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Where's the Representation?: The Impact of White Washing on Black Children

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Johnson & Wales University



WHERE'S THE REPRESENTATION?
THE IMPACT OF WHITE WASHING ON
BLACK CHILDREN

Black Erasure and White Washing in popular media negatively impacts children in the Black community and aids in the robbery of their childhood.



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Abstract

This paper's resolve is to discuss the effect Black Erasure and White Washing has had and continues to have on children in the Black community. Today there are strikingly few substantial roles for Black actors and actresses, few young-adult novels either written or featuring Black bodies, and an alarmingly small amount of Black writers, producers, and directors working to produce today's media. The paper will take a look into the effects this erasure has on Black children's self-image and self-esteem as well as discuss how its negative effects extend to other populations of our society. The goal of this paper is to spread awareness and to create conversation.

Value Statement

The value of a child's life is immeasurable. Children are a source of hope and growth; simply put, they are our future. There is a social responsibility to complete any tasks necessary to protect children from the perils of the world for as long as possible. What comments can be made on our American society as we have chosen to abandon Black children to this unjust treatment much sooner than their white counterparts? As a society, we have allowed generation after generation of Black children develop without a full picture of the positive impact they can have in the world, especially in the world of media; consequently, they develop a mind set that their bodies and they themselves, are not good enough. This paper is valuable to all members of this society. It is important to know where and how our American society fails Black children and the impact this failure has on their lives. This paper aims to create conversation with hope to foster positive change.

Where's the Representation?
The Impact of White Washing on Black Children

“Defining myself, as opposed to being defined by others, is one of the most difficult challenges I face.” – Carol Moseley-Braun

White Washing and Black Erasure in media has always been something I have been aware of. The term White Washing can be defined as a racist practice of removing visible minorities in popular media by making their skin appear lighter, or even replacing them altogether with white actors. Black Erasure can be described as the tendency to ignore, remove, and falsify Black bodies and Black voices in academia, news, media, and other outlets. As someone who has always identified as Black, as a young girl, I wondered why I did not look like the little white girls on the TV or in books. When I grew a little older, I began to resent that I did not look like the light skinned, blond haired models in all of the magazines and popular TV shows. Rarely, did I ever see any minorities in the media that I was exposed to. White Washing in the media has impacted me negatively. Black Erasure and White Washing in media negatively impacts children in the Black community and aids in the robbery of their childhood. Black children in America grow up in a society where ‘White’ is the default race. Additionally, Black children traverse life with institutionalized and internalized racism. If that is not enough, there is very little representation of black bodies in media.

There is a widely accepted notion that ‘White’ is the default race. Often there are all-white casts in movies, books, and shows. Usually, audiences are only graced with one or two characters of color. These characters are commonly made to fit into stereotypes and are marginalized with flat, uninteresting storylines. Black women are typically sassy and opinionated (Blaque). Their characters are either hyper sexualized or overweight and meant to be unattractive. Black men are

typically abusive and loud. Black male characters are usually revolved around being a ‘thug’ or some other negative lifestyle. It is important to note, many Black characters are created to be one-dimensional. The same is not true of white characters. White characters have been heroes, villains, brave, weak, shy, dangerous, outlandish, etc. There is no one way to describe the roles white actors have played, and yet there are clear circumstances where Black actors have been demoted into playing stereotypical roles.

Certainly, Black children face many problems that their white counterparts do not. In addition, Black children in America are typically not exposed to positive reflections of themselves in the media. There are many ways in which racism will affect Black children’s lives. Black children, sometimes younger than eleven, are targeted by law enforcement and are brought to criminal court at rates much higher than young white children. Black children experience far higher probabilities of being hyper-policed and have a higher chance of being suspended from school. It has been noted that Black boys are generally believed to look older and ‘less innocent’ (Starr). In *7 Ways Racism Affects the Lives of Black Children*, an article published by the American Psychological Association’s Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, author Jermaine Terrell Starr revealed:

.... experiments on 176 police officers (mostly white males, 37 years of age) from large cities to determine how biased they are against Black boys based on “prejudice and unconscious dehumanization of Black people by comparing them to apes.” After reviewing the officers’ files, researchers determined that cops who used force against Black children dehumanized them. Force includes killings, wristlocks, takedowns, tear gas, electric shocks and striking with a blunt object (Starr).

Overall, the experiments found that in the eyes of some law enforcement and young white college-aged females (another test group), ten-year-old Black boys don’t deserve a childhood (Starr).

The 2012 *Dark Girls* documentary by African American filmmakers Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry, focuses on colorism, discrimination against members of a community with a

darker complexion, based on skin tone among Black Americans, and delves into the preconceptions that Black women face throughout the world (Capretto). It reports on an updated version of the experiment by Kenneth and Mamie Clark. Their 1940s Black Doll Experiment verified that Black children experienced internalized racism by having children, both Black and White, select a doll with light skin color, representing a 'White' baby, or a doll with a dark brown complexion, representing a 'Black' baby, based on questions asked. Those questions included prompts like: Which [doll] is pretty? Which [doll] is ugly? Which [doll] is bad? And which doll do you want to play with? The children almost unanimously chose the 'White' dolls as the positive response and the 'Black' Dolls as the negative response. In the restructured version, Black children still favored the light-skinned dolls opposed to the dark-skinned dolls, which they perceived as bad (Haque).

Racial prejudices on-screen are found in virtually every facet of the filmmaking industry. Across the field, writers, directors and producers of color are distressingly, under-represented (Scherker). In the new movie *Jem and the Holograms*, the character of Shanna, who was originally portrayed as a dark-skinned Black character with purple natural hair, was cast as a light-skinned Black woman with straight black hair. This casting is an example of colorism, a form of Black Erasure and White Washing. The casting directors failed to take the chance to hire a dark-skinned Black woman and elevate her to a high point, make her a role model (Blaque).

A manifestation of Black Body Erasure can also be observed in Fantasy, Sci-fi, and Paranormal Romance young adult novels. These novels disproportionately feature white characters to Black characters. There is a huge lacking in male characters with complexity and conflicting attributes. It is typical that white characters will have a higher standing or position compared to Black characters in film (Osbourne).

Continuing this thought, there are many examples of Black characters that have a lesser standing than their white counterparts. An instance of this is apparent in the casting of the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* film. The character Grover Underwood is half man half goat, otherwise known as a Satyr; he is Percy Jackson's best friend. While not expressed in the books, in the film Grover is a Black character. The issue with this casting is his character is of lesser social standing than the other main characters. The other two main characters are demigods, and he is merely a legendary creature and a hybrid (Osbourne). In the first the Harry Potter movie there was a shot of 272 students, only seventeen were Black or people of color. Only five were given names and characters in the books (Harrison).

In other cases, there are occurrences of Black erasure where characters that are Black are not shown as Black for large portions of the movie. For example, Princess Tiana of *Princess and the Frog* spends about thirty minutes of the movie as a Black woman and the rest as a frog. Additionally, her character is a servant and waitress, who gets 'saved' by a man. This serves to create a dreadfully fractured and flat representation of what could have been a view of what it meant to be a strong independent, female Black business owner in the 1920's South (Osbourne). There is also the character Johnny from *Fantastic Four*. In the 2015 update of the movie, 'Johnny' is played by one of two Black actors in the film, Michael B. Jordan. However, he spends a large portion of the movie not being Black, but in flames.

A 2013 study released by USC's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism offers statistics about diversity in Hollywood films:

Examining 500 top-grossing films released in the U.S. from 2007 to 2012, the study considers some 20,000 characters and finds diversity is definitely lacking. Across 100 top-grossing films of 2012, only 10.8 percent of speaking characters are Black, 4.2 percent are Hispanic, 5 percent are Asian, and 3.6 percent are from other (or mixed race) ethnicities," the paper notes at the outset. "Just over

three-quarters of all speaking characters are White (76.3 percent). These trends are relatively stable, as little deviation is observed across the five-year sample (Rizov).”

Black actors and actresses are simply not given fair chances to be positive role models in the media.

Viola Davis is the first Black woman to win a Best Actress Emmy Award in a drama. Davis acknowledged in her 2015 Best Actress Emmy Award acceptance speech, “And let me tell you something: The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there.” This comment points out the frequently overlooked fact, Black actors and actresses, especially those whose skin is dark, usually are not cast in popular roles or as main characters.

Black body erasure is a large factor in how young Black children construct and perceive body image. It is incredibly difficult to grow and thrive in a world that views your body and your skin as undesirable, or to value your unique beauty in spite of being told that your skin is anything but beautiful. Black children are fed so many messages, directly and indirectly, about light skin being good skin and dark skin being bad skin. Commonly, villains or antagonists are associated with the color black whether it be their skin, their clothes, or some aspect of their character.

Many young Black aspiring artists and writers don’t include Black people in their works. Black animation artist, Kat Blaque, said it never even occurred to her that she should include Black people in her art. She remembers all of the peach colored crayons she used being labeled as flesh or skin-tone, while all the brown colored crayons were labeled dirt or earth. In her video, #JEMTHEMOVIE AND COLORISM, Blaque stressed the importance of ‘un-packaging’ and realizing all of the ways in which she was internally racist toward herself. Blaque said as an adult she includes Black bodies and characters to uplift and encourage Black children, artists, and women (Blaque).

Black Erasure and White Washing in popular media negatively impacts children in the Black community and aids in the robbery of their childhood. It is hard to think about the magnitude of the effect that colorism and the complete erasure of Black bodies has had on children in the Black community. Without regularly seeing positive reflections of themselves on the media it becomes hard for some Black children to value their self-image. It is so uncomplicated to begin to feel unattractive and undesirable when there are so many books and shows that fail to include Black well-rounded and interesting characters. Black children face many hardships in life outside of Black Erasure and White Washing. White children will never have to deal with internalized and systematic racism that Black children face.

On the whole, it is evident, erasure of Black bodies and White Washing in popular media detrimentally impacts Black children. For any change to happen however, there must be a conversation. Many people are completely unaware of the disproportionate representation of races, cultures, and skin tones. As a society, we have fully accepted the idea that White is the default race. That is problematic because it is simply not true. Recently, I have become aware of Black people voicing their discomfort and recognizing the many ways in which the media has taught them to hate aspects of themselves. However, there are not enough people talking about this; some individuals have never even heard the terms White Washing and Black Erasure. It is important to verbally challenge instances of institutionalized racism even if it is conversation among friends or a simple acknowledgement that something is wrong. The importance having conversations about White Washing and Black Erasure cannot be stressed enough. These conversations can lead to more people questioning the notion that White is the default race, help Black children feel less alienated, and ultimately foster a stronger and more inclusive American society.

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