

Representing Black Men

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Reaction Paper # 1

SAMPLE PAPER

Throughout America's complicated and ever-evolving history, one thing remains constant, black bodies, and, more broadly, blackness, continues to be monetized, weaponized, and utilized as a disposable tool and commodity ever in service of the state. As one considers the economical production of slavery, the racial discrimination of Jim crow, and, today's mass incarceration of minorities, the peculiar plight of blacks in America becomes rather stark. Blacks must grapple with being economically vital to the underpinnings of America and yet socially despised as criminal by its larger white society. Accordingly, this reaction paper will center on the notion of racial criminalization. Referencing Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness " and Khalil G. Muhammad's "The Condemnation of Blackness: Race Crime and The Making of The Modern Urban America," this paper carefully examines how race and crime are strategically linked to produce the racial antipathy, indifference, and stigma, necessary to drive the prison system and marginalize minorities. Furthermore, the paper highlights the stringent social caste produced by marginalization as the racialization of criminality is internalized in the consciousness of society at large.

Today over two million African Americans are incarcerated in the criminal justice system and, though alarming, this is not by accident. In fact, according to Michelle

Alexander in her piece, "The New Jim Crow," the numbers are the product of a massive undertaking with multiple parties lending a hand and gaining impetus from an American declaration of war on its citizens as she writes, "The launching of the War on Drugs and the initial construction of the new system required the expenditure of tremendous political initiative and resources. Media Campaigns were waged; politicians blasted soft judges and enacted harsh sentencing laws; poor people of color were vilified" (2). The declared "war on drugs" was not a war on substance use and abuse. It was an unequivocal war on blacks cloaked under the guise of clever political slogans and catchphrases.

Furthermore, I assert that the government willfully sought to equate race with criminality by targeting and arresting entire communities of color. Alexander appears to support this theory as she writes, "Today the War on Drugs has given birth to a system of mass incarceration that governs not just a small fraction of a racial or ethnic minority but entire communities of color. In ghetto communities, nearly everyone is either directly or indirectly to the new caste system. The system serves to redefine the terms of the relationship of poor people of color, and their communities to mainstream, white society, ensuring their subordinate and marginal status" (7). In her most visceral critique of the link between race and criminality comes as Alexander states, "arguably the most important parallel between mass incarceration and Jim Crow is that both have served to define the meaning and significance of race in America. Indeed a primary function of any racial caste system is to define the meaning of race in its time. Slavery defined what it meant to be black (a slave), and Jim Crow defined what it meant to be black (a second-class citizen). Today mass incarceration defines the meaning of blackness in America: black people, especially black men, are criminals. That is what it means to be black" (12). The racial

stigma associated with the war on drugs continues to plague the black community and has been internalized by the greater white society.

Moreover, what it means to criminal has become conflated with what it means to black. In fact Alexander argues, “in the era of mass incarceration, what it means to be a criminal in our collective consciousness has been conflated with what it means to be black, so the term white criminal is confounding, while the term black criminal is nearly redundant” (13).

In his piece, *Condemnation of Blackness*,” Khalil G. Muhammad, like Alexander makes the link between race and criminality. Muhammad writes, “the problem was racial criminalization: the stigmatization of crime as black and the masking of crime among whites as individual failure. The practice of linking crime to blacks, as a racial group, but not whites, he concluded, reinforced and reproduced racial inequality”(3). Muhammad argues further that, “black criminality had become the most significant and durable signifier of black inferiority in white people’s minds since the dawn of Jim Crow”(3). As aforementioned above with Alexander’s piece, here Muhammad also asserts that racial criminality has become internalized into the consciousness of the larger white society and, with it, cementing the racialization of criminality. The danger of racial stigmatization and its association with blackness is the racial apathy and indifference it breeds allowing for further exploitation and marginalization of African Americans through racial violence and mass incarceration system. Muhammad amplifies these nefarious affects by stating, “African American criminality became one of the most widely accepted bases for justifying prejudicial thinking, discriminatory treatment, and/or acceptance of racial violence as an instrument of public violence”(4). Muhammad and Alexander also find common ground in their explanation for the true reason as to why the war on drugs was waged. Both

Alexander and Muhammad argue that the campaign against crime and particularly people of color was waged to fan the racial flame and hostility of an otherwise unhappy poor white and immigrant population seeking to unleash its racial animus. Alexander argues that, “mass incarceration, like Jim Crow, was born of racial opportunism-an effort by white elites to exploit the racial hostilities, resentments, and insecurities of poor working class whites” (15). The use of coded phrases such as, “war on drugs,” and “tough on crime,” were dog whistle for racist whites who equated criminality with black.

My only contention is with Alexander’s assertion that we should believe whites who were polled in the 1980s that claimed they opposed race discrimination in all forms. Alexander claims that, “it is more likely that most Americans by the early 1980s had come to reject segregationist thinking and values and not only did not want to be thought of as racist but did not want to be racist”(16). Alexander later explains that racial indifference by whites towards the plight of black drives the caste system (16). I assert that racial bigotry has and continues to give life to the system of mass incarceration. I agree with Alexander that some white are racially indifferent to marginalization but I also believe that this apathy stems from their racial animus. Lastly, I also believe whites are keenly aware that the criminal justice system disproportionately targets and imprison people of color.

As I ponder over the arguments put forward by both Alexander and Muhammad, the gravity of the implications of over two million African Americans in jail gives me great pause. One cannot help but think about the societal impact of that many men torn from families, proper socialization, education, and integration into society at large. The prospects for felons post release from prison is dismal as Alexander writes, “laws operate collectively to ensure the vast majority of convicted offenders will never integrate into

mainstream, white society. They will be discriminated against, legally for the rest of their lives-denied employment, housing, education, and public benefits”(6). With those somber prospects, recidivism is almost certain. My principle objection with mass incarceration and the wider criminal justice system is that now functions as a medium to control and house black bodies as opposed to providing a holistic approach to help correct deviant behaviors and promote full reintegration into mainstream society. Alexander artfully references the criminal justice system by stating that, “it is no longer concerned primarily with the prevention and punishment of crime, but rather with the management and control of the dispossessed”(7). It is my belief that there can be no remedy to the current criminal justice and incarceration system in its present state. It will take nothing short of a revolution among men and women of good will to overhaul the entire system into one that equitably serves the interest of society at large. The disproportionate number of blacks that cram our prison systems today is emblematic of a larger society that has maliciously racialized criminality with the expressed intent of marginalizing people of color.

Work Cited

- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*, 2010, pp. 1-58

- Muhammad, Khalil G. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race Crime and the Making of the Modern Urban America*. Harvard University Press, pp. 1-87