield, 2008).

Such media depictions gave the impression of unchecked black animalistic desires; that is, once freed, black male sexual desires became completely unrestrained in the south. What is more, black men's animalistic desires seemed to target white women. The result of the abolishment of slavery, thus, was the violation of white women's purity and the destruction of basic American values. The ideas set forth in "*Birth of a Nation* not only incited racial violence and lynching, but through its very nature, justified it" (Riggs 1986). The film ran 44 consecutive weeks (Littlefield, 2008), gave resurgence to the Ku Klux Klan, and fueled a massive lynching crusade throughout the southern states. The enduring theme taken from the film was that what was needed was a return to the nostalgic period of slavery, before the animalistic desires of freed, dangerous slaves consumed America (Riggs 1986).

As the lynchings progressed and the terror of the Ku Klux Klan increased, African Americans began an exodus to the northern industrialized cities. This movement became known as the Great Black Migration. As whites were away at war, African Americans emerged in the workforce in unprecedented numbers. Black migration and competition for jobs threatened the status pool of the north. The character of the Urban Coon emerged, coinciding with the period in which whites increasingly felt threatened by the number of blacks in the labor force. The Urban Coon would spend most of his day shooting craps, playing cards, dancing and fighting, partaking in leisurely activities while largely ignoring his job responsibilities. The Urban Coon character, wielding his signature weapon, a razor, portrayed the myth that African-American workers could be childishly entertaining one minute and violently hostile the next. Such images extended the idea that African-Americans were inherently either clownish or dangerous and violent (Riggs 1986).

This brief yet weighty history of minstrelsy described the importance of representation for American racial relations. The implications of minstrelsy are thus, in times of social competition amongst particular ethnic groups, representations served as an ideological mechanism to control the competition of a non-white other, justify inequality, and reinforce the idea of white superiority. The causes and consequences of representations as a mechanism of social domination amongst different groups should not be understated. Having thus established the history we now turn towards BET's corporate structure, and how it works as a system of racialization in our new racial era.

BET's Business Model and New Racism

This new American racial era is situated in a post-civil rights period in which the legal mechanisms for racial oppression have been nullified, and the biological explanations for black failure have been muted. Consequently, as black scholar Hill-Collins (2004) contends, new racism relies much more heavily on mass media to reproduce the ideologies necessary to justify racism and inequity. New racism helps to create the ideology that makes racism and inequality in the changing American landscape appear normal. Under these changing social relations, we see cultural explanations that explain black failure taking the place of biological ones.

BET and Viacom

It is the thesis of this paper that BET, under the control of a multinational and largely white controlled corporation, will become an ideological tool of this new racism. In order to make such an assertion we now turn to an examination of BET's business model.

Social critics Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky contend that because of the fact that corporations are legally obligated to increase profits, media outlets under control of corporations or conglomerates will naturally reflect their corporate interests (1988). Since the owners of Viacom (the corporation that owns BET) are white capitalists that own many other business ventures, logically the biases lie in the propagation and glorification of their own particular concerns, and the advancement of their self-interests.

In 2001, Bob Johnson (Founder of BET) decided to sell BET to Viacom for a staggering \$3 Billion dollars. This effectively made Johnson the first African-American billionaire (Pulley 2004). The deal called for Johnson to remain at the helm of BET as its CEO. Many people argue that BET's programming did not change much and that BET always showed a lack of substantive programming, as black historian Keith Boykin claims, "What Johnson did as owner of BET was to air a steady stream of mindless, degrading music videos, comic shows and infomercials playing to the lowest common denominator in black entertainment" (Boykin 2002). However, a further examination shows that while BET always had issues with its programming, its cofounder believed after BET was sold to Viacom it changed for the worst. Take for example the words of BET's co-founder Sheila Johnson:

When we started BET, it was going to be the Ebony magazine on television... We had public affairs programming. We had news... I had a show called *Teen Summit*, we had a large variety of programming, but the problem is that then the video revolution started up... And then something started happening, and I didn't like it at all. And I remember during those days we would sit up and watch these videos and decide which ones were going on and which ones were not. We got a lot of backlash from recording artists... and we had to start showing them. I didn't like the way women were being portrayed in these videos. (Quoted in Gove 2010).

For its audience, BET represented more than a mere television station, it was to many a literal manifestation of black culture on television, as author Smith-Shomade (2007) contends, "No longer watching across the grain or in opposition, as cultural theorist Stuart Hall calls it, I am validated as an African-American citizen-due in part to seeing and hearing a reflection of the culture I am intimately acquainted with on a daily basis" (XIV). But Robert Johnson revealed his more sinister and exploitive motives for BET in a 1984 meeting with his staff. In this meeting Johnson described what he saw as the ultimate goal

of BET "Our goal...is to make BET the predominant source for advertisers to reach the black consumer" (Pulley 2004:58). When blackness is commodified in such a manner it strips blackness of all substantive meaning and integrity. As cultural critic Bell Hooks (1992) maintains, "As signs, their power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when they are commodified. Communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption." (33).

BET has never been the beacon of light for African Americans the way its name implied, but at least when it was under black ownership it had certain quality programming. Under the Viacom umbrella, some insist that BET began to resemble its sister network MTV with black versions of MTV shows such as *Hell Date* (MTV's *Disaster Date*), *106 & Park* (*Total Request Live*), *Baldwin Hills* (*The Hills*), and so forth (Smith-Shomade, 2008:78). Consequently, BET's target demographic changed and the emblem of black culture on television became the symbolic equivalent of adolescent white culture. BET no longer had the goal of African-American entertainment; rather, many argue it increasingly began to look like a Black MTV. Under the Viacom umbrella BET changed for the worst.

BET and Twenty-First Century Racism

Since the dawning of American culture, blacks have been portrayed as ignorant, lazy, and insatiably savage beasts while whiteness has come to represent the epitome of goodness, beauty, and civility. Slavery and colonialism forced these value systems on the enslaved and colonized, and these ideas were often internalized by them (Hunter 2002). Minstrelsy reinforced these ideas in popular culture, and today's mass media continue to propagate these racist relations of mental slavery, or consciousness colonization. Although we know the minstrel show was a deliberate and purposeful racial project, current media images are not so explicit. While not necessarily overtly racist, it is the purpose of this paper to argue that like the minstrel show of the past, contemporary media representations of African Americans are professionally designed and manipulated in a cultural struggle in which the dominant racial group seeks to contain the subjectivity of a competitive nonwhite other through the practice of racialized cultural politics (Page 1997).

Hill-Collins (2004) contends that racism in the twenty-first century exhibits three distinctive features. One new forms of global capitalism frame this new racism. Put simply, relatively few multinational corporations control a vast amount of the world's wealth while most people, particularly those of African descent, are left out. Two, racism is characterized by a political structure that leaves the poor out of the decision making process while simultaneously portraying the illusion that they are included. And lastly, what this study is about, the use of the media to disseminate ideologies necessary to justify the racism and inequality present in our era, and to control the subjectivity of a competitive non-white other. Given these presumptions about the nature of media and power, it is safe to draw inferences to the type of representations that would likely be found on the BET network.

Cultural anthropologist Helen Page has noted that, as American society has become more technologically advanced, media reproduces ideas of black men as one of dull witted laziness, ignorance and intellectual deficiency. The media encourages the viewing public to believe that only a few exceptional black men are capable of succeeding in a technologically advanced society, while the rest are intellectually deficient and inherently violent in nature. It is believed that the latter must be contained both figuratively and literally (through prisons), since they tend to fail even when given equal chances (1997).

Likewise, sociologist Marci Littlefield claims presentations of black females rarely deviate from images of the Black Savage, Jezebel, and Mammy of the past. Littlefield notes

that black females, depicted in the past as servants and subservants to their white masters, were then, and continue to be portrayed today as hypersexual and brainless, just as their male counterparts are. According to Littlefield, the effect of this image is this: Black women (and men) are held responsible for a variety of social problems that plague African-American communities, including the high rates of out-of-wedlock births, the high rates of HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, the decline in marriage among African Americans, among other problems (Littlefield 2008). It is within this new/post racial American framework that we turn to the representations on BET and analyze its discourses about blackness.

Analysis of BET's Programming

BET's schedule follows the same format throughout the week, largely comprising sitcoms produced on other networks and music videos. For years, BET has maintained this low-cost television schedule model and it is unlikely to change anytime soon. The shows and music videos may change but the substantive content remains relatively stable.

Typology of Characters

After analyzing BET's programming I constructed a list of new millennium minstrel characters that I believe best represents the characterizations of black individuals on BET and blacks in popular culture.² I based this typology on what I believe to be the most significant (in the sense of numbers) and the most influential (how people view African Americans) black characters of modern times. THE WALDOS, which I argue are modernized versions of the Sambo, had the following characteristics: dim witted, not easily angered, and content within his own idiocy. The Waldo's are not complete failures however, as they can excel in activities other than schools such as sports or music, the original Waldo from the sitcom *Family Matters* was an idiot but an excellent chef. This character implies that most young black males are utterly buffoons that can rap and/or play sports but cannot survive in an intellectual or professional world. THE GANGSTERS, present modernized versions of the Savage Brute and Urban Coon of late minstrelsy, the main characters presented as thus: violent, weapon wielding, hypersexual, athletic, money hungry, and a substance user/seller. This character is the stereotypical ideal of the violent dangerous young black male. The PORNO CHICK (character created by Marci Littlefield) is the new jezebel, according to Littlefield (2008) this character is: hypersexual, money hungry, unclothed, sassy, and void of human thought. Like the Jezebel of the past, this character is frequently pursued by the dangerous black brute and is a more than willing target for sexual advancement. And the last character was the URKEL, which I argue is a morphed version of the Zip Coon. This character was smart and intelligent but lacked the features of what would be referred to as authentic blackness. In many instances, this character was emasculated in a way that robbed him of both his sexuality, and his dignity. This character implies that intelligence and authentic black masculinity are mutually exclusive.

BET's Sitcom Sections: Waldos and Urkels

I argue the heaviest representation of Waldo characters came from the situational comedies. As a general arrangement BET does not produce its own situational comedies. It has for years relied upon syndicated shows produced on other networks to fill its schedule. This accomplishes the goal of keeping cost low while providing tried and true entertainment for their black audience.

However, those tried and true methods so apparent in African-American oriented sitcoms routinely deny black males any type of intellectual features. For example, a recent BET produced show *The Game* stars a black female medical student (Melanie Barnett) and her football player boyfriend (Derwin Davis). In this show, practically all of the black male characters are athletes and all of the light skinned female characters are high class business women. In addition to athletic non-intelligent job, Derwin Davis is also a sexual philanderer, along with practically every other black male in the show. Davis consistently cheats on his girlfriend that gave up her life as a medical student for him, and has a child with another woman while in a relationship with Melanie. The show frequently portrayed the black male characters as hypersexual, and savagely brutish. Although *The Game* was originally produced by the CW, BET began producing new episodes of the series in 2010, with much the same savage brutish content.

Moreover, the sitcoms typically utilize young black males as two man parallel Sambo teams. Frequently, instances of clownish or buffoonish behavior done by one character is followed by an equally Samboish action by other. In many ways, these characters formed a throwback to an *Amos and Andy* or *Kenan and Kel* type duet. The consistent contrast between smart black nerds and cool idiots are to some degree modern day binary opposites of the Sambo and Zip Coon characters of early minstrelsy. Sambo and Zip contrast are a constant iteration in black sitcoms, including, but not limited to, Eddie Winslow and Waldo and Steve Urkel, or Will Smith and Carlton Banks.

It is no secret that young African American males perform significantly poorer in academic pursuits than their white upper class counterparts do. African-American males currently make up approximately 38.9 percent of the prison population (Harrison and Beck 2006) and only 13.1 percent of the higher education population (Riggs 2010). Some may argue that these sitcoms reflect that intellectual dynamic; others maintain that this dynamic is brought about by our cultural understandings of racism. Sociologist Margaret Hunter (2002) asserts, "White teachers and administrators are prone to make distinctions among African-American and Mexican American children about who the smart kids are and who the good kids are...Those distinctions are often influenced by our cultural standard of racism" (278). Based on stereotypes of intellectual inferiority, African-American children are habitually tracked into remedial courses and affected academically in disastrous ways. While Hunter underscores the role of institutional racism and, in particular, the role of agents of socialization (e.g., teachers) in reinforcing racial hierarchies, media images focus on the individual, as opposed to institutions. That is to say, television programs—and especially the situational comedies—invariably portray individuals as intellectually deficient, cyclically perpetuating this arrangement.

Sitcoms on BET regularly showed black (often male) students as dull-witted, lazy, complainers, immature, and intellectually unsophisticated. While some people might consider these images as simply "mere entertainment," these images and ideas, especially when repeated on a mass level, are anything but entertaining to the black men/boys and women/girls who are affected by these images and ideas. These images and ideas promote the idea of black intellectual inferiority and emotional immaturity, ideas that are played out in the educational system, the job market, among other social institutions, with all-too real consequences for black men and women.

BET's Music Videos: Gangstas and Porno Chicks

The music video section was much more complex. A variety of characters were on display so I decided to focus on the most prominent characters and their actions and how they

were portrayed. Nonetheless, hip-hop music (the dominant genre on BET's video section) has frequently been criticized as hyper-sexualized and violent. This is to some degree a product of the general direction hip hop music has taken. Yet before the Viacom buyout, BET was not so beholden to the dictates of the hip hop industry, as Sheila Johnson's quote illustrated on in the BET and Viacom section.

What is most apparent in BET's video section is the new minstrel character the Gangster, and of the five female artists in the video section, four fit the Porno Chick mold. Many video's central themes were based off sex, alcohol, violence, and money. There were also instances of nudity, and although the nudity was pixelated out, the connotation was clearly depicted. These videos implied, as Littlefield (2008) noted, black male and female sexual insatiableness. BET claims to ban weapons; guns are censored, but according to BET guidelines, grenades are still acceptable. The violence combined with the rampant sexuality in the videos shown on BET harkens back to the days when the Savage Brute would spend his time chasing the Jezebel around stage. This type of black hypersexual imagery reached its crescendo in 2000 with the introduction of BET's late night video series *BET-UNCUT*. *BET-UNCUT* was the network's late night video programming that aired at 3:00AM, and although it claimed to be aimed at adults, the disclaimer in the introduction (spoken by the voice of a seductive female) lured men and women of all age groups. The videos that were broadcast were incredibly violent, highly sexualized, and largely uncensored. Many of *UNCUT*'s videos, such as the St. Lunatics "Tip Drill", bordered on pornography. *BET-UNCUT* was eventually cancelled after much controversy.

Like black-male dull-wittedness in sitcoms, violent black male imagery in the music video sections was thoroughly and utterly abundant. There were four videos in which their entire themes centered on violence. Hyper-sexuality and violence were plentiful in the video section, with car chases, gang bandanas, blood, fighting, and even grenade explosions. These video segments are a notable departure from the days of teen summit and video soul before the Viacom buyout.

These types of images are painstakingly copious in the music videos, yet, it would be wrong to believe that these types of images are present only in BET's video programming. In late 2006, BET aired its wildly popular documentary series *American Gangster*. The series chronicled the rise and falls of some of America's most famous black gangsters. Every episode is an essential throwback to the Urban Coon of late Minstrelsy. The program frequently showed dangerous black male gang members brandishing weapons and selling drugs on inner-city streets. However, there was little to no discussion of the economic structure, lack of proper schools and jobs, or social disorganization and social strain conditions that spur the construction of gangs in black communities. Rather, the show focused on gangbanging black males terrorizing neighborhoods and fomenting the destruction of their own community through the production and distribution of drugs. Each show ends with the gangsters either dead or serving time in prison, implying that crime does not pay; but, in another way, the show also glorifies the gangsters. Many individuals with little or no opportunities to be noticed in American society may look at *American Gangster* and idolize these individuals, because they are many times the only people in the neighborhood with money and prestige. Additionally, by focusing on the gangs without discussing the structural context that led to the production of gangs, *American Gangster*, in large part, exonerates the larger American economic and social structure of any wrongdoing. In a social structural context, one can view the glorification of violent imagery directed towards black males as the manifestation of a subconscious, or many times conscious, desire for a genocidal assault on young black men (Hooks, 1992: 109).

These types of shows and videos pose a problem because violent black male imagery has both successive and immediate effects on the livelihood of African Americans. Similar to the Urban Coon, gangsters and pimp stereotypes justify violence against, and incarceration of African-American males. The extent that these images and ideas have been so ingrained in the U.S. subconscious can be seen in our criminal justice system. Notably, black men are incarcerated at far higher rates than any other racial group (Page 1997). According to a 2005 figure, blacks in the U.S. accounted for approximately 12 per cent of the population, yet made up approximately 38.9% of the prison population (Harrison 2006). No doubt, the persistent media images of the black male as violent, dangerous, and criminal had some influence on why black men make up the majority of the prison populations.

In a similar fashion, Littlefield (2008) argues that depictions of black female sexual insatiableness justify the rampant social problems affecting the African-American community, and other problems in society. In the days of minstrelsy, black women were depicted as Jezebels. In the 1980's, during the Reagan era, black women were portrayed to be welfare queens. Today (like their male counterparts), they are still constructed as sexual scapegoats for a myriad of social problems (for instance, HIV/AIDS, the high rates of single parenting, etc.) present within America that have structural bases (Littlefield 2008). Black female Porno Chicks flourish in the music video section of BET. Occasionally, a female artist in BET's music video is not presented in a stereotypical overly sexual manner, yet this latently reinforces ideas of white beauty. The Porno Chicks in the videos had lighter skin and more Anglo facial features. Thus, while this finding is inconsistent with my expectation that black women will be portrayed as Porno Chicks, the fact that the darker female was not portrayed in a sexually attractive manner still reinforces the idea that white beauty (i.e., Anglo features) are highly desirable and valued. According to scholar Patricia Hill-Collins, ideas of superiority that privilege whiteness can only function through the degradation of blackness. Privilege, power, and identity are relational; and those who are defined as intelligent, beautiful, and civilized are defined that way only in relation to those who are defined as ugly, intellectually deficient, and dangerous (Hill-Collins 1991). Thus, even though the light-skinned jezebel is not virtuous, she is still attractive, sexually desirable, and, therefore, valued over her darker-skinned sisters. The jezebel/porno chick embodies an aesthetic that suggest black women must resemble white women to be attractive.

BET Films

Another relevant development following the Viacom buyout was programming lineup was the Black Buster films. Much like the sitcom programming, BET dedicates much of their primetime lineup to reshowing old blaxploitation films and recent African-American centered films. In a symbolic fashion BET routinely broadcast stereotypical black films whose original purpose, as the name blaxploitation implies, was to save a near bankrupt Hollywood by targeting African-American audiences with low budget stereotypically demeaning films. The black community was complacent in such a genre because, like BET, it was the only place African Americans could see representations of themselves in the media.

Airing films such as these suggest radical departures from BET programming before the Viacom buyout. Prior to *Black Buster* movies and *BET Star Cinema*, BET produced a line of self-produced movies based off the Arabesque book company it bought in 1998 (Smith-Shomade 2007). Many of these self-produced movies dealt with struggles, hardship,

and the racism of the time. And although many of these arabesque films were of relatively low quality compared to other mainstream productions, they were something quintessentially non-stereotypical, as is presented in so many of the commonly broadcasted *Black Buster Films*.

Discussion

This study reveals that, indeed, BET operates as a form of racialization. Omi and Winant's (2005) concept of racial projects puts the minstrel show and BET in their proper context. Racial projects establish the meaning of race in a particular socio-historical period through the control of images, representations, and explanations about specific categories or groups of people in an attempt to redistribute power along racial lines. In this context, both the minstrel show and BET, by reinforcing racial stereotypes of black men and women, could be construed as a project to justify racial hierarchies, by suggesting that, based on their behaviors, black men and women are in need of social control. That is to say, regardless of their behavior—whether as clowns and buffoons, as jezebels, Mammies or as criminals—black men and women are in need of remedy. Because they are seen as disorderly somehow, they need to be silenced and restrained.

Although representations do not have the ability to force social behavior, they affect individual's perceptions, and create the ideological basis necessary to justify racism and inequality. Furthermore, stereotypes create systematic structural barriers for African Americans (Littlefield, 2008). These representations, while damaging to the African-American psyche, go far beyond simply hurt feelings; these types of racist depictions play a fundamental and lasting impact on the outcomes and life chances of African-Americans. Both whites and blacks internalize stereotypes and the sheer repetition of these images creates the image of reality for both white Americans and African-Americans.

It would be wrong to assert that every character portrayed on BET's sitcoms and in their music video programming were negative or stereotypical. Many characters broke the mold and even challenged the stereotypical ideas of black masculinity. However, all these characters were light skinned in relation to their darker counterparts. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall contends, "Anything that attempts to ascribe to the black population characteristics that used to be reserved for the white ones generates enormous tension in a society" (Hall 1996). According to Hall, anything that breaks this classification must be fixed or remedied somehow. Consequently, there can be positive, beautiful, or intelligent African-Americans, but those African-Americans must be light skinned. In this respect, one might argue that light-skinned characters or intelligent light-skinned African-American characters on BET and other mass media outlets do not break the classification of black inferiority; they are simply the half-white exceptions.

The BET network has plans to expand around the globe (BET 2008) and these types of racist images and portrayals will likely be the only representations the world will see of African Americans. BET, however, is anything but a network that focuses on real black issues. Instead, BET appears only to be a front for a white capitalist machine. Under these circumstances, BET will almost certainly have a vested interest in reinforcing racial stereotypes about African Americans. For the white owners of BET (Viacom) personally benefit from a system of racial stratification by maintaining their status as the racially dominant group. For, as Hill-Collins (1991) contends, white privilege is only sustained through the degradation of blackness. Hence, they are able to capitalize by widely

disseminating racist stereotypes about African Americans. In this respect, Viacom (the corporate owner of BET) is not much different from the T.D. Rices of yesteryear; for it too, capitalizes on the pain and culture of African Americans for profit.

Conclusion

The minstrel show is one of the most fundamental characteristic of American popular culture. Minstrel shows were the first original form of American entertainment. The minstrel show, via the minstrel line, contributed to the formulation of Jazz, set precedence for variety, sketch and improvisational comedy employed by shows like *Saturday Night Live* and *In Living Color*. The minstrel show was in large part the basis of all modern sitcoms, and was the origin of standup comedy, which led directly to the comedic geniuses of Redd Foxx, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Chris Rock (Abdul-Jabbar and Obstfeld 2007). Notwithstanding, blackfaced minstrelsy justified lynching, slavery, and debauchery. Blackfaced minstrelsy has had a vicious and lasting effect on the history and whole of America, and caused death and despair for countless black men and women. The minstrel show gave resurgence to the Ku Klux Klan, sparked massive lynching crusades throughout the south, incited every type of racial hatred imaginable, and justified them all the same.

BET, like the minstrel show, exerts a similar dynamic as a type of love/hate relationship with black America. BET provided the launching ground for many influential African-American artists. Many famous black comedians got their first big break on *Comic View*, and BET still remains the one television network that consistently shows African-American actors and musicians in its programming. But the opportunities for many of these artists came at a great price for the countless African-Americans whom did not benefit from this exploitive co-optation. BET programming, especially since its sell out to Viacom has categorized blackness into stereotypical demeaning roles that symbolically justify and legitimate racism and inequality.

With these racist and stereotypical representations so thoroughly abundant in American media and popular culture, and particularly African-American media, Spike Lee appears to be dead on in his assessment that "current American popular culture has yet to exorcise the blackface demons of its past" (Lee cited in Nowatski 2007: 117). The mass dissemination and longevity of these images suggests not only the continuation of a ghastly, horrid, and detestable period in America's history, but is a testament to the pervasiveness of racism, and the acceptability of racist ideology in America.

By sheer reasons of ownership, the fact that Black Entertainment Television should relinquish its name goes without saying. If not relinquished, the "Entertainment" portion of the BET acronym should be supplanted with the word "Exploitation." In all truthfulness, however, neither the former nor the latter will occur because the systematic control of African-American images by white ownership will not let that take place. Only a break from that system and another revival of African-American self-consciousness will bring about such change.

Notes

- ¹ Minstrels used to put white paint around their lips and white gloves on their hands to mock the skin disease vitiligo.
- ² This interpretation was taken from a longer content analysis of BET's programming, which the author conducted for my Master's Thesis. The content analysis was removed for space. In order to see the entire study, please contact author.

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