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POST-BACCALAUREATE  
ACHIEVEMENT PROGRAM

# The Man Behind the Mask: The Progression of Masculinity in African American Males in film

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## Abstract

This qualitative study will examine the way in which the masculinity of African American men is portrayed in films through a textual analysis of the leading male character in movies that have been awarded the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Actor in a Motion Picture. I'll be performing a textual analysis of the following movies: "Flight", "Book of Eli", and "The Great Debaters". Through the analysis of the main character, I discuss the following: types of marginalization experienced in the film, interactions/relations with (African American) women, as well as the importance that his education and/or occupation will play in his identity as a man. Using these factors, I argue that these characters represent the progression of African American men in film; and they are able to preserve their masculinity as a means of escaping the emasculation created in a society that marginalizes men of color in film. Using the studies of Stuart Hall, I'll be able to examine the extent to which representation affects the portrayal of Black masculinity in film and how those representations can serve to become ideologies in society.

## Materials and Methods

I decided to do a qualitative textual analysis of 3 films that were awarded the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Actor in a Motion Picture. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) uses this awards ceremony to honor people of Color for excellence in TV, film, and literature. Therefore, this would be a good source of movies that show men of color in a stronger condition. This qualitative textual analysis will be focused on the main male characters of these films and I look at the following:

- Ways in which they were marginalized throughout the film.
- Interaction and relations with (African American) women
- Importance job and/or education played in his identity

## Background on Donald Bogle's Stereotypes



**Uncle Tom:** a slave who is insulted and belittled; yet they never turn against their white slave masters or mistresses. They remain submissive and endearing to white audiences, which makes them heroes. No matter what, the white slave master always knows best.

**Masculinity Representation Implications:** Very childlike and docile to white audiences. This eliminates them as a threat to those with White supremacist views and ultimately emasculates/castrates the Black man by taking away his strength. Also, placing them in the role of loyal servant implied that slavery was and always will be okay in society.



**Black Buck/Brute:** The exact opposite of the Uncle Tom, Black Bucks were seen as extremely violent and menaces to society. There are villainous and quite deviant with this uncontrollable desire to sexually assault white women.

**Masculinity Representation Implications:** Portraying Black men as extremely violent and careless made them look animalistic, which in turn takes away their humanity. Taking away their humanity and making them villainous sent the message that Black men are a threat to society and any violence done against them is justifiable. Validated any and all hate crimes committed against Black men during this time (Lynching, castration, beatings etc.)

## Stuart Hall's Theories of Representation

Hall believed that representation can be defined as "the production of meaning through language."

Representation is split up

Into two processes, also known as two systems of representations.

1. There are many different objects, people, and events that we connect with mental representation that are carried into our minds.
2. Language is the second process as it is used to communicate these ideas we have with the rest of the world. Language helps us understand the way people understand the world around them.

According to Hall, stereotyping:

- Reduces, naturalizes, and fixes differences
- Fixes boundaries and excludes everything which does not belong
- Tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power.

## Findings



**Captain Whip Whitaker (Flight):** Reverses many of the stereotypes such as:

- Saves and protects white women instead of attacking them.
- Emasculates white oppressor by referring to him as "boy" instead of addressing him as equal.
- Takes pride in career as airline captain to maintain good reputation and respect

**Eli (Book of Eli):**

- Preserves and appreciates humanity instead of trying to destroy it
- Protects women and doesn't sexually exploit them despite sexual advances from female counterpart.
- Although he possesses superior fighting skills, fights in the name of peace and progress for humanity.

**Melvin B. Tolson (The Great Debaters):**

- Instead of being childlike, Tolson is very much an influential father figure to his debate team.
- Although a lot harder on her than the other debaters, Tolson gave a female student a chance to be the first female on the Wiley College debate; and he pushed her to excellence.

## Conclusion

Stuart Hall's theories on representation confirmed that ideologies are created as a result of images created with inaccurate information. Stereotype models such as Bogle's showed that historical and social constructs influenced the depiction of African American men in the United States. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black men were presented as two extremes: either no possible threat to those with White supremacist views, or too much of a threat. In order to justify the ideal of slavery and violence against Black men, films and literature were produced that portrayed them as unintelligent and incapable of handling responsibility. However, the representation and presence of Blacks in film has evolved. Through the NAACP Image Award winning films, I've demonstrated that Black characters are capable of being well rounded. They can have jobs other than servant roles, and protect their loved ones. Black men are capable of contributing to society instead of destroying it. Through these tasks, Black men are able to preserve their manhood and identity in a society with ideals that marginalize men of color.