

Representations of and Racism Toward Black Americans in the Media

Racism toward Black Americans has been and continues to be a powerful, persistent, and pervasive feature of American culture and society. The following activities ask you to analyze media representation of, and social media use by, Black Americans, and then design media that affirm and celebrate Black lives and culture.

At the Constitutional Convention, the American Revolutionary era declaration that "all men are born free and equal" was denied for Black people. The **Three-Fifth Compromise**, which counted those in slavery to determine representation in Congress, gave greater power to southern slave-owning states and helped elect slave-owning Presidents in the years before the Civil War. A **Fugitive Slave clause** was included in the Constitution and the slave trade was allowed to continue for 20 more years. Black slavery that lasted until after the Civil War was followed by Jim Crow segregation and a long civil rights movement that demanded equality and justice, but racial stereotypes persisted.

Powerful, persistent, and pervasive White racism toward Black Americans that began with the forced arrival of the first slaves in North America in 1619 continues today in multiple areas of modern society, including social media. In a video lecture, Emory University professor Nathan McCall has [tracked the history of negative, racist imagery toward Black Americans in the media](#) from the founding of the U.S. to the Presidency of Barack Obama.



[Black Lives Matter Shirt NYC](#) by Shanluan is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Racist imagery is only one means of racism in the media. Limited opportunities for creative expression online, racist algorithms, and allowing White people to steal and get credit for the work of people of color are all different means of maintaining existing systems of inequality and racism.

During summer 2020, amidst protests for racial justice following the death of George Floyd, TikTok faced extensive criticism about treating content created by African Americans unfairly on the platform. The company responded saying it was committed to diversity and equal opportunities for Black content creators to post on the site ([A Message to Our Black Community, June 1, 2020](#)).

More than a year later, civil rights leaders say social media platforms have not done enough to address bias toward and unequal treatment of people of color, a frustrating situation given the ways social media platforms, like TikTok, can support and extend social and civic activism.

Black artists staged a strike against TikTok at the beginning of July 2021 (learn more: [Many Black TikTok creators are on strike from the platform. Here are voices from the boycott](#)). For many content creators, the popularity of their posts produces income to sustain their artistic and creative work. However, far too often, Black artists often lose credit and income when White artists steal the styles, dances, and trends they create, as in the case of the Renegade dance designed by Black teenager Jalaiah Harmon, and then platforms like TikTok spotlight and promote the White artists' posts rather than the original content creator's post.

Activity 1: Uncover Media Stereotypes Toward Black Americans

- Explore the following videos:
 - [A look into how movies, TV shows and food labels push racist stereotypes](#)
 - [Disturbingly Racist Moments in Cartoons](#)
- Consider and discuss the following questions:
 - What are some stereotypes of Black Americans you have seen in the media?
 - Where did these stereotypes originate?
 - Are the stereotypes different based on the medium (e.g., social media vs. TV)?
 - What might be the effect of such stereotypical depictions on how people think, communicate, and interact with Black Americans?
- **Design a video, podcast, or website** that connects decisions made during the Constitutional Convention to how Black Americans are portrayed in the media today.

Activity 2: Analyze Black American Content Creators on Social Media

- Choose a platform of your preference: YouTube, Snapchat, or TikTok.
 - Explore Black American content creators on the platform (e.g., [27 Top Black YouTube Stars](#)).
 - Consider:
 - How do these content creators portray stereotypical or counter-stereotypical Black American identity?
 - Do you think that platforms such as YouTube, Snapchat, or TikTok (where users generate content) help to provide counter-stereotypical examples of Black American people?
 - Who owns the platforms? What might the relationship be between the corporate owner and the content?
 - Do you think that these content creators are supported by the social media platform (e.g., is their work spotlighted? Are they credited for their work?)?
 - Then:
 1. **Interact with one of the content creators** (i.e., send a positive message, write a thoughtful comment, share their work), AND
 2. **Write a PRAISE letter** to the platform CEO (YouTube, Snapchat, or TikTok) if their platform positively shapes Black lives and culture. **Write a PROTEST letter** if the platform negatively shapes Black lives and culture.

Activity 3: Curate a Collection of Images of Black Lives and Culture

It is 2050 and enormous strides have been made toward civil rights and social justice in the United States. You are working as a historian for the Smithsonian and you have been asked to create a digital collection of images that represent Black Lives and Culture in the first two decades of the 21st century.

- Explore the [Image Files for Media Use](#) from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History & Culture.
- Then, **assemble a digital collection of images** that combat racism and affirm Black lives and culture on a [Wakelet](#), [Google Site](#), [Jamboard](#), [Google Slides](#), or [Adobe Spark page](#).
 - See the [University of Massachusetts Amherst's Black Presence Website](#) and [Timeline](#) as examples.

Additional Resources

- Documentaries
 - [The 13th](#)
 - [Ethnic Notions](#) (Kanopy)
 - [I am not your negro](#) (Kanopy)
- Novels:
 - Octavia Butler's sci-fi novels: [Kindred](#); [Wild Seed](#)
- TED Talks
 - [Whoever Controls the Media, the Images, Controls the Culture](#) | Min Kim | TEDxLehighU

Connecting to the Building Democracy for All eBook

[Building Democracy for All: Is a Federal Constitutional Amendment Needed to Abolish Slavery as a Punishment for a Crime?](#)

Connecting to the Standards

- [Massachusetts Civics & Government Standards](#)
 - *Identify the various leaders of the Constitutional Convention and analyze the major issues they debated and how the issues were resolved* (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Science) [8.T2.3]
- [ISTE Standards](#)
 - Digital Citizen
 - 2b: Students engage in positive, safe, legal and ethical behavior when using technology, including social interactions online or when using networked devices.
 - 2c: Students demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the rights and obligations of using and sharing intellectual property.
 - Knowledge Constructor
 - 3a: Students plan and employ effective research strategies to locate information and other resources for their intellectual or creative pursuits.
 - 3b: Students evaluate the accuracy, perspective, credibility and relevance of information, media, data, or other resources.
 - 3c: Students curate information from digital resources using a variety of tools and methods to create collections of artifacts that demonstrate meaningful connections or conclusions.
 - 3d: Students build knowledge by actively exploring real-world issues and problems, developing ideas and theories and pursuing answers and solutions.
 - Creative Communicator
 - 6a: Students choose the appropriate platforms and tools for meeting the desired objectives of their creation or communication.
 - 6b: Students create original works or responsibly repurpose or remix digital resources into new creations.
 - 6d: Students publish or present content that customizes the message and medium for the intended audiences.
- [DLCS Standards](#)
 - Interpersonal and Societal Impact (CAS.c)
 - Digital Tools (DTC.a)
 - Collaboration and Communication (DTC.b)
 - Research (DTC.c)
- [English Language Arts > History/Social Studies Common Core Standards](#)
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9
- [English/Language Arts Common Core Standards](#)



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