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# Black Men in the American Imaginary from Slavery to Black Lives Matter

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The killings of unarmed black males by police and self-proclaimed vigilantes have become alarmingly frequent in America; prompting many to conclude that young black men have become an endangered species.<sup>1</sup> While several killings are not headlined and thus concealed from the public, some have provoked public indignation and condemnation. These murders keep happening with frightening frequency.<sup>2</sup> The occurrences of these killings seem to buttress the endangered species viewpoint. The fact that the law enforcement officers and vigilantes involved were either not charged at all, or in some cases, tried and found not guilty and acquitted, has galvanized public outrage that birthed the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>3</sup> It now seems normative to see young black men murdered publicly and without repercussions. The popularized image of black men in American society and media is that of the violent, immoral, incorrigible gangsters and drug dealers who create broken homes and sire children who are then abandoned to the charge of the government and welfare agencies.<sup>4</sup>

Why is there no collective national outrage against the murders of unarmed black men? Why have the killings become routinized and normative? This paper attempts to answer these questions by tracing the historical dynamics undergirding contemporary disregard for the sanctity of the

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1. Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, *Young, Black and Male in America: An Endangered Species*. Dover, MA: Auburn House Publishing, 1989. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Mugging of Black America*. Chicago, IL: African American Images, 1990; also his *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*.
  2. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Why Black Lives Do Matter*. Los Angeles, CA: Middle Passage Press, 2018. Kevin Alexander Gray, *Killing Trayvons: An Anthology of American Violence*. New York: Counterpunch, 2014. Wesley Lowery, *They Can't Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America's Racial Justice Movement*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016. Haki Madhubuti, *Taking Bullets: Terrorism and Black Life in Twenty-First Century America*. Chicago: Third World Press, 2016. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016. Gary Younge, *Another Day in the Death of America: A Chronicle of Ten Short Lives*. New York: Nation Books, 2016.
  3. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #Black Lives Matter*. Russell Rickford, "Black Lives Matter: Toward a Modern Practice of Mass Struggle." *New Labor Forum*, vol. 21, number 1, 2016, pp34-42. Christopher Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
  4. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*; also his *The Mugging of Black America*. Paul L. Wachtel, *Race in the Mind of America: Breaking the Vicious Circle Between Blacks and Whites*. London: Routledge, 1999. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Why Black Lives Do Matter*.

lives of black men. One has to start with examining the stereotypes embedded in the institution of slavery. Winthrop Jordan suggested that many of the behavioral patterns and beliefs responsible for the dehumanization of blacks in the twentieth century existed more than two hundred years ago.<sup>5</sup> Europeans who colonized the New World regarded blacks as “corporeal creatures” and fundamentally different.<sup>6</sup> This was also the worldview of the “Founding Fathers” of the American Republic. The only reality and future they envisioned for blacks was being slaves. Though the Constitution adopted in September 1787 did not mention the word “slavery,” but instead used phrases as “such persons” or “other persons,” there were almost 500,000 “such persons” (slaves) at the birth of the new nation.<sup>7</sup> The 1857 United States Supreme Court decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* affirmed the primacy of slave identity.<sup>8</sup> The court decided that blacks “were unfit to associate with whites...and the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, blacks were objects and denied human attributes. Carl Degler argued that from the beginning blacks were treated as chattel, and the distinguishing attribute of a chattel was being non-human.<sup>10</sup> Blacks would bear this stigma and identity for over two centuries, and some would argue that the long term effects and enduring legacies continue to shape the black experience in twenty first century America.<sup>11</sup>

As chattel, slaves could not envision family relationships. This also abrogated the male slave’s ability to function as “head” of his family. Male slaves watched helplessly as whites raped and abused female slaves. However, the same system that reduced black men to this abject condition also popularized the notion that, if left alone, blacks generally were incapable of anything productive. The dominant imaginary portrayed blacks as “objects” in need of the constant supervision and guidance of whites. Such condition, many believed, would restrain the potent but dormant animalistic attributes of the black man. The plantation (Labor) defined and limited the slave’s world. Slavery required the imposition of subhuman status and thus denial of the slaves’ humanity.<sup>12</sup> This obtained from 1619 to the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment ending slavery

5. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968, px. Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Black in Western Popular Culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992.

6. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black*, pp34

7. Darlene Clark-Hine, William C. Hine & Stanley Harrold, *The African American Odyssey*, vol. 1. New York: Pearson, 2014, pp112-113

8. Ibid, p241-424

9. Ibid, p242

10. Carl Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986.

11. Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*. Portland, OR: Joy DeGruy Publications, 2005. Na’im Akbar, *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery*. Tallahassee, FL: New Mind Production, 1984. Ruth Thompson-Miller, Joe R. Feagin and Leslie Picca, *Jim Crow’s Legacy: The Lasting Impact of Segregation*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015.

12. Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976. Also his, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation*. New York: Vintage Books, 1971. Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. Eyerman, *Cultural*

in 1865. The attainment of freedom did not obliterate the stigma of slavery. Free blacks were discriminated against and restricted to demeaning occupations.<sup>13</sup> Whites monopolized decent jobs and confined blacks to a life of ignorance and abject poverty.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding, free blacks tapped into and mobilized their meager individual and collective resources to create structures, institutions and movements with which they resisted dehumanization and perpetual domination.<sup>15</sup>

The process by which the ethnicities involuntarily taken from Africa became transformed into the aggregate “Afro-American” identity was itself an exercise in existential nullification. Africans became chattels for the primary purpose of justifying their enslavement. They became “the other” in an environment of racial demarcation. To legitimize this worldview, enslaved Africans were ascribed attributes that affirmed their sub-human status. They were associated with values that fed the American imagination with negative images of peoples of African descent as objects deserving of far less.<sup>16</sup> Pseudo-intellectuals and pro-slavery ideologues and writers portrayed blacks as animals, closely related to apes and monkeys.<sup>17</sup> With ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment and ensuing Radical Reconstruction reforms came attempts to restore the humanity of blacks. Blacks gained citizenship, the right to vote, and promise of equal protection of the law. Yet, they were not fully integrated. The end of slavery did not usher in a nation that accorded blacks full equality and dignity. Instead, blacks transited from chattel to *Jim Crow* which further subverted their humanity.<sup>18</sup> Legal and extra-legal strategies were introduced to reinforce their sub-human status from the 1880s through the 1960s. They retained second class citizenship, and denied civil and political rights.<sup>19</sup>

The association of blacks with animals became even more pronounced after the demise of slavery. Writings of leading American intellectuals as well magazines, newspapers and journals depicted blacks as, “half child, half animal,” mentally impaired, dangerous and a threat to

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*Trauma: Slavery and the formation of African American Identity.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (Written by Himself)*. Boston, 1845.

13. Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965. Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Blacks in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

14. Ibid

15. Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery*. Harry Reed, *Platform for Change: The Foundations of the Northern Free Black Community, 1775-1865*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1994. Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters, The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.

16. Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

17. Idus A. Newby, *Jim Crow's Defense: Anti-Negro Thought in America, 1900-1930*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965. George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*.

18. Jerrold M. Packard and Jerrold Packard, *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003. David K. Fremon, *The Jim Crow Laws and Racism in United States History*. New York: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 2014.

19. Idus Newby, *Jim Crow's Defense*. Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. Idus Newby, *The Development of Segregationist Thought*. New York: Dorsey Press, 1969. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.

society, especially white women.<sup>20</sup> Some of the publications represented blacks as neurologically challenged and prone to violence.<sup>21</sup> Charles Carroll, described the black man as a subspecies of the animal world.<sup>22</sup> W. S. Armstead, a Georgia theologian, referred to the black man as a beast who murderously “waylaid” white women.<sup>23</sup> Frank Hoffman, a German, discussed the “race trait and tendencies” of black men, and their “immense amount of immorality and crime.”<sup>24</sup> Walter F. Wilcox, chief statistician of the United States Census Bureau alleged that blacks were “several times” more likely to commit crimes than whites.<sup>25</sup> Leading media and academic publications amplified the “black men as beasts and menace” theme.<sup>26</sup> The onslaughts on black character were meant to legitimize discriminatory policies. They also mirrored undercurrents of anxiety about the social implications of black freedom. There was unease about the alleged threat of black sexuality. Even as the slave system profited from, and thrived on, emasculating black masculinity, it did acknowledge and nurture that humanity. With foreign importation of slaves outlawed in 1808, southern planters confronted a challenge: Where to acquire slaves for their plantations? Many began to improvise by “producing” slaves domestically. They coupled male and female slaves for breeding.<sup>27</sup> This domestic “slave manufacturing” increased the property and enhanced the wealth of many planters, such as John Smith’s master who, according to Smith “...started out wid two ‘omen slaves and raised 300 slaves.”<sup>28</sup> Nothing more exemplified the dehumanizing nature of chattel identity than slave breeding. Black men became sexual objects (tools) at the convenience and disposal of the masters. Slave breeding ultimately infused in planters gnawing and threatening image of the black man. By using black men as breeders, white planters had birthed a bogey that would haunt America for decades (the mythical black rapist).

The exploitation of black sexuality reinforced preexisting, but subdued, notions of black hypersexuality. It has been suggested that whites had harbored the image of blacks and of the black man in particular, as hyper-sexual and imbued with insatiable sexual desires since their first encounters with indigenous Africans. According to Winthrop Jordan, long before their formal contact, Europeans perceived Africans as “lustful and venomous” people endowed with insatiable sexual drives.<sup>29</sup> Earl Ofari described the myth of the rapacious black male sexuality as one of America’s

20. Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman*. New York: Doubleday, 1906. Robert W. Shufeldt, *The Negro, a Menace to American Civilization: A Menace to Civilization*. BiblioBazaar, 1817.

21. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*, p24. Charles Carroll, *The Negro a Beast, or in the Image of God?* Ayer Co. Publication, 1900; Robert W. Shufeldt, *America’s Greatest Problem: The Negro*. Philadelphia: F. A. Davis & Company, 1915.

22. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*, p21

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid, p23

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Eddie Donoghue, *Black Breeding Machines: The Breeding of Negro Slaves in the Diaspora*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2008. Gregory Smithers, *Slave Breeding: Sex, Violence, and Memory in African American History*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012.

28. Gregory Smithers, *Slave Breeding*, pp1

29. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black*, pp33-35.

most durable and early stereotypes and that it predated slavery.<sup>30</sup> One early explorer referred to the Mandingo penises as “Burthensome.”<sup>31</sup> Another marveled at their “large propagators.”<sup>32</sup> The institution of slavery and demand for plantation labor had kept the black man’s sexual propensity and the fear it embodied for whites in check. After the end of slavery, this would become both emotionally and psychologically unsettling to whites who were tormented by the thought that, left unchecked, “black sexual animals and predators” would unleash their hyper-sexuality on white women.

There was thus a pervasive atmosphere of “Black Scare” across the nation: “scare” that free black men were not only seeking economic and political rights, but also white women.<sup>33</sup> Blacks were widely perceived as driven by the desire for “sexual equality,” and an “innate fondness for white women.”<sup>34</sup> Some blamed Civil War and Reconstruction reforms for infusing in blacks the belief that they could and should strive for social equality and intermarriage. This supposedly aroused their “animalism.”<sup>35</sup> No southern group was more threatened by blacks’ “desires” than the “virtuous and defenseless white women.” There was supposedly “something alluring and seductive to the Negro in the appearance of white women...” To counteract this threat to the South’s “priceless jewel of beautiful, splendid and spotless womanhood,” extreme measures were introduced including violence and lynching.<sup>36</sup> Between 1865 and 1900, white southerners placed blacks “under an elaborate system of prohibitions and restrictions mostly associated with social conventions that symbolized their subordinate and subservient status.”<sup>37</sup> The most frightening of the conventions pertained to the inviolability of white womanhood. If a white woman accused a black man of rape or attempted rape, “we see to it that the Negro is executed,” declared Arkansas poet John Gould Fletcher.<sup>38</sup> Every able-bodied white man assumed the existential duty of protecting “vulnerable white women” from the menace posed by the sexual pathology of black men. White men assumed this responsibility with a crusading zealotry, reflected in the intensity and barbarism of the lynching orgies that engulfed the country from the late 1880s to the 1950s.<sup>39</sup> Castration was a signature ritual of the lynch mob. Some states passed laws prescribing castration for black men who attempted to rape white women.<sup>40</sup> This symbolized extinguishing the sexual causative object of white anxiety. It was also a subliminal message to all black men about the consequences of not respecting the sexual

30. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*.

31. Ibid, pp70-71.

32. Ibid.

33. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*, pp20-25

34. Idus Newby, *Jim Crow's Defense*, pp135

35. Ibid, pp136-137.

36. Ibid, pp137.

37. Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp104-105.

38. Ibid, pp105

39. Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Michael J. Pfeifer, ed., *Lynching Beyond Dixie: American Mob Violence Outside the South*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

40. Ibid. See also, Evelyn M. Simien, *Gender and Lynching: The Politics of Memory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

boundary. The sadistic rituals and pageantry that accompanied lynchings and the characterization of lynching burnings as “barbeque” underscored the association of blacks with animals.<sup>41</sup> Thousands of black men were lynched. More than 80% of the lynchings was justified on the alleged rape or attempted rape of white women, and most of the accusations were later proven to be fabricated. Lynching exemplified public and national devaluation and de-legitimation of black lives.<sup>42</sup>

Newspapers publicized and hyped the alleged hyper-sexuality of black men. It was also a popular research theme in the Humanities, Sciences and Social Sciences. Several scholars theorized about black sexuality and the threat to white women.<sup>43</sup> The belief in, and fear of, black sexuality unified Americans across party and ideological lines. This gave lynching culture a national audience and acceptance. Mob violence and other forms of summary justice against black men reigned unchecked.<sup>44</sup> The lull in the intensity of lynching in the late 1950s did not obliterate the existential threat black men encountered daily. When lynching declined, and the lynch mob receded, the state agencies and apparatus took over. Between 1930 and 1981 four hundred and fifty-five (455) men were executed for rape. Of that number, four hundred and five (405) were black men. They were put to death “on the flimsiest evidence, mostly the word of white women.”<sup>45</sup> The lynchings and accompanying macabre orgies reflected the depth of America’s obsession with the threat of black sexuality. Lynching was not the exclusive act of the lynch mob. It had the backings of top federal and state government officials and law enforcement agencies. There appeared to be a national resolve to protect white womanhood and white civilization against the perceived threat of a “black beast” now unleashed upon the nation.<sup>46</sup> The black man had become America’s sex bogey; ever-present danger and threat to white women. However hard they tried; anti-lynching advocates could not get Congress to act on anti-lynching legislative initiatives.

To be a black man in America, therefore, is to assume the extra burden of assumed criminality. Black and crime have become synonyms in the American imaginary to the point where many readily invoke that linkage even when a white person had committed the crime. The cases of Chuck and Carol Stuart in Boston in 1989, and Susan Smith of Union, South Carolina, in 1995 come to

41. See lynching photos in James Allen, Hinton Als, John Lewis and Leon Litwack, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. New York: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000.

42. Michael Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984. Timothy B. Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017. Patricia Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP*. College Station, TX: Texas A & A University Press, 2005. James Cameron, *A Time of Terror*. Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1982. Howard Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. Dominic J. Capeci, *The Lynching of Cleo Wright*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998.

43. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of Black Male Image*, pp70-72

44. Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynchings*. Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1988. Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004. Philip Dray, *At The Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. New York: Random House, 2002.

45. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*, pp73

46. Ibid. Also, Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*.

mind.<sup>47</sup> This blame-the-black-man syndrome is embedded in American history. The tradition of whites willfully and wrongly accusing blacks of crimes they (i.e., the whites) committed is all too familiar. The lynchings mentioned earlier were not all due to the popular sexuality (rape) charge. There was also the pervasive image of the black man as incorrigible criminal. There were cases of black men lynched for allegedly murdering white women or kids, only for their innocence to be proven after their deaths.<sup>48</sup> It would be discovered that a white person had actually committed those crimes. A good example was the case of fourteen years old George Stinney in Alcolu, Clarendon County, South Carolina wrongfully executed for the murder of two white girls in 1944. In 2014, South Carolina publicly acknowledged that George Stinney was indeed innocent.

By the 1960s civil rights movement, the image of the black man as rapist was coupled with his image as social and economic parasite; perennially unemployed, unemployable, uneducated and uneducable, with a pathological disdain for morals, unambitious and thus a parasite. This became justification for maintaining white superiority. There is no consideration of the historical circumstance, systemic and structural dynamics that had put black men and blacks in general in such abject conditions. With young black men unable to acquire quality education, they are less likely to secure decent jobs without which they are forced into underground economies. The negative images of black men birthed a counter culture of vigilantism reflected in the epidemic shooting of unarmed black men, mass incarceration and expansion of the prison industrial complex.<sup>49</sup>

What the history shows is that after slavery, blacks transited into a world of other forms of unfreedoms and nullification of their humanity. They would remain 'the other,' less deserving, sub-humans, whose lives were not worthy of the protection of, and validation by, the state. The fact that freedom did not completely restore and affirm the inviolability of black humanity birthed and kept the civil rights movement alive to this day. The numerous unsolved, or solved but unprosecuted, cases of black lynchings and assassinations during the 1950s and 1960s underscored how devalued black lives had become. There is still demonstrably flagrant disregard for the sanctity of black lives. Many who endanger and extinguish the lives of young black men escape punishment. The brazen disregard for the sanctity of black lives provoked resistance that galvanized the modern civil rights movement. Let's recall the questions posed at the beginning: What precisely, in the making of American, would help us understand how and why the flagrant disregard for the sanctity of black lives does not provoke collective national outrage? Why have the killings become routine and seemingly normative?

Despite post-Civil War and Reconstruction reforms, and subsequent civil rights era reforms,

47. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*, p44.

48. Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. James H. Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

49. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2012.

there lingers in the imagination of a significantly segment of the American population, particularly law enforcement officials, those negative and nullifying images and portraits of blacks, especially young black males, as brutish, disorderly and a menace. Modern efforts to stifle civil rights and prevent implementation of welfare and social reforms are premised on age-old demonization of blacks. Portrayed as lazy and brutes who seemed comfortable with violent get-rich-quick schemes, blacks and the poor in general, are dismissed as undeserving of any government assistance. Anti-civil rights and anti-social welfare reform initiatives, and continued emasculation of black humanity, have become refrains in public discourses. This became more pronounced with resurgence of ultra-conservatism during the Reagan-Bush presidencies. Ronald Reagan, in particular, was noted for invoking age old ethos of black dehumanization to justify subverting and eroding civil rights and social welfare reforms.<sup>50</sup> Attempts to alleviate poverty through government reforms were denounced as unnecessary diversions of national resources to undeserving groups. Unemployed, uneducated and unemployable blacks who, in desperation sought other means of bettering themselves characterized as pests and a menace. The prison industrial complex expanded and law enforcement developed stringent, unrestrained, merciless and racist response strategies.<sup>51</sup>

Americans who considered blacks second class citizens not deserving of same rights were only temporarily subdued, not completely defeated, by the reform initiatives from Reconstruction to the civil rights movement. *Jim Crow* and the lynchings it unleashed, as well as the modern anti-civil rights, and anti-social welfare, reforms initiatives, and resurgence of nativism all attest to the resiliency of that segment of America that perceives blacks as less deserving. The depiction of blacks as animals remains an enduring trait of American society. Blacks who seemed to challenge established stereotypes readily earn these attributes, regardless of education and status. Being elected to the highest political office in the country did not immune Barack Obama, who was repeatedly caricatured as a monkey. For example, in 2009, *New York Post* cartoonist, Sean Delonas, depicted President Barack Obama as a monkey.<sup>52</sup> Studies suggest that many Americans still associate blacks with apes and monkeys.<sup>53</sup> The association of blacks with animalistic attributes has become widespread since the election of Donald Trump. Trump frequently demeans his black critics by depicting them as animals and questioning their intelligence.<sup>54</sup> After securing the Republican

50. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*, pp65-78. Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, "Young, Black Males in America: Endangered, Embittered, and Embattled," in Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, ed., *Young, Black, and Male in America*, pp1-36.

51. Samuel L. Myers, Jr., ed., *Civil Rights and Race Relations in the Post Reagan-Bush Era*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2012. Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. See also Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination*, pp125-127. Kenneth Meeks, *Driving While Black, Highways, Shopping Malls, Taxi Cabs, Sidewalks: How to Fight Back if You Are a Victim of Racial Profiling*. New York: Broadway Books, 2000.

52. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Why Black Lives Do Matter*, pp123.

53. Ibid, pp124

54. He has referred to his former White official, Omorosa Manigault-Newman as "a dog", and has persistently referred to perhaps his most vocal critic in Congress, Congresswoman Maxine Waters as a person of "low intelligence".

Party nomination as gubernatorial candidate in Florida, Trump-backed Ron DeSantis warned Floridians to not “monkey up” the election by voting for the Democratic Party candidate Andrew Gillums who is black. The historic negative and dehumanizing attributes have now become coded lexicons of modern American politics that seemed to resonate with a segment of the electorate. This perhaps explains why the disregard for black lives often generates little, if any, collective public outrage.

The animalistic attributes ascribed to blacks shape the American imaginary which sustains and nurtures the blatant disregard for the sanctity of black lives. A significant segment of the American population has yet to jettison the historic and racist images and perceptions of blacks and the limitations they signify. Blacks who challenge this worldview by their demonstration of intelligence and accomplishments are bitterly resented. Some who somehow succeed in challenging the system either did not live to exercise the rights they had fought so hard for, or were subjected to abuses and caricatures that continually reminded them of the limits of their political visions and immutability of their ascribed images and attributes. Obama’s accomplishments stoked the latent anger and anxiety about the successful black man, and about blacks in general, that had remained dormant. Black Lives Matter is a movement against a resilient culture of devaluing of black lives that began with the advent of slavery in America and has remained a permanent feature of American political culture. Young black men have transited from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century image of sexually depraved beasts with insatiable desires for, and thus a menace to, white women, to the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century image of an ever-present threat and danger to the comfort and security of white America. They are presumed guilty until proven innocent, and often not given this benefit since they are usually hunted and shot like the animals they were characterized.

Like in a relay race, the baton of targeting young black males as society’s menace and threat has passed from the lynch mobs to the state. Now high-tech, the lynching of black males occurs within the purview of government and law enforcement agencies. As several scholars have argued, the blatantly racist rationale for lynching has been replaced by coded phrases, fundamentally of the same meaning and intent, disguised as race neutral. Yet disproportionately, these policies target young black men. State interventions of this nature have been traced from Richard Nixon’s “war on crimes” against “criminal species” who supposedly threaten urban America, down to the 1980s Reagan’s “war on drugs.” They shared a relentless opposition to social welfare reforms. The ultimate goal was to erode the gains of the civil rights movement, and undo other anti-poverty and racial justice programs associated with Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Great Society” reforms.<sup>55</sup>

Urban America, where blacks are concentrated is designated “war zones,” “crime prone” areas, and “gang infested,” and subjected to draconian government and law enforcement policies.<sup>56</sup> The

55. Elizabeth Hinton, *From War on Poverty*. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.

56. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*, pp29-33. See also, Khalil Gibran Mohammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

fact that Americans see predominantly young black men arrested and paraded on televisions, and in pages of newspapers and magazines, as pathological and incorrigible criminals, only reinforce those historical racist attributes and stereotypes. Assaults on social welfare and get tough on crime policies only exacerbate the already bleak fortunes of black youth, pushing many even deeper into the underground economy which provokes even more stringent and often illegal law enforcement reactions. Black males have been targeted and maligned as societal menace and threats since the early eighteenth century, and the present Black Lives Matter movement is therefore a logical development.