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JUSTIFYING INJUSTICE: HOW CARICATURED DEPICTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IMPACTED WORLDWIDE PERCEPTION

Jaida Noble
Arts, Media, and Culture
June 2022

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Deirdre Raynor

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors, University of Washington, Tacoma

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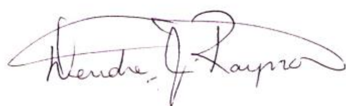

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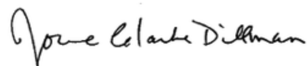

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Introduction

Despite racist depictions of African Americans in art seeming to be behind us, the consequences of such representation and stereotypes live on. Caricatured images of Black people displayed to white society that this group consisted of socially inept buffoons with an innate tendency for violence and hypersexuality. These stereotypes have passed the need for explicit caricatures and have survived into the present day, resurfacing in modern media and in the various excuses meant to justify the countless murders of unarmed Black people. This paper asks: how have Black caricatures been used as propaganda throughout history, and how have African American artists responded to this racist imagery?

This paper will argue that the use of caricaturing Black people throughout history is a form of propaganda, affecting the overall perception of African Americans and influencing policies that have barred them of human rights. Propaganda is a term commonly used to describe authoritarian governments' forms of media distribution, but it is normally not a term that is used for nations as democratic as the United States. However, the various memorabilia that has been distributed of caricatured African Americans may prove that the term is not exclusive to governments like the Third Reich. Black caricatures depicted as lazy, incompetent, and happy in positions of servitude flooded American media throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Using Erwin Panofsky's iconographical framework, this paper will analyze various examples of Black caricatures in various forms of media from film to advertisements to illustrations in order to argue their impact on the perceptions of Black people. To end the paper on a more positive note, I will also be highlighting, primarily Black, artists who combatted this imagery by defying this racist representation or reclaiming it as satire. This, I argue, is one of the

solutions to this issue; allowing Black artists to tell their own stories and depict themselves in a realistic way allows for a more well-rounded, human image of African Americans.

What is Caricature?

Merriam Webster (n.d.) defines a caricature as an "exaggeration by means of often ludicrous distortion of parts or characteristics." In art, caricature is commonly used to simplify and comically exaggerate a subject, usually a politician or celebrity. This comedic use of depicting a person can range from lighthearted joking to vicious mockery. Throughout history, caricaturing certain racial or ethnic groups has been the latter.

For African Americans, historically, this has been especially so. During the antebellum period, quoting Jackson (2016), "marketing images of African Americans were not as distorted as they became, with many appearing in sanitized, even carefree depictions of a romanticized antebellum plantation life" (p. 3-4). Showing enslaved Blacks as happy in captivity softened the outward image of slavery being an inhumane practice. According to the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia (n.d.a), however, anti-Black caricatures took a much more hostile and dehumanizing role post-slavery, portraying Black people as "pitiable exotics, cannibalistic savages, hypersexual deviants, childlike buffoons, obedient servants, self-loathing victims, and menaces to society." Some of these portrayals seem contradictory, but each one had a message being sent to white America. These images permeated everyday American life through material objects from salt and pepper shakers to ashtrays, as well as print media and, later, film. These caricatured depictions, such as the Golliwog which will be discussed further, had even gotten international fame, spreading these stereotypes into other parts of the world (Pilgrim, 2012c). As a result, this vicious portrayal of Black people helped in both normalizing and justifying the inhumane treatment received due to segregationist laws and white hostility.

Framework

When analyzing artworks and other visual media, this paper will be utilizing Erwin Panofsky's iconographical framework, discussed in Leeuwen and Jewitt's (2000) *The Handbook of Visual Analysis.* The framework consists of three layers: representational meaning, iconographical symbolism, and iconological symbolism.

Representational meaning is what is physically shown in a piece of media, while iconographical symbolism refers to the connotation behind an element shown in an image (p. 100). The challenge between representational meaning and iconographical symbolism, Leeuwen and Jewitt state, "is to see this kind of recognition as separate from the understanding of the conventional meanings that may be associated with what is represented" (p. 100). An image of a person waving, for instance, is the representational meaning, while the understanding that they are greeting someone is the iconographical symbolism.

Lastly, iconological symbolism refers to the connotation of the element within the context of the image. For example, the color red in a painting could have various meanings, but for the context of the specific image, it could mean lust. Because "iconography uses both textual analysis and contextual research," researchers will have to do a bit of digging to grasp the context behind the subjects shown in an image, especially for older pieces or pieces that are culturally specific (p. 101). This allows them to understand what was aimed to be communicated contemporaneously to that time period.

With this understanding of the iconographical framework, this theory will grant the opportunity to analyze multiple artworks including African American caricatures. To start, let us begin with an example done by Stevens and King-Meadows (2017) as they analyze the 2008

New Yorker cover, *Politics of Fear,* and explain why this piece was unsuccessful in communicating its message due to the image's elements.

Barry Blitt's (2008) illustration titled *Politics of Fear* (see Figure 1), depicts Barack Obama in Arab-style garb with a photo of Osama Bin Laden hung up above the fireplace burning an American flag. Obama bumps fists with his wife, Michelle, who is dressed as a Black Panther, armed with a rifle and flaunting a large Afro. At first glance, one may think that the artist behind this caricatured image did not support this future president and was depicting their prejudiced fears of what would happen if Obama was elected. As Stevens and King-Meadows (2016) revealed in their survey, many participants interpreted the image in the same way, with 55 percent of participants finding it offensive. Further analysis of the piece using Erwin Panofsky's iconographical framework showed that its iconography communicates a message of the Obamas being non-Christian, foreign, anti-American, radicals.

Figure 1. Politics of Fear (Source: Blitt, 2008)

However, the purpose behind this image was, allegedly, the exact opposite. *The New Yorker* claims that Barry Blitt's aim was "to 'satirize the use of scare tactics and misinformation in the Presidential election to derail Obama's campaign'" (Stevens and King-Meadows, 2016).

Despite its intention, it seems that this illustration missed the mark. With the image allegedly lacking an explanation for what it was trying to communicate according to Wingfield and Feagin (2009), it was taken quite literally by many viewers, especially those unfamiliar with *The New Yorker*. Those who opposed the image, such as Wingfield and Feagin (2009), claimed that the caricatured depiction of the Obamas as terrorists "played into existing white-framed ideas of the Obamas as different and potentially dangerous threats to U.S. national security" (p. 91). In a letter to *The New Yorker* criticizing the piece, Rusel DeMaria (2008) writes that the piece "provides ammunition to further the very thing that it satirizes, and that is potentially very damaging to a worthy candidate," and advises that these editorial pieces should focus on the individuals that it aims to confront: the "real fearmongers." Correctly predicted by DeMaria, and verified by Barack Obama himself who claimed that the image "fueled some misconceptions," rather than getting them to reflect on their prejudiced views, those who opposed Obama's Presidential campaign were more likely to resonate with the image (Steven & King-Meadows, 2016). In Stevens and King-Meadows' (2016) survey, 41-percent of Republicans found the image clever while 31-percent found it funny, as opposed to the 22-percent of Democrats who found it clever and 17-percent who found it funny. Blitt's illustration enabled their narrow-minded fears of what illustrator Norman Ethre Jennett referred to as a "Negro rule," which will later be discussed in this paper, and the Islamification of the United States government. It was misread as classic fearmongering.

These on-the-nose details of Bin Laden being the framed portrait in the background, Michelle's Black Power Afro and large boots, and Obama's tunic, are emphasized by their sheer size in this visual art form of caricature, meant to force the viewer to notice them and interpret what is being communicated. The use of exaggeration in caricatures accentuates features that are deemed comical, unpleasant, or even scary. The piece heavily relied on the "Barack is Muslim" and "the Obamas are un-American" visual motifs, "playing to the racialized, gendered, and xenophobic narratives trafficked during the 2008 election cycle: that the Obamas were deceitful and foreign to White Americans" (Stevens and King-Meadows, 2016).

With the biographies of the Obamas questioned constantly during the 2008 presidential campaign, the impact of this phenomenon survives today. From 2008 to 2015, the number of voters who believed that Obama was Muslim went up from 13 percent to almost 30 percent (Stevens and King-Meadows, 2016). This spike shows how well propaganda can stick into the minds of millions. Caricatured depictions of the person or group being targeted only exacerbate the issue. *Politics of Fear* provides a foundation for understanding the impact caricatures can have on enforcing stereotypes, whether intentional or otherwise.

Background

Caricature Internationally

The caricature of African Americans was not limited to the United States. With the use of caricatures in advertising, merchandise, and media, negative depictions of Blacks had spread worldwide, with some cultures still utilizing these caricatures into the present day.

A primary example in European history is a 1938 poster to advertise the *Degenerate Music* exhibition in Nazi Germany. Figure 2 depicts a caricatured Black man playing the

saxophone. He wears a black and white two-piece suit with a Star of David attached to his lapel, white gloves, and a top hat. In one ear, he wears an earring.

This image heavily takes inspiration from minstrelsy, as shown in the Black man's suit and white gloves. The gold earring is a common element in depicting Black people as savages, connoting primitiveness and incivility. The exaggerated facial features, especially the oversized lips are a common method of caricaturing Black people, making them appear inhuman and buffoonish, something to be laughed at. Lastly, the Star of David, according to Britannica (2020), is a Jewish symbol, more modernly used as an "emblem of Judaism." However, when worn as a badge in the context of Nazi-occupied Europe, this was a forceful way to "mark" Jews to enforce discriminatory laws and the later atrocities of the Holocaust.

For historical context, the *Degenerate Music* exhibition was meant to show the German people what music was deemed "degenerate" and was therefore banned in the country. The Florida Center for Instructional Technology (n.d.) states that "The words 'Jewish,' 'Degenerate,' and 'Bolshevik' were commonly used to describe any art or music not acceptable to the Third Reich." Music that was considered degenerate to the Nazis was anything played by or originated from anyone outside of the German or "Aryan" race. Jazz, which gained international attention, was essentially banned in Nazi Germany, not just for originating from Black people but for originating from America and being modern.

Put together, the subject of this image was an amalgamation of all that was deemed "degenerate" by the Nazis. The image of a Black man wearing a Star of David was what Potter (2016) described as "inviting suggestions of racial otherness, American degeneracy, and Jewish control" (p. 26). The caricatured Black man as the face of degeneracy shows the collective knowledge of the negative connotation of Blackness; being put on the same level as a Black

person was meant to be an insulting act. Blackness equates to foreign, primitive, unintelligent, and overall unwanted. This way of depicting a person or group as Black caricatures in art was what Leeuwen and Jewitt referred to as "niggering" (p. 104). The main target for this was Jews, but the poster was meant to illustrate that Jews were on the same level as Blacks, the lowest based on the racial hierarchy and race-based eugenic pseudoscience.

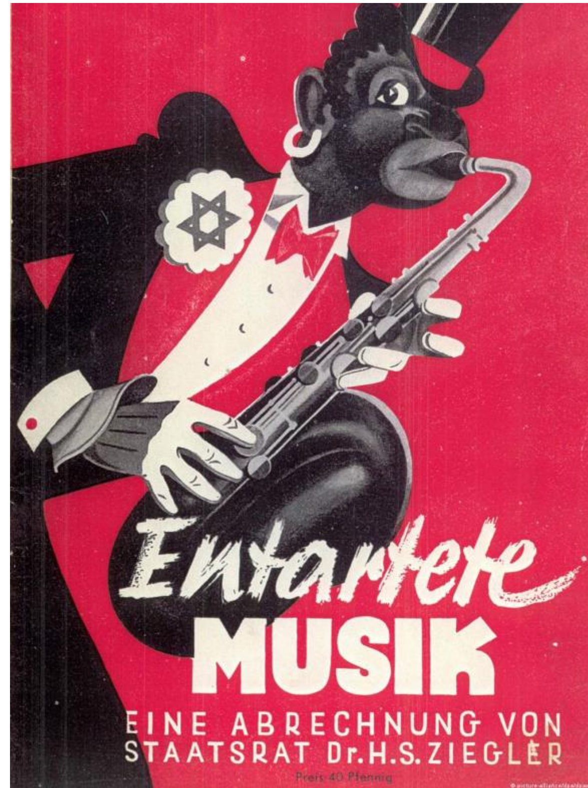

Figure 2. Entartete Musik (Degenerate Music) (Source: 1938)

The various caricatures of African Americans during the Antebellum period depicted them as childlike and harmless, stereotypes that justified their subjugation under whites who maintained the belief that "a paternalistic institution where masters acted as quasi-parents to their slaves was humane, even morally right" (Pilgrim, 2012a). However, after the abolition of slavery and entering the Reconstruction era during the age of "The New Negro," these caricatures began to take a more sinister turn as Black people began to obtain more freedoms. Pilgrim (2012a)

paraphrases sociologist Allen D. Grimshaw, stating that "the most savage oppression of blacks by whites, whether expressed in rural lynchings or urban race riots, has taken place when blacks have refused or been perceived by whites as refusing to accept a subordinate or oppressed status." These caricatures justified violence directed towards African Americans and the refusal of equal rights, and have survived into the present day.

Types of Caricature

There are various stereotypes that have been used throughout American media history that have negatively impacted African Americans in the real world. Heavily referring to descriptions from Ferris State University's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, this section will provide an overview of these stereotypes, including their purpose in what they were trying to communicate. However, there will be some that will be discussed in greater detail than others as they will be mentioned in later sections.

Brute

The brute caricature is arguably the most deadly caricature on this list. Depicting Black men as violent and hypersexual rapists of white women, this caricature was used as a way to villainize Black men during the height of the abolitionist movement and reconstruction era. The goal was to create an agenda that Black men only wanted equal rights to gain access to white women, a dig at both miscegenation and the conservation of white womanhood (Pilgrim, 2012a).

The stereotype of the Black brute signified that Black men were a danger to society if not under a place of subjugation under whites. Believed to want human rights in order to establish a "Negro rule," using their newfound power to destroy the white race, the need to control and subdue these seemingly uncontrollable subhumans was a major priority among whites (2012a). Lynchings were public acts of murder that was a common response to Black men who were often

falsely accused of raping white women in the American South (Tucker, 2007, p. 54-55). Burning the person alive, hanging, beating, or cutting off body parts to keep as souvenirs were common acts during these public events that were attended by white men, women, and children. Tucker (2007) states that records documented that 4,742 African Americans were killed by lynch mobs, or "unknown perpetrators" despite countless witnesses, between the years 1880 and 1968 (p. 53). If we look at the present day, the brute caricature also plays a part in rationalizing the brutal and often fatal violence directed at Black men at the hands of police officers and white vigilantes. This is part of the reason why many call instances of police brutality "modern-day lynchings."

In the present day, the brute caricature still makes a massive impact. From the numerous depictions of Black men in media as threatening thugs or predators, this is observable. In 2008, for example, Vogue was under hot water when accused of photographing professional basketball player, LeBron James, with model Giselle Bunchen in a suspiciously similar way to a World War I poster by Harry R. Hopps (1917) (See Figure 3). The poster depicts Germany as a wild gorilla holding a club and a white woman. The caption above the image reads, "Destroy this mad brute" (1917). James is holding Bunchen, who is wearing a similar dress to the woman in the poster, in one hand, while dribbling a basketball in his other hand in place of a club. Depicting Black people as apes is a common caricature meant to humiliate and dehumanize them.

Figure 3. Hopps' enlistment poster next to Vogue's 2008 cover of LeBron James and Giselle Bunchen

When a Black person, particularly a Black man, displays any kind of aggression, their blackness tends to heavily be taken into account for their behavior as if it is innate. An example of this is boxer Mike Tyson. Known for his violent and emotionally unstable temperament, "Americans see him as an affirmation of the black brute caricature, and he has, especially in recent years, embraced the stereotype outside the boxing ring," despite it being a one-dimensional view of the athlete (Pilgrim, 2012a). The brute stereotype is also reflected in the present-day American justice system, demonstrated by African Americans being over five times more likely to be incarcerated than whites, according to the NAACP (n.d.). This caricature permeates American culture to the point where there is a social perception that Black people, especially Black men, are seen as inherently dangerous.

Jezebel

The Jezebel stereotype depicts Black women as hypersexual beings. This caricature was used to counter the assertion that white men in the Jim Crow era were sexually assaulting Black women, according to Pilgrim (2012d). This stereotype stemmed from European travelers to Africa before the slave period. The "scantily clad natives" who practiced polygamy and danced tribal dances were misconstrued as being due to an innate uncontrolled sexual lust (2012d). This was later reinforced during the slave period when Black people were often stripped of their clothing on auction blocks, as well as only having clothes so ragged that body parts were often exposed. In comparison to white women, who were mostly covered, "[t]he contrast between the clothing reinforced the beliefs that white women were civilized, modest, and sexually pure, whereas black women were uncivilized, immodest, and sexually aberrant" (2012d).

A classic example of a Jezebel caricature is in satirical cartoonist Robert Crumb's (1968), *Zap Comix*. The first page of *Zap Comix #2* shown in Figure 4 depicts a caricatured African woman, Angelfood McSpade, a hypersexual woman whose only purpose is to sexually satisfy white men. In this excerpt from Crumb's comic, her mostly nude body is the main focus and is treated as an "elusive creature," examined and hunted down like an animal in a jungle (1968). She is "ready, willing, and able" to give her body away, but is seen as a risky catch (1968). While Angelfood McSpade and Crumb's other characters were "caricatures of mainstream culture figures," as described by Sorensen (2004), many critics found the Angelfood character racist (p. 26). Similar to Blitt's *Politics of Fear,* it seems that Crumb's way of satire did not clearly communicate the message that he was trying to send to his hippie audience of the time.

Figure 4. Zap Comix #2 (Source: Crumb, 1968, p. 1)

The Jezebel stereotype of having an innate mature and sexual nature is not limited to Black women, however. The stereotype also affects young Black girls by them being treated as older than they actually are. Toliver (2018) paraphrases Morris, stating that "distortions of Black girlhood create a form of age compression, in which the young girls are likened more to adults than children, rendering Black girlhood interchangeable with Black womanhood." Toliver goes on to cite the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality in their findings "that Black girls between the ages of 5 and 14 were perceived to be more independent, know more about adult topics and sex, and require less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort than White

girls." This creates an environment where Black girls are unable to have a full childhood as the expectation for them to be mature and self-sufficient is much higher.

Mammy

Often portrayed as a fat, dark-skinned, asexual woman, the mammy dedicates her entire life to the white family that she serves, putting the wellbeing of her own family last. A well-spread and beloved Black caricature for her maternal nature and nostalgic connotations to many whites, the mammy was a common image for commercial products from pancake mixes to salt and pepper shakers (see Figure 5). The image "romanticized the realities of slave and servant life," creating the notion that Black people, particularly Black women, were content and happy being subservient to whites (Pilgrim, 2012e). The image of a wide-grinned figure rationalized economic discrimination toward Blacks.

Figure 5. "When You Sang Hush-a-Bye Baby to Me" sheet music cover (Source: The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia)

While the mammy is an image of maternity and loyal subservience, there is an even more sinister undertone for the creation of this caricature. Despite the narrative that the mammy was a common antebellum period figure, most house slaves were mixed-race, thin, and young, the complete opposite of the common image of the dark-skinned, fat, old, or middle-aged mammy. According to Pilgrim (2012e), the mammy was "created by white Southerners to redeem the relationship between black women and white men within slave society in response to the antislavery attack from the North during the ante-bellum period." With the common occurrences of sexual abuse perpetrated by white men towards Black women during the slave period, "the mammy caricature was deliberately constructed to suggest ugliness" (2012e). The false narrative that the mammy was a common sight during the slave period established the notion that Black women were too ugly to be assaulted in any way, dismissing the thousands, if not millions, of rape cases in the antebellum South.

Golliwog

Florence Kate Upton created the Golliwogg, later changed to the Golliwog, character for her children's book series, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls.* Described as "a horrid sight, the blackest gnome," the Golliwogg was a humanoid creature with black skin, wooly hair, wide eyes, and a large smile surrounded by bright red lips (Pilgrim, 2012c). With his "bright red trousers, a red bow tie on a high collared white shirt, and a blue swallow-tailed coat," he was a clear caricature of Black people as Upton was inspired by a Black minstrel doll she played with as a child. The Golliwog was, essentially, what Pilgrim (2012c) describes as a "caricature of a caricature." While "unsightly," the Golliwog was a lovable and silly character.

The Golliwog became an international craze in Europe, with his image found in various memorabilia such as postcards, dolls, and jewelry. Beginning with parents making Golliwog

dolls for their children, it later began being produced by manufacturers. Jam and preserve company, James Robertson & Sons, trademarked the Golliwog image in the early twentieth century, naming it Golly (Pilgrim, 2012c)(See Figure 6). In a mail-away campaign, Robertson's sent brooches of Gollies playing sports in return for their marmalade coupons. This brought great success to their company and up until 1999 have sent out over 20 million brooches (2012c). In the present day, there is an ongoing debate on whether or not the Golliwog is a racist image that should be removed from newly published books and brand trademarks.

Figure 6. A Golly found in a 1961 magazine by a friend in the U.K. (Source: @sourgripz [Instagram])

Sapphire

Later into the Blaxploitation era, which Lawrence (2016) defined "as films made between 1970 and 1975 by both black and white filmmakers to capitalize on the African American film audience," there was an increase in the Sapphire caricature. Originating from the character

Sapphire Stevens from *Amos 'n Andy,* the Sapphire is described as sassy, emasculating to Black men primarily, and overbearing. Pilgrim (2012f) writes, "The Sapphire's desire to dominate and her hyper-sensitivity to injustices make her a perpetual complainer, but she does not criticize to improve things; rather, she criticizes because she is unendingly bitter and wishes that unhappiness on others." The Sapphire is the direct media depiction of the "angry Black woman" stereotype. Outside of media depictions, this stereotype hinders Black women from displaying displeasure of any kind for fear of being seen as this stereotype and therefore dismissed. As Pilgrim (2012f) states, "The Sapphire portrayal has been around for as long as black women have dared to critique their lives and treatment."

Tom

The male counterpart of the mammy, the Tom caricature was an alternate depiction of Black men, depicting them as physically weak and subservient to whites. Faithful and dependable, the Tom dedicates his life to caring for white families and is happy to do it. Named after the title character of Harriett Beacher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* this caricature name has become an insult in the Black community to describe someone who tries to assimilate into whiteness by "betraying" their community (Pilgrim, 2012g).

Coon

An abbreviation of the word raccoon, the term coon is a slur against Blacks that also is its own caricature (Pilgrim, 2012b). Compared to the Sambo who was an older yet innocent Black male with "the ability and the desire to work for, to entertain, and to serve whites," coons were described as young, rebellious, "urban blacks who disrespected whites. Stated differently, the coon was a Sambo gone bad" (Tucker, 2007, p. 62; Pilgrim, 2012b). However, despite him not being happy with his place in society, the coon is unable to change his position due to his

supposedly innate laziness and lack of intelligence. Similar to the brute, the coon was also a way to justify violence directed at Black people.

Savage

The savage caricature was mainly directed toward native Africans, meant to depict them as primitive and less evolved compared to their European counterparts according to 19th-century anthropological pseudo-science (Jim Crow Museum, n.d.a). The caricature was depicted as “animalistic, crazed, or comical cannibals, often with bones in their oversized lips” (n.d.a).

Tragic Mulatto

The tragic mulatto was a common caricature depicted in literature and media. To discourage miscegenation, or race-mixing, the tragic mulatto caricature depicted a mixed-race character, usually a woman, whose biracial identity left them so confused about where they fit on the racial hierarchy that they would go mad. Their story usually ended in their demise often by suicide, unable to handle the paralyzing feeling of not knowing where they belonged. As Pilgrim (2012h) states, “in a race-based society, the tragic mulatto found peace only in death. She evoked pity or scorn, not sympathy.”

In this non-exhaustive list of stereotypes, notice how there are many that contradict each other: the hypersexual Brute versus the loyal Tom, the seducing Jezebel versus the subservient and mothering Mammy. These stereotypes are dependent on the social climate of their time, using media portrayals to create a narrative in order to both spread an inaccurate image of and justify the treatment of African Americans.

Impact

With a wide array of caricatures that covered the American landscape, it is clear that it has negatively impacted the public perception of African Americans through the stereotypes they promoted. Put simply, this kind of representation is a form of propaganda. Smith (2021) defines propaganda as “the dissemination of information… to influence public opinion. Deliberateness and a relatively heavy emphasis on manipulation distinguish propaganda from casual conversation or the free and easy exchange of ideas.” The term propaganda is typically a word used to describe the news spread in fascist societies like Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. However, it is forgotten that propaganda was, and arguably still is, shared here in the United States.

When this kind of representation of Black people is all over American media, it must be asked, what message is being sent here, and what can this kind of representation lead to?

Wilmington Coup

The Wilmington coup of 1898 is an American historical event that is not a well-known historical event that is often discussed. However, it is argued to be one of the main catalysts for Jim Crow segregation in the American South. Wilmington, North Carolina was considered the most progressive Southern city in the post-slavery era, with a strong Black middle-class and nearly 126,000 Black men having the right to vote in 1896 (Randle, 2020). A number of Black Republicans were elected officials in the city. The opposition to the Republican Party and the Populist Party, consisting mainly of African Americans and poor, white farmers, was the wealthy, all-white, segregationist Democratic Party. To reestablish a polity of white supremacy, the Democratic Party came up with a plan to create fear among Wilmington’s white residents against Blacks in the city and switch the majority’s political standing. This included spreading

exaggerated and even outright wrong news in the local newspaper, *News and Observer,* on a "Negro Rule" that must be squashed to withstand white supremacy.

One aspect of this plot was in the art posted in the paper, done by cartoonist Norman Ethre Jennett. Hired by its editor, Josephus Daniels, Jennett used Black male caricatures to create a negative image of Black men in office, pushing the belief that Black men are predators of white women and will infest the local government to establish a Black-run society.

Figure 7 shows one of Jennett's (1898) illustrations that depict a caricatured Black man at the center of the image. He has large wings with the words "Negro Rule" labeled on them, large clawed and hairy hands, and spaced out teeth. His tail comes out of the Fusion Ballot Box. He is large compared to the tiny white men and women he looms over as they run and scream. At the bottom of the image is the caption, "The Vampire That Hovers Over North Carolina."

Figure 7. The Vampire That Hovers Over North Carolina (Source: Jennett, 1898)

As already discussed, the use of caricaturing Blacks was a way of dehumanizing, but Jennett takes it a step further by making the Black figure a winged vampire. Vampires connote a predatory being that drains one's life source and prey on the innocent, primarily female virgins. The vampire's large size suggests his power over the tiny and afraid people running about. Lastly, the fusion ballot box suggests unfair voting practices as fusion voting, according to

BallotPedia (n.d.), is defined as when more than one political party supports a candidate, allowing that candidate to “appear on the same ballot multiple times under multiple party lines.”

Put all together, this image pushes the agenda that the human rights of Blacks were a plot to dismount white supremacy, shown by the scared white men and women who are powerless against the growing power of the Negro. The Black vampire emerging from the ballot box suggests that the Negro is infiltrating the government with unfair political tactics. As Williams (2013) writes, it represents “the menace of black men; it equates black men with not only supernatural demons but also anthropomorphic beasts hungry to dominate the bodies of whites” (p. 9). This imagery added fear among the white population of Wilmington, creating anxieties that something must be done and must be done fast.

And that it did. On November 10, 1898, over 2000 white insurrectionists committed a coup that ran all of the Black politicians out of Wilmington, as well as the majority of the Black population. The Black-owned newspaper office was burnt down. At least sixty Black civilians were murdered. No one was brought to justice. After this event, the empty seats in the government were filled by whites, and no Black people were put in office until a century later. This event created a ripple effect of a change of legislature that both prohibited Blacks to take positions in office as well as the right to vote. The laws of Jim Crow had begun.

This event cannot be discussed without mentioning who played an important role in it. Jennett’s job of spreading racist propaganda for political matters through his art was a heavy contributor to the Wilmington coup and to the discriminatory laws created as a result. The spread of misleading news to maintain white supremacy was aided by his art as it provided a visual of “what could be” if they allowed Black people equal rights. Williams (2013) writes that Jennett’s editorial works presented the notion that letting Black people into political leadership positions

guaranteed a system of "scandals, incompetency, corruption, and insults to white women," the last point feeding into the brute stereotype, in comparison to white men in power guaranteeing "good government, prosperity, peace, and protection to white women" (p. 4). The atrocity that occurred in Wilmington is a prime example of the impact media can have on public policy.

Normalization of Black Pain

These caricatures depict Black people as incompetent, innately hypersexual and predatory, and yet simultaneously childlike. These images were used to enforce stereotypes that, at least to white society, justified segregation and race-based violence directed at them. This was reflected back into the caricatures in forms of entertainment such as minstrel performances with slapstick, as well as in carnival games using Black people, then later wooden Black models, as hitting targets in the 1900s (Jim Crow Museum, n.d.b). Black pain thus became a normalized part of American culture, establishing the struggle faced by African Americans as not only natural but deserved as well.

Resistance And Reclamation

In contrast to the numerous caricatures that permeated American media, there are numerous examples of creatives past and present who have used their craft as a path to resisting the system that denied them human rights. From paintings such as Jon Onye Lockard's *No More*, changing Aunt Jemima from a loyal mammy to a woman breaking through her subservient confines with a Black Power fist, to Kara Walker's caricatured silhouettes meant to comment on the horrific reality of slavery, these artists use their work to spark conversation on the way that Black people are depicted in mass media. This section will be focusing on a handful of these creatives throughout history who have used art to critique race relations and stereotypes either by challenging them or reclaiming caricatures to use as satire.

George Herriman

An early artist that challenged race relations in secret was cartoonist, George Herriman. He was the creator of the cult classic comic strip *Krazy Kat* which told the story of a black, genderless cat in love with a white mouse. It wasn't discovered until a few decades after his death in the 1940s that Herriman was a Black man or, rather, mixed-raced as we would classify his identity today. As shocked family and friends looked in hindsight at his works and his life, the pieces began to come together. He always wore a hat or cut his hair low to hide his curls, his colleagues always referred to him as Greek as he never disclosed his ethnicity, and he kept his life very private (Cole, 2017). Despite living as a white man, Herriman's work often used code to discuss social norms involving race and gender.

His commentary on race was shown particularly in his early, short-lived comic strip, *Musical Mose.* Each strip centered around Mose, a caricatured Black male musician, that would try and integrate with various white ethnic groups: Italians, the Scottish, the Irish. However, the result was always the same: he would get found out, beat up, and sent home to his girlfriend to nurse his wounds and scold him for ever thinking it was a good idea and, as Wanzo (2020) puts it, "reminds him of more appropriate (black) spaces that he can inhabit" (p. 33) (See Figure 8).

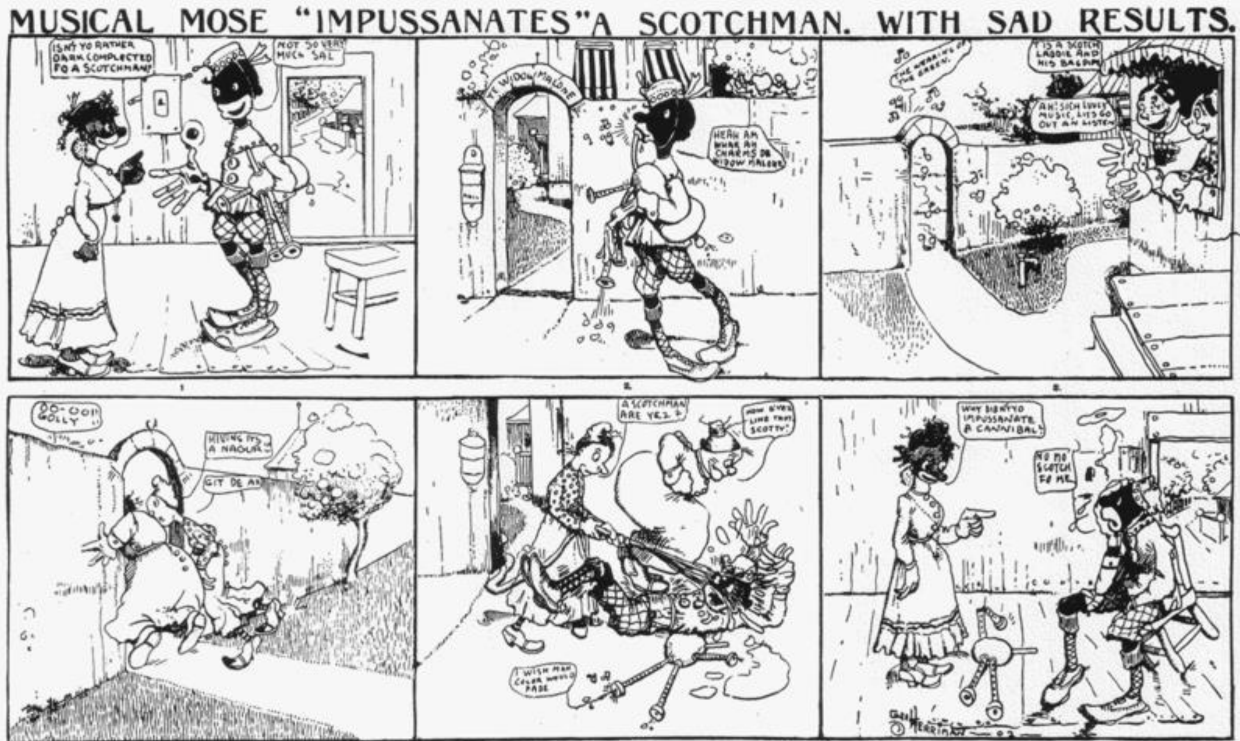

Figure 8. Musical Mose "Impussanates" A Scotchman, With Sad Results (Source: Herriman, 1902)

When considering Herriman's background and his decision to pass as white for the rest of his life, one cannot help but wonder how much Mose was a reflection of Herriman's anxieties of his Black ancestry being discovered. His career would have been over otherwise. He could have been assaulted, or worse, and once again been limited to the few options for Black people in the twentieth century, scolded for even thinking to leave his "place" as a Negro. His works suggest that it was his way to both reflect on his own choice as well as communicate how this is not the way society should be. Wanzo (2020) states that *Musical Mose* is "a violent illustration of the risks and potential costs when black people attempt to assimilate— even when their skills and abilities should create the conditions for acceptance" (p. 34). In other words, Herriman uses *Musical Mose* to assert that no matter a Black person's skills or character, their blackness will be the defining factor in what opportunities are available to them.

Herriman sneaks in commentary on race relations in his most well-known work *Krazy Kat*, including themes of white supremacy, and “Uncle Tom” mentality. Though the famous strips do not always suggest a critique on race, “the allegorical and affective messiness signified by [Krazy’s] body can tell us something about how racial identity categories function” (Wanzo, 2020, p. 42). In the *Krazy Kat* strip shown in Figure 9, Krazy challenges Ignatz’s definition of language in a rare occurrence of pushback; rather than being a way to understand each other, Krazy believes that language is a way of *misunderstanding* each other.

Figure 9. Why is Language, Ignatz? (Herriman, 1918)

Wanzo (2020) states that interpreting this strip through a racial identity lens, “Krazy’s interrogation of language reads as an attack on a white and Western logic that orders the world… Language is a tool used to oppress with categorizations and alleged transparency of meaning” (p. 44). In the context of white supremacy, socially constructed language meant to categorize racial or ethnic groups becomes messy when some identities cannot be clearly identifiable or given a fixed label. Herriman’s racially mixed heritage classified him as a Black man in the twentieth-century, but his light skin allowed him to pass as white without getting caught. His skills as an artist shocked family and friends when his race was discovered, many doubting “that ‘America’s greatest cartoonist’ could be considered African American” (Wanzo, 2020, p. 37). Language

helps in enabling certain connotations, and “Black” was a supposed indicator of a lack of intelligence or skill. Herriman seems to be arguing that “the theme of poor categorization of identity and misreading is suggestive of how we should read blackness, and what blackness helps us see: namely, that identity indeterminacy can be a site for not just survival, but joy” (p. 45). The nuances of race as a social construct allowed Black people who were able to pass the opportunity to get human decency and live a more fulfilling life. Despite the possible loneliness of passing, Herriman was able to share his commentary on American race relations through his comic strips, utilizing racist caricatures and animals to hinder being found out.

Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*

Filmmaker Spike Lee in his controversial satire, *Bamboozled* (2000), sparks conversation surrounding the representation of Black people in American media as mere products of entertainment based on stereotypes. In an attempt to call out the negative representation of Black people in media, *Bamboozled* tells the story of an African American television writer who creates a modern minstrel show. However, to his surprise, the show becomes a hit.

Bamboozled asserts that the media representation of Black people is so dependent on stereotypes and racism that it has become normalized, even to the point where more three-dimensional representation seems abnormal. In an interview, Lee argues “that whites in general remain uncomfortable seeing black actors in dramas that depict the diverse lives of Africans-Americans,” and instead, representation that plays into stereotypes, or what the film calls “shuckin’ and jiving,” is met more positively (Barlowe, 2003, p. 3). It becomes apparent at the end of the film when the minstrel performer Mantan, real name Manray, becomes defiant against performing a caricature that he is met with hostility and is thrown out of the studio.

Bamboozled also discusses the sacrifice many African American artists make in their desire to “make it.” Despite the protagonist’s reassurance that this new show is satirical, Mantan and his stage partner Sleep n’ Eat, real name Womack, cannot help but put on blackface with tears in their eyes. They are more successful performing an offensive caricature than they were at the beginning of the film, dancing on the street for pennies.

Lee utilizes the offensive depiction of Black people in American media to argue that this history not only impacts the perception of Black people in the “new Millenium,” but that it still occurs despite it being in a different form.

Something Good– Negro Kiss

Something Good- Negro Kiss (1898) was a film discovered in 2017 by University of Southern California film archivist, Dino Everett. The footage depicted two African American vaudeville minstrel performers, discovered to be Saint Suttle and Gertie Brown, displaying affectionate embraces and kisses (Selig, 1898) (See Figure 10). The film’s creator, William Selig, was the co-owner of two minstrel companies that worked exclusively with African American performers, making Field (2021) infer that Selig’s close work with his Black colleagues was reflected in his humanizing representation of Suttle and Brown. The title alone, *Something Good– Negro Kiss,* “abstains from deprecatory terms,” and even in Selig’s catalog description of the film, Suttle is referred to as an “Afro-American brother” (2021). During a time when African Americans were exclusively represented in media to be mocked, this footage that was advertised in numerous catalogs was an incredible rarity as the performance is genuine and raw with no hint of mockery or caricature.

That being said, many advertisements for this film were marketed as being “grotesque,” a common term to describe the subgenre of African American kiss films, and was synonymous

with “unnatural” or “comedic.” This displays the overall perception of African Americans in the media, only meant to be subjects of mockery or ridicule. Despite this film implying none of that, the negative connotation of Black people on screen was inevitable in its advertising.

Despite the footage being only about thirty seconds long, it is a crucial and one-in-a-million find, as it has gained international attention. This kind of African American representation was rare for the time period it was set in. Black people were not depicted in most media as humans or at least displaying human qualities like affection. This short film was purely objective, with no attempt to caricature these actors or mock them. This footage was a protest in itself, showing that Black people were human and displayed love in the same way any other human would. While unclear if Selig’s film was aimed to be a form of resistance to negative Black representation, his close work with African Americans is inferred to be an inspiration for his more respectful depiction. The footage, the reception, and the advertisements all give a multifaceted look at what the social climate was for African Americans of the time, making the dig to find the author of this film so important. In contrast to the common representation of Black people during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as dangerous Brutes, primitives, or happy servants, this film, as Fields states, “‘stands as a moving and powerful image of genuine affection, and is a landmark of early film history’” (Library of Congress, 2018).

Figure 10. Something Good– Negro Kiss (Source: Selig, 1898)

Allowing a more complex representation of African Americans is part of the solution to creating systematic and cultural change. Understanding that Black people are not a monolith that can simply be condensed into racist stereotypes and caricatures is the first step in ensuring that more well-rounded depictions of African Americans, or of any marginalized group, are shown. Our day and age have shown great improvements in the media representation of African Americans and other minority groups, but there is still a long way to go. Television shows and films with central Black characters, especially made by Black people, allow a realistic and more well-rounded depiction to be shared with audiences, further dismantling racist belief systems and strengthening a culture of diversity and equity.

Conclusion

It is imperative that the path we go down when it comes to media depictions of African Americans is a well-rounded representation. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 TEDGlobal presentation, she states that "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" (17:29). A variety of single stories of African Americans have negatively impacted global perception through the use of caricatures in Western media, depicting them as lazy, incompetent, hypersexual, and a danger to society. These single stories have negatively impacted opportunities and safety, enforcing and normalizing segregationist laws in the Jim Crow era, as well as justifying acts of domestic terrorism such as lynchings in the name of white supremacy. Adichie goes on to say that these single stories enforce harmful stereotypes, which are not necessarily untrue, but

“incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (13:03). These caricatures enforced negative stereotypes that live on into the present day, supported by the all too familiar characters that are merely a modern-day caricature, as well as used to justify the numerous killings of unarmed Black people every year. The solution, here, is to tell multiple stories of Black humanity, especially told by Black people themselves through various kinds of media.

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