Off The Glass; The Ritchie Campbell Case Study

&

The Blackness Project

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I will argue how the misrepresentation of African Americans in the media creates barriers to advancement within our society and leads to systemic forces that hinder African Americans as a whole. I will argue how the mass incarceration of African Americans due to these policies prove to have long term effects on the African American family. I will provide examples from 2 feature length documentaries that I created to support my argument. Off The Glass; The Ritchie Campbell Story and The Blackness Project. Off The Glass; The Ritchie Campbell Story takes and up close and personal look into the life of the former basketball star who grew up in poverty and struggled with learning disabilities, lack of positive role models, a family history of substance abuse, and incarceration. The film is used as a case study to create awareness of what happens to many urban youth despite being talented. The Blackness Project is a featured length documentary film about culture and race from the perspectives of African American and other minorities. By analyzing these films, I will thoroughly argue how the United states has created an uneven playing field with a disadvantage to urban communities, and systematically invoking polices that create a cycle of incarceration and generation poverty in the black community.
I. Introduction

As an adolescent growing up in the ghettos of Buffalo, NY, it may be easy to see how one’s life experiences might allow them to be narrow-minded in a broad society. The way we view commercials, films, and different aspects of media can shape the minds of future generations of an entire culture. The media, communicators and advocates have created a worldwide false representation of African Americans for decades. The media struggles with proper communication of our world news and often offers portrayals of African Americans that stack the odds against them with systematic forces that can stagnate an entire culture. Writer, Leigh Donaldson wrote “In a 2011 study Media Representations & Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys, conducted by The Opportunity Agenda, negative mass media portrayals were strongly linked with lower life expectations among black men. These portrayals, constantly reinforced in print media, on television, the Internet, fiction shows, print advertising and video games, shape public views of and attitudes toward men of color. They not only help create barriers to advancement within our society, but also make these positions seem natural and inevitable”. 1 I believe the negative images create more obstacles and life hurdles for African Americans than any other race in the world. I also believe there is an under

representation of African Americans in the media that contributes to stagnation and lack of self-confidence. Donaldson continues by saying “Men of color held in esteem by the media, while entirely worthy of praise, too often personify a circumscribed spectrum of human qualities. Prowess in sports, physical achievement in general and musicality are emphasized inordinately. Common role models depicted by the media such as rap or hip-hop stars and basketball players imply limited life choices”. It is my belief that the media needs to create fuller and more accurate portrayals of black males in the media — through education and external pressure targeted at media producers, through production of new images, and by working to embed more African Americans in all links in the media production chain. Until this is done, people will not be aware of the systemic forces that hinder African Americans as a whole. These systemic forces and false representation in the media, allow audiences to draw the wrong conclusions about what is causing problems and how to address them. In this thesis, I will provide several examples of the misrepresentation of African Americans in the media, accompanied by real descriptions of the basis and contexts with theoretical scholarly documentation to explain the aims of my own film making process.

As an African American filmmaker, I believe that I have a responsibility to alter the media representation of African Americans. Through the art of film, my goal is to change perception and offer different images of African American life than what is normally portrayed. Writer John Kessler states “People tune in to the

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1 Donaldson, When the Media Misrepresents Black Men, the Effects Are Felt in the Real World, 2015
network that matches their already established political ideology, preventing them from seeing the world from more than one viewpoint, and making them less perceptive to the viewpoints of others". My goal is to counter the media representation and expose the structural racism that African Americans have to overcome to be placed on a level playing field. Although these issues are complex, the structural thinking of African Americans, which has streamed from decades of historical events, has contributed to the media content being distributed. It is an extremely difficult challenge to convince White Americans that structuralism helps control our fate and not solely our individual choices. Not every player is dealt the same hand of cards in the deck. Among the most important mechanisms for maintaining (or changing) these perceptions are the mass media with their significant power to shape popular ideas and attitudes.

My first encounter with the effects of media is still vivid in my mind. The year 1990 was a pivotal year in my maturity. I was entering the 5th grade at a new private school. Coming from the inner city of Buffalo NY, my parents made sacrifices to send my brother and me to the best schools that they could afford. Private school was a privilege for most children, but more like a nightmare for me. Every young child has dreams of being the popular prom king, but my reality kept me struggling to fit into everyday normalcy. For a lot of the rich Caucasian kids at my school, this was their first encounter with an African American outside of what they saw on TV. Hip-hop

music was introduced in the early 80’s but was still considered a “fad”. The most popular rap group of that era was RUN-DMC. The rap group had just broken into the mainstream by being the first hip-hop act to be featured on MTV. The only other African American to be featured on that station was Michael Jackson. RUN-DMC hit the scene with Adidas sneakers, Kangol hats and massive gold chains. Although they were my favorite group at the time, I had no aspirations of being a “rapper” or nor did I share the urge to dress like the group. On my first day of attending private school at Catholic Academy of West Buffalo, I was the only African American in my class of 50. Throughout the day, I made lots of friends, most of whom had no other black friends, but because hip-hop music was on the rise, they all wanted one. After a few weeks of school, I saw the disappointment in my so-called new friends. They were disappointed that I didn’t have a big gold chain, and that I didn’t know how to rap. Some were disappointed that I didn’t wear Adidas sneakers and own a Kangol hat. I remember getting into fistfights on a regular basis and wondering why was this happening to me. I didn’t understand it then, but it occurred to me later in life that I didn’t meet the standard of what most kids in that school thought I should be. Because I didn’t act like they other African Americans they saw on TV, I was no longer interesting to them. The media depicted African Americans, as being these “hip-jive talkers” and regular Peter Johnson wasn’t acceptable to them. Needless to say, after becoming conscious of this, the remainder of my school career went much smoother.
Understanding this at an early age made me very insecure of my identity. On one hand, I wasn’t “Black” enough for my classmates in school and on the other, because I went to private school; I wasn’t “Black” enough for the kids in my neighborhood. I was torn between worlds until I discovered the meaning of cultural identity. There are various misrepresentations of African Americans, and my biggest struggle was staying true to myself and not being who society thinks I am. The
negative perception of African Americans results in attitudes and barriers of advancement for the culture and affects the outcomes of Black people in an American Society. Media theorist Stuart Hall argues that there are two sides in the communicative exchange. Hall suggests “media messages accrue a common-sense status in part through their performative nature. Through the repeated performance, staging or telling of the narrative, a culturally specific interpretation becomes not only simply plausible and universal, but is elevated to common-sense”.4 I take this statement from Hall to mean that the messaging of African Americans through the media allowed my classmates and society as a whole to make assumptions about me so decisive that they simply expected that I would act/dress and behave a certain manner.

Several years ago, I was working a substitute teacher in the Buffalo public school district, which is 85% minority populated. I remember dreading going to work because the children show no mercy when a substitute teacher is there in place of their regular one. Throughout the day, the children’s behavior was moderate, but it wasn’t until an hour was remaining in the school that the kids grow jumpy. A fight started and all hell broke loose. After observing the situation, the environment and the circumstances in which everything occurred, I came to a distinct conclusion. These inner city children needed more than what I was teaching. They needed more than what the school system had to offer. The school district consisted mainly of African American children with majority Caucasian teachers and instructors.

4 Stuart Hall, Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse: Council Of Europe Colloquy on Training in the Critical Reading Of Televisual Language” Birmingham, 1973 pg. 78
Although that point may not seem important, children being raised in poverty tend to connect with others in the same situation. Usually a disconnect or an inability to relate, allows children to put mental barriers in place. Some of these children are blocking out everything their teachers are saying, therefore learning is virtually impossible. School districts typically guide their instructors to teach with certain methods not considering that every child doesn’t learn in the same way. If we look at the evolution of technology, almost everything that we use in our daily lives has evolved since its original creation. The advancement of cars, telephones and computers has changed our world drastically. However, when we look at photos of school classrooms from 100 years ago, we still see the same images as today.

Children seated at desks, with a teacher in front of the class. Everything in society has evolved except for our teaching methods. I decided that these inner city children needed to learn something different such as life skills to aid them along. The social studies and science classes were not going to aid them based on their life trajectory. According to the national criminal justice statistics, “within 5-10 years, one out of every three African Americans will be arrested or incarcerated by the age of 18 years old”.

I asked myself, how could I teach them English and Science according to the system’s standards and not try to prepare them for real life? Science has proven that children at the infancy stages learn through imitation. Babies learn to walk and talk by watching adults demonstrate it, and then they do their best to replicate it. Due to the classroom disconnection, many inner city children emulate the behavior that

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they see at home, ultimately creating cycles of their environment and decision-making. In order to enable real change in these children’s lives, they need to receive knowledge from someone that they could relate to and the message had to be something worth learning. Understanding Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory helped me better connect with these children. According to Saul Mcleod, “Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid”.  

Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper A Theory of Human Motivation states

“that people are motivated to achieve certain needs and that some needs take precedence over others. Our most basic need is for physical survival, and this will be the first thing that motivates our behavior. Once that level is fulfilled the next level up is what motivates us, and so on”. Individuals must satisfy lower level deficit needs before progressing on to meet higher-level growth needs. Every person is capable and has the desire to move up the hierarchy toward a level of self-actualization. Unfortunately, progress is often disrupted by a failure to meet lower level needs. If an individual is stuck in these stages, it is safe to predict a different outcome for that individual’s life”.  

Even the way that individual views the world, will be different than a normal person because that individual is stuck in survival mode. That individual will

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· Saul Mcleod, Maslow’s Hierarchy Of Needs, Simply psychology, 2017 
https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslows.html

· Abraham Maslow, A Theory of Human Motivation, Martino Books 2013, pg 4
operate in society differently because their priorities revolve around their basic needs and not their self-fulfillment needs.

Figure 2

I asked myself yet another question, what could I do to change this cycle? How could I use my filmmaking to inspire and save any youth that could potentially be caught in this cycle? Most independent filmmakers do not make films for the monetary outcome. They do it to tell a story or to have a voice. I want to create films that educate African American youth by highlighting stories about African American life that has been traditionally misunderstood.
II. *Off The Glass; The Ritchie Campbell Story & The misrepresentation of African Americans in the media*

Four years ago, I was introduced to a man who would aid me in exploring the systemic cycles that have repressed the African American community for centuries. Ritchie Ray Campbell, or “The Legend” as the neighborhood called him wanted to meet with me about his life story. He was recently released from federal prison after serving a 17 and a half-year sentence for manslaughter. Ritchie, now in his 40’s but still in great shape, has been called Western New York’s greatest basketball athlete. Although there was an age difference, I had always heard stories about the legend of Ritchie Campbell. He was the Michael Jordan of my neighborhood. Despite the folklore, I never personally met Ritchie, but was vaguely familiar with his story. Campbell, touted as the most prolific scorer in Western New York high school basketball history, set records in the late 80’s and early 90’s with his charismatic playing, impressive jump shots, and overall scoreboard leading with career high 2,355 points. However, his life off the court would tell a different story; one of struggle, hardship, lure of the streets, and eventually prison life. Although he was an ex-con, I was just as nervous meeting him as I would be meeting the President of the United States. In the inner city, we have accepted heroes that the broader society rejects. Believe it or not, the neighborhood drug dealer that helps his community receives more glory than the district councilman. In my community, people rarely celebrate the outcome of a situation. What matters most is what you represented in
process. Here is an example, in 1983 Al Pacino starred in the iconic film *Scarface.* His character "Tony Montana" comes to the United States as a Cuban refugee and stakes claim on the drug trade in Miami, FL. According to Hollywood standards, the film was box office flop, but received a cult-like following in the urban community. In the film, we witness Tony's rise and fall in the drug industry and ultimately a brutal death by a rival Columbian cartel. Why was the movie so relatable in the urban community? It was because of what Tony represented to them. Tony began his life as a poor immigrant and connived his way up to the American dream. Tony represented success, ambition, aspiration and promise. Most kids in the inner city don’t aspire to be doctors or lawyers, but they know they could become Tony Montana. Ritchie Campbell had that same respect in the community. He represented hope to us. Hope that other children could be as good as he was on the basketball court. After meeting Ritchie and learning more about him, I began to see a pattern in his life that I see in many underprivileged kids in the inner city neighborhoods. Ritchie was raised in poverty without a father figure, in a substance abused home with a family history of crime and incarceration. Given these odds, the statistics of children that succeed are alarming. According to Emily Badger at the Washington post,

"a poor black family, in short, is much more likely than a poor white one to live in a neighborhood where many other families are poor, too, creating what sociologists call the "double burden" of poverty. Concentrated poverty is getting worse because poor people — especially poor African Americans — are increasingly left behind. And a number of forces drive this pattern, including systemic discrimination, policies that have historically concentrated public housing and
modern zoning laws that keep the poor out of wealthier communities”.

Despite the soci-economic factors that Campbell was raised in, the media’s portrayal of him damaged his career just as much as the crime he committed. Every media outlet painted Ritchie as a street thug who totally wasted his bright future. Given that Ritchie did in fact commit a crime, everyone in the community knew Ritchie wasn’t a bad person, but due to media oversaturation, I’m sure this representation contributed to his sentencing and the diminishing of his career in order to rebuild himself after his prison term. So telling Ritchie’s life story of his rise and fall seemed non-negotiable.

As I learned more about Ritchie Campbell’s story, I wanted to incorporate my perspective and experiences of structural racism, media misrepresentation of African Americans and the effects of White hegemony overall. In his 1993 publication, Harvard professor, Dr. Cornel West discusses the problem stating, “The major enemy of Black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning”. This nihilism, due to a lack of moral nourishment and political power, is the fuel behind the rage black Americans feel. West attributes the loss of hopelessness due to history of African Americans. The hegemony of White

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* Emily Badger “Black poverty differs from white poverty” Washington Post 2015

Americans over the course of colonial times has left African Americans in a submissive mind state. Mentally, many are still enslaved. West argues that the views of identity to “historize and pluralize”; meaning that the media creates nothing new in the history of criticism and representation of African Americans.

Arthur Stovall and cultural theorist Dr. Yosef Ben Jochannan both provide theories that support Dr. West as well. Stovall wrote *The Last remnants of slavery; An African American dilemma* which deals with the Last Remnants from the past that is still influencing the economic, social and political values in African American communities. Stovall states,

“The processes of the remnants discouraged Africans and subsequent African Americans from any organized effort at providing for their communities' economic, social and political representation that would have allowed self-sufficiency after emancipation and proclamation in 1865. The Africans unbeknown to themselves became guardians of the poverty paradigm and passed it to their future generations' not just poverty as a lifestyle, but the socialization process that has ensured its perpetuation. The effects of the Last Remnants' tactics have grown roots in the lifestyle of the African American families and communities. The outcome of the Last Remnants is evident by the crime reports, which suggest that 90% of the incarcerated population is made-up of African American youth between the age of 18 to 38, and 70% are substance abuse related offenses”.  

African American historian and cultural theorist Dr. Yosef Ben Jochannan quoted in his book *A Black Man of The Nile and His Family* “that there is an

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unbroken psychological chain from slavery with White Americans and African Americans. The chain consists of White Americans feeling that they are superior to any other race on the planet and African Americans feeling as if they have been victimized. Not that African Americans are inferior, but feeling more as victims, which results in mental barriers in society”. 11 These mental barriers cheat the culture of believing in the American dream. As an African American male, I grew up in the inner city knowing that I could be anything I wanted to be in life but not believing that I could actually accomplish being what I wanted. Prior to Barack Obama being elected, the mere thought of having an African American president seemed far-fetched. Even after two presidential terms, the media slandered President Obama from issues of his citizenship to his religion. Here is a man that has provided hope to an entire race but still isn’t accepted by the mainstream media.

Stemming from the Civil Rights era, Blacks have always dealt with these forms in barriers and not feeling equal in American society. Starting from slavery the American government has employed systematic racism to hinder African Americans. After slavery, convict leasing took effect. Convict leasing was a system of penal labor practiced in the Southern United States. That provided prisoner labor to private parties, such as plantation owners and corporations. After convict leasing ended, a new form of legal slavery was born called Jim Crow. Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States to keep African Americans second-class citizens. Today we are in the era of mass

incarceration in which the US prison system is 87% minority populated and strips people of color of the same rights won in the civil rights era. Research has shown that during the 1990’s “war on drugs” Former president Bill Clinton signed a bill which enforced higher prison sentences associated with the selling of crack-cocaine. Crack-cocaine is of higher concentration than normal cocaine but sold on the street at a much lower price. This drug was primarily popular in the lower income communities. LA Times writer David Savage wrote "If somebody is convicted of selling $225 worth of crack cocaine, they get the same penalty as somebody who sells $50,000 worth of powder cocaine," said Rep. Melvin Watt (D-N.C.). Poor young kids who can afford only crack go to jail. Rich young kids who can afford powder cocaine go home and sleep in their own beds. In 1995, 96% of those prosecuted for crack cocaine crimes were blacks or Latinos”. During that era, the “No Snitching” slogan was driven into a media frenzy. The slogan focused on the indictment of violators protecting their own by not snitching on each other. As the media begin to exploit this slogan associated with the war on drug campaign it created a distrust of Africans Americans and the police. The belief that a don’t snitch mindset exists in black communities tends to “criminalize” the entire population.

The media portrayal of African Americans has contributed to racial profiling and police brutality. African American males have 75% higher likelihood of being shot or brutalized by a police officer than a White male during a routine traffic stop.

Law enforcement officials often try to rule out racism when these tragedies occur, however it is in my belief that is the media portrayals of African Americans which make police officers often more aggressive when dealing with blacks. There is no doubt that our nation’s police force has a tough job especially in our inner city neighborhoods. However, in the past three years, America has witnessed some alarming videos, which portray some African Americans being murdered without committing any crimes. Police officers have the right to use deadly force to compel compliance and obedience. If the officer fears for his own life, he can also apply deadly force. In most recent cases, fear is all it takes to avoid an official sanction, as in the case of officer Jeronimo Yanez in the killing of Philando Castile. This same credulous acceptance of the narrative of fear is why Officer Betty Jo Shelby was acquitted in the killing of Terence Crutcher (she was “fearing for her life”); why a grand jury declined to charge Officer Timothy Loehmann in the killing of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old (he “had a reason to fear for his life”); and why a jury deadlocked in the case of Michael Slager, a South Carolina police officer who shot and killed Walter Scott during a traffic stop (he felt “total fear”). Fear appears to be the common denominator of why these police officers are shooting these minorities. I question that motive due to other hideous crimes being committed across America in which the police officers do not respond in the same manner. In 2015, 23 year old Dylan Roof mass murdered nine African Americans in a Charleston Baptist church. After being identified as the suspect, he became the center of a manhunt that ended the morning after the shooting, by being detained by the police. It would appear to me that fear would still be a factor and police officers should use the same caution with
this suspect. However, Dylan was successfully detained with no resistance. By no means am I implying that he should have been shot by the police, I am simply posing a question as to how a murderer imposing the same police fear can be easily detained, and others that have not committed a crime, can be the victims of a police shooting?

Prior to the civil war, southern white plantation owners held a fear of slave revolts. Due to the mass profits that resulted from slavery, lawmakers created patrol units or “slave catchers” to enforce slave codes, interrogate enslaved people and punish them if necessary. In many ways, I believe that same psychological fear still exists in many white Americans towards Africans Americans. Also, the media has perpetuated a deadly fear of African Americans. As police shootings begin to increase across the nation, many concerned Americans led protests, some peaceful and some violent. I recall watching world news, as most stations only focused on the violent protests that were occurring. Although there were more peaceful protests than violent ones, these images suggested that people of color were much more aggressive and less likely to cooperate resulting in a negative depiction of people of color in broader society. These depictions manifest when police officers are given the duties to maintain order in society. In New York State, former Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s enforced the “Stop and Frisk” law, which empowered police officers to detain and search people for often-vague pretexts. 88% of these traffic stops resulted in no further action and has caused the city multiple lawsuits. More importantly, as this law was implemented in NYC and the media frenzy spread
across the nation, it created a barrier between law enforcement and minorities both resulting in fear on both sides. Law officials possessing the fear of the unknown whenever conducting a traffic stop and the other possessing fear of what the officer may do to them.

After almost four years of working on the Ritchie Campbell biopic, the cycle of generational poverty and incarceration was so imbedded in Ritchie’s lifestyle that it was too difficult for him to experience a world without it. He reverted back to his comfortable methods of survival after serving a 17-year prison sentence. Most ex-convicts are released from prison with very few life skills, or trade skills that can help them improve their life after prison. Most ex-convicts often go back to their former environments, continuing the same habits that got them originally incarcerated. Ritchie Campbell fell to recidivism, as many ex-convicts do for the distribution of illegal drugs. Ritchie was sentenced back to prison for three more years for violating his probation. This put an immediate halt on the film project. It was difficult for me to explain my disappointment in Ritchie, after how far he has come. However, it solidified to me how deeply structural racism is affecting my community. The media sparred no mercy on Ritchie’s recent mistake either. He was highlighted in the local newspaper with the article headline *Former athlete with promising future returns back to prison*. Ironically to me, Ritchie Campbell never had a promising future. The structural racism that he experienced as a child made his circumstances almost impossible to overcome despite his incredible basketball talents.
After Ritchie served the reminder of his three-year sentence, I was hesitant about finishing his movie. Although the majority of interviews and footage had already been collected, I questioned how his story would affect other people. It wasn’t until after his release that he and I went to a local gym and Ritchie was spotted by youth basketball coaching working with his players. The coach seemed a bit star struck at Ritchie’s presence, which was odd to me given that Ritchie has spent most of his life incarcerated. The coach asked Ritchie to come over and speak with some of his players, especially one in a particular who was exceptionally talented but didn’t have the right attitude to help him get further in the sport. I didn’t listen to Ritchie’s direct conversation with the young man but shortly after the young boy joined his teammates with an extreme hustle that he didn’t possess before. I needed to know what Ritchie said to this young man to turn him around so quickly. When I asked him what he said, Ritchie told the boy to be better than he was. Don’t make the same mistakes that he did, and do not take his basketball talents for granted. In order to succeed the young boy must make the right choices in life, and not be persuaded by people using bad judgment around him. Most importantly, Ritchie told him that he must outwork everyone on the basketball court if he wanted to be great! At that moment, I realized the importance of Ritchie’s story again. Although he didn’t achieve the success he dreamed he of, he could pass on those lessons and aid someone else in the world at being great. If I wanted to stay true to my beliefs as a filmmaker to educate, I needed to finish his film to shed light on the systematic circumstances that held him back in life.
III. **Confronting Systemic Racism**

As we neared the end of completion of the Ritchie Campbell documentary, my partner and I began brainstorming about the project. It may seem awkward to other filmmakers to begin thinking about the next project in the midst of one but that’s how my partner and I stay productive. We had just celebrated winning the San Diego film festival with our feature narrative film *The Romans*, so we were confident that we could conquer any genre. Since our job titles rotate and I was directing the *Ritchie Campbell* story, it was his turn to direct the piece of his choice. He called me on a late night Friday and asked to me view a link he had sent me via email. I clicked on it and it took me to a film entitled *The Whiteness Project*. Fellow Buffalonian, Whitney Dow, directed the film. It was an interview style documentary in which 21 white Americans speak freely about their race and culture in Buffalo, NY. I found this ironic because Buffalo is listed as one of America’s top 10 racially segregated cities. Why couldn’t the filmmaker choose interviewees from a different city? While watching the film, it was interesting and shocking to hear from the remarks. What I found the most interesting was a statistic the Dow included in his film. The statistic was “Almost 70 percent of White Americans in Western, NY do not have any contact with African Americans.” So here’s my question. “If someone does not have any contact with African Americans, how can one choose to come to a conclusion about them?” Some said they feel threatened, and some feel that black men are violent.
Speaking as an African American male, I have felt some of the negative connotations of those assumptions for years. I could probably understand them more if some of those conclusions came from personal experiences. But in this film, the majority of the interviewees rarely came in contact with any African Americans to even get a personal experience. I’m sure their opinions came from the depiction of African Americans in the media.

Steve Taylor with psychologytoday.com has conducting studies regarding issues of race and how its affects the brain. His findings are directly related to the ideology of The Whiteness Project. Taylor states:

1) “The amygdala, a brain region associated with experiencing fear, tends to be active when whites view an unfamiliar black male face (regardless of their conscious reports about racial attitudes.

2) After “seeing” unknown black faces flashed at subliminal speeds (too rapidly to consciously perceive), whites tend to show more hostility in various contexts — leading to a breakdown of social connection between different races.

3) Whites tend to more easily associate negative words (e.g., terrible, failure, horrible, evil, agony, war, nasty, and awful) with unknown black faces, as opposed to white faces”. 13

As a filmmaker, my work stands firmly on the grounds of countering this negative imagery of African Americans so I knew I couldn’t sit back and watch this

"Steve Taylor, "The Psychology Of Racism” Psychology Today, 2018
https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/out-the-darkness/201801/the-psychology-racism
film without giving my feedback or opinion in some way. My partner and I decided to create a follow up film that encouraged people to discuss their differences. To discuss racial differences openly in an educational way to learn from the other side.

At that moment, we began pre-production for *The Blackness Project*. (TBP)

**IV. Meta Media Forms & The Blackness Project**

Media theorist W.J.T. Mitchell’s (who is not African American) theory of metapictures helped explain the misrepresentation of Africans Americans as depicted in *The Whiteness Project*. In an online interview with *Image and Narrative Magazine*, Mitchell stated

> “in *Picture Theory* I tried to distinguish three different kinds of metapictures in which any picture whatsoever can become a metapicture, a picture that is used to reflect on the nature of pictures. Any picture is at least potentially a kind of vortex or "black hole" that can "suck in" the consciousness of a beholder, and at the same time (and for the same reason) "spew out" an infinite series of reflections. I encourage readers to analyze the visual reception of the image, to encourage prolonged contemplation, second and third looks, reversals of perceptual fields such as figure/ground and surface/depth”.

As I translate his definitions, I agree that his theory that supports my idea of the media providing a iconic images for African American representation. In other words, “If you’ve seen one, then you’ve seen them all”. This translation can be used

W. J. T. Mitchell “What Do Pictures Want” *Image and Narrative Magazine* 2006 -
http://www.visual-studies.com/interviews/mitchell.html
as an example in the many online images of Trayvon Martin. The most iconic image
of Martin depicts him in a hooded sweatshirt over his head. This same image was
used as the symbol, and metapicture of several protesters all over the country. This
metapicture of of Trayvon Martin was previously associated with violent and
criminal people which are representations of African Americans as a whole. The
negative connotations are judged not on an individual basis but for an entire culture,
which is the entire basis of the Whiteness Project. Although *The Whiteness Project* is
a feature film and not a stand alone image, it can be considered a Meta-media
representation. This ideology is similar to a meta-picture but using other media
formats such as films and books to resonate the same perceptual concept.

![Figure 3](image-url)
Mitchell’s theory of Meta Pictures again resonated with me just recently when America experienced yet another mass school shooting in Florida. On 2/14/18, NBC news reported “A teen gunman accused of opening fire with a semi-automatic rifle at his former high school in Parkland, Florida, has been charged with 17 counts of premeditated murder”. Over a five-year span, our country has experienced multiple mass shootings. As tragic as it is, the media has a responsibility to report accurate news to the public. The next day after the recent mass shooting, I logged onto the Internet to read the news reports to explain the details of the tragedy. I came across the Chicago Sun Times online publication. Once clicked on the homepage, a half screen sized mug shot photo of an African American male appeared. Beside his photo in huge capital letters read the caption “REPEAT FELON CHARGED IN COP MURDER”. At the bottom of the page in much smaller print read another caption At least 17 killed in shooting at Florida school. I thought to myself “wow, how could a local police murder be more important than 17 high school children losing their life in some form of terrorist attack? The teen gunman involved in the high school shooting was identified as Nicholas Cruz, a 19 year old Caucasian male. To date, there has been 290 school shootings across America since 2013. I conclude that if it was a minority or a Muslim causing these shootings, there would be an immediate law change or program put into effect to prevent further shootings. However, since it’s almost always a young Caucasian doing it, the only effective plan to manipulate the media exposure when it occurs. It was obvious that the media attempted to highlight the African American’s crimes as being more severe.. It didn’t matter whose crime was more severe, this is a tactic used by the
media to continue the negative perception of African Americans. To go as far as including half page photo of the black man being charged, and no photo at all of the Caucasian male further proves my point of the visual misrepresentations the media presents.
On both films my style approach was to study my idol filmmakers that have created similar films. My favorite is Spike Lee. Lee challenges the public to reflect on the cultural differences of race relations and discrimination through the art of filmmaking. He is a master at creating a piece that is not only factual but also gives his own point of view. I remember watching his HBO documentary series “When The Levee's Broke”, a film about the devastation of New Orleans, Louisiana following the failure of the levees during Hurricane Katrina. Besides the heartfelt stories from residents who lost everything in the flood after Hurricane Katrina, Lee puts a political twist on the film which allows his viewers to explore a different side of the disaster, implicating that the levees could have been purposely blown up to flood the lower income areas of the city. As, I watched the film, Lee inspired me to make similar stories that show the plight of my people, and provide a voice for a community that is ordinarily overlooked. The New York Times said, “Even with its formal musical trappings, “When the Levees Broke” is the opposite of a Ken Burns documentary. Where Mr. Burns’ historical panoramas examine momentous events from a magisterial distance, Mr. Lee’s documentary boils with anger and a degree of paranoia.”15 I wanted the Ritchie Campbell story to have the same emotional effect on viewers. Different emotions surface, but providing the same emotional roller coaster as Lee does. The film needed to have the gritty realism of Buffalo, NY

poverty that would frighten someone unexposed to it. It needed to have the street credibility of someone living a similar lifestyle can relate to. Another film maker whose style I incredibly admire is Ava DuVernay. Ava DuVerney is a film director, producer, and screenwriter nominated for an Academy Award for Best documentary for her feature film 13th which explores how the 13th Amendment led to Mass incarceration of African Americans in the United States. DuVernay cleverly addresses hidden codes in American history, which leads to America’s racial hegemony. I wanted to take a similar approach with my documentary by similarly addressing larger issues such systemic barriers and the media misrepresentation and how it is still paradoxal to the African American community.

As a style choice, I also knew that I didn’t want my image to be included in the film. Some film documentaries feature the filmmaker, or include this voice in the narration. My approach was more indirect, to stress an experience and to share an emotional response to the world. Although I’m an opinionated person, I didn’t want viewers to feel like this film was biased from my views. If I had narrated the film, it would have been a clear indication that I was leading the viewers through this journey. I preferred to allow my interviews the steer the viewer in the direction I wanted, without hearing my voice or seeing my face. Although some may disagree, my objective was to tell Ritchie’s truth. Most people in the community were aware of his mistakes from the news and media’s perspective. The news considered him a thug, so few felt sorry for him. The purpose of the film was not to make people feel sorry for him, but to tell the circumstances of why he made some of the choices that
he did. I wanted to tell the story of a former basketball star turned into ex-convict from his perspective. In many films, we view them from the perspective of the victim. I wanted to tell the killer’s story and make everyone realize that “the bad guy” isn’t so bad after all.

As for *The Blackness Project*, the objective of film was to educate, elevate and engage in an effort to bridge the racial gap by creating a dialogue on race between blacks and whites. Originally the film was going to be shot in very similar film style to *The Whiteness Project*. We wanted to discuss the same topics, interview the same amount of people and even ask the same questions. The purpose of this was to show viewers both opinioned sides. Not depicting either side right or wrong, but just to show both view points. In order to do this, we reached out to *The Whiteness Project* film director Whitney Dow. It would be great to have his cooperation to use the footage of his film to create our project. Needless to say, he never responded. In fact, he sent his father, (who just so happens to work in the same building in which our office is located) to sniff out our motives. Apparently, Dow has received a lot of flack for his film. His father told us that he was extremely apprehensive to working with anyone else regarding his film. He’d rather we just scrap our film and just forget that we ever viewed his film. When Dow's father left our office, we knew exactly what to do. We were going to proceed with the production of our film because sweeping the issues under the rug is exactly what America wants us to do. For decades, people have shied away from open conversations regarding race, but kept their feelings the
same behind closed doors. There was a need for *The Blackness Project* film to be created to re-write Americas narrative about race and culture.

There were extreme obstacles pertaining to both films during their production. The obvious being that “Ritchie Campbell “was sent back to prison during production but (TBP ) had its challenges as well. During the course of filming, the director and I traveled to NYC, the Million Man March in Washington DC, and Salt Lake City, Utah conducting interviews. With over 100 hours of interview footage, our film team lost some direction on where the film was heading. The most difficult job the director and I were facing was how to condense 100 hours of footage into a one-hour film? Needless to say, this sparked many creative disputes among our film team. So much so that the film was put on a three-month hiatus to figure out if we even wanted to complete it. After swallowing a lot of pride, we all decided to continue with postproduction of the film. Many of our internal problems could have been solved with a healthy film budget, but as independent filmmakers tackling racial issues that are sensitive to the world, we weren’t given access to the funds necessary to finish this film. Fundraisers, and “go fund me” accounts revolved around people donating to see the completion of our work, but we didn’t get the sense that people wanted us to succeed. Maybe if we were doing a sci-fi film, or another urban narrative, some people would have been more receptive. But race is an issue that makes people uncomfortable. People choose to not openly have conversations about race. This issue only motivated us even more to complete this film. Without the proper budget, we just needed to do all the work ourselves.

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Everything from the editing, sound design, color correction and graphics we did on our own. We completed a 52-minute high impact documentary film narrated by UB professor Dr. Henry Taylor, which covered 8 chapters revolving around race. Our film premiere concluded with a panel of 8 people, all of different racial backgrounds discussing their thoughts of the film and race related issues. The film director, Korey Green decided to make a gutsy decision and invite former Buffalo school board member Carl Paladino to participate. Our film company has had a relationship with Paladino for years, but due to his outspoken personality, Paladino was recently removed from the Buffalo School Board for making racist remarks in a local newspaper. Although this seemed like a risky decision, the purpose of the film is to evoke conversation and dialogue about race, and this includes hearing from all sides. In order to understand one another, everyone must be prepared to listen, even if it means hearing someone’s views that we disagree with. Once Paladino confirmed to be on our panel, the media took yet another opportunity to corrupt the public opinion about our film. Without explaining our true motives for having Paladino participate in the discussion, our film was labeled as racist work due to Paladino’s affiliation. Honestly, I had no idea how many people hated Paladino. We received letters from groups threatening to protest the event, and sponsors threatening to pull out if he participated. People even attempted to cancel their museum membership at the Burchfield Penney Art Center because they were hosting our event. We never anticipated this media surge creating this type of community uproar, but we were prepared to deal with it. As a filmmaker, I am passionate about the art; I create and refuse to compromise my vision for any lack of
integrity. The film had to be honest, and insightful and the panel discussion following had to be truthful and educational as well. Turns out the film and panel discussion were a hit. Discussing topics in the film such as; ethnicity, slavery, structural racism, African Americans and the police and the infamous "N" word, viewers sold out our screening and stayed all night listening to our panel discussion. Knowing all the obstacles that had to be endured creating both films, which shared similar themes, made the victory of a great film even sweeter.

V. Conclusion

As I end my MFA candidacy, I am pleased at myself for completing both films of exploring African American culture, the systemic obstacles, and misrepresentation of Blacks in the media. I believe I achieved my objective of exploring identity and how media misrepresentation affects the daily lives African Americans and stagnates their future progression. Now that these films are complete, I am seeking to continue my thesis work by seeking distribution of these 2 films. As I see it, Off The Glass; The Ritchie Campbell Story, would be most effective when viewed by players in sports camps and clinics in the urban community. My objective of the film was not to redeem the soul of Ritchie Campbell, but to explore his life circumstances and reveal how stacked a deck he was up against, as well as many of his peers in the black community. The idea of incorporating this film in sports programs aimed at under privileged youth, could hopefully inspire those children to be aware of their systemic obstacles and not make the same choices as Ritchie Campbell. As for my second film The Blackness Project, distribution of this
film is not the end goal. Of course creating awareness and driving racially motivated conversations was the objective, however this film’s purpose is to be used as a platform to secure more work. In my opinion, *The Blackness Project* would be most effective as a television series, using 30-minute segments to explore various topics of racism. With the film, my partner and I were not able to expound on each racially driven topic to satisfy our need. I believe continuing this subject matter in depth would really contribute to the healing that some racism causes. In order to draw attention of producers and investors to my future work, releasing *The Blackness Project* free online makes the most sense to me. The tweet or Instagram post by one celebrity can draw millions of viewers to the film, which can ultimately propel my film career. Currently, we are accepting speaking engagements from educational institutions to screen the film and conduct a talk back afterwards discussing our thoughts on the film. Ultimately, teaching film and media studies from an African American perspective would be ideal. As a filmmaker, creating work to educate and change the perception of African American life is my dream. Noticing how the power of media has the ability to influence drives my passion to create such projects. My purpose is to create engaging work highlighting my culture and recognizing identities that have been overshadowed and misrepresented. Among the most important mechanisms for maintaining (or changing) these perceptions are the mass media with their significant power to shape popular ideas and attitudes.
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