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ARTICLE & ESSAY: Do You Really Love New York?: Exposing the Troubling Relationship Between Popular Racial Imagery and Social Policy in the 21st Century

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SUMMARY:

... In today's post-welfare reform society one can see the reconstitution of popular stereotypic images that were so critical in the political arguments about pre-1996 welfare state brokenness. ... Given that the majority of black children are currently born out of wedlock (62% in 2004), what is the potential impact of images like those in the paternity test shows on our perceptions of black parents, children, and families? ... If, instead, one drew a dividing line based upon level of parental involvement and engagement, there might evolve one category composed of investment bankers and street corner hustlers, with low levels of engagement, and another category composed of teachers and unemployed stay-at-home-fathers, who engage more substantially with their children. ... In contrast, the images reinforced by reality shows such as *The Maury Povich Show*, rely on a belief that single parents ought to live unassisted with the consequences of their own misdeeds. ... Reality television not only coincides with the behaviorist narrative (sometimes in grotesque fashion, as in the instance on *Flavor of Love* in which a black female contestant defecated on the floor because she couldn't figure out how to make the appropriate decision to leave the room and go to the bathroom, an example of extreme inability to make the most basic of decisions or behave in an appropriate manner) but also gives it credence in a way perhaps impossible in any other media venue. ... It is unsurprising that one of the guilty pleasures of reality television is programming in which individuals are "made over." ... Whereas previously discussed shows present images of behavioral failures that are tied to policy narratives and may even shape policy measures, *The Salt N Pepa Show* fits in as an example of a racial reform show by virtue of negatively contrasting Pepa's lifestyle against Salt's. ... This examination of race in reality television provides one among many potential examples of how media representation plays an integral role in both perceptions and policy.

HIGHLIGHT: During the 21st century, reality television has become a cultural phenomenon in the United States. Part of what makes the concept so engaging is the fantasy of "truth" presented on the screen. At the same time, any savvy viewer is aware of how the production and editing process manipulates reality television. In this essay, I explore how images, particularly racialized images of African Americans in reality television, dovetail with the preoccupations of public policy. I argue that the image of truth in reality television supports a representation of African Americans as culturally deficient, personally irresponsible, and in need of external impositions of order. Although I stop short of arguing that reality television leads to particular policies, I do contend that there is a dynamic relationship between image and social practice. Part of our agenda in law and policy is to participate in unraveling racialized popular images and replacing them with a more nuanced analysis of social conditions affecting African-American communities.

TEXT:

[*92] Introduction

It is well-established that television shapes people's beliefs regarding public issuesⁿ² and that public opinion and popular discourses shape policy.ⁿ³ Also, public policy measures taken by legislators are validated with their constituencies through political language. Might it not also be the case, then, [*93] that popular imagery plays a significant role in policy as well as in politics? With that idea in mind, consider the enormous popularity of reality television. Many different types of unscripted programs fall under the broad definition of reality television, including voter-decided competitions, courtroom dramas, talk shows, and manufactured domestic situations.

A shorthand definition of reality television might be that it is unscripted. Unscripted television, however has been around at least since the 1940s, examples being *Candid Camera* which debuted on ABC radio in 1947 and on ABC television network in 1948, and gameshows like *Truth or Consequences* which ran on NBC radio and then television from 1940 to 1957.ⁿ⁴ Annette Hill, author of *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*, describes the "reality" genre as, "a catch-all category that includes a wide range of entertainment programmes about real people...[it] is located in border territories between information and entertainment, documentary and drama."ⁿ⁵ I would argue that reality television is further distinguished by its depiction of human relationships and intense emotional drama, either "real" (meaning that they have developed outside of the production of the television program) or constructed, through the creation of domestic or social relations within the context of production, or through the competitive framework of the show (as in *American Idol* for example.) Reality television provides many of the images of African Americans on American television in the twenty first century. This "market share" of black representation is heightened, in part, as a result of the dearth of the sitcom in American television, an arena in which African Americans had made great headway in television presence.ⁿ⁶

Stereotypic racial imagery is widespread in reality television. There are many possible explanations for the prevalence of stereotypes in the purportedly "real" format. First, the choice of participants is likely shaped by producers' ideas about the viewers' voyeuristic interests. Second, participants who aspire for celebrity status are aware of the types of behavior likely to get more airtime. Generally speaking, the more outrageous the spectacle, the more attention a person gets. This serves the individual willing to exploit hysterical racial stereotypes for celebrity. Third, editing decisions create narratives of events and character development. It is quite easy to imagine that racial stereotypes impact television editing. Editors are individuals who exist in the same society as the rest of us, a society rife with racial stereotypes and bigotries.ⁿ⁷

[*94] In many ways the character development in reality television can be seen as a kind of collage in which the composition may be compelling and human but look little like the original uncut version. And so we can look at it and consider how individuals are "composed" according to racial stereotypes. At the same time the consolidation of corporate media in the late twentieth century has led to diminished opportunities for diversity in representations of people of colorⁿ⁸ and a devolution of representations of people into the "lowest common denominator" of stereotype precisely because stereotypic images are the most broadly familiar and therefore lend themselves to widespread "appeal" and marketability.ⁿ⁹

In today's post-welfare reform society one can see the reconstitution of popular stereotypic images that were so critical in the political arguments about pre-1996 welfare state brokenness.ⁿ¹⁰ These images are perhaps even more insidious now because they have the veneer of truth as they proliferate in reality television. They capitalize on the perceived authority and pleasure of the voyeur "seeing it with his own eyes" and they shape both perception and misperception. In this essay, I will discuss a series of reality programs that display the same cultural logic as that found in contemporary social policy.

In the first section I will describe the relationship between paternity testing on *The Maury Povich Show* and the presence of a conservative and patriarchal conception of family relations in contemporary social policy, specifically means tested benefits. In the second section I will discuss the VHI program *I Love New York* in light of the retreat from social policy initiatives directed to poor women of color, arguing that the depiction in the show coincides with narratives in policy and politics of undeserving black female recipients of welfare. These narratives have been central to the implementation of punitive policy as well as the limitation of society's safety nets. Finally, in the third section I describe a series of shows including *We Got to Do Better*, *The Salt N' Pepa Show*, and *Flavor of Love Girls: Charm School* as examples of what I term "racial reform shows." These shows affirm a conservative [*95] ideology which argues that policy initiatives cannot and have not assisted the black poor because the problem is not a lack of opportunity but rather their behavioral failures. In arguing for the reformation of black communities or black individuals with stereotypical behavior the shows either explicitly or implicitly advance a bootstraps idea of black progress and reject evidence of systematic inequality and lack of access as explanations for persistent racial disparities.

I.

"You are NOT the father": Media Representations of Black Parenthood and the role of the fatherlessness trope in policymaking

A. Fatherlessness in Reality

The signature format for *The Maury Povich Show*, the number four-rated talk show in 2006,¹¹ is the paternity test. On these shows, disproportionately African-American young women appear to have men, even more disproportionately African-American, tested for paternity of their children. Notably, a substantial number of the women return for several appearances before finding the father of their children or giving up. In one instance, a woman named Sholonda tested seventeen men before giving up the search.¹²

The focus of the show is remarkably narrow. There is no discussion of the possibility of substance abuse, rape, prostitution for subsistence, or mental illness, or a combination of events playing a role in these dramas. The potential sympathy for the woman hinges solely on whether or not the man she has identified as the father is proved to be the father.

Despite the technically unscripted nature of the show, the choreographic repetitions from episode to episode are remarkable. The women pronounce their conviction the man is the father, while the men aggressively deny the possibility. In the all too frequent worst case scenarios Maury says, "You are NOT the father." The woman runs off behind the stage and the man stands up and does a jubilant version of whatever dance is currently popular in urban clubs. The camera follows Maury backstage where he goes to comfort the woman and offers to continue the paternity hunt. Some of the more genial men also embrace the woman, yet clearly remain satisfied they have "won."

It is important to recognize that shows like this provide the dominant image of young single black mothers on contemporary American television. One is hard pressed to think of alternative formats (besides other talk shows, [*96] judge shows, and investigation police dramas like *Cheaters*¹³ and *Cops*¹⁴, all with similar stereotypic representations) where young black single women are featured in their roles as mothers. For example, any casual observer who turns on a music video television channel will see many young black women, but few as mothers and most as sex objects.¹⁵ And black family sitcoms overwhelmingly feature married women with children or divorced parents with blended (but still married) families.¹⁶

By the same token these men, who are so anxious not to be caught up with the burden of a child, provide a popular representation of young black fathers as irresponsible and promiscuous. Given that the majority of black children are currently born out of wedlock (62% in 2004),¹⁷ what is the potential impact of images like those in the paternity test shows on our perceptions of black parents, children, and families? The representation is one in which black families are without fathers and therefore incomplete and broken. There is often no father identified on these shows. Moreover, the security of the role is forever vulnerable, even when the father is found precisely because of the divergence from the traditional nuclear family model and the image of the mother as promiscuous, and, therefore, a "bad mother."¹⁸ This representation obscures reality. Perhaps such obfuscation should be expected from sensationalistic television. However, these images of poor and working class African Americans are quite consistent with those found in contemporary policy literature.

B. Fatherlessness in Policy

There is a great deal of moral panic in the early years of the 21st century about the problem of fatherlessness. The term "fatherless" is a provocative one because it implies not mere absence but non-existence. However, the term's use in popular media is not simply a case of an effort to sensationalize research data. Documents such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' *Building Blocks for Father Involvement*¹⁹ use the term "fatherless" quite often. [*97] This representative document contains statements such as, "the United States is the world's leader in fatherless families."²⁰ But the footnote for this comment cites data which details the number of children not living in the same home with their fathers, not the number of children whose fathers cannot be identified. Likewise, one can find the term "fatherless" applied to children born out of wedlock.²¹ What does it mean to infer non-existence of a father merely because he does not have a formal domestic or legal relationship with the mother of his children, particularly in a national context in which out-of-wedlock birth is highest amongst African-Americans?²²

The father's erasure in statistical reportage in cases when the father does not have the state recognized relationship to the child indicates that the structural relation is given a primacy over the substantive one. However, there is compet-

ing data that demonstrates that African-American fathers of children born out of wedlock spend more time with their children than comparable white and Hispanic fathers.ⁿ²³ This is not offered as a simplistic defense of black fathers but to demonstrate what gets lost in this legal conception of fatherhood.

The argument developed from the discourse about fatherlessness is that fatherless children have poor outcomes. According to these statistical assessments, they are more likely to become teen parents, drop out of school, commit suicide, experience depression,ⁿ²⁴ etc. It is readily apparent that what might be a correlation (as a result of poverty, urbanity or some other variable) is interpreted, with little analysis, as causation. That is, raising children out of wedlock or not in the same household as their fathers leads to these social problems. In part this conversation about fatherlessness has been a warping and troubling extension of the important feminist critique of gender roles in the 1970s. At that time researchers began to look at the cultural behaviors associated with masculinity and the impact upon families of masculinist detachment from domestic engagement.ⁿ²⁵ The fatherlessness discourse focuses not on the substantive dimensions of intimate association. It instead assumes [*98] that legitimate intimate association can only occur within the context of a traditional domestic structure. Further, in attributing social failures to the absence of this traditional domestic structure, it pathologizes black families that often fail to conform to traditional nuclear domestic structure. Similarly, Latino families and gay and lesbian families also frequently present different models of domestic intimate association, either through extended family networks or fictive kin relationships.ⁿ²⁶

Another problem with describing children from out-of-wedlock births or non-household sharing families as fatherless is that this draws a dividing line at a point that is non-substantive. If, instead, one drew a dividing line based upon level of parental involvement and engagement, there might evolve one category composed of investment bankers and street corner hustlers, with low levels of engagement, and another category composed of teachers and unemployed stay-at-home-fathers, who engage more substantially with their children. These categories would cut across race and class lines. One also might find that even with comparable levels of parental engagement, class and resources have far greater impact on the successes or failures of children's lives than domestic arrangements. My guess is that research comparing class and parental engagement in child outcomes would result in evidence that upper class children with low levels of parental engagement still have far better economic and professional outcomes than their poor counterparts regardless of degree of parental engagement.

Another problem with the fatherless discourse is that it makes invisible domestic spheres in which parental presence is emotionally destructive. Although we now have had several decades of awareness about sexual, physical, and emotional abuse within intimate relations, these problems continue to exist.ⁿ²⁷ This focus on the formal relationship, rather than the substantive one leads us to assume that traditional nuclear families are necessarily safe and good, and unmarried homes are necessarily unsafe. With these assumptions we are less likely to be mindful of the possibility that family members in traditional nuclear families are unsafe. We are also less likely to look for examples or to acknowledge the existence of excellent non-married or non-domestic fathers (or mothers.) Furthermore, individuals in non-traditional familial relationships are encouraged to see their families as deficient and discouraged from developing alternative healthy family structures. On the other hand, individuals within traditional nuclear families may find it difficult to [*99] acknowledge or articulate when their families are not healthy or functional.

C. Reality and Policy

The reality show image of the morally bankrupt mother who does not know the identity of her child's father, or the image of the father who refuses to acknowledge his child, supports the logic underlying the assumption that the father is completely absent or that the household is generally chaotic when the traditional formal domestic structure is not present. The reality show provides a sensationalized image of what things look like "behind the statistics." This image legitimizes the assumed social and moral superiority of traditional nuclear American domestic relations. As a result, too few questions are raised about policies such as deliberate social engineering to reduce out-of-wedlock birth, increase marriage, and decrease abortions that can be found in the legislative intent of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), or welfare as we currently know it.ⁿ²⁸

In terms of cultural symbolism, we can see Maury Povich acting as the liberal father, helping these people sort out relationships and create some order (but not responding to the emotional, economic, and psychological challenges that likely led to these scenarios). Legislators, in contrast, can be seen as the stern fathers imposing rules that must be followed if these miscreant kids are going to stay under this roof! The metaphor of the "roof" could refer to many social institutions, from public assistance to subsidized housing, or perhaps even more broadly to citizenship given the astronomical rates of criminal punishment in African-American communities.

Imagine instead if there were a reality show not unlike *Intervention* (a reality show which stages interventions for drug and alcohol addicts, largely from middle class white families) for poor families in crisis. Imagine this show as one providing help to young parents wishing to communicate more effectively, to meaningfully pursue life goals, and find work and educational opportunities, to co-parent, and to socialize their children with ritual, healthy habits, appropriate establishment of behavioral boundaries and practices that support intellectual and emotional development. This show could have a format based upon faith in human potential and a belief that these individuals should receive help in the face of challenging obstacles.

In contrast, the images reinforced by reality shows such as *The Maury Povich Show*, rely on a belief that single parents ought to live unassisted with the consequences of their own misdeeds.

Furthermore, imagine, as Angela Onwuachi Willigⁿ²⁹ and Solangel Maldonadoⁿ³⁰ have done, structures of social policy that are neither unfairly punitive nor intend to impose heteronormative mainstream standards, but, instead, attempt to assess effective familial and co-parental relationships and the conditions (economic, social, and emotional) that allow for those relations. These inquiries would focus on the substantive rather than the formal dimension of family structure. For example, Europe evidences high rates of out-of-wedlock births, but it is well established that this generally occurs within long-term monogamous co-parenting in a single home. This pattern so closely mirrors that of the traditional nuclear family that it does not incite a moral panic.ⁿ³¹ In contrast, when all black American children born out of wedlock are collapsed into one pathologized category, we fail to distinguish between situations where children are happily situated with two parents, live with one parent in the midst of a flourishing extended family structureⁿ³², or in other healthy situations, with those situations where a single parent is overwhelmed and incompetent in providing care for his or her children. We should make these distinctions in order to better assess the landscape of families in the United States but also to identify multiple ways in which poor families of color are able to be healthy and stable.

II. I Love New York: Behavior, Accountability, and the Development of Policy

A. Do You Really Love New York?

Tiffany Pollard is the star of the VH1 reality series: *I Love New York*. She is "New York" a moniker she was given by Flavor Flav (the "clown prince of rap" who first achieved celebrity as a member of the hip hop group Public Enemy in the 1990s) on the reality program *Flavor of Love*. On the *Flavor of Love*, a group of women competed to be Flavor Flav's significant other. Importantly, Flavor Flav's image on the show was distinguished from the highly politicized hip hop group within which he provided both comic relief [*101] and social critique. In *Flavor of Love*, Flavor Flav and his potential mates were all unremittably ridiculous. Tiffany Pollard was eliminated on the first season of the show only to return midseason on the second round, where she was eliminated again. It is likely she received her own show, with an identical format, because of her frequent screaming matches and sometimes violent conflict with other members of the show. She is a spectacle.

As with all reality shows, *I Love New York* invokes popular literary and filmic tropes to engage the viewer. She is in some ways a modern black Eliza Doolittleⁿ³³ removed from her "ghetto" context, styled in increasingly more expensive clothing and hair styles, and made over with plastic surgery. She is also the rough-around-the-edges woman with the heart of gold who is trying to make good and find love. And so, despite her ridiculous outbursts, the audience has sympathy for New York.

But she is ultimately unsuccessful and inassimilable to a feminine ideal. When she gets close to success there is always a terrible transgression on her part. The first season winner proposed to her only to rescind his offer when New York mistreated his mother. In the second season she gets into terrible conflicts with two of the final four men's mothers (incidentally both white women). New York's "going off," of course, fits into the traditional stereotype of the angry black woman. Hence, in this show we see both classic character roles and popular stereotypes in one figure. But the racial stereotype means that the story cannot have the happy ending it typically does in classic literature.

One immediate reading of this show is that it falls in line with a traditional image of black women as undesirable mates in any realm beyond the sexual.ⁿ³⁴ The problem with such a reading is that the structure of the show is one in which the men are competing for her attention. Instead, perhaps we should read it as a show about how a black woman is desired and has the opportunity to choose amongst many suitors, but she nevertheless repeatedly fails in her aspiration to find love and marriage because of her unattractive behavior.

Unlike the Maury Povich scenario, there are other single childless black women on television who occupy a range of roles. Tiffany Pollard herself has argued that she doesn't believe her show is problematically stereotypical because it

is only one of a plethora of different representations of black women.ⁿ³⁵ Nonetheless the show follows a cultural logic that is dominant in several policy arenas and is, therefore, worthy of analysis.

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B. Reality vs. Policy

Much of the conservative backlash to both the welfare state and affirmative action was based upon the idea that these institutions produced laziness and a sense of entitlement among welfare recipients, particularly African Americans.ⁿ³⁶ The evidence for those assessments was found in the persistence of achievement gaps and multigenerational welfare dependence.ⁿ³⁷ The underlying idea is that even when given a chance, they can't cut it. In some ways this is an argument about inassimilability, either socially or in terms of objective measures of achievement. The focus of evaluation then turns on the recipient of extra consideration or means tested benefits, rather than educational inequality and bigotry within educational institutions, or minimal occupational opportunities. In the reality show analog we choose to trace New York's romantic failures to her inability to control herself (to "act right") or to her inability "to act like she's been somewhere before" (in another black English turn-of-phrase), to act appropriate to the circumstances. We focus on this explanation as the main driving force of New York's character, rather than to the show's bizarre format, the likely motivations of contestants, the burdens of public scrutiny, the voyeuristic delight in her outbursts, and the celebration of promiscuity and greed as the source of New York's problem. In truth, she's "acting right" according to the public demand. For this behavior she reaps individual benefits. She also represents a particular type of black woman: imagined as poor or working class, as "hood" (living in the ghetto), imagined as single for a good reason. And, albeit less directly, she also represents why black people are thought to be unable or unwilling to take advantage of the opportunities for successful living that exist in this society.

In a posting on the successful and important blog, Blackprof.com, written by a roster of distinguished African-American law professors and guest bloggers, a visitor posted the following comments:

...For some posters, the theme of victimization seems to permeate all thought. You are the inverse of Charles Dickens' Mrs. Jellyby from "Bleak House". Instead of seeing nothing nearer than Africa, you can see nothing farther than your own skin...

The rest of the country moved on a long time ago and you're stuck in the 60's civil rights movement. With no real enemies to fight, you endlessly search for new ones in every word, every gesture and every vote. You succeeded and achieved your goal of a colorblind society and now need to adjust your thinking to success in an equal world and just can't manage to do it. Census statistics [*103] prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the dominant factors in earning power are behavior. While there are some racial factors, they are minimal in comparison to behavior.

It's simple. Get married and stay married. Educate yourself as much as you can in a marketable field. Work hard. Save your money. That's all there is to it. You control every one of those variables. Skin color has nothing to do with it.
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Such a "behavioralist" explanation for racial gaps has become mainstream and both shapes social policy and the resistance to social policy. It also facilitates an inattention to evidence of persistent discriminatory practices in housing, education, employment and criminal law enforcement.ⁿ³⁹

Reality television not only coincides with the behavioralist narrative (sometimes in grotesque fashion, as in the instance on Flavor of Love in which a black female contestant defecated on the floor because she couldn't figure out how to make the appropriate decision to leave the room and go to the bathroom, an example of extreme inability to make the most basic of decisions or behave in an appropriate manner) but also gives it credence in a way perhaps impossible in any other media venue. Reality television bears the image of authenticity and the opportunity for decisive self-representation on the part of the participants. This is not a sitcom, written by a host of white male writers, or news programming obviously controlled by an overwhelmingly white cast of decision makers. Instead, here are black people deciding how to "represent themselves" by exploiting the stereotypic imagery for personal gain with minimal regard for how their image impacts the larger populace.

But as evidence in the fields of media studies and social cognition have demonstrated (as discussed by previously cited authors Jerry Kang and Leonard Baynes for example) it is quite evident that images of people of color do impact attitudes. And while it is difficult to draw a direct causal link to policy decisions, we can take evidence of how racially coded political speech impacted electoral politics in the mid to late twentieth century as a strong indicator that who we

choose to represent us and the actions we expect them to take as legislators, judges, and executives are shaped by images of people of color as deficient or threatening.ⁿ⁴⁰

One study of reality television identified part of its appeal for viewers in their interest in distinguishing how they might react to certain situations from the participants' reactions.ⁿ⁴¹ Black viewers may distinguish between [*104] themselves and these reality show participants and find satisfaction in that symbolic boundary between self and other. White viewers, on the other hand, may distinguish between themselves and the participants, or might distinguish between their sense of a white "us" and black people in general, or poor and/or undeserving black people in particular. Implicit in the appeal of much of reality programming is the practice of identification, disidentification, and judgment. It is unsurprising that one of the guilty pleasures of reality television is programming in which individuals are "made over." These both tap into a long-standing American ethos of being "self-made" and the impulse to "fix" those who fall short in comparison to the "us" that is the television audience. There are a wide range of that fall into a "make-over" model. Among these are those that "make over" the deficiencies that are stereotypically attributed to poor black people. These "make overs" promise to provide those who sincerely make themselves over with better lives. They also make arguments about how those in the "ghetto" should reform themselves generally.

III. Hot Ghetto Mess: Outward Appearances, Grooming Stereotypes and Development of Policy

A. Repair and Reform

In programs like *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan*, participants undergo a number of plastic surgery procedures, are painted with lots of make-up, dressed in expensive clothing, and coiffed. They go from what is described as offensive and devastating unattractiveness to acceptably attractive, and sometimes all the way to gorgeous. These programs provide, as critics have noted, a physical corollary to the Horatio Alger and Cinderella stories of our popular culture history.ⁿ⁴² There are black contestants on these shows. Often the plastic surgeons offer assurances that they will be culturally sensitive and not alter the "ethnicity" of their features. Although this racial sensitivity does not extend to hair (with makeover show staff often eager to fix tightly coiled hair with relaxers and weaves) it does demonstrate at least a modest awareness that beauty assimilation should be tempered with pluralism.

However, another category of shows could be identified as engaged in a sort of unapologetic "racial reform." One example would be *Flavor of Love Girls: Charm School* in which comedian Monique brought back former contestants from *Flavor of Love* to be trained in appropriate behavior. Although not all contestants are black, the behavior that was to be reformed was identified as "ghetto" and therefore implicitly black.

[*105] Another twist on this racial reform is found in *The Salt N Pepa*ⁿ⁴³ Show. This "celebrity"ⁿ⁴⁴ show follows the two members of the successful rap duo in their efforts to reunite and mend their broken relationship. Salt is settled down in a large house, comfortable, happily married, and a socially conservative Christian. Pepa is adrift, without a partner, a single mother, and still a wild child. Much of the show centers around Salt's (Cheryl) moral dilemma with the music they once made because now the sexually explicit lyrics do not conform with her morality. Little discussion is present about the extent to which the sexual freedom in the music was part of a larger discourse about feminist self-determination and how they were the leading performers of feminist anthems in Hip Hop's golden age. Hence, in the figure of Salt there is an implicit conservative backlash against pop culture feminism, and the feminist content of their music is truncated to appear as mere celebrations of promiscuity and lasciviousness. Another theme of the show is Salt's effort to socialize Pepa to act and dress less provocatively and more appropriately for a mother. All of these efforts are made with the clear presence of Salt's religion and church in the background.

Conservative social policy critics have argued that since social policy has failed to improve the lot of black people, then perhaps we should look to black churches to "socialize" black people into better behavior.ⁿ⁴⁵ The call for church forces to impose greater order is echoed in the calls for being "tough on crime" or "accountability" that get expressed in everything from growing rates of imprisonment,ⁿ⁴⁶ to more punitive child welfare practices,ⁿ⁴⁷ and work contingent welfare benefits (often employment paying below market-rate).ⁿ⁴⁸ The idea that black people in particular must be disciplined, socialized, and ordered has been continually re-imagined and has found new expression in each generation since the ante-bellum period when a conception of racial inferiority rather than religion first provided the principal justification for slavery.ⁿ⁴⁹ Whereas previously discussed shows present images of behavioral failures that are tied to policy narratives and may even shape policy measures, *The Salt N Pepa Show* fits in as an example of a racial reform show by virtue of negatively contrasting Pepa's lifestyle against Salt's. Moreover, Salt's efforts to [*106] improve Pepa's behavior are themselves (often unsuccessful) a kind of church based "reform." This also imagines the problems of black women as resulting from behavioral failures, and presents a model of "success."

The Black Entertainment Television (BET) show *We Got to Do Better* began as *Hot Ghetto Mess*, named after Jan Donaldson's website which provided the inspiration for the program. The name change resulted from complaints from citizens and concerns from advertisers about the offensive stereotypes the title suggested the show would contain. Both the show and the website identify themselves as demands for black self-discipline and order. The demand however is not for political activism and organizing, economic development, increasing educational opportunities, or building capacity for these kinds of developments within the African American community. Instead, the focus is on the voyeuristic display of images intended to be understood as representative of cultural and moral failure. The symbolism of these images of black failure is largely dependent upon grooming style, perceived physical unattractiveness, and the identification of those grooming styles with people in poor black communities. On the website www.hotghettomess.com beneath the photograph of the person humiliatingly referred to as the "Hot ghetto mess of the month" there is a quote attributed to Martin Luther King Jr, "Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."ⁿ⁵⁰ What is so troubling about the use of this quote is that it is based on the inference that appearance, and culturally specific styles, indicates "conscientious stupidity."

As municipalities across the country enact anti sagging ordinances,ⁿ⁵¹ making wearing baggy pants constitute a misdemeanor or result in a fine, evidence grows that proxies for race, like skin color,ⁿ⁵² language,ⁿ⁵³ and the Africanness of one's featuresⁿ⁵⁴ can impact job and housing prospects and criminal sentencing. The identification of things that are highly correlated to racial groups but not inherent to racial groups as undesirable - clothing style, hair styles, features, speech patterns - allows for policies and social practices that are racially discriminatory yet facially neutral. Moreover, these discriminatory practices are justified as a simple demand that black people "do better." Thus, those who are poor and black are held responsible for their own experiences of discrimination against them with little question raised as to the [*107] legitimacy of the basis of identifying "doing badly" according to the given terms which are often stylistic rather than substantive.

The fact that these calls for the imposition of order come from black as well as white voices means little in the way of discounting their discrimination. As the pundits who proclaim the existence of a values gap between the black poor and the black lower-middle to upper classⁿ⁵⁵ continues to increase, we find the practice of racism growing more complicated by the incorporation of some blacks into the mainstream and the further alienation of some blacks from the mainstream. At the same time, as there is much ado made in our popular culture about distinctions between these groups, statistical realities such as the high rate of out-of-wedlock birth among college educated black women,ⁿ⁵⁶ the significant achievement gap between middle income black and white children,ⁿ⁵⁷ the significant wealth gap between middle income black and white people,ⁿ⁵⁸ and the fact that middle class blacks generally live in close physical proximity to poor communities,ⁿ⁵⁹ show that the measurable differences are not nearly as great as the rhetorical ones. The emphasis on the distinctions, however, makes it appear as though the American Dream is fully achievable regardless of race, and the failure of so many African Americans to achieve it is shaped by behavior not opportunity.

IV. Conclusion

Media is an easy target for criticism. Part of the reason we are so comfortable resorting to it as an agent for racism is because it has a disembodied quality. We can call it racist without pointing the finger at any particular individuals who are at fault. We can propose different Federal Communications Commission (FCC) policies, imagining the potential for different media images without fully questioning how the profit motive encourages stereotypic representation (because we have been reared by our deeply entrenched racial ideology to find such images appealing). But it is hard to figure out who would do something different and how it would be sustained.

[*108] And yet it has been demonstrated in many ways that media shapes our perceptions and ideas about the world and its people and so it has to be challenged for its role in supporting racial inequality. To the extent that policy is shaped by political pressures and ideas proposed by party platforms, we have to accept that the underlying assumptions there are in turn shaped by media representations, including racialized ones.

Understanding this, one approach to the problem of stereotype and racial ideology shaping social policy is to consistently challenge stereotypical images with alternative stories and images presented via alternative and new media.ⁿ⁶⁰ Another approach is to challenge policy research to greater rigor. To the extent that it is largely quantitative, it is easy for the fantasies of stereotype to be imposed upon the numbers. For example, the image of the out-of-wedlock birth can easily become the hysterical Maury Povich guest. Hence, we must provide a challenge to policy research to become more substantive and qualitative. Ethnographic accounts must be offered as companions to the numbers of those living on public assistance, born out of wedlock, imprisoned, dropping out of school, and the like. Moreover, in other branches of scholarship, particularly race and feminist studies, it is incumbent that we critically deconstruct the words and cate-

gories applied to people in policy talk. We should ask: who are the offenders, deviants, people with special needs, clients, illegitimate children, fatherless children, deadbeat parents, etc.? And how else might they be identified, categorized, or fleshed out as human beings? The hope is that engaging in such critical deconstruction in many fields of knowledge would challenge a public image that is shaped by both media and policy and political speech. In this media saturated and consolidated culture, citizens desperately need the tools to critically read the media. This examination of race in reality television provides one among many potential examples of how media representation plays an integral role in both perceptions and policy. Neither citizens nor policy makers interested in pursuing racial equality will be able to adequately respond to the impact of these representations without the tools and language of media critique.

FOOTNOTES:

n2. See Roger Silverstone, *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture* (1981); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw Hill 1964). See also Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., *The "Welfare Queen" Experiment: How Viewers React to Images of African American Mothers on Welfare*, 53 *Nieman Reports* (Summer 1999), available at <http://repositories.cdlib.org/ccc/media/007/> (discussing this effect as it particularly relates to race).

n3. See generally Susan Herbst, *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics* (1995).

n4. See generally Allen Funt, *Candidly Allen Funt: A Million Smiles Later* (1994); Steve Ryan & Frost Wostbrock, *The Ultimate TV Gameshow Book* (2006).

n5. Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television 2* (2005).

n6. See Fern Gillespie, *Major Networks Black Out African American Comedies*, *The Crisis*, September/October 2006, at 57. See also Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (1995).

n7. See Jerry Kang, *Trojan Horses of Race*, 118 *Harv. L. Rev.* 1489 (2005). Kang discusses the role of unconscious bias in the operation of racial discrimination in the contemporary United States. Kang argues that television images shape people's likelihood to feel racial bias against members of racial minority groups. Taken from another perspective, the evidence in social cognition research which he identifies also strongly supports an inference that those who make decisions about depictions of people of color on television are impacted by the messages they have received from the society, thus creating cycles of biased representation and biased sentiments.

n8. See Leonard M. Baynes, *Race, Antitrust Theory, Media Consolidation and Online Content: The Lack of Substitutes Available to Media Consumers of Color*, 39 *U. Mich. J.L. Reform* 199 (2006).

n9. See Travis L. Dixon, *A Social Cognitive Approach to Studying Racial Stereotyping in the Mass Media*, 6 *African American Research Perspectives* (Winter 2000), available at www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/prba/perspectives/winter2000/tdixon1.pdf

n10. See generally Jimmie L. Reeves & Richard Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television News, The Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy* (1994) (providing a thorough discussion of the impact of the welfare queen image on welfare reform efforts).

n11. Chip Crews, *Paternity Ward: Cross "Maury" With a DNA Test and What Do You Get?* *Big Ratings*, *Wash. Post*, Mar. 28, 2006, at C01.

- n12. The Maury Povich Show (Syndicated television broadcast Jul. 9, 2007).
- n13. Cheaters is a nationally syndicated reality television show produced by the Bobby Goldstein Production Company.
- n14. Cops is a reality program that appears on the Fox Television Network.
- n15. See Su Lin Gan, Dolf Zillman & Michael Mitrook, Stereotyping Effect of Black Women's Sexual Rap on White Audiences 19 Basic & Applied Soc. Psychol. 381 (1997).
- n16. See for example the 21st century sitcoms: All of Us, House of Payne, My Wife and Kids, The Bernie Mac Show, The Tracy Morgan Show, That's so Raven, and Romeo!
- n17. Jane Lawler Dye, U.S. Census Bureau., U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Fertility of American Women 2004 5 (2005). See also Black Out-of-Wedlock Births: The Deception That Put Welfare Reform Over the Top 13 J. Blacks in Higher Educ. 13 (1996).
- n18. See Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment 77-79 (2001) (discussing the image of the "bad black mother").
- n19. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration, Building Blocks for Father Involvement (2004).
- n20. Id. at 6.
- n21. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Center for Health Statistics, Survey on Child Health 1993. Also see the use of the term in these manners in: David Blankenhorn Fatherless Families: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem (1995).
- n22. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, Summary Report: Roundtable "Why Marriage Matters" 2 (2003).
- n23. Heather L. Koball & Desiree Principe, The Urban Institute, Series B, No. B-44: Do Non-Resident Fathers Who Pay Child Support Visit Their Children More 3 (2002).
- n24. See Building Blocks, supra note 19, at 1.
- n25. See Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (W.W. Norton & Co. 1976) (providing a skeptical treatment of the marginal parenting roles of fathers). See also Ross D. Parke, Fathers (Harvard Univ. Press 1981) (discussing the benefits of active fathering in contrast to traditional paternal roles).

n26. For a discussion of the implications of the imposition of these norms in light of cultural differences in familial domesticity patterns see Laura Wherry & Kenneth Finegold, *The Urban Institute, Series B No. B-61: Marriage Promotion and the Living Arrangements of Black, Hispanic and White Children* (2004).

n27. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Child Maltreatment 2004* (stating that approximately 872,000 children were abused in the United States in 2004 and 79% of abusers were parents).

n28. See Rebekah J. Smith, *Family Caps in Welfare Reform: Their Coercive Effects and Damaging Consequences*, 29 *Harv. J.L. & Gender* 2006; Susan T. Gooden & Nakeina E. Douglas *Ever Present, Sometimes Acknowledged, But Never Addressed: Racial Disparities in U.S. Welfare Policy*, in *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Reality of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century* (Keith M. Kilty & Elizabeth A. Segal eds., 2006) for critical discussions of the conservative political ideology undergirding welfare reform and experimentation. Also see these works for the impact of these reforms on African Americans in particular.

n29. Angela Onwuachi-Willig, *The Return of the Ring*, 93 *Calif. L. Rev.* 1647 (2005).

n30. Solangel Maldonado, *Deadbeat or Deadbroke: Redefining Child Support For Poor Fathers*, 39 *U.C. Davis L. Rev.* 991 (2006).

n31. See, e.g., Marietta Pongracz, *Birth Out of Wedlock*, *Demographic Research Institute*, <http://demografia.hu/WorkingP/wp2.pdf>; and Sarah Lyall, *For Europeans, Love, Yes; Marriage, Maybe*, *N.Y. Times*, March 24, 2002.

n32. For examples of research that does look at such families see M. Lindblad-Goldberg, *Successful Minority Single-parent Families, in Children in Family Contexts* (1989); Shirley M. H. Hanson, *Healthy Single Parent Families*, 35 *The Single Parent Family* 125-32 (Jan. 1986).

n33. The lead character in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Doolittle is a Cockney flower girl "made over" into upper class language and deportment.

n34. See Rose Weitz & Leonard Gordon, *Images of Black Women Among Anglo College Students*, 28 *Sex Roles* (1993).

n35. Interview by Crystal M. Myrick with Tiffany "New York" Pollard of *I Love New York* (Nov. 2, 2007), http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/431603/interview_with_vh1_star_tiffany_new.html.

n36. See, e.g., John McWhorter, *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America* (2005).

n37. See, e.g., Amy Wax, *Rethinking Welfare Rights: Reciprocity Norms, Reactive Attitudes and the Political Economy of Welfare Reform*, 63 *L. & Contemp. Probs.*, 257 (Winter/Spring 2000); Amy Wax, *Against Neutrality*, *Boston Review*, (April/May 2004).

n38. Anonymous, Comment posted Jan. 12, 2006 09:20 AM, <http://www.blackprof.com/?p=1125>.

n39. Howard Winant, *Difference and Inequality: Postmodern Racial Politics in the United States*, in *Racism, the City and the State*, Malcolm Cross & Michael Keith eds. 114 (1992).

- n40. See Jimmie L. Reeves & Richard Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television News, The Anti-Cocaine Crusade and The Reagan Legacy* (1994).
- n41. R.L. Rose & S.L. Wood, Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity Through Reality Television, 32 *J. Consumer Research* 284-96 (September 2005).
- n42. Micki McGee, *Self Help Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (2005).
- n43. Salt N Pepa, along with their deejay Spinderella are to date the most successful female rap group. The height of their career was the early to mid 90s when they achieved dramatic crossover success through popular and playful feminist anthems.
- n44. Celebreality is a term applied to reality shows which feature celebrities.
- n45. John McWhorter, *Why Blacks Don't Need Leaders*, *City Journal* (Summer 2002).
- n46. See Devah Pager, *Marked: Race, Crime and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration* (2007).
- n47. Dorothy Roberts, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (2002).
- n48. Keith M. Kilty & Elizabeth A. Segal, *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Reality of Poverty* (2006).
- n49. See, e.g., Robert L. Douglas, *Myth or Truth: A White and Black View of Slavery*, 19 *J. Black Studies*, 343-60 (March 1989); Susan M. Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (2003).
- n50. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* 46 (1981).
- n51. Laura Parker, *Several U.S. Cities Snapping Over Baggy Pants*, *USA Today*, Oct. 14, 2007; Niko Koppel, *Are Your Jeans Sagging? Go Directly To Jail*, *USA Today*, Aug. 30, 2007.
- n52. Maxine S. Thompson & Verna M. Keith, *The Blacker the Berry: Gender, Skin Tone, Self Esteem and Self-Efficacy*, 15 *Gender and Society*, 336, 337 (2001).
- n53. S.J. Ko, C.M. Judd, & I.V. Blair, *What the Voice Reveals. Within and Between Category Stereotyping on the Basis of Voice*, 32 *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 806-19 (2006). Michael Erard, *Language Matters, Legal Affairs* (July/Aug. 2002).

n54. W.T. Pizzi, I.V. Blair, & C.M. Judd, Discrimination in Sentencing on the Basis of Afro-centric Features, 10 Mich. J. Race & L., 327-53 (2004-2005).

n55. Optimism About Black Progress Declines: Blacks See Growing Values Gap Between Poor and Middle Class (Pew Research Center Survey Nov. 13, 2007).

n56. Irwin Kirsch, Henry Braun, Kentaro Yamamoto, & Andrew Sum, America's Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing our Nation's Future Policy Information Report, Educational Testing Service ed. (Princeton, NJ 2007) (showing 41% of births to Black college educated women under age 30 were out of wedlock in 2004).

n57. John Ogbu, Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement (2003) (data on middle class black-white achievement gap); See also, Amy J. Orr, Black-White Differences in Achievement: The Importance of Wealth, 76 Sociology of Education, 281-304 (Oct. 2003) (indicating important challenges to the cultural explanations provided by previously cited work).

n58. Dalton Conley, Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth and Social Policy in America (1999).

n59. Mary Patillo-McCoy, The Black Middle Class: The Limits of Out-Migration for the Black Middle Class, 22 J. of Urban Affairs, 225-41, (Fall 2000).

n60. But see, Leonard M. Baynes, Race, Media Consolidation, and Online Content: The Lack of Substitutes Available to Media Consumers of Color, 39 U. Mich. J.L. Reform 199 (2006), (discussing the limits of new media as a legitimate alternative media source for people of color so long as the digital divide persists).