

## **The Black American**

What Does That Look Like?

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## **Abstract**

Being black in America doesn't carry the same weight as it does to be white in America unless you view it from a negative perspective. Blackness is one of the most grounded foundations that we see out in the world today, but it is so easily overlooked by individuals that feel like it doesn't belong in a system they created. From the beating of Rodney King that took place on March 3, 1991, to the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, we have witnessed the black body being used as an example to show that it has very little value on the scale of racial hierarchy. With a system in place that has identified the black body in a negative connotation, it is time to establish the correct representation of blackness in America. Using a powerful black gaze to show an internal reflection, defining the internal behavior of the oppressor, bringing awareness towards inclusivity and black culture. Without the equitable inclusion of black culture in society, this isn't the land of the free...but it can be.

## **The Black American**

### *What Does That Look Like?*

We all think about how we are fully able to live our lives without feeling like we must experience real problems. In America, that thought process is experienced differently for black men and women because of the hazardous elements that are incorporated into the American lifestyle. We have all been taught about the greatness of America being the "land of the free", but when you truly allow yourself to think about this statement, you must think about who this privilege is made for. Allowing the placement of a black gaze to be a part of society can create dialogue that breaks down the barriers built by a system that benefits whiteness. *I must ask the much-needed questions, what are the factors that contribute to the endangerment of black men*

*and women? How can a society of different cultures establish a balance that allows the black body to feel free in America?*

*Black in 1991*

Let's jump back a few years and look at one of the craziest situations to take place during my childhood. In Los Angeles, California on March 3, 1991, a black male was beat by the hands of four police officers, with three of the men being white. Rodney King was a victim of not only a savage attack for fifteen minutes by white males showcasing their power on his black body, but an example that racism and ethical inequality were still living and prevalent in America.<sup>1</sup> A year later, on April 29, 1992, the matter escalated as trial took place for the four men, featuring a jury of 12 residents from the suburbs of Ventura County that found all four officers not guilty on all charges.<sup>2</sup> This decision started a fire amongst black men and women in California, but also, across all of America. This showed everyone living in a black body, that a little over a century since the end of the Civil War, the establishment of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, the black body is still victimized for sake of executing power over the oppressed.

Being a black two-year-old in 1991, living in the Bronx, New York, I wasn't at the age to understand what was going on, but the black population around me saw the harm in the hateful actions that took place. As I became older, I began to see how my black body was viewed in America under the microscope of the white gaze. Certain events that were either personal or global, involving race and ethical inequality, started to explain how the black body was valued in a system that was built on ideas of whiteness being at the top of the pyramid. Other cultural groups became a second priority. This is harmful to black men and women who attempt to live their lives on a day-to-day basis, but is also harmful personally in different forms because of the

unease of what can happen if encountered by the oppressor that is willing to stripe you of your black body.

*Black in the Present*

On May 25, 2020, nearly twenty-eight years after the televised beating of Rodney King, people around the world witnessed another black man being stripped of his black body through a recording that was posted all over the internet. George Floyd was a 46-year-old black man who found himself in a situation that all black people fear they may someday encounter. Unlike Rodney King, who was able to live to see another day, George Floyd was completely stripped of his life by the hands of whiteness. Floyd wasn't the first black person to be killed by the hands of a white person, but was one of the leading factors that sparked a need to fight against the actions that have been taking place for so many centuries against the black body. Derek Chauvin, the white male that took the life of George Floyd, didn't see him as the human he truly was, a man that "habitually urged others to act with love, not hate," but as a target that he saw was worth harming for the sake of establishing dominance over someone he deserved should suffer.<sup>3</sup> Floyd had to suffer for a matter of exactly eight minutes and 46 seconds before Chauvin decided to take the pressure of his knee off of Floyd's neck, further proving that black men are 2.5 times more likely to killed based on race.<sup>4</sup> These facts take a major toll on the well-being of black men and women knowing that they live in a nation that is rooted in the acts of racism. This vicious attack on George Floyd brought to the forefront how black men and women must fight against the ways of the oppressor and re-identify how the black body is seen.

Being an adult who is experiencing the life of a black person navigating the world in my black body, I see how, now more than ever, it is extremely important to fight the battle against racism and oppression placed on the black body. There is importance in establishing a sense of

self-awareness in the reflection of whiteness. Through self-awareness, white identity will experience internal reflection that will spark a change in the way the black body is seen and encountered. Restructuring the output of black information has built a positive effect of racial identity development by increasing racial centrality for black men and women.<sup>5</sup> This output of information shows that there is significance in embracing black culture, whether internally or from an outside perspective, because that builds up the core identity of black representation.

### *The Identity of Blackness*

In my thesis work, *The Black American*, I felt it was important for me to confront whiteness in America and the harmful system that was built to oppress people like myself for centuries. (see figure 1)<sup>6</sup> Looking into what it means to truly be black in America, negative ideas pop up because of the constant struggle with finding justice for just being black. In a study done by Afrometrics, they conducted a poll that asked a wide range of people, what does it mean to be black? This question is challenging because it forces people, not all black, to dive deep into some form of self-reflection and think about what it means to be a black individual in America. The results showed that twenty-five percent of the black respondents answered that they identified being black with “being a part of a struggle for justice and equality against the forces of racism and other forms of oppression.”<sup>7</sup> Knowing that regardless of where you reside, you will feel the consequences of the struggle against the black body. That struggle varies for everyone, but needless to say, it will always be present, which is why so many black people can see the hardships as a beautiful struggle. Along with that answer, respondents also answered that ancestry, pride, history and legacy, African decent community, and physicality contributed to one’s blackness. These factors are important because they help defy the difficulties of being

black in America, but also the positivity in being black. To be black in America is to be present and have pride in who you are in a world that wants to see you as little.

### *The Rise of White Supremacy*

Being that blackness is important the foundation of our very existence, you find the oppressor that lurks around every corner, trying to abolish what they feel is a threat to their self-proclaimed desire for power. In history we have seen several moments that sparked periods of challenging the dominance of whiteness in society. Most recently this has occurred during the reign of Donald Trump's presidency in United States. Ashley Jardina, a Duke political scientist and writer of the book, *White Identity Politics*, discussed the rise of whiteness in recent times as being "a possibility that the United States was no longer going to be defined by whiteness."<sup>8</sup> This ideology has caused a radical movement to make sure whites remain privileged, overlooking the simple fact they don't have to encounter their own racial identity. Jardina states, "we think about whiteness and white identity as being an invisible group identity because whites don't experience systematic subordination or discrimination."<sup>8</sup> These factors remain to be very dangerous, but also, why it is so important, to establish a sense of self-reflection and awareness through something as powerful as the black gaze. The oppressor has refrained from seeing the reflection of their projected racism on black people, but it is time to hold a mirror up to whiteness.

### *Belonging and Existing*

No one, but black men and women, will truly understand what it means to exist as black in America. With the way the world has been viewed through the eyes of black Americans, it is easy to want to run away from what you fear but overcoming that fear and feeling a sense of belonging allows for the body to exist in way that is needed to form growth and development. In the book, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates speaks on the experience of being naked

in the existence of America, stating “to be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world.”<sup>9</sup> This small statement reigns supreme for all black men and women in any state because this nakedness is a result of policies created by white supremacy that force black Americans to “live in fear for centuries.” I, like many other black men and women, was stripped of my innocence at a very young age because of the talk my mother felt obliged to have with me. This serious talk occurred because of traumas that black people fear can happen someday come to life. It forced me to realize I must be careful because no move I make will go unnoticed under the microscope of the white gaze.

Think about a sense of belonging. It's important to be proud of being who you are because without that form of acceptance within yourself, there can be pressure on one's self that is difficult to overcome. Even though black men and women deal with a level of discrimination and oppression that can feel crippling, most black people love who they are. This is crucial because one of the hardest things to do, even for someone like myself, is accepting that you exist in a space that has wrongfully represented you for years. In *the Black American*, I knew there was a level of overcoming the battle of internal acceptance. Knowing that most black people wouldn't change who they are, we can struggle with our place in society seeing that we must endure the cruelty of a system built hinder us. Black people have always known we belonged but forcing the oppressor to get rid of the microscopes they are always using to judge black lives could allow for progression. Addressing the concerns by confronting the systems of power through knowledge creates self-awareness in form of the *Black Gaze*. (see Figure 2)<sup>10</sup>

### *The Black Gaze*

The black gaze is a peaceful form of changing the reality that black men and women are forced to live with, allowing for progress to a better future. bell hooks defines the gaze can be

used to create self-awareness through self and the oppositional gaze. It is important for black men and women to see the power they hold through their self-reflection. The black gaze is what interrogates whiteness and provides insight to how white supremacy functions in the heart of America. Gazing into the foundation of the oppressor, causes a reflection of the internal behavior that was built on acts of white supremacy. Allowing for the black gaze to create self-reflection forces a confrontation of the negative image and behavior towards the black body. Awareness is a key component for creating a sense of inclusivity that forms a partnership with blackness, leading to dismantling the hatred of white supremacy. Once you face that which is seen as harmful to the well-being of the black body, the confrontation can only lead to a positive shift.

A gesture in the form of a gaze remains to be a powerful component when encountering whiteness in the form of change, growth, and development. The gaze is seen as a form of psychoanalysis that allows one to achieve self-awareness through the gaze of another person. Building on the idea of the black gaze comes from bell hooks' idea of the Oppositional Gaze, where during the times of slavery, enslaved black people were punished just for the simple act of looking, denying them any right to gaze. The desire to simply gaze carried on for centuries until the negative nature of the gaze was turned into an "overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze."<sup>11</sup> hooks further installs the importance of the oppositional gaze through the eyes of whiteness by stating, "By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality'".<sup>9</sup> The oppositional gaze, meant to be used for the black female spectator, gives birth to the black gaze, which is meant to fight against a system that was built to oppress the minority.

*The Object of Two Gazes*

Confronting whiteness is not the only obligation of the black gaze, but also what it means for black men and women to belong in their own culture. Something that black people find themselves dealing with, that isn't seen through whiteness, is how they fit in their own culture based on the guidelines of what it means to be black. Some black people, like myself, dealt with the issue of not being black enough to truly define yourself as a black American, even though you experience the same struggles any other black man or woman faces. In the paper, "Being Black, Middle Class, and the Object of Two Gazes", Hugo Canham and Rejane Williams discuss what it means to not only be the object of a white gaze, a gaze that seeks to "discipline black people they have not escaped white contestation," but also the negative connotation of a black gaze, which is seen as a form of surveillance and disciplining that seeks to police certain forms of blackness.<sup>12</sup> This creates a crisis in one's self because it is the space where you are supposed to feel safe and authentic, making you feel like you don't have the qualifications that are needed to be black. Hearing things like, you didn't grow up in this area, you aren't black enough, to being told that things you do for fun are what white people do. There are so many questions that are asked of one's blackness, leading to racial imposter syndrome, which means to feel like you don't belong to the race you identify as, lacking the feeling of belonging in the world that says you're black based on a single ruling.

There was an internal battle that I faced growing up, causing me to confront my own crisis of what I felt wasn't black enough. I grew up as a child in the Bronx, a place that was known for chewing up and spitting out people that couldn't survive the streets. The Bronx was a predominately black city but filled with so much negativity and crime. That didn't stop me from loving everything about it but once I moved to Colorado, I was exposed to things that I would

have never seen in New York. I always struggled with where it was that I truly belonged, not being black enough for my culture, but black enough to deal with the everyday struggles of a system built to benefit whiteness. Much like my thesis work goes on to project a black gaze, encountering self-reflection, self-awareness, and whiteness, I needed to confront my own desire to belong. By establishing my own identity among blackness, I began to see what it means for inclusivity of black culture to exist in the American DNA. We must find it within ourselves to love who we are and never overlook our history, making sure to establish a sense of pride and not give power to those that want to strip us of our blackness.

In my thesis work, *The Black American*, I needed to address all things black and what it means to exist in blackness during a time of heightened white supremacy. As black men and women, we are the object of two gazes, the white gaze and the black gaze. The idea is that the *Black Gaze* confronts that which seems to deny that black men and women aren't equal to their white counterparts. In Figure 2, when you look at the figure in the black and white photo, you can't escape what society has confined blackness to be, just black and nothing more but there is more to it that makes it worth levels of praise. It confronts those notions saying that we are different, that we cannot run away from, but just like you, my body is meant to be loved. It is ignorant to deny that there aren't issues in America that affect black men and women because the need for power in the form of white hierarchy. It is important to break those barriers and restructure the idea of blackness in America through a simple, powerful gaze back at what has oppressed us for centuries, whether that be internal or to the world around us.

#### *The Inner Reflection*

There is a need to create a form of self-reflection in my thesis work that forces one to hold a mirror to their own beliefs in the entirety of racism and racial inequality. *Self-*

*Reflection* forces the viewer to look at how they have contributed to a system built on white beliefs, causing them to see what they have done negatively and what they must change. (see Figure 3)<sup>13</sup> When you project your gaze at the figure, the intensity of the black gaze causes you to see what sits in the pupil; you see a shadow figure that represents your thoughts and the role you play. In a peaceful form of confronting whiteness, putting rules in place, and internal identity, the power of the gaze and self-reflection allow one to judge their feelings and the role they want to play in the future. This is needed in order for the black body to feel free because it breaks the chains by questioning one's wrongdoing in misidentifying the belonging of the black body in America. Since most white people don't feel the need to confront their own whiteness, which is harmful in itself, you must force a reflection that causes them to look deep within. This gesture in my work will push the agenda and help create a dialogue that will redefine the world for generations to come. Although this matter won't be fixed overnight, people in America will see a shift that allows the black body to do what it has been longing for since beginning, to freely exist in its entirety amongst the people of this world.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, it is important for the history of blackness and the black identity to remain protected against anything that feels the need to erase it. The black body is fragile but holds such a strong foundation that keeps it fighting day in and day out. Through the intensity of the black gaze, we can confront the system that was built on the ideas of whiteness and against what once didn't allow black men or women to move and gaze, freely. Black men and women are going to continue to experience trauma and issues with this system, but that doesn't mean it isn't a battle worth fighting. We must fight so that there won't continue to be tragedy after tragedy that places chains engrained with fear on the bodies of the oppressed. Being that there is no way of knowing

how things will actually turn out in the future, the shift we are seeing will lead to understanding the value of the black identity in America, just as much as it does for that of white identity. It is not about how one can exercise power over another, but how groups must live amongst one another in a way of experiencing true freedom in the “land of the free.”

**Figure References**



Figure 1: Kenyatta Cole, *The Black American*, 2020, Poster Series.



Figure 2: Kenyatta Cole, *The Black Gaze*, 2020, Photography.



Figure 3: Kenyatta Cole, *The Self-Reflection*, 2020, Photography.

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- <sup>1</sup> Jack Katz. "Culture within and Culture about Crime: The Case of the 'Rodney King Riots.'" *Crime, Media, Culture* 12, no. 2 (August 2016): 233–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659016641721>.
- <sup>2</sup> Anjuli Sastry and Karen Grigsby Bates. *When LA Erupted In Anger: A Look Back At The Rodney King Riots*, NPR, 26 Apr. 2017, [www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots](http://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots).
- <sup>3</sup> "George Floyd." In *Contemporary Black Biography Online*. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2020. *Gale In Context: Biography* (accessed October 2, 2020). [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/K1606008683/BIC?u=auraria\\_main&sid=BIC&xid=bf413176](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/K1606008683/BIC?u=auraria_main&sid=BIC&xid=bf413176).
- <sup>4</sup> Greg Johnson. "Police Killings and Black Mental Health." *Penn Today*, Penn Today, June 23, 2020, [penntoday.upenn.edu/news/police-killings-and-black-mental-health](http://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/police-killings-and-black-mental-health).
- <sup>5</sup> Jas M. Sullivan and Ghenni N. Platenburg. "From Black-Ish to Blackness: An Analysis of Black Information Sources' Influence on Black Identity Development." *Journal of Black Studies* 48, no. 3 (April 2017): p. 227.
- <sup>6</sup> Figure 1: Kenyatta Cole, *The Black American*, 2020, Poster Series.
- <sup>7</sup> Serie McDougal and Sureshi Jayawardene, "Black People Say What It Means to Be Black," *Afrometrics*, July 30, 2013. <http://www.afrometrics.org/black-people-say-what-it-means-to-be-black>.
- <sup>8</sup> Isaac Chotiner, John Cassidy, and Ashley Jardina. "The Surprisingly Complex Connection Between White Identity Politics and Explicit Racism." *The New Yorker*. *The New Yorker*, January 19, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/the-disturbing-surprisingly-complex-relationship-between-white-identity-politics-and-racism>.
- <sup>9</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates. *Between the World and Me*. (New York, NY: One World, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2015), p. 17.
- <sup>10</sup> Figure 2: Kenyatta Cole, *The Black Gaze*, 2020, Photography.
- <sup>11</sup> bell hooks. "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), p. 116.
- <sup>12</sup> Hugo Canham and Rejane Williams. "Being Black, Middle Class and the Object of Two Gazes." *Ethnicities* 17, no. 1 (February 2017): 23–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796816664752>.
- <sup>13</sup> Figure 3: Kenyatta Cole, *The Self-Reflection*, 2020, Photography.

## Annotated Bibliography

"George Floyd." In *Contemporary Black Biography Online*. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2020. *Gale In*

*Context: Biography* (accessed October 19, 2020).

[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/K1606008683/BIC?u=auraria\\_main&sid=BIC&xid=bf413](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/K1606008683/BIC?u=auraria_main&sid=BIC&xid=bf413)  
176.

This biography offers a look at who George Floyd was a person, a black man who was living in America during a time that was seeing spikes in white supremacy. Offering an in-depth look his life, I was able to gather information on a black man that was tragically murdered by a white man for just being black. This source speaks to my thesis because it speaks one who this black man truly was even though the media and world might have seen his as just another casualty.

Canham, Hugo, and Rejane Williams. "Being Black, Middle Class and the Object of Two Gazes." *Ethnicities* 17, no. 1 (February 2017): 23–46.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796816664752>.

Hugo Canham and Rejane Williams discuss the existence of being black in a society that imposes two forms of the gaze on black society. One is the "white gaze" that is undermining. by establishing a ruling in the form of social context. The other is the "black gaze" that is seen as policing black under black boundaries This article can offer a different perspective on the other side of the black and white gaze in our society.

Chotiner, Isaac, John Cassidy, and Ashley Jardina. “The Surprisingly Complex Connection Between White Identity Politics and Explicit Racism.” *The New Yorker*. The New Yorker, January 19, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/the-disturbing-surprisingly-complex-relationship-between-white-identity-politics-and-racism>.

In an interview between Issac Chotiner and Ashley Jardina, they discuss the resurgence of white identity under the reign of Donald Trump’s America. How these massive shifts of the importance of white identity becomes highly relevant when there is potential for change, leading to the loss of power on a hierarchy scale. This interview is effective in understanding why racism is so present in 2020 and why white identity is creating a racial carrier? Seeing a standpoint of the other side that will help explain the oppressor’s identity.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York, NY: One World, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2015.

Coates breaks down the importance of living a life in the black body and what that means to a society that was birthed on taking that from black men and women. In a direct address to his son, Coates speaks on the violence that takes place against the black body and how the destruction of these bodies is a major component of the “American Dream.” This book offers valuable insight into how we live life in America through the lenses of the black body.

hooks, bell. “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.” Essay. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 115–31. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015.

hooks discuss the longing to gaze that was taken from black slaves as a form of oppression. White people saw the power of the gaze and tried to shut it down because

they knew was powerful enough to create a shift. Using the black gaze to change reality is what the focus of my thesis is about. Establishing a right to exist amongst the world we world born into without being oppressed.

Johnson, Greg. "Police Killings and Black Mental Health." Penn Today. University of Pennsylvania, June 23, 2020. <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/police-killings-and-black-mental-health>.

Johnson talks about how living as a black man or woman during 2020 and a height of police brutality weighs heavily on black people's mental state. The contributes to the fears that black men and women must face on a daily basis but want to change for the future. In my paper, I discuss the fears that we continue to deal with and how it makes it harder to just exist when you know there is a system that is supposed to help you, but it's constantly destroying you.

Katz, Jack. "Culture within and Culture about Crime: The Case of the 'Rodney King Riots.'" *Crime, Media, Culture* 12, no. 2 (August 2016): 233-51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659016641721>.

Katz goes into looking at the jury that was appointed to the case of Rodney King, an all-white panel of 12 people that were from the suburbs. These people found the 4 men that beat Rodney King, not guilty on all charges. This is what started the uproar of all black men and women across America. This gives me more information about how peoples placement in society causes them to have little interaction with black people, therefore, holding on to their negative views of black men and women.

McDougal, Serie, and Sureshi Jayawardene. "Black People Say What It Means to Be Black."

Afrometrics, July 30, 2013. <http://www.afrometrics.org/black-people-say-what-it-means-to-be-black>.

Serie. McDougal and Sureshi Jayawardene conduct a survey on what it means to be black and why it is important to understand this. This is important to my research because it helps me see why people hold on to their blackness in a society that sees it negative. They are able to fight and stand up for what they believe, just the ability to exist peacefully in their body.

Sastry, Anjuli, and Karen Grigsby Bates. "When LA Erupted In Anger: A Look Back At The Rodney King Riots." NPR. NPR, April 26, 2017.

<https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots>.

Anjuli Sastry and Karen Grigsby Bates look back at the history moment of the Rodney King beat that shook the world and the events that took place shortly after. This situation was striking because you really began to see black people be made an example over twenty years ago on national television. This sparked the want and need for change in black lives of all kinds.

Sullivan, Jas M., and Gheni N. Platenburg. "From Black-Ish to Blackness: An Analysis of Black Information Sources' Influence on Black Identity Development." *Journal of Black Studies* 48, no. 3 (April 2017): 215–34.

Jas M. Sullivan and Gheni N. Platenburg break down the idea of black identity and how the information that is consumed by black people influences the black development.

Through a series of unique survey data and extended research, they have been able to find the factors race identity have on a positive effect that helps individuals find the definition of self. But also, the negative aspect of the public regard and seeing the perception that other races have on black culture through the eyes of black media outlets.

