

The Black comedy and entertainment industry is used as a coping mechanism for marginalized groups, and developed into the overall interaction and relationship of black America, the media, and the public. I researched and gathered images through films, shows, music, social media, books, and art as well as various news journalism articles. My topic's ability to be molded by culture, sociology, real peoples' life experiences and enraging current events drove me to express my opinions as well as learn others' opinions. My chosen medium was collage because it is a way for me to alter the media I am referencing. My pieces are able to stand alone, as well as work together to give a wider scope on the multidimensional ideas of the project. My work plays on the different tactics each group used to get their message out and how easily censorship and widespread stigmas can influence the lives of billions of people. I want my project to speak on its own, because no matter how it is interpreted, each piece makes you think about ideas that are often pushed aside or criminalized.

Madison B.
New York

The Revolution Has Been Televised

Madison B.



*“The revolution will not be right back after a message
About a white tornado, white lightning, or white people”*

-Gil Scott-Heron

The black experience has gone through phases throughout history and continues to be something the whole black community deal with on a day to day basis. The experience of black people as a whole has been hidden from white America because of censorship and segregation of one of our most widespread forms of media and culture: the entertainment industry. Black people have constantly been marginalized and oppressed by the systems and people that have been formed around them. Society has always formed a small box for “the black person” that fits preconceived stereotypes and portrays one viewpoint to the public. The entertainment industry is a place for black people to thrive, express themselves, publicize ideas, and be discriminated against. Comedy, having an influential role in the black entertainment industry, can highlight serious topics and encourage people to have uncomfortable conversations. Marginalized groups use comedy to bring each other together as well as a coping mechanism for the things they are forced to go through.

“The Revolution Will Not be Televised” was as a slogan for the 1960s Black Power Movement, as well as the title of a song by Gil Scott-Heron in response to the spoken word piece, “When the Revolution Comes,” by The Last Poets, which starts with the line, "When the revolution comes, some of us will probably catch it on TV." These lyrics add to the widespread idea that black people are only entertainment, that the only thing they could possibly do is entertain white America. The lines talk about the censorship of the news and the fact that you will not be able to ignore their voices, you will not get a break, because the revolution is live and happening in real life. However, much of the advancement of black people was through entertainment. Ironically, the advancement of African-Americans was possible through one of the many industries formed to oppress them.

Minstrel Shows, an American form of entertainment that developed in the early 19th century, started the exploitation of black people. Shows were performed by white people wearing black face, though some African-Americans also performed as all black minstrel groups. By 1848, Minstrel Shows were a national art form, black characters were depicted as being dim-witted, lazy, buffoonish, superstitious and happy go lucky. These shows afforded white Americans a singular and broad understanding of what some whites considered significant aspects of black culture. The minstrel shows played a large role establishing certain stereotypes of black Americans. Art and advertisements reflected the look minstrels gave black people and added to these stereotypes. The Minstrel Show paved way for the entire entertainment industry to put all black people as minstrels.

Music represents ways entertainment can be used as a vehicle for change as well as how black artists can be taken advantage of and used. Jazz music, a genre that originated in the African American communities of New Orleans, was a place where African Americans were able to express and enjoy themselves. Jazz served as a way to link independent, traditional, and popular music styles with African American and European American forms. Rock and Roll defined itself as a musical style in the United States in the early to mid 1950's, derived from rhythm and blues, boogie woogie, and jazz. Its influencers were black artists who are discredited for their success in this genre. Rock and roll was “whitewashed” and rebranded with a white face to expand the audience. This changed the goal of the music because the music became less of a way of expression and more about the profit. The writer Robert Palmer expressed his views on the cultural aspects of Rock and Roll in saying, “Rock and Roll was an inevitable outgrowth of the social and musical interactions between blacks and whites in the south and southwest. Its roots are a complex

triangle. Bedrock black church music influences blues, rural blues influenced white folk song and black popular music of the Northern Ghettos, blues and Black pop influenced jazz and so on but the single most important process was the influence of black music on white.”

Rap and Hip Hop gave new light to sound and rhythmic messaging. It put forth the grounds for a political artist to express their ideas. Political Hip hop is a subgenre of Hip Hop music that was developed in the 1980s as a way to turn music into a form of social activism. Albums such as “Fear of a Black Planet,” by Public Enemy, “Straight outta Compton,” by N.W.A., and “AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted,” by Ice Cube, all defined this subgenre by addressing the topics of black feminism, police brutality, white supremacy, drug addiction, ghetto life, racism, and poverty. Songs like, “Fuck the Police,” off N.W.A.’s album, were highly censored and ridiculed for their expression of their controversial opinions. The song was removed from radio stations and less often to be heard, muffling the intended message.

These genres have shifted over time, broadening the intended audience as well as the subject matter. “New” rap, for example, portrays a stereotypical version of the black experience. Artists like J. Cole, Kendrick Lamar, and Jay Z, criticize artists who exploit themselves by promoting sex, drugs, gangs, and stereotypes of what black culture is. These artists use their platforms to express their views the same way the political hip hop artists were doing. Jay Z released a song called the *Story of O.J.*, which discusses his views on the outside perception of seeing a black man like O.J. on such a high platform and not using it to help others. Jay-Z sings, “O.J. like, ‘I’m not black, I’m O.J.’ ... Okay.” The “Okay” seen as a nod from the black community saying, “you can define yourself however you choose on this platform but you can never leave who you are.” Jay Z also expresses the difficulty of poverty within the black community and gives his own sense of advice to young black people.

“You wanna know what's more important than throwing' away money at a strip club?

Credit

You ever wonder why Jewish people own all the property in America? This how they did it

Fuck livin' rich and dyin' broke

I bought some artwork for one million

Two years later, that shit worth two million

Few years later, that shit worth eight million

I can't wait to give this shit to my children

Y'all think it's bougie, I'm like, it's fine

But I'm tryin' to give you a million dollar's worth of game for nine ninety-nine

I turned that two to a four, four to an eight

I turned my life into a nice first week release date, mm

Y'all out here still takin' advances, huh?

Me and my niggas takin' real chances, uh

Y'all on the 'gram holding' money to your ear

There's a disconnect, we don't call that money over here, yeah”

These lyrics, though controversial, send a message to the listener. Jay Z went beyond his lyrics by releasing a video that depicted animations that were key references to the ways black people were portrayed in cartoons, such as, “Scrub Me Mama With a Boogie Beat,” and others. The combination of his lyrics and subject matter in his video express an important point about the

entertainment industry and how the public eye will always view you as “nigga” no matter how famous you are and how much you please the audience.

Rap artists are currently contemplating this idea through their music. There is division between many black artists coming into the industry at this time versus black artists who have seen how black people were treated by the entertainment industry. Jay Z, is an older artist who expresses how exploiting and stretching the idea of what the black experience is will not get you anywhere in the end. Younger artists like J Cole and Kendrick Lamar share the same mindset as Jay Z on this topic and express this in their songs as well. J Cole's song "985", is about this idea exactly and his advice on the subject some lines of the song that send his message very clearly are:

These white kids love that you don't give a fuck
'Cause that's exactly what's expected when your skin black
They wanna see you dab, they wanna see you pop a pill
They wanna see you tatted from your face to your heels
And somewhere deep down, fuck it, I gotta keep it real
They wanna be black and think your song is how it feels
So when you turn up, you see them turnin' up too
You hit the next city, collect your money when it's due
You gettin' that paper, swimmin' in bitches, I don't blame you
You ain't thinkin' 'bout the people that's lookin' like me and you
True, you got better shit to do

He expresses anger and plainly lays out the reality of what young rap artists are exploiting as well as the repercussions that has on them and the black community.

Within the film industry black actors were rarely seen and when they were seen their roles fit the stereotype white America wanted them to continue to fit into. Black actors were forced to take these roles though they knew the effect they would have because it was a way to get paid. The film industry recognized the market for movies tailored to a black audience in the early 1970s, and with this realization they created a subgenre of crime and action movies. These movies gained the name of “Blaxploitation” films but the Los Angeles NAACP, because they came from the genre of “exploitation films” which were films that exploited current trends. The movies’ support of a stereotypical view of black people in the ways of their speech, attitude, and mannerisms open up many doors for criticism. However, the movies were still a big step in the black entertainment industry because of the fact that black characters were heroes and protagonists of film and television instead of being sidekicks or second hand characters. Sweet Sweetback's “Baadasssss” song was one of the first black films to incorporate black power ideology and give liberty to black actors, permitting them to be the stars of their own narratives. Addison Gayle wrote his views on Blaxploitation films and the film industry's treatment of black roles in 1974, “The best example of nihilism/ irresponsibility are in Black films; here is freedom pushed into its most ridiculous limits; here are writers and actors who claim that freedom for the artist entails exploitation of the very people to whom they owe their artistic existence.”

The movie, “Hollywood Shuffle,” directed, written, and featuring Robert Townsend focused on this crossroad most black actors went through in their career. The movie follows an actor through his journey into the acting industry. He goes to audition for a black role and gets told by the white directors that they are looking for an “Eddie Murphy type” who is good at speaking jive. After receiving the part he is forced to decide if his values lie in the paycheck and fame or in the accurate representation of his community. Different people in his life have different points of view as to what he should do: his grandma wants him to get his paycheck elsewhere and not dumb

down to the stereotypical roles he was being offered; his brother looked up to him for following his dreams; his mother wanted him to do what he wanted to do and understood the paycheck and fame as a reason to do what he was doing. The movie was low budget and was given plenty of criticism even in its infancy, Hollywood did not want to be exposed the way the movie exposed its twisted sense of black portrayal on camera.

The film Industry spreads into pornography, which is an industry with many flaws within itself but contribute to stereotypes and still continue to pigeonhole women and men of color in subtle and extreme forms. Dorchen Leidholdt, in 1981, lays out how simply these stereotypes are placed, "In pornography, all of culture's racist myths become just another turn on. Thus Asian women are portrayed as pliant dolls; Latina woman as sexually voracious yet utterly submissive; and Black women as dangerous and contemptible sexual animals." These roles influence fetishization of Asian women, Black women, mixed women, Latina women, Native women, and every person of color. The endorsement of these fetishes opens doors for negative treatment and targeting of certain women when it comes to sexual abuse. The pornography industry influences how black women are allowed to express their sexuality, changing the dynamics of relationships with strangers, significant others, co-workers, bosses, and themselves. When a woman of color sees a pornographic film, video, or book, they should see a woman taking control of their own sexuality that does not show a singular view of beauty.

The television industry, similarly to the film industry, shows examples of the profiteering off black stereotypes. Television was, and still is, one of the most widespread ways to address the public and influence their ideas about any given topic. The first black sitcom, "Amos 'N' Andy" was extremely ridiculous because it did the same thing every other film and television show did: showing black people from one point of view. The NAACP shut down the show after one season because of this arguments emerged about what could have been done instead of its shut down. Stanley Crouch stated "in place of protesting the show itself, they should have protested for more black television shows" to produce an outlet for more portrayals of black Americans to be shown and publicized.

70's sitcoms rewrote the conventional definition of what it meant to be black in America. "Good Times" was the first show to illustrate a black family go through real life issues and them getting through them by sticking together as a family. "The Jeffersons" who were shown as to "getting out" and showing how life can be changed. The next big television show to influence the way America, and the whole world saw black people was "The Cosby Show". The show debuted in 1984 and was the first prime time show to portray an affluent, well educated black family. The continuation of the airing of shows that showed middle and upper class families continued into the 90s with shows like "The Fresh Prince of Bel Air" and many others. They depicted more topics of non-race exclusive issues such as bad days at work and conflict at home, with unbreakable elements of family, unity, love and morals. This was not only important for white America to see but also important for black America to see because it gave young black children role models. In today's television, black families are portrayed in shows like "Empire," where a drug dealer turned hip hop tycoon is haunted by his ex-wife, shows are for the scandal.

Bill Cosby opened a new door to the black family, using his own personal experiences with his family, he had a sense of relatability and was able to universalize all of our experiences. He continued to reshape the view of black families in "The Cosby Show," which heavily influenced black roles in television when it was debuted in 1984. Bill Cosby was known as America's favorite father, he opened a door for many comedians today prior to the revelations about his sexual misconduct.

“Humor served as a means for expression, inspiration, and a diversion from the despair of our times.” Comedians have been serving us education on a hilarious platter for centuries. Black comedy is black history. Black comedy gives light to Black America. Each comedian and comic give more opportunity to the rest of the ones that followed as in what they were able to do and say and how adventurous their content. Egbert Austin Williams paved the way for every black person in the entertainment industry. In 1901 he became the first black performer in a Hollywood motion picture. He was light skinned, facilitating his acceptance in Hollywood, but too light skinned to play an African American on camera, thus he had to be in black face for the film. After Williams, Lincoln Perry starred in dozens of films usually under the stage name of “Stepin Fetchit”: a bumbling tongue tied servant known as the laziest man in the world. He was the first black comedian to become a superstar, he made more money than any other entertainer at the time, because he had the white people watching as well as the black people. He is often an example used when discussing whether they should act like fools because that's what white people was to project us as to being, people would even say “don't act like stepin fetchit”. In a way he is someone of his time and he did make the best for himself in that way because if he didn't, he wouldn't have a job or the life he did.

In 1913, there was new era for black entertainers because of the opening of the Apollo Theater where Comedians such as Mantan Moreland and Nipsey Russell forged what was later called the “Harlem Renaissance,” where a new stream of black comedians, writers, musicians, artists, and so on, were able to come out of the clubs and go into mainstream America. Moms Mabley was the first black female comedian on television. She was tremendously influential to many black females who are in the comedy industry today, because of how she carried herself as a strong black woman with her own opinions.

Redd Foxx would not have been able to do what he did without the era of the Apollo Theater and those who came before it. Redd Foxx is considered the “godfather of today's comedy.” He was able to take social issues, during a time of racial tension in the 50s and 60s, and twist them in a way that would make you laugh. He left people thinking “is that right, can that happen?” He addressed things that would not be acceptable in “polite conversation” and make people think. He once said, “I carry a knife now, because I was reading a white magazine that said that all black people carry knives. So I rushed out and bought me one.” The audience laughed but he was able to poke fun at ridiculous stereotypes that were being broadcasted to the public. He made jokes about and satirized police brutality, segregation -- anything that would underscore what was wrong.. Also in the 60s Dick Gregory was able to show white America that there is a real person behind the personas that are used on entertainment platforms. He was invited onto a famous white talk show at the time and he was the first black person to sit on the talk show couch and be interviewed. It was the first time white people got to see a black person having a human conversation. In addition to being a comedian, he was also a writer, social critic and a civil rights activist, “his impact on the civil rights movement is like black comedy's impact on black America”.

Richard Pryor was able to reach a wide audience, he was incredibly influential to both comedy and black comedy. Black comedian Keenen Wayans “Richard Pryor talked about white people, nobody has ever gone on stage and made fun of white folks before, and lived. “Other comedians when talking about his legacy have said, “that man single handedly taught white America what black America was about and taught black America what white America is about”. Eddie Murphy, coming after Richard Pryor, mainly kept politics out of his comedic content. He emerged around the same time as Run DMC and Spike Lee. He was the first bold black comedian

of film. He would not have been able to do what he did without Richard Pryor's role in comedy and no one who came after Eddie Murphy would have been able to do things without him. Comedians coming after both Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy have a sense of freedom to tailor to any audience they want because of how segregated and widespread as it currently is. Out of this Whoopi Goldberg was able to express herself and give a definition to a self-defined black woman.

Comedy itself today has a comedian for any given person, and there are many comedians that follow in the footsteps of Richard Pryor or Eddie Murphy or in their own direction entirely. Shows like "In Living Color" made "The Chappelle Show" possible, which made the "Key and Peele" show possible, and so on. This expression through entertainment and with comedy specifically are not excluded to the black community also to other marginalized groups; comedians like Ali Wong shares a different voice of an Asian American woman, and giving more voice to Asian Americans. The new ability for a comedian to tailor to any given audience creates a web of influence for both people of color and everybody else in all of entertainment.

New Era

The question of why comedy and entertainment could be seen as a coping mechanism is because it works. It works to educate, question, and make people laugh. Comedy works for marginalized groups in a different way because of the commonalities between people. Historically oppressed groups find a way to cope and continue to think about things with lighter spirits. Example of ways to do this flood Black History. work songs sung by slaves kept spirits high and helped pass down information about the lived experiences of enslaved people. Inevitably communities bond over common factors making inevitable bonds and a strong sense of culture that the black community has done an incredible amount of work to share and build strong.

Today's media sources and the heavy influence of social media, the spreading of entertainment is in the public's hands. Headlines like "Black Twitter is Laughing Racism to Death." can be found all across the internet, hashtags like #LivingWhileBlack holds important messages of problems with our society while poking fun at how stupid it is that someone has to deal with these things. Black Twitter is a source for black people to defend each other and call out what no one is listening to, and is able to spread it as far as possible to make change. A quote from Medium talking about Paula Deen's N-word Scandal that sprung black twitter forward into the eyes of white America states, "Black Twitter neither grieved nor groused over Deen's apparent racism, but instead plunged directly into its center, poking around in it, and then reshaping it into something Black people could use—source material for a good, long, laugh-so-hard-you-have-to-get-up-and-walk-around-the-room kind of laugh." Black twitter opens a door for many black people who don't necessarily have the platform to get their voices heard and spread the Washington Post points out that "You can observe [Black Twitter's] power and impact in the witty, sharply worded rebukes that haunt public figures when they do or say something stupid, especially if it's racially insensitive." There is much power in community and the ability to spread that, because of how hard it is to censor the internet now. There is more of an access to put people of color in powerful and influential positions, that will influence the way the black community is able to fight oppression.

"If you are not cooning, you're not on the air, the dumb nigger sells great". The exploitation of the black experience in the past is ridiculed by the people of today and brings up the question of "is it just a product of the time?". For many black entertainers their options for ways to be seen by the public were limited to one single view but now because of the progression of the black community more options are open. The option to fit that stereotype still exists but in my opinion should not be chosen black entertainers with a choice.

Most of the Television and Film Industry have gotten better at portraying black roles as real people, though there are many who continue to find more ways to exploit black people. Movies like Black Panther, Moonlight, Hidden Figures, 42, and many more movies are examples of where roles of black people created inspiration for others. Get Out and other movies that have racial and political themes are shining a new light on the black experience that is helping call attention to problems within our society. The success and support any movie or television gets allows for the opportunity for more movies and shows with these positive attributes to develop. Television shows like Atlanta, Black-ish, and Dear White People are also bringing more ideas to the front of people's minds.

There is a lot of power in what black entertainers put out into the world that most don't realize. Black Entertainers and Influencers take on the role of showing white America how diverse and multidimensional black America is as well as show black America the same thing so young people can grow up in a world where they don't only have one option. Though this power should not lie in our hands to educate but it does because no one else is going to do it for us. The ability to influence change does not solely rely on media, it also depends on action because "the revolution will not be televised". It will be tweeted, screamed, and uncensored.