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Title

To Be Black in America: Contemporary Experiences of African Americans

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A capstone project submitted for
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APPROVED

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Abstract

Introduction

This University Honors Capstone Project is a creative project that combines the fields of Art, Sociology, and Ethnic Studies. It seeks to depict multiple experiences of African Americans in the contemporary United States that put them at a disadvantage in society, emphasizing the institutions and structures that contribute to these outcomes. The goal of my project is to showcase the experiences that policy makers and the general public often deny, and their effects on the lives of African Americans today. Recognition of the unique experiences that are dictated by race and the structures that maintain them is the first step to creating significant change, and is the ultimate goal of this project.

Before continuing, there are important definitions that need explanation. The first term to clarify is my use of "African American". For the purposes of this project, African Americans include any person in the United States (regardless of their personal racial identity, where they were born, and where they reside) who resembles a person of African origin. In other words, people with "black" skin in the United States, including those from the Caribbean and other nations. The reason for this broad definition is that the experiences are most often dictated by the color of the person's skin, so how a person self identifies racially becomes irrelevant. The term "Black" will be used interchangeably with "African American" throughout the paper. The project focuses on the experiences of African Americans who live in today's society, described as contemporary. The second term is "Social Structure". Social structures are institutions and powers within society that dictate societal goals and the means by which those goals can be achieved (Merton). For example, the social structure of poverty functions to define material wealth as a societal goal, and the means by which wealth can acceptably be achieved include

legal employment and familial inheritance (as opposed to selling drugs, which is effective but unacceptable). The project highlights eight unique social structures, detailed below.

The genesis of the project comes from my own personal fascination with the quilts of the underground railroad. I was under the impression that coded quilts had helped to guide escaping slaves to freedom before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1865 and the Civil War. Originally, I had planned to create quilts that resembled those that existed during the pre-emancipation era, but the "codes" would represent contemporary experiences of African Americans. With this original project, I hoped to draw attention to the fact that African Americans today experience oppressions that are maintained by social structures, and the medium of the quilt would salute the journeys of African American ancestors and show that people today are still on a journey toward freedom. However, through more thorough research I learned that primary sources about the quilts from the underground railroad do not exist, and it is likely that coded quilts did not actually help guide escaping enslaved African Americans to freedom. Some people believe that the idea of the quilts was fabricated in order to romanticize the journeys of those escaping enslavement, further exploiting their experiences. This new information caused me to reevaluate my project, and ultimately changed its trajectory. I decided that I wanted to remove the quilts from my project but keep the aspects of contemporary African American experiences, journeys, social structures, and art. Thus, I came up with a plan for a temporal timeline of various experiences that are connected by the systems that create and maintain them. The medium was still unclear at this point, but the inspiration and goals of the project were apparent.

The next step in the project involved deciding which experiences to depict, because it is clearly impossible to include every experience of modern African Americans that is oppressive and maintained by social structures. The specific experiences were inspired by and drawn from

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the literature that I read specifically for this project. I read novels that were written by contemporary African American authors and published in 2017 and 2018. The books covered a wide range of topics, including drug use, athletics, and education; and the authors and subjects varied in their locations within the United States, their ages, their education levels, and their socioeconomic status. The collection of novels provided a comprehensive perspective from which I chose experiences that were prevalent.

Finally, I tackled the issue of the artistic medium for the project. The final decision was contingent upon my ability to create images that could be posed artistically and capture the metaphorical aspects of experiences that were not completely tangible. I researched contemporary African American artists from which to draw inspiration, and was most inspired by the works of Kara Walker. I was impressed by how much expression could be shown by silhouettes and thought that this representation would work for my project by representing the invisibility of African Americans in society. The artistic medium that worked best with the silhouettes and my abilities was paintings, and so my decision was made.

Project Construction

The physical project itself is rife with symbolism and metaphors, each intentionally drawing attention to different aspects that impact African American experiences. The background is made of three plywood boards, each measuring two feet (width) by four feet (height), set up to represent one large eight feet by four feet board. The use of three boards was ideal for transportation purposes. The background is white to represent the dominance of the White race in the United States society, as all other people exist in a space that was created by and for White people. On the boards is a map that is guided by multiple colors of yarn

surrounding canvas paintings. The yarn is color coded to represent the eight social structures

that are explained below. The colored yarn leads to and surrounds the experiences that are

created and maintained by the social structure that the color represents. The map begins on the

left side of the board and moves to the right in a temporal fashion, beginning before birth and

moving through childhood and into adulthood. Finally, each of the canvas paintings depict a

unique experience of contemporary African Americans. The paintings are attached to the boards

by Velcro, which allows them to be easily detached. This serves to show that each experience

exists and is meaningful on its own, but it also fits into the wider structure of society that impacts

the cohesive life of a Black individual. Together, with each board, yarn, and painting in place,

the project represents various life paths that African Americans might take. It draws attention to

the complexity and connectedness of the experiences, how the social structures interact with

African American lives, and how easily African Americans can be ignored in their own

experiences.

Social Structures

The project focuses on eight individual social structures that directly impact Black

experiences: media (red), healthcare (orange), prison systems (yellow), poverty (green),

education systems (blue), censorship (purple), government assistance (white), and the

objectification of Black bodies (also called the White standard of beauty) (black). These

structures, though maybe not all-encompassing, seemed to be the most prevalent in the

experiences that I chose to depict. The media represents how information is spread through

televisions, radios, social media, etc. In this project, it is shown to spread the message that Black

people and bodies are not valuable. The healthcare system includes any aspect of society related

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to health, including medical personnel, procedures, and nutrition. Healthcare in the United States has proven to be dangerous for many African Americans due to lack of access and exploitation by medical personnel. The prison system, unfortunately, is prevalent in a large portion of the project. It includes physical jails and prisons, law enforcement officers, and life after incarceration. The prison system impacts multiple aspects of Black people's lives, both directly and indirectly, and is important to recognize because it disproportionately impacts African Americans. The project highlights the prison system's impact on children, people within the prison institutions, spouses of the incarcerated, and the formerly incarcerated. Poverty in this project encompasses the financial struggles of African Americans today. It is shown to negatively impact living situations, health, education, and employment. The education system involves schooling, but also includes aspects of schools beyond learning in the classrooms. The project exposes how the education systems disadvantage African Americans through exclusion to advanced classes, finances, and even schools generally. Censorship, which can also be referred to as the inability to protest, involves the silencing of Black voices and the exclusion of Black experiences in many contexts. The project shows that this structure is prevalent from a young age, with children silenced in and excluded from preschool classrooms, and continues through adulthood with Black people suffering when they choose to speak out against injustices. This structure needs recognition because it is a clear manifestation of how African Americans are kept silent and oppressed in a society that does not value their experiences. Government assistance means any aid that is provided by the government. Here, the assistances that are noted include food stamps, welfare, universal healthcare, subsidized housing, government issued paychecks, and student financial aid. Although often considered a right, government assistance in this project is shown to be a privilege that is often revoked from some of the people with the

greatest need in the United States. Lastly, the objectification of Black bodies or White standard of beauty simply means that less value is given to people with "black" skin. This structure is demonstrated by exclusion in marketing, racial stereotypes, and dehumanization. This structure is most easily recognized when the experiences of African Americans are compared to those of White people, because the same experiences have different outcomes solely due to skin color. These eight structures combine to dictate all aspects of Black experiences, and by understanding the structures we can better understand how and why the experiences occur.

<div align="center">

African American Experiences

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As mentioned above, each of the depicted experiences can stand alone to be analyzed, but also fit into the larger narrative of a complete life cycle. In order to explain each individual experience thoroughly, I will examine them in number order. Image 1 is a simplified template of the map.

Image 1
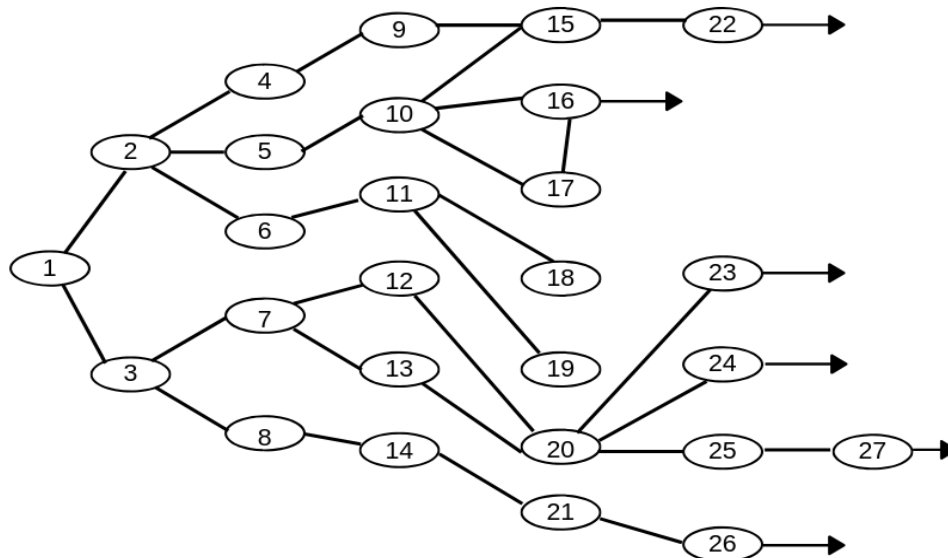
Painting number one illustrates an ultrasound with a Black fetus. The background of the ultrasound shape is grey to resemble a real ultrasound, and the background of the image is black to symbolize that Black babies come from Black bodies. This starting point for the map is necessary because it shows that being born in a Black body sets a person up for disadvantage in the United States. Michael Bennett refers to being born in a Black body as a "preexisting condition" with symptoms that can only be understood by someone who has lived the experiences (Bennett). The image is framed by all eight colors that represent the eight social structures because the African American person is being born into a society where they will be negatively impacted by each of these structures. For African Americans, birth is the launching point into the society that oppresses and devalues them.

Painting number two depicts a low-income neighborhood where children play basketball with makeshift hoops in the street. This image represents the fact that many African American children grow up in poor neighborhoods with limited resources. Black children are more likely than White children to grow up in low income neighborhoods, with forty-two percent of Black children aged six years and younger living in poverty (Burton). The structures that influence this phenomenon are poverty and government assistance. Poverty works here in the obvious way of providing fewer resources and lower quality buildings, and in the less obvious way of disproportionately impacting Black people and families so that they are concentrated in these neighborhoods. Government assistance is influential in two distinct ways: subsidized housing and historical policies. Government-provided subsidized housing is often of lower quality when it is located in predominantly Black neighborhoods (Alexander). Thus, when African Americans utilize the subsidized housing resource they are forced to reside in inferior buildings. Additionally, past housing policies (like redlining) have concentrated African Americans into

neighborhoods that have received less government attention and fewer resources than other neighborhoods, which maintains racial segregation into the contemporary era (Alexander). For these reasons, Black children today grow up in poor neighborhoods which ultimately dictate the resources and opportunities available throughout their lives. From this image the map moves into experiences with education, sports, and food resources, each of which is impacted by the locations where the children reside.

Painting three represents preschool suspensions. Black children as young as three years old get suspended from preschool, and even taken by police and put in handcuffs, because they throw temper tantrums (Bennett). Multiple issues stem from this phenomenon: exclusion from a space of learning and socialization, early encounters with law enforcement that emphasize the inferiority of Black people, inability for young children to express themselves, and reinforcement of the aggressive Black stereotype. The exclusion from the classroom is maintained by the education system. Preschools are supposed to be places of learning and socialization, meaning that young children are expected to attend in order to learn basic social skills and how to function in a classroom setting. It should be expected that children, many of whom are away from their parents for the first time and who have no classroom experience, will have emotional and behavioral issues that they need to learn to cope with and correct. However, Black children are not given that chance. At the first sign of a temper tantrum, teachers see an aggressive person who needs to be dealt with as such. This is an objectification of Black bodies that reinforces stereotypes. By calling in security or law enforcement to handle the child, the teachers show the children of all races that Black children are inferior and need to be dealt with by superior officers. Lastly, the fact that African American children are punished so severely for temper tantrums shows them that their emotional expressions need to be silenced. This is a form of

censorship because the Black children are not given any room to express their emotions in any way that is deemed unacceptable by their teachers. In these ways, preschool suspensions are influenced by the structures of education systems, prison systems, objectification of Black bodies, and censorship. From this image, the map moves into more negative experiences in schools and media representation, which exist in the context of exclusion from a young age.

Painting number four shows a small Black body on a soccer field playing with larger White bodies. It illustrates the fact that African American children are often pushed into sports at a young age and expected to succeed. Children may be pushed into sports by their parents or other family members or encouraged by teachers or coaches to join. This experience is influenced by the social structure of objectification of Black bodies because it is fueled by the stereotypes of aggressive Black people and the success of Black Athletes. With these stereotypical beliefs, people often push young Black children into competitive sports with the expectation that they will succeed. This can be problematic because young children are not cognitively mature enough to handle competitions, especially with older children, and it can cause identity and emotional issues if the children do not immediately succeed (Bennett). Athletics can be a positive component in children's lives as an outlet, an avenue to learn social and leadership skills, and a form of exercise, but when young children are forced into a sport with high expectations it can be damaging. This image calls attention to the Black children who are pushed into sports at an early age with pressures that can cause psychological harm by reinforcing stereotypes (Bennett). The map shows that it leads into more experiences with athletics that are damaging to other aspects of the individual's life.

Painting number five depicts a Black student in a low level classroom attempting to learn from a higher level textbook. This image represents how African American students are tracked

into low level classes, regardless of ability. The only way for many African American students to learn advanced level material is for them to seek out resources and teach themselves (Emdin). This experience is impacted by the education system and censorship. Schools have systems in place that exclude Black students from Honors, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and other high level classes through teacher and counselor recommendations. Advanced classes are the spaces where students learn critical thinking skills and share their ideas with their peers, and when Black students are excluded from these spaces their experiences are excluded from academic thoughts and advances. This is a form of censorship in that African Americans are unable to share their ideas and perspectives when excluded from the classes that allow for more open discussions. Censorship is also at work in the students' inability to advocate for themselves. In most schools, teacher and counselors' recommendations dictate student placement in classes without much (if any) consideration of the students' opinions or even the advocacy of parents. Thus, African American students are forced to remain in lower level classes without the challenges and resources that would help them advance intellectually. This experience leads into higher education, where Black success is lacking.

Painting number six is a metaphorical representation of food deserts. Food deserts are geographic locations without grocery stores, leaving residents to survive off of fast-food restaurants (Burton; Bennett). The image combines components of deserts (sand, cacti, tumbleweeds) with recognizable logos of fast-food chains and junk food companies to symbolize a vast geographic location with minimal food choices. The logos are black to represent that food deserts are disproportionately inhabited by African Americans in the United States (Bennett). Food deserts are dangerous because they force residents to consume unhealthy foods on a regular basis, which impacts health. In addition to consumption, children growing up in these areas are

not educated on nutrition or healthy eating habits. Thus, if presented with an opportunity to choose a healthy food they will be unable to identify the healthy option. Michael Bennet recalls with distress a child in his nutrition program who did not know what a strawberry was, and thought it was a small apple (Bennett). Food deserts and their effects are influenced by poverty and government assistance. Food deserts exist primarily in low income areas, with residents who are unable to make any progress toward establishing healthy eating resources in their communities nor travel to the nearest grocery store. The Government fails to offer aid to these areas to bring in food or educational resources that could help the residents, and thus perpetuates the problem. In fact, the government spends less than three percent of its funds on nutrition programs, and the people in the programs receive less than $30 per week in benefits (Burton). Out of the food desert issue comes struggles with health in later ages.

Painting seven represents the impacts of school dress codes on Black girls, who are targeted and excluded from classrooms as a result. The painting shows two girls in identical outfits, one Black girl and one White girl, with a security guard standing between them and looking disapprovingly at the Black girl. The White girl is permitted to enter school grounds while the Black girl is sent away because of dress code violations. African American girls are targeted in schools for breaking dress codes, while White girls violate in the same ways and go unpunished (Morris). African American girls believe that the shapes of their bodies cause them to be targeted for the violations that go unnoticed for White girls. One high school student in Morris's book *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* explained that her curvy hips and legs drew attention to her shorts and caused administrative staff to send her home while a White girl in the exact same pair of shorts was allowed to remain in school because her body was not as curvy (Morris). Another aspect of dress codes that target African American students

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are rules about hair styles, which often outlaw cornrows, box braids, and afros. These hairstyles are common for African Americans because of their natural hair, which is kept healthy in braids and grows naturally into an afro shape. These dress codes are inherently racist in that they target the racial group who may require such hairdos for hygiene, hair maintenance, or simply natural beauty. Additionally, dress code violations involving hair are sanctioned more often for Black people than White people whose most common violation is use of hair dye or hair bleach (Morris). The influential social structures here include objectification of Black bodies, education system, prison systems, and censorship. The objectification of Black bodies is seen in how school employees target Black girls because of the shapes of their bodies and how their clothes fit rather than clothing items generally. The distinction between Black and White girls who wear the same outfits prove a White standard of beauty and a hyper-sexualization of Black bodies. This aligns with the stereotype of Black women as harlots and sexual objects, which are projected onto young Black girls. The educational systems maintain the dress codes that target Black students, specifically in rules related to Black hairstyles. These rules show a clear lack of acceptance for African Americans in school settings, as they are turned away for wearing their hair in a natural fashion. The prison systems work here to, again, force Black students to interact with law enforcement who demonstrate their power of the Black youths. Dress codes are often enforced by security guards within schools, and if another employee calls attention to a violation it is common for students to be escorted off campus by a security guard (Morris). Again, Black students become familiar with their inferiority to law enforcement, which will likely play a significant role throughout their lives. In addition, when youth are excluded from school for dress code violations they are given the opportunity to engage in illegal activity, increasing their likelihood of arrest (Alexander). Thus, the education and prison systems combine to

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disadvantage Black students and push them toward incarceration. Lastly, censorship is at play in that Black students are unable to express themselves through their clothing and hairstyles, and are forced to conform to whatever code the administration requires of them. This is an example of how institutions dictate and control what Black people are allowed to express, and it shows how the control begins at a young age before the students are able to realize how they are being conditioned. In the map, this experience fits between negative experiences in early education and abusive experiences with law enforcement, all of which are impacted by overlapping social structures.

Painting number eight symbolizes African American representation in cartoons. The image shows a Black child watching a Black football player on television, and on the wall above the television are images of White superheroes. This image shows how African American children are unable to see superheroes on television who look like them, and therefore do not have the same heroes to which they can relate. Instead, African American children see African American athletes as the heroes that are relatable (Bennett). The way that White fictional superheroes talk, the problems they face, and the villains they oppose do not pertain to the lives of Black children, who find commonality in the narratives and abilities of Black athletes. Michael Bennett juxtaposes White children's capes with Black children's jerseys to highlight that each child has a hero to look up to, but media representation and lack of diversity in cartoons cause Black children to seek heroes outside of children's media. This experience is influenced by the social structures of media and objectification of Black bodies (Bennett). Although in recent years we have seen the progress of a Black Disney princess and Marvel's Black panther, Black characters are still widely underrepresented. The objectification of Black bodies plays out in the roles that Black characters have played in media, including villains and sidekicks. Such

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roles convey the idea that African Americans are not worthy of main character status, and reinforces the stereotypes of Black stupidity and Black criminals with children as the target audience. This experience leads to further objectification, with experiences that clearly exclude the Black population from product marketing.

Painting nine symbolizes the academic options for college athletes. It depicts a basketball player attempting a layup and metaphorically reaching for the majors that are not attainable to him while being weighed down by the majors into which universities track athletes. Notice that the academic fields that are out of reach include natural sciences and mathematics while the available options are arts, humanities, and social sciences. Natural sciences and mathematics are valued more highly than humanities, arts, and social sciences in the United States, which is apparent when the average salaries in these fields are compared. This is problematic for the athletes because of the employment opportunities that are available to them upon graduation. Less than two percent of college athletes continue to play professional sports, so the other ninety-eight percent need to seek employment with their college major as their training (Bennett). In addition, college athletic programs require student athletes to prioritize athletics over academics, and aim for passing grades rather than academic excellence (Bennett). This is a further disadvantage for the athletes after graduation, with grade point averages that carry little weight in the economy. The experience is influenced by the education system and objectification of Black bodies. The African American bodies are exploited for the benefit of the athletic program. Bennett describes how he spent most hours of each day following the specific workout and nutrition regimen that his coach required so that his body fit the exact mold that the coach wanted (Bennett). He goes on to explain that the intense training and dedication were required by the athletic department and supported by the academic and administrative branches

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because a winning football team brought money into the school (Bennett). Thus, Black bodies are exploited in college athletic departments for the school's financial gain. It is further objectification in that institutions place minimal value on African American minds, seeing no value in having the athletes excel in academics. Following the map, it is apparent how African American athlete exploitation leads into economic distress later in life.

Painting ten is a metaphorical representation of low college graduation rates for Black students. The image displays a graduation line with students walking toward a podium to receive their diplomas, with the single Black body unrealistically smaller than the White bodies. Graduation rates for African Americans are consistently the lowest graduation rates by racial and ethnic groups (Leary; Burton; Bennett). From one perspective, we can applaud the Black students who do graduate from universities and colleges despite the systems that work against them, but from a broader perspective we can understand that the education system is oppressive in its inhibition of Black success. For this reason, the image is influenced by the education social structure. The failure of higher education to accommodate and support African American students is a social injustice that needs to be recognized and addressed. This particular experience is especially interesting when considered in the larger societal context because it is evident that Black students need to overcome obstacles just to get to college, but once they are there they must continue to struggle for success. Even after graduation, the map exposes further struggles in employment for the educated African Americans.

Painting number eleven is representative of the high rates of obesity and other preventable diseases that impact the Black population. The image shows two Black bodies sitting on a couch surrounded by large renditions of unhealthy foods. The image is meant to depict excessive consumption of fast food and junk food. The food aspects highlight how many

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preventable health issues are caused by unhealthy diets. The people are sitting to address the misconception that unhealthy habits in Black communities are caused by laziness in that the people would rather consume the convenient fast food than spend time cooking healthy foods (Bennett). The social structures that impact this experience are poverty and healthcare. Poverty dictates the foods that much of the population is able to access, with low-income people residing in food deserts. As described above, food deserts give residents no access to grocery stores and force them to consume foods from fast food restaurants. Even people who have access to grocery stores may not have the financial resources to purchase fresh produce and other healthy foods for themselves or their families. In these ways, poverty restricts the foods people are able to consume. Poverty also impacts educational attainment, making it probable that poor people do not understand nutrition and thus are unaware that their eating habits have drastic effects on their health. Healthcare is also at play, with African Americans having limited access to quality care. Even if Black people see the doctor regularly, they may never be told that their diet causes issues until those issues are beyond repair. Further, African Americans are continuously stereotyped to be liars and addicts, which causes medical personnel to disregard Black patients' concerns (Chalhoub and Rimar). The combination of poor eating habits and lack of quality medical care result in high rates of obesity and other preventable diseases for African Americans, who have extremely high rates compared to the rest of the population (Leary). These diseases affect families, with most Black children having a family member with a disease caused by poor nutrition (Bennett). As shown by the map, this experience stems from living in a food desert and leads to more negative experiences with health care.

Painting twelve represents the harsh reality of police brutality against Black people. The image uses the experiences of multiple African Americans who were killed by police to highlight

the extreme rates of injustice. The painting shows a hill over images of seven bodies, which exist underground to symbolize their deaths. On top of the hill are four officers pointing at a sleeping Black body inside a car. The body in the car represents Tyisha Miller, a 19-year-old Black woman who was killed in Riverside, California after her family members called the police because she was unconscious in her car. Police arrived on the scene, forced entry into Miller's car, and shot Miller twelve times claiming she reached for a weapon (Terry). The officers were originally fired, but then reinstated after their loss of employment was deemed an abuse of administrative power (Terry). This case is highlighted in the project because of my personal connection. Tyisha Miller was my aunt's best friend, and she grew up near my father's family. Her death occurred in the same city as my college institution and is very relevant to the community. The other cases highlighted in the painting were chosen because they each vary in many aspects, including situation, age, and gender of the victims; but are parallel in that Black people were killed by law enforcement officers. First is the case of Jeremy McDole, depicted as a black body in a wheelchair. He was a 28-year old Black man who was shot and killed by police while they instructed him to put his hand up (Reyes). It is unclear if he was armed during the shooting, but he was not holding a weapon in his hand when he was shot (Reyes). The second case is that of Sandra Bland, illustrated as a black body hanging by her neck. Bland was arrested after a traffic stop turned violent, and she was found hanging by a trash bag in her jail cell three days later (Hennessy-Fiske). Her death was ruled a suicide, but it is widely believed that she was killed by police and staged (Hennessy-Fiske). Third is the case of Tamir Rice, depicted as a small black body holding a toy gun. Rice was shot and killed by police at a park where he had been playing with a toy gun (Izadi and Holley). As he was shot, he was holding out the toy to show officers that it was fake, but they opened fire on him and killed him. He was

twelve years old. The incident was caught on surveillance video and was distributed widely.

Fourth is the case of Alton Sterling, painted surrounded by CDs. At age thirty seven, Sterling

was shot at close range by officers who were responding to a call about a man selling CDs

outside of a convenience store (Izadi and Holley). They claimed that he reached for a gun in his

pocket. This incident was also recorded by multiple bystanders. The fifth case is the famous

case of Trayvon Martin, depicted as a black body in a hooded sweatshirt holding a bag of Skittles

candy. 17-year-old Martin was followed and fatally shot by a neighborhood watch officer while

walking through a gated community, returning from a convenience store where he had purchased

a bag of Skittles (Fausset). The attacker, George Zimmerman, claimed that Martin looked

suspicious because of his hooded jacket, and because he did not look like he belonged in the

neighborhood (Fausset). Zimmerman pursued, attacked, and killed Martin because of the way he

looked and the place where he was walking. The sixth case is that of Charleena Lyles, depicted

as a pregnant black body. Lyles was killed by officers who responded to her report of a burglary

in her home (Miletich). The officers claimed that Lyles confronted them with a knife, and they

opened fire, killing the 30-year-old pregnant women (Miletich). It was later reported that Lyles

suffered from mental illness and may have been reaching out for help (Miletich). She was a

mother of four who lived in subsidized housing at the time of her death. The seventh case is that

of Eric Garner, depicted with his hands in the air surrounded by the words "I Can't Breathe".

Garner drew police attention when he broke up a fight outside of a store, but he was also accused

of illegally selling loose cigarettes (Dianis). He called out police for targeting him before the

encounter turned violent, and an officer grabbed Garner in a chokehold and held him for nearly

twenty seconds ("I Can't Breathe"). The incident was recorded by a bystander's cellphone.

Garner can repeatedly be heard saying "I can't breathe" while the officer holds him, but the

officer does not let up ("I Can't Breathe"). Garner died due to compression of his airways

(Dianis). None of the officers in any of the cases above suffered criminal consequences for the

murders of the Black citizens (Terry; Reyes; Hennessy-Fiske; Izadi and Holley; Fausset;

Miletich; Dianis). In combination, the cases show that Black people are targeted by police and

killed without any regard for their lives. In 2015, police killed 102 unarmed African Americans,

and only ten of the officers faced criminal charges (Burton). Thus, on top of the abusive

treatment of Black citizens the officers face minimal if any consequences. The structures at play

here are objectifications of Black bodies, prison systems, the government, and the media. Black

bodies are dehumanized and stereotyped by the officers who target them and act aggressively to

end their lives. This treatment of African Americans proves the societal belief that Black lives

are disposable. The prison systems contribute to police brutality by providing a secure location

for abuse, as in the case of Sandra Bland. The government employs the officers who target

Black bodies and maintains the systems that kill members of the African American population.

Finally, the media functions to distribute information about the shootings, which works in

different ways. Media outlets are able to influence the way that the public views both the

perpetrators and the victims in these cases, and often works to humanize the officers by

justifying their actions and reactions while criminalizing the victims. For example, in the case of

Trayvon Martin the media highlighted that the boy should not have had his hoody up while

walking around at night, implying that his death was the result of the actions he took to look

suspicious. In the case of Tamir Rice, media outlets showed images of toy guns and suggested

that any person would have assumed the toy was a real weapon and opened fire on the child, so

the police were justified in their responses. Overall, the details laid out here suggest that Black

people are susceptible to violence by police no matter their age, location, gender, or other unique characteristics, and officers will not face consequences for their brutal actions.

Painting thirteen symbolizes how African Americans are more likely to be criminalized for drug use than people of other races. The image shows a Black body in handcuffs next to a small amount of drug paraphernalia while two White people sit unbothered while surrounded by a large amount of drug paraphernalia. Black people are more likely than White or Hispanic people to be arrested for drug-related activities, a phenomenon that is exacerbated when specific types of drugs are considered. For example, 75% of crack cocaine users are White or Hispanic but African Americans constitute 85% of people in prisons for crack cocaine offenses (Burton). Crack cocaine has historically been more criminalized than powder cocaine, which has the same chemical makeup but is more commonly used by White people while crack is more commonly used by Black people (Alexander). The criminalization of Black drug users is especially pertinent to Black women, who are twice as likely to serve prison sentences for drug-related charges as White women (Burton). The social structures that influence this experience are poverty and prison systems. Living in poverty often means living in communities where drug use is rampant and stress is high, causing people to be surrounded by the temptation of drug use. This combines with over-policing of poor neighborhoods and increases the likelihood of being caught with illegal drugs. Poverty also restricts the resources that help people avoid sentences, like quality lawyers, which also increases the likelihood of incarceration. The prison systems thrive on drug charges, as drug users and distributors make up a large portion of prison populations which contribute to the funding of prison institutions. Thus, prison systems have no motivation to decrease the criminalization of Black drug users.

Painting number fourteen depicts a Black female standing at the edge of a makeup shelf looking for makeup that will match her skin tone. The makeup bottles are displayed in a color gradient, with colors ranging from very light beige to tan. There is not a color on the shelf that is even close to the color of the woman's skin. This phenomenon is all too familiar to women with dark skin, as makeup brands have continuously excluded dark colors from their foundation collections. The issue highlights the societal idea that dark skin is not the norm, and therefore does not need to be included in marketing. It aligns with the structure of Black body objectification, which includes a White standard of beauty. Makeup is meant to enhance facial features in order to highlight aspects that society considers beautiful, and by excluding dark shades of makeup the companies suggest that dark skinned people are beyond the scope of accepted beauty. This issue can be especially problematic for the women and girls who seek makeup and are unable to find their shades because they may internalize the idea that their skin is not beautiful or even normal. Large brands have exacerbated the problem, including Dove and KKW Beauty. The infamous label that Dove used on a moisturizing lotion stated that the product was good for "normal to dark skin", implying that White skin is the norm and dark skin is abnormal (Tejada). Kim Kardashian's issue is subtler, but not less exclusive. She continuously utilizes models of diverse races and skin tones to advertise her makeup products. In one campaign, she advertised her line of concealers by having multiple models pose with all sixteen shades striped on their arms in a gradient. In the picture of the model with the darkest skin, it is apparent that none of the concealer shades match her skin (KKWBeauty). So, despite diversity in models, the KKW Beauty concealers contribute to the exclusion of Black women from makeup marketing. This is just one form of the objectification of Black bodies, and as the

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map shows it contributes to the larger phenomenon of dehumanization that reinforces stereotypes.

Painting fifteen is a symbolic representation of high student loan rates for African Americans who attend college. The image shows a giant money bag with a Black person attempting to climb over it while holding a diploma in one hand. The money bag represents student loans that are expensive to begin with and then accumulate interest. The person in the picture is struggling to climb over the bag as a metaphorical representation of how Black students must work throughout their post-graduation lives to surmount their excessive student debt. The person holds a diploma to acknowledge the specificity of student debt, and also to make a hyperbolic comparison between the tiny degree and the gigantic debt. More African American students require student loans in order to pay for education than White students, and the interest rates attached to loans for African American students are higher than the rates attached to loans for White students (Leary; Flynn; Burton). While it may be true that many college students and graduates of all races can find painting number fifteen personally relatable, the fact of the matter is that Black students are particularly impacted by the issue because of the way that the systems target them. This experience is influenced by the education system and government assistance. The higher education system in the United States is overpriced, making finances a barrier for low-income people. This fact combined with the value that society places on education makes for significant burdens for people who cannot afford college but need a degree in order to land a job that pays a living wage. The government provides and sponsors financial aid for college students in the forms of grants, scholarships, and loans. Its inability to provide low income students with the amount of grants and scholarships to fully fund their education, including living expenses, forces students to pursue loans. Further, the government

profits from the interest that the loans acquire. The map makes visible that the intense burden of

student debt comes after the struggles of getting through school at multiple levels, and even after

graduation we see continued struggles in the job market.

Painting number sixteen depicts the experiences of two Black contemporary men who

experienced severe loss because of their protests. On the left side of the painting is a man in a

football uniform kneeling in front of an employment office, which represents the experience of

Collin Kaepernick. Kaepernick was the quarterback for the National Football League's San

Francisco 49ers team who decided to kneel during the National Anthem before each game as a

protest against the racist police brutality that occurs in the United States. Kaepernick's action

was misrepresented by the media, which repeatedly called his kneeling disrespectful to the

military despite Kaepernick's consistent verbal confirmation that his protests did not involve the

military in any way. Because of the negative attention that Kaepernick received for the protests,

no NFL team signed him when he became a free agent. On the right side of the painting is the

blur of a man who is jumping in the air while holding a confederate flag in front of a grave,

which represents the experience of Muhiyidin Elamin Moye. Moye jumped over a barricade in

front of a venue where activist Bree Newsome was scheduled to speak in order to remove the

confederate flag that had been raised in protest of Newsome (Larimer). Newsome is famous for

climbing a flag pole and removing a confederate flag in front of a government building in South

Carolina, so the presence of the confederate flag at her speech was clearly opposed to her

mission. This was not Moye's first activist act: he had previously participated in walkouts and

sit-ins to protest police brutality against Black people (Larimer). Moye was arrested for

disorderly conduct after he took the flag, and a few weeks later he was assassinated in New

Orleans by unknown assailants (Oppenheim). Moye lost his life because of his activist work, the

same reason that Kaepernick lost his employment. Thus the painting highlights how Black

people are unable to protest because it results in loss of employment and life. The social

structures at play here include media, objectification of Black bodies, and censorship. The media

plays the role of misrepresentation by criminalizing the efforts of African Americans who fight

for justice. Kaepernick's kneeling was called disrespectful to U.S. troops and Moye was called

aggressive and destructive for removing a racist symbol of hatred. The media worked to spread

negative messages about the protestors which influenced public opinions and arguably led to the

destruction of the protestors' lives. Objectification of Black bodies is relevant here because it is

clear that Black lives are considered unimportant and dispensable. This process promotes the

dehumanization of African Americans, because when they are seen as subhuman or objects their

lives carry less value. Finally, censorship is seen here because the voices of the protestors are

taken away. When Kaepernick failed to be employed, he lost the platform that was effective in

spreading his message. Moye's killing completely removed his voice from the world in order to

keep him from spreading his ideas and beliefs. The systems in place work to keep Black voices

silent, because when Black people see what happens to protestors who speak or act out, they

become scared to protest themselves and are thus forced to conform to a society that does not

value their lives.

Painting seventeen represents the idea that Black teachers receive criticism, reprimand,

and even death threats when they teach Black history in schools. The image shows a Black body

in a classroom at a desk in front of a map of the slave trade, solemnly examining harsh

documents that disparage their teaching practices. Black history is largely excluded from

curricula across the United States despite the important roles that enslaved Africans and African

Americans have played throughout history (Edmin). This phenomenon means that African

American students are prevented from learning about their history and ancestry. When Black

teachers attempt to change this and teach about Black history, including the slave trade, they are

criticized by their superiors and students' parents, and even threatened with violence (Edmin).

These extreme reactions illustrate that including Black experiences and information relevant to

Black history is considered unacceptable to a large part of the population. The influential

structures here are the education system and censorship. The education system fails to

implement Black history into the curriculum, causing individual teachers to try to fight against

the institutions in order to teach relevant and important material. The fact that teachers who are

willing to fight this battle face extreme obstacles, including threats to their own personal safety,

is a form of censorship. These teachers are restricted in the material that they are allowed to

present to their classes, with their employers shaming them for teaching about experiences that

are personally and societally important. In these ways, the structures that keep students ignorant

about Black experiences are maintained and teachers are scared into conforming. This

experience fits into the societal context of continuous negative experiences in education. Those

who hope to change the education system are silenced and forced to contribute to the same

systems that they loathe.

Painting number eighteen shows a woman giving birth while lying in a grave. This

image depicts the phenomenon of Black women dying in childbirth at disproportional rates in the

United States. Black women are three to four times more likely than White women to die from

complications during childbirth, and other factors such as socioeconomic status and education

level do not protect against the phenomenon (Chalhoub and Rimar). Professional athlete Serena

Williams called attention to medical treatment during childbirth after she gave birth to her

daughter in 2018, revealing that she almost died as a result of complications and acknowledging

that she was lucky to receive excellent care when many other African American women are not so lucky. The complications that African American women experience do not come from unhealthy Black bodies but from lack of attention and care from medical professionals. Most deaths of African American mothers in childbirth are caused by preventable issues that go untreated because medical personnel fail to listen to the patients' concerns (Chalhoub and Rimar). Further, some complications are caused by the extreme stress that results from Black women understanding the racial disparities in medical practices and fear for their lives and the lives of their children (Chalhoub and Rimar). Thus, the experience depicted is impacted by objectification of Black bodies and the health care system. Medical personnel likely consistently fail to acknowledge the concerns of Black patients because of the stereotypical idea that Black people are drug addicts who seek access to drugs when they enter medical facilities, or because of the belief that Black lives are disposable. Again, we see dehumanization that allows professionals with resources to abuse Black people, particularly women. The health care system plays two main roles: failure to train medical workers in diversity in order to cater to the needs of patients without bias, and failure to provide access to quality care for Black people. Since medical workers continuously prove to be abusive, it is clear that they do not receive proper training that would allow them to understand the needs of Black patients. Further, African American citizens, particularly those of low socioeconomic status, lack access to health insurance and thus access to quality medical care (Chalhoub and Rimar). These impacts of the health care system contribute to the negative experiences of Black mothers when they give birth, which too often result in the loss of life for the women, and the loss of mothers, wives and daughters for Black families.

Painting number nineteen shows a black body on a doctor's table next to a doctor with a medical chart while a line of other black bodies waits behind bars. It represents the lack of medical doctors who serve inmates in prisons. This issue is specifically problematic because many African American people who end up in prisons suffer from health problems, including addiction, obesity, and mental illness (Alexander; Burton). With few resources to help, these prisoners' issues are likely to become worse and more difficult to treat in the future. In addition, the doctors who are available are most often White, unable to relate to their patients, and biased (Burton). Therefore, inmates suffer in similar ways to the women described in painting eighteen. The lack of doctors results in at least one preventable death in prisons every week (Burton). The social structures here are the prison systems and healthcare. Both systems disadvantage prisoners by preventing access to needed medical care. Although all inmates are impacted by the lack of medical doctors, the prison industrial complex impacts African American people more than people of other races and ethnicities, making it a primarily Black issue. As illustrated by the map, this experience comes after multiple other experiences that were dictated by lack of resources.

Painting twenty depicts the extremely high rates of Black incarceration across the country. The image shows multiple jail cells with Black bodies inside of them, with an overwhelming amount of grey colors used to symbolize the dull lives and grim outlooks of the inmates. African Americans suffer more than people of other races at the command of law enforcement and the prison systems. With current trends, 1 in 3 Black men will be incarcerated in their lifetime (Burton). In other words, one third of the Black male population will know the experience of serving time in jail or prison. The likelihood that Black women will serve time in prison is 1 in 19, compared to 1 in 118 for White women (Burton). This results in Black women

representing thirty percent of the United States' incarcerated women while only representing seven percent of the total population (Burton). Further, African Americans serve the same amount of time for nonviolent drug offences as White people serve for violent crimes (Burton; Alexander). These statistics prove that the prison system is an issue primarily for Black people. The Black population is targeted through beliefs in racist stereotypes, over-policing in Black neighborhoods, and lack of resources that would prevent incarceration (including but not limited to money for a lawyer). The prison system works in this way to remove Black people from society and reinstate them with even fewer resources and more issues than they had when they entered the system.

Painting number twenty-one shows multiple headshots of people under the title "News", with a clear disparity between the images of White people and those of African Americans. This painting draws attention to how criminals are portrayed on the news, with media outlets using social media profile pictures for White perpetrators and mug shots for Black perpetrators. This disparity is important because it impacts the way that viewers perceive the assailants, and eventually works to sway the public's opinion to favor White people and oppose African Americans. The systems at work in this issue are the media, prison systems, and objectification of Black bodies. The media is the institution that continuously portrays Black people in a negative light, thus influencing the public's opinion. A study conducted in an area of China where no Black people reside found that opinions of the Chinese people who watched sports (where Black people excel) favored Black people while the opinions of Chinese people who consumed American media opposed Black people, proving both that American media demonizes African Americans and that media influences opinions (Tan et al.). Therefore, it is clear that the media's constant portrayal of Black people as criminals in comparison to White people is

problematic for Black people's status in society. The use of mug shots for Black criminals while White criminals are portrayed using images from social media is objectification of Black bodies because the mug shots are dehumanizing. In showing stoic, positioned images of Black people the media portrays the offenders in a way that suggests that they do not have relatable lives that include family, friends, employment, and struggles. The social media images that are used for White people show their emotions and sometimes their family members and/or hobbies. These images help viewers relate to the criminals as fellow human beings with valuable lives and influence the way they think about the cases. If the media portrayed all criminals in with mugshots it would be an issue that impacts all people and would not be discriminatory, but since there is a disparity between people of color and White people it becomes a structurally racist issue. The prison systems are relevant here because they disproportionally impact Black people by way of dehumanization which may stem from these media portrayals. The issue depicted here fits into the societal context of a White standard of beauty and which continuously impacts personal and public opinions of Black bodies in different ways throughout the life cycle.

Painting number twenty-two represents high levels of unemployment for African Americans. It shows a line of people waiting to enter an employment office, with the majority of people in line being Black. Unemployment rates in the United States have a severe impact on the African American population, because African American unemployment rates are consistently twice as high as the rates for Whites (Burton; Alexander). This issue is not protected by education level, proving that it is a racial disparity. Black people who attain college or more advanced degrees experience similar unemployment rates to White people with only high school degrees (Burton). Therefore, although the image looks to be exaggerated because the line is overwhelmed with Black bodies, it is not unlikely that a line in front of an

employment office would consist primarily of Black people since they are the population that is

most likely to be unemployed. The influential structure here is poverty, as the financial

situations of the Black population are dictated by their inability to find employment. In the

societal context, this experience comes after struggles with education, which prove unfruitful

even for people who succeed in higher education and earn an advanced degree. Although this is

the last experience shown on this branch of the map, all eight colored representations of social

structures lead off of the board to indicate that more experiences come after and will be

influenced by various social structures despite the small scope of this project.

Painting twenty-three depicts a consequence of the prison industrial complex: spouses of

incarcerated people become the sole earners and keepers of households. This issue

disproportionally impacts Black women since Black men are over criminalized, and when

women are incarcerated their children often end up in foster care or with extended family

(Alexander). The painting shows a Black woman in the middle of a kitchen bending and

reaching in an attempt to multitask. Her surroundings symbolize the different responsibilities

that she must juggle as the sole adult of her household: a Black baby to represent childrearing,

groceries to represent cooking and feeding, laundry and a broom and a full trash can to represent

household chores, and a laptop and books to represent employment and education. The image

seems overcrowded with symbolic images in order to highlight the overwhelming amount of

responsibilities that fall onto a single person while her partner is incarcerated. The social

structures that influence this experience are poverty and the prison systems. Poverty is impactful

because single Black women are more likely to live in poverty than married Black women or

single White women, and the problem worsens if the Black woman has children (Burton;

Desmond). Additionally, the wage gap for Black women is wide, with Black women currently

paid about $0.59 for every White man's $1 (Desmond; Leary). Thus, poverty intensifies the struggles of the spouses of the incarcerated because the economic resources available to Black women are scarce and often inaccessible. The prison systems cause the issue by locking up an extreme number of Black men and providing no resources to their spouses and families. The absence of Black men is felt in their families both economically and emotionally, with the wives and children forced to exist without support in either realm. The image and analysis focus on Black women because, as stated above, they are the group most impacted by the issue but also because research on homosexual partners, interracial partners, and men in the same situation is nonexistent. We do know that 1 in 9 African American children has an incarcerated parent, while the rate for White children is 1 in one 125 (Burton). Incarcerated mothers are also impacted in a similar way, with the majority of incarcerated women being mothers to underaged children and more than forty percent of them reporting that they were the only parent in the household (Burton). In these ways, the prison systems and poverty combine to create a devastating experience for families, with the harshest impact on Black mothers and children.

Painting number twenty-four represents the very minimal opportunities for drug rehabilitation after incarceration. It shows a Black person walking out from behind bars and directly into hyperbolically large images of drugs, including a heated spoon, a bottle of pills, and a marijuana leaf. Behind the drugs is a large hill with a building on top labeled "rehab" with a large dollar sign on its roof. The meaning of this metaphorical image is that people walk out of prisons and into drug ridden communities while rehabilitation centers are out of reach due to their limited enrollment spaces and their financial cost. While the image may be relatable to people of all ethnicities, it is a primarily Black issue because Black people are more likely to be criminalized for drug use and because prison systems disproportionally affect Black people. The

phenomenon represented in the painting is specifically highlighted in Susan Burton's book

Becoming Ms. Burton, where she recounts her experiences with the prison industrial complex.

She recalls that drug users and dealers literally populated the bus stop where the prison busses

left released inmates (Burton). This is problematic for the millions of African Americans who

serve time in prison for drug related charges, as they are thrown right into a community with

rampant drug use without ever encountering any rehabilitative services. Burton goes on to

acknowledge that she was never recommended or even told about rehabilitation services until the

third time she was arrested for drug-related charges, when her public defender recommended that

she request such services (Burton). In fact, less than fifteen percent of people who are

incarcerated for drug-related charges are granted access to drug treatment programs with trained

professionals (Burton). Without this particular court-appointed lawyer and without court

approval, it is likely that Burton would have never accessed rehabilitative services. When

inmates are not lucky like Burton, they are faced with the challenge of reentering society without

access to rehabilitation and with little motivation to abstain from participating in the drug use

that surrounds them. The systems at work here include the prison systems, government

assistance, poverty, and healthcare. The prison system fails to provide proper services to inmates

who struggle with addiction and drug-related recidivism. Simple solutions include having

prisons provide quality rehabilitation services to prisoners and criminal justice courts

recommending drug offenders to rehabilitation centers instead of prisons. Government

assistance fails to provide support for rehabilitation centers, causing the institutions to be

privately owned and patient-funded, and consequently inaccessible to low-income people.

Government funding could lower the cost and expand the quantity of rehabilitation institutions to

increase accessibility throughout the country. The government could also provide rehabilitation

coverage or subsidization in universal healthcare, so that people who need the services would not need to pay the excessive fees out of pocket. This ties into the impacts of poverty, as many of the Black people who require the services do not have the economic resources needed for access. This image serves to highlight another consequence of the prison systems that are damaging to Black lives after release.

Painting twenty-five symbolizes the loss of resources for people who go through the prison systems. Once again, this is a Black issue because of the prison system's excessive impacts on the Black population. The image shows a Black body walking toward bars and walking away from symbols of resources. The resources depicted include medical insurance, food stamps, the right to vote, financial aid for higher education, and subsidized housing. The resources that are restricted to felons vary by state and by criminal charge (Alexander). This image depicts some commonly restricted resources. It is estimated that Americans with criminal records face 45,000 consequences as a result of their incarceration, many of which are permanent restrictions (Burton). In this way, felony charges can be considered life-sentences regardless of the amount of time a person actually spends in an institution. Social systems that are influential here are prison systems, government assistance, poverty, and censorship. Prison systems take in a disproportionate number of African Americans and thus intensify the denial of resources to this population. Government assistance fails to acknowledge that the people who move through the prison systems are in fact needy and deserving, and thus denies resources to people in need. This exclusion forces released felons to find ways to make ends meet without any aid, which proves impossible for many and leads to recidivism. Poverty functions in a circular fashion: impoverished people enter the prison systems and are primarily impacted by loss of resources and people who lose the resources after incarceration become impoverished. In both cases, the

people who are released from prison are in need of resources but denied access, leading to impoverishment and more need. Lastly, censorship is specifically influential in the loss of voting rights. By incarcerating an extensive portion of the African American population and taking away their rights to vote, the systems remove Black voices and opinions from politics. This is problematic in that the injustices that Black people face cannot be changed politically without advocates and action, and those who have lived the experiences are unable to exercise their right. These consequences of incarceration disadvantage Black people by taking away their resources and complicating their lives after release.

Painting twenty-six shows a Black body in a museum examining a piece of art while security guards surround them. The image represents the fact that increased security is considered necessary when African Americans enter places that hold valuables, including museums and retail stores. The painting was inspired by the 2018 film Black Panther, in which a Black character exposes a museum executive for increasing security around him once he entered the building (Coogler et al.). This experience is impacted by the social structures of objectification of Black bodies and media. It is another example of how racial stereotypes influence the actions of people toward African Americans. The "Black criminal" stereotype causes museum staff to increase security around a Black customer. The increased security functions not only to make the customer uncomfortable, as the extra assistance is very noticeable and not at all subtle, but also to increase the likelihood that the Black customer will be caught in a violation because so many suspecting eyes are looking for any sign of misbehavior. These circumstances are oppressive to Black people who encounter such situations in multiple spaces on a daily basis. As seen earlier in the experiences that led up to this one, the media influences the public's opinion of Black people by spreading stereotypes through portrayals and

representations of Black people. This experience further exemplifies how Black bodies are dehumanized and stereotyped in multiple facets of the United States society.

The last painting, number twenty-seven, is representative of Black politics. African American representation in United States politics is severely lacking. The systems shown throughout the project to be oppressive to Black people hopefully serve as a way to understand why political success is difficult to achieve. Yet, some African Americans have been successful in the political realm and are depicted here as symbols of hope for future generations who aspire to make change. Most recognizable and arguably most important is Barack Obama, the forty-fourth president of the United States and the first African American to hold office. The painting is modeled off of his 2008 campaign, where he ran on the platform of Hope. Under his portrait are images of other Black politicians. From left to right: Jesse Jackson, Sr., Condoleezza Rice, Stacy Abrams, and Barbara Lee. Their portraits are not silhouettes because they are visible to the world because of their politically powerful positions. Thus, their actions and values become important for Black communities specifically because they have the platforms that can help create change. Jesse Jackson, Sr. was the first Black man to mount a nationwide campaign for presidency in the United States (Apple). His political beliefs included multiple issues that directly impacted the Black community and other minorities, including increased minority representation in politics, removing focus from the mandatory minimum sentences in the War on Drugs, and increasing funding to schools in low-income areas (Apple). As the first African American woman to hold the office of Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice has made great strides in the areas of national security and diversity in education (Rice). Stacy Abrams uses her position in the Georgia House of Representatives to call attention to educational injustices and the need for increases in federal funding for education (Bradner). She started a low-interest loan

program for college students in Georgia to help them fund their education without accumulating

massive amounts of debt (Bradner). Barbara Lee is a California Representative who focuses on

injustices for low-income communities, which include issues that have proven excruciating for

African Americans. Two issues that much of her career has focused on include universal health

care and gun violence. Lee sees healthcare as a right that should be accessible to all people

(Lee). She hopes to decrease accessibility of guns because of the excessive gun violence that

occurs in the United States and often harms innocent people (Lee). Together these politicians

have made great strides for the Black community beyond simple visibility in positions of power.

The influential social structures here include censorship, government, and media. Censorship

here works differently than it does in the previously highlighted experiences because the political

leaders are able to speak out against injustices and social issues with voices that carry weight.

Rather than being silenced, Black politicians have space to make arguments that other Black

people are unable to make and that most White politicians do not acknowledge. While there are

cases in which Black politicians are advised not to speak out on issues that may bring down their

public opinion ratings, as a whole they are less susceptible to the negative impacts of censorship

than other African Americans. The government employs the politicians and therefore is a

relevant structure. It also maintains obstacles that make it difficult for Black people to succeed

in politics, such as majority White control. The media works to spread the messages of Black

politicians while also influencing public opinions. This can function in different ways, positive

and negative, depending on the way an individual media outlet construes information. But all

media helps give Black politicians visibility, regardless of the light in which they are portrayed.

Visibility is important for recognition, individually and as a community. When Black bodies are

shown to the public in positions of power, it influences the way people understand Black

excellence. This can be especially important for Black children, who can see that political success is attainable and base their goals accordingly. With the successes of the Black politicians portrayed in the painting, Black communities and allies were given hope that the country may actually move in the direction of equality.

Limitations

This project has multiple limitations that are dictated by creator choices and existing literature. The limitations can be viewed as opportunities for future studies and projects, as will be explained in the following section. These limitations include suggesting solutions, intersectional identities, other scenarios and experiences, other social structures, the paths on the map, and comparisons to people of other races and ethnicities. Each of these limitations is detailed below.

The first limitation is that this project does not suggest solutions to the issues it presents. This can be seen as a negative aspect because the project draws attention to multiple injustices that impact a huge portion of the population without acknowledging ways that these issues may be resolved. The many possible solutions that may exist are beyond the scope of this project. It is meant to bring recognition to the issues that occur on a daily basis that most people deny or fail to acknowledge. I hope that eventually we as a society can move beyond recognition and into activism and solutions, but because many of the issues are not widely acknowledged the project aims for recognition.

The second limitation is the minimal acknowledgement of intersectional identities. The idea of intersectional identities comes from the term Intersectionality, coined by civil rights advocate and social theorist Kimberle Crenshaw. Intersectionality is a social theory that

acknowledges how multiple aspects of an individual's identity can simultaneously impact their experiences in society (Crenshaw). An example of this is the wage gap, which is especially wide for Black women due to their intersecting racial and gender identities which combines the lower status of African Americans and the lower status of females to provide a wage that is lower than that of Black men and White women. This project focuses primarily on the experiences of cis-gendered African American men, with some acknowledgement of unique experiences of cis-gendered African American women. A more comprehensive rendition might acknowledge how certain experiences may differ due to other aspects of identity, including transgender identity, LGBQ+ sexual orientation, ability, and mixed race or multiracial identities. Part of the reason for this limitation is length and size of the project, which cannot accommodate the intricate ways in which experiences differ by all aspects of identity. Another, more severe reason is that literature on people with these unique identities and experiences is minimal and nonexistent. For example, to my knowledge there have not been published studies on the impacts of prison systems on Black homosexual couples or families. Because of this, an attempt to include these diverse experiences would risk misrepresentation since a large body of knowledge on the experiences does not exist. I am hopeful that more researchers will find such research interesting and important and produce data that can be used to educate the public on how people with diverse identities experience the issues that this project addresses.

The third limitation is that not all scenarios and experiences are depicted. One important issue that does not appear in the project is sexual abuse in Black populations. Not all experiences are included because of spatial limitations of the project, not at all because of importance of some issues over others. The experiences that were chosen were guided by the literature that was available, and even topics that were included in literature were excluded from

the project because of space and how they fit into the map with the other experiences. It is very possible that this project could be redone with the same motivation and even the same social structures but with acknowledgment of completely different experiences. It is naïve to think that a project like this can address all experiences that African Americans face due to social structures in the United States, so this project focuses on a small minority of scenarios to start a conversation and gain some recognition.

The fourth limitation is that not all social structures are highlighted. The social structures included in this project were also dictated by available literature and by the experiences that were chosen to be illustrated. Other social structures, such as Religion, Family, and the Institution of marriage are also social structures that impact the Black population but are not directly acknowledged in the project. Like the depictions of experiences, the social structures were limited due to space and fit, not because of the varying levels of importance. The inclusion and acknowledgement of more social structures would broaden the scope of the project and make it more comprehensive.

The fifth limitation is the map, which can restrict views and suggest that the depicted paths are static and invariable. The map is meant to be a tool that shows how social structures connect multiple experiences. Seeing the paths as set ways that must be followed by all Black Americans is a misunderstanding of the map and the project as a whole. The map simply highlights certain experiences that can happen throughout the life course due to the influential structures. There are actually innumerable paths and experiences that can be depicted, depending on the social structures and identity aspects that one chooses to highlight. This rendition of the project aims to recognize a small portion of the life experiences that exist.

The sixth limitation is the minimal comparisons to people of other races and ethnicities. The project is meant to acknowledge the experiences of African Americans, and thus the comparisons to the experiences of other people were only used when they strengthened a point. Inclusion of other people's experiences distinguished by racial categories could highlight other issues, such as injustices toward all poor people or White supremacy over all minorities. This project is limited in that it only acknowledges experiences that are specific to Black people and only includes some comparisons to White people. Inclusion of other racial groups would expand the comprehensiveness of the project and shed light on issues that cannot be seen when only Black experiences are examined.

In sum, there are a number of limitations in this project that restrict its scope. Most limitations are due to spatial considerations and available literature. The project accomplishes its intended goals of recognition for Black experiences that are influenced by social structures, but the limiting aspects would strengthen the arguments made by the project.

Future Directions

This project serves as a starting point for conversations about racial inequality in the United States that affects the Black population. I hope that future researchers and activists will work toward solutions to the injustices acknowledged in this project. The social structures that impact the experiences are the aspects of society that need to change in order to successfully address the injustices. This suggestion may seem insurmountable, but it is a course of action that would bring about real change. Abolishment of poverty, prison systems, educational and healthcare inequality, etc. would shift the ways that Black people are currently disadvantaged. However, drastic change like this requires research, activist work, and resources. All of these

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requirements depend on people understanding the issues that need improvement, which is where recognition comes into play.

Projects similar to this one with different considerations are also future directions that I hope come to fruition. As mentioned above, other renditions of this project that highlight different experiences and social structures would draw attention to aspects of society that this project lacks. Other projects could choose to represent the experiences of other racial groups, or focus on women, or acknowledge only intersectional identities. Any of these renditions would be valuable in that they would illustrate how social structures impact various groups in unique ways and dictate experiences in ways that are not always just. From these recognitions may come activism and change, influencing the future direction of society in a positive way.

Link to Images

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1s4ZL0sVzN-M3xZD7-roatqvjIwCPMTah9O9augo1UrM/edit?usp=sharing

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