

Coconut Crunchos is a part of this Unbalanced Society

Donald's Glover's *Atlanta* is nothing short of a cultural masterpiece, continuously shedding a white-hot light on underrepresented and misunderstood societal outlooks. Episode 7 of season 1, *B.A.N.*, focuses on "Montague", a fictional talk show that airs on the also fictional B.A.N. (Black American Network). This intensely unique episode of Glover's award-winning series is a conglomeration of satirical remakes to widely-known brands, hysterically drawing our attention to 'what everyone is *really* thinking'. The episode operates in a style similar to *Saturday Night Live*, as Montague resumes its segment after each string of culturally-renovated advertisements. Donald's modern take on the old-fashioned, thieving Cookie Crisp mascot creatively expresses several concepts and contexts that we have discussed in this course. *Atlanta*'s "Coconut Crunchos Cereal" is the quintessential illustration of black stereotypes, while simultaneously exposing hegemonic figures. These figures both metaphorically and literally hold black men down in attempt to breathe a steady puff of air into the lungs of these stereotypes.

The scene opens up with the Coconut Crunchos mascot playfully racing to the bowl of cereal, only to trip and fall short of the prize. The kids take the cereal for themselves, unaffected by the mascot's attempt to compromise their breakfast. After a brief daydream of the cereal's "chocolatey, coconut crunch", the wolf embarks on a second attempt to swipe the cereal. This time he is violently tackled and handcuffed by a white police officer (it is made clear that the Coconut Crunchos mascot is black, based on the voice actor Brian Tyree Henry and overall tone of *Atlanta*). In his book *Malign Neglect – Race, Crime, and Punishment in America*, Michael Tonry writes, "people of goodwill, from W.E.D. Du Bois at the turn of the century through Gunnar Myrdal in the 1940s, to most contemporary scholars of crime, agree that disproportionate black criminality is the product of social and economic disadvantage, much of it traceable to

racial bias and discrimination, more overt in earlier times than today (3).” While being sat on and kneed in the back, the mascot cries out, “man I’m just hungry, man. They don’t let wolves in stores, man!” The wolf’s complaints are directly affiliated with Tonry’s idea of an intertwinement between black criminality and economic disadvantage. The black male, or the wolf in this situation, is deprived of food and sensible options in obtaining that food. So, he results to crime; not because he wants to, but because he has to. The unwarranted discrimination that the police officer is bringing to this scene mirrors real-life issues that we witness today, as many black individuals are targeted by the police force with little to no credibility.

Tonry continues, “crimes and punishments of blacks are acute social problems; their ramifications dig deeply into the fabric of American life; and there is no agreement on their solution (3-4).” It is obvious that African Americans have been stereotyped since America’s birth, as Tonry’s choice of language serves as a general synopsis of African-American history. In their article *The Experience of Violent Injury for Young African-American Men: The Meaning of Being a “Sucker”*, John A. Rich and David A. Stone state, “homicide is the leading cause of death for African-Americans 15 to 34 years old and the third leading cause of death for all persons 15 to 24 years old. In 1989, the lifetime probability of an African-American male being murdered was 1 in 27, while for a white male it was 1 in 205 (77).” Violence and brutality toward African-Americans, especially African-American males, undoubtedly have substantial historical roots in this country’s social identity.

In continuation of dissecting black stereotypes, Stuart Hall, in regard to Richard Dyer’s 1977 essay *Stereotyping*, hones in on the core of stereotype analysis. In Hall’s *The Spectacle of the ‘Other’*, he explains, “... the first point is – *stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’*. Secondly, stereotyping deploys a strategy of *‘splitting’*. It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable. It then excludes or *expels*

everything which does not fit, which is different (247).” Notice Hall’s choice of words with “deploys a strategy”; in the context of this video, the concept of ‘splitting’ strategically marks African-Americans as irregular slices of humanity and concurrently defines Caucasians as society’s ideal participant. This notion of a societal strategy links back to Tonry’s noting of economic difficulties for African-Americans. John A. Rich and David A. Stone strengthen this concept by articulating, “annually, in the United States, some 450,000 African-Americans and Latinos suffer nonfatal violent injuries. Persons who are violently injured are at high risk of being injured again and of experiencing the comorbidities of substance abuse and unemployment (77).” The fact that vigorously injured individuals are at a noticeably higher risk of a second violent injury legitimizes the claim of a hegemonic strategy, one that attempts to extend the loop of social injustice.

Turning away from the repressed position of the wolf, the favored white cop in this scenario is a stereotypical figure as well. However, as Donald Glover’s objective is to indicate the common stereotypes of black men as untrue, the characteristics of this police officer are familiar. In his article titled *Hegemony*, James Lull writes, “... hegemony does not mature strictly from ideological articulation. Dominant ideological streams must be subsequently reproduced in the activities our most basic social units – families, workplace networks, and friendship groups in the many sites and undertakings of everyday life (40).” Situations like the one portrayed in *Atlanta*’s “Coconut Crunchos Cereal” skit have become a part of this “basic social unit” category. Individuals alike the police officer overuse their authority so frequently that these violent and unjust occurrences have bled into our everyday life. This police officer illustrates the hegemony surrounding the police force, and their power over black men in particular. He exercises unnecessary force to apprehend the wolf, and even he doesn’t seem entirely certain of his motives behind his actions. The police officer asks the kids, “he was trying

to steal your cereal, right?” It is clear that the cop is trying to find a reasonable cause for his behavior, as the average person is aware that such violence is surely excessive in arresting a cereal-thief. This style of exerting racism has evolved from a hegemonic superiority that police officers have equipped themselves with overtime.

With this short video, Donald Glover isn't just highlighting modern police brutality, but its specific and unforgiving targeting of black citizens. Over the years, this race-driven focus has resulted in an increasing disapproval and distrust of police officers. Shaun L. Gabbidon and Helen Taylor Greene analyze the relationship between the public and the law enforcement in their book *Race and Crime*. They explain, “most Americans have positive attitudes toward the police, although minorities are less likely to view the police as favorably as Whites do. For example, in 2003, while 92% of Whites had either a great deal or some confidence in the police, only 80% of minorities and 73% of Blacks did (103).” It is situations like this one artistically represented by Donald and his crew that are held responsible for this unsatisfactory statistic. Elijah Anderson, American sociologist and author, reiterates these numbers in his award-winning book *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. He states, “in the community the police are often on the streets, but they are not always considered to have the community's best interests at heart. A great many residents have little trust in the police. Many assume that the police hold the black community in low repute and sometimes will abuse its members (320-321).”

In order for the police force to maintain dominance over the black community, these ideologies and stereotypes must be hardwired into the realities of the youth. One of the kids in the video suggests, “hey, it's cool, we'll just give him the cereal!” Without hesitation, the cop responds, “no, only kids can have Coconut Crunchos you know that!” This demeanor that the

cop demonstrates is hegemonic, as he is attempting to override the children's honest, moral compass with social structures that confirm the wolf as a criminal. One of the other kids cuts in and comments, "that's a whack law." As Donald was trying to emphasize, it is apparent that the younger generations are ethical because they are yet to be corrupted by hegemonic social groups. There is even a subtle intersectionality with this portion of the video; the police officer is essentially convincing the young, black kids that not only being black, but being black, *male*, and *economically underprivileged* is what constitutes the wolf as a violator of the law. If this officer was intrinsically and totally racist, it would be safe to suggest that he would have been more intolerant of the children. The end shows an intense, climatic confrontation between the officer and the kids. Completely disregarding the supposedly dangerous wolf, the cop is now completely focused on overpowering the resistant children. Demanding cooperation through both physical and mental intimidation, he himself is convinced that his propositions are correct; whether it was instruction from the police academy, the way he was raised as a child, or some other internal or external force, the officer is compelled to further his race's preeminence for generations to come. Therefore, this video demonstrates specific unbalanced social standards, with a hegemonic figure in place to regulate the circumstances in favor of white supremacy.

Police Ethics: The Corruption of Noble Cause by Michael A. Caldero and John P. Crank discusses the possibility of ethnocentric impulses and desires within police officers: "If officers also have in place racist somatic markers, then through implicit and explicit bias, they will view and treat society's minority out-group members as more dangerous than in-group members. Hence, when officers have somatic markers that both find good in the noble and bad minority group members, then the noble cause may be acted out on behalf of citizens and at the same time reinforce racist differences (112)." The psychedelic-nature of white supremacy within these

types of officers leads them to define their wrongful actions as “noble”. Although they are committing racist practices, they can be blinded by the opposing notion that they are assisting their in-group members, and therefore actually executing beneficial practices.

I perceive this short as the infant-form of Donald’s *This is America* music video, seeking to bring these injustices to the forefront of our everyday conversations. Similar to *This is America*, this is a complex and imaginative video that displays deep and plentiful sources of racism in modern America. It offers a bountiful array of how racism is applied today. Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* echoes this existence of immense, deeply-rooted branches of racism. She declares, “one theorist, Iris Marion Young, relying on a famous ‘birdcage’ metaphor, explains [structural racism] in this way: If one thinks about racism by examining only one wire of the cage, or one form of disadvantage, it is difficult to understand how and why the bird is trapped. Only a large number of wires arranged in a specific way, and connected to one another, serve to enclose the bird and to ensure that it cannot escape (184).” Donald has exemplified how American racism, especially against African-American males, has constructed a labyrinth-like cage, severely trapping its victims.

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