Underprivileged Black Americans: The Aftermath Of King Cotton

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UNDERPRIVILEGED BLACK AMERICANS:
THE AFTERMATH OF KING COTTON

by

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B.A. Florida Atlantic University, 2005

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ABSTRACT

It has been criticized that the present economic state of Black Americans is a reflection of their history stemming from slavery. Diana Pearce’s Feminization of Poverty Theory discusses the idea that the ever-rising number of underprivileged Black Americans is due to the fact that there exists a rise in female headed households. The researcher constructed and analyzed several concepts that fall under the Feminization of Poverty Theory: education, employment, family, and social class. For the analysis the study used the documentary *Lalee’s Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*. Results show that each of the categories are approximately equal in proportion under the Feminization of Poverty Theory and that they also affect the impact that capital, government programs, economy, and investments have on underprivileged Black Americans.
This thesis is dedicated to my nieces Santanna and Yahnae. My two favorite girls who will help lead their people out of the cycle of poverty.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Black Americans (for the purpose of this study, the term Black Americans has been defined as third generation Americans of African descent) after continuous years of oppression, stereotyping, and unequal opportunities still “lag behind” the rest of America, forcing them to run what seems to be an unending race to keep up with the mainstream. Hegemony as defined by Antonio Gramsci (Gorham, 1999), introduces the idea that we live in a society with various power structures and with one main group dominating over another. Such power structures often leave underprivileged Black Americans lagging behind the rest of society labeling them as the invisible poor. The label is a result of dominance and superiority. The power relations are used to decide who has representation, which is listened to, and what issues matter (O’Donell, 2005). “African-American history is directly tied to past government-sanctioned enslavement. Since the early days of the slave trade, pictorial stereotypes have been used to maintain the dominant culture’s power over the group” (Lester, 2006, p.97)

The Study

As of 2005 the poverty rate for Black Americans was down from 31.3 percent to 24.9 percent, however the poverty rate for Black American female-headed households was reported as being 28.7 percent (U.S. Census, 2006). This study looks at the lives of underprivileged Black Americans and the issues that they face every day as a result of their race, class, and history in this country. The primary purpose of the study is to analyze the elements of the cycle of poverty
under Diana Pearce’s Feminization of Poverty theory as presented in the documentary *Lalee’s Kin: The Legacy of Cotton* through the categories of education, employment, family, female-headed households, social class, and by interpreting visual cues and the social content of the images.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Black Americans: Historical Perspectives

Slavery

The gap between Negro and white economic conditions has been of long duration, its roots firmly buried in the institution of slavery. Lincoln could free the Negro people from slavery with the stroke of a pen, but he could not so easily free them from its ruinous legacies. (Kain, 1969, p.1)

Black Americans have been deeply rooted in the history of the United States since the very start of this nation. Pitts-Walter (1992) states that slavery set the precedence for the mentality that white America felt about Black Americans and their work ethic. Slaves worked what was called “can’t to can’t” days. The term “can’t” refers to working from dusk to dawn. The slaves worked hard labor for 14 hours a day, fearing punishment if they did not maintain their same speed and performance. The constant fear of punishment gave the perception of laziness to some of their owners, engraving into their minds that black Americans were lazy and had bad work ethics (Tidwell, 1988).

Following the Civil War into the Reconstruction era, southern states were having serious problems because they were starting from nothing economically. Tidwell, (1988) felt that rather than giving to the slaves what they were promised and what they deserved, they were forced to
live on the edge of the nation’s economy by being denied (by the white system/society) the opportunities to advance themselves. Scholars, including Tidwell (1988) have stipulated that because the former slaves did not receive their 40 acres and mule, which was promised by the government, it brought slaves into a downward financial spiral.

According to W.E.B. Dubois and John Hope Franklin, slavery and post-reconstruction racism caused blacks to be impoverished, resulting in their being an industrially unskilled labor force that was relegated to the lower level in the wage structure. (Griffin, 2002, p.26)

King Cotton

The core of the south’s economy was cotton. The south depended on cotton so much that the region was called King Cotton (Pitts-Walter, 1992). Due in part to the government’s inability to provide former slaves with the proper tools to become self sufficient landowners and farmers, former slaves turned to the world of sharecropping. Sharecropping is a system of agricultural production where a landowner allows a sharecropper to use the land in return for a share of the crop produced on the land. It was also a system that strongly worked against blacks (Kain, 1969). Thus, a vicious cycle of paid slavery started after landowners rented their materials and land to the former slaves. They were often left in a lifetime of never-ending debt. Other former slaves turned into landowners and became financially dependant on the cotton crop (Kain, 1969).

Walker wrote about the end of the Reconstruction era and the beginning of Jim Crow.

“…Jim Crow, that deeply entrenched set of cultural and institutional practices built up over for centuries of racist domination and the exclusion of blacks by whites in the South” (Patterson, 2006, p. 4) The term Jim Crow derived from the song and dance “Jump Jim Crow” song by T.D.
Rice who performed it while in black face. The expression to jump Jim Crow came to mean "to act like a stereotyped stage caricature of a Negro." Walter’s defense was that successful Black American land owners in the south lived in fear of becoming targets of the highly aggressive and dangerous Klu Klux Klan and other racist white intimidators (Pitts-Walker, 1992). Intolerant whites often thought that blacks were their competition for economic success in society; they often feared that there was not enough work for both blacks and whites (Willie, 1983).

**Segregation**

The discrimination of the Jim Crow era led to widespread racism throughout the nation. The United States was turned into more of a segregated society after the landmark case Plessy v. Ferguson of 1869 in which the United States Supreme Court ruled that states could forbid the use of public facilities by Black Americans. This case made it constitutionally legal to have separate but equal public facilities for blacks and whites (Kain, 1969). This law also further increased the prejudices that intolerant whites held against blacks in education, employment, and residency.

Prejudice by whites against Negroes obviously bears a large part of the responsibility for the existence and maintenance of discriminatory practices. Current white attitudes toward discrimination and integration will be crucial in determining the success of programs designed to reduce discrimination and provide greater opportunities for Negroes. (Kain, 1969, p.128)

Massey and Denton (1993) found that racial segregation helped to concentrate poverty. The difference between blacks and whites often increased because the more segregated an area, the more impoverished it became. Massey and Denton (1993) felt that the high degree of residential segregation forced on blacks led to their social and economic isolation, as well as
their alienation from mainstream American society. Glasgow (1980) believes that institutional racism contributes to the exclusion of young black youth from the normal path of success.

Unless ghetto residents work outside of their neighborhoods, they are unlikely to come into contact with anyone else who is not also black, and if they live in an area of concentrated poverty, they are unlikely to interact with anyone who is not poor and black.

(Massey & Denton, 1993, p. 160)

Desegregation

Jim Crow laws legally ended with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. In addition, the Civil Rights Act of 1968, also known as the Fair Housing Act, prohibited discrimination concerning the sale, rental, and financing of housing. These two acts allowed Black Americans to safely integrate into mainstream society by legally allowing them to live in places of their choice (Glasgow, 1987).

According to Bell Hooks (2003) the two Civil Right Acts also forced the blacks who wanted to move beyond the isolation of their segregated communities to assimilate into white culture and become accepted by white America. With this assimilation, financially-able blacks began to move out of the all black neighborhoods and away from black-owned business which created what some call middle-class abandonment, and the black bourgeoisie. Bell Hooks (2003) is one of many scholars who felt that desegregation weakened the black community because it helped increase poverty within them. The gap between privileged blacks and poor blacks continues to rise along with upper class mobility. Thanks to the migration of middle class blacks to urban communities, the underclass gained more notoriety. “A critical consequence of
this development, in Lemann’s view, was that members of the lower classes were left without the positive values, institutions, role models, and social controls that their middle-class brethren had provided” (Glasgow, 1987, p. 132).

Critics often in turn ask what roles do the leaders of the black community play in helping change this economic situation. Some feel that in today’s society we are given many opportunities to improve ourselves (Tidwell, 1988). Glasgow (1987) thinks that blacks must get together as a community and take necessary actions to reverse the establishment of the underclass.

**United States Economy**

*Poverty*

Poverty is defined as the inability of individuals to provide for themselves or for those who rely upon others (e.g. relatives) for their sustenance. It is the lack of opportunity; the lack of choice. It is a relative lack of resources and/or inability to utilize resources. (Griffin, 2002, p. 26)

In the 1960’s President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty. The poverty that America then focused on was white poverty. After declaring war on poverty, poor blacks became the undeserving face of poverty. Through outlets such as the media, they were portrayed as Americans who wanted to be poor and wanted to live off of the government because they were too lazy to work, reinforcing the racial stereotypes that many people have about Black Americans (Griffin, 2002). Blacks continue to face racial stereotypes such as that they are lazy,
aggressive, and uneducated; stereotypes that have been in existence since before the birth of the United States. Gorham (1999) defined a racial stereotype as the operationalization of racial myths as social reality beliefs concerning members of racial groups based on perceived group affiliations. Some scholars feel unemployment is the creator of poverty although it is not an important issue to American policy makers. Over time, the black unemployed have lost sympathizers and are blamed for their own failures (Glasgow, 1987). Others like Kaufelt (2003) believe that poverty is about women, blacks, and the young.

**Welfare**

Welfare or *Aid to Families with Dependent Children* (as it was originally called until 1997), led the way for the racialization of poverty in the United States. It was originally created and structured by its program leaders to help white, not black families during the Great Depression. But as more blacks began migrating north looking for work, as well as being able to escape the Jim Crow laws of the south, more of them began to apply for the aid (Gilens, 1999). Because of this, “the linkage between poverty/welfare and race is firmly implanted in the American psyche” (Kaufelt, 2003, p.170).

Griffin (2002) divided the United States welfare system into three time periods. The construction of social welfare (1933-1969) represents the formation of the welfare system as a support system for white women. Reconstruction of social welfare (1970-1996) was the introduction of more Black Americans to the aid system and the start of welfare reform. The final stage is called the deconstruction of welfare (1996-present) and it is the era that represents the welfare-to-work program and a program that works to get people off of welfare and into the workforce. “Murray and Gilder argue that expanded education, jobs, and welfare programs of the
Great Society encourages laziness and promiscuity and decreased incentive among the urban poor by providing payments to those who chose not to work” (Griffin, 2002, p.30).

Scholars believe that Americans hate welfare because they view it as a system that rewards the undeserving poor. “For centuries, Americans have distinguished between the ‘deserving poor,’ who are trying to make it on their own, and the ‘undeserving poor,’ who are lazy, shiftless, or drunken and prefer to live off the generosity of others” (Gilens, 1996).

According to Gilens (1999) in today’s society, the majority of Americans believe that most of the nation’s welfare recipients are black people with a lower work ethic than other Americans. When in reality Black Americans only make up 38% of all welfare recipients in the United States. Racial attitudes are at the core of creating white America’s views on welfare spending and its benefactors. Stereotypical attitudes and opinions have been placed in American history since the start of the nation and stereotypes that are often categorical are used by people to judge others outside of their groups (Gilens, 1999).

*Feminization of Poverty*

…the largest group of welfare recipients in the United States is poor children, a group that is typically viewed sympathetically and as deserving by the general public. Yet media depictions of welfare recipients seldom focus on children, but instead, on their mothers, who are often single and bear the brunt of public animosity. (Bullock et al., 2001, p.234)

The rise of Black American poverty has been placed on female-headed households. Changes in the American family structure since the 1970’s have been identified by sociology professor Diana Pearce as the Feminization of Poverty Theory. The Feminization of Poverty
Theory has been defined as the idea that the increase of poverty is due to the fact that there is an increase in (single) female headed households (Pearce, 1983). Feminists feel that the easiest solution is to place the blame of poverty on someone else (Glasgow, 1987). “Men are moving out, while women, many with children, are moving in” (Pearce, 1990b, p.1). Single mothers are often seen as negligent women without morals who have chosen to place themselves in dire financial situations. It is not explained that these women often live off of low paying jobs that do not provide enough for them to live comfortable lives (Bullock et al. 2001). Furthermore, concern about men’s dependency on government aid is virtually non-existent, whereas women’s dependency on government aid is ever rising (Misra et al. 2003). The faces of these mothers are often black. One group among them are considered the “welfare queens”. The term welfare queen has been used to describe those young women who continue to have children, in order to receive financial benefits from the government (Bullock et al. 2001). The white poor families are greater in number than the black poor families. How then can the stereotype of only black welfare recipients survive? (Sotirovic, 2001,). The shift in the family structure in the 1970’s, has left three out of four poor black families to be headed up by women; the shift has resulted in an increase of minority poverty and racial inequality” (Pearce, 1990, p.1). The issue of welfare and the United States’ current economic state have led to the discussion of class and social status in America, which is the focus of the following section of this study.
Theoretical Framework

Separation of Class

Society is divided into three general economic classes: upper class, middle class, and lower class. However, some social organizations include an underclass, which falls below the lower class. The upper class is considered the dominant and/or ruling class. (Stillo, 1999). One of the earliest definitions of the underclass was developed by the Russian Karl Marx. Karl Marx was a philosopher, political economist, revolutionary, and scholar. He described the underclass as the lowest part of a population that included the ragged, demoralized, those unable to work, and those who cannot adapt to mainstream society (Darity et al, 1994). Marx believed that to understand the “way of doing things” in a society was to understand the dominant social groups of the society. Those who belong to a dominant social group are able to make their beliefs and ideas seem natural and indisputable (Gorham, 1999). Marx’s ideas influenced many scholars including Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci studied the idea of hegemony and felt that even the subordinate class has the opportunity to become the dominant class. Such dominance is obtainable by uniting forces with other under classes and combining forces together to become one large group (Stillo, 1999).

Though the idea of class division in American society may be obvious, Americans prefer not to speak about class and choose not to verbally place themselves in a particular group. It is rare to hear someone from a lower class level identify themselves as such. Other personal identifiers that are preferred are ethnicity, occupation, and/or place of origin because they have the media as a constant reminder of the division between the upper and lower class. The media shows the upper class as an example for the lower class to copy, however unattainable the
lifestyle that the upper class may be living (Mantsios, 2003b). In her hypothesis, Kaufelt’s (2003) believed that mainstream media in the United States creates hegemonic conceptualizations of poverty that serve the interest of those who hold economic and political power.

**Social Levels**

“The contrast between rich and poor is sharp, and with nearly one-third of the American population living at one extreme or the other, it is difficult to argue that we live in a classless society” (Mantsios, 2003a, p.34). Hegemony is achieved when one class successfully persuades other classes to accept and follow their moral, political, and cultural beliefs. The class group that makes the ideas/rules that the society follows is often considered to be the dominant group and the other classes that follow the stipulated ideas/rules are known as the subordinate group. These ideas/rules are known as “common sense” by the majority of society (Stillo, 1999).

Gramsci’s ideas about hegemony influenced Edward Said (1978) and his ideas of Orientalism, which is defined as the study of Near and Far Eastern societies and cultures, languages and people by Western scholars; it also refers to the imitation or depiction of aspects of Eastern cultures in the West by writers, designers, and artists. Said (1978) believed that Orientalism was for European-Atlantic people to display their power over the Orient. Said thinks that it was a classic display of showing how a dominant culture looks at and controls a subordinate group.

In any society not just totalitarian, then, certain cultural forums predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others; the form of this cultural leadership is
what Gramsci has identified as hegemony, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism the durability and Strength… (Said, 1978, p.7)

These ideas of Orientalism and hegemony intertwine with the role of blacks in America. The people of the Orient were looked down upon because they were thought to be childlike, immoral, and different. “In a multicultural society, members of other cultures often are stigmatized because of their inability to articulate the symbols of the dominant culture” (Lester, 2006, p.15). The Europeans believed that in comparison to Orientals that they were normal, mature, kind, and giving (Said, 1978). The stereotypes placed on Black Americans by whites have been similar to those experienced by the people of the Orient when they encountered Europeans.

**Media Portrayals of Black Americans**

“In modern societies, the different media are especially important sites for the production, reproduction and transformation of ideologies” (Hall, 1995, p.19). The media is considered to be one of the dominant parts of ideological production. They contribute to the production of the images, explanations and descriptions that help the public understand why the world is the way it is as well as the way that it works. Via imaging, the media also plays a part in defining racial problems. Although the media is a powerful source where ideas are expressed, formatted, altered, and shared with the public, it has often been criticized as being a form of propaganda (Hall, 1995).
The coincidence of the rise of the mass media with the increased industrialization and movements of populations away from rural communities has prompted many theorists to see the mass media as contributing to the erosion of interpersonal and group life and fostering increasingly centralized models of communication and identity. (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p.161)

*Media Influence*

“For the most part, our media is national in nature and single-minded (profit-oriented) in purpose” (Mantsios, 2003b, p. 99). In today’s society the media is present in people’s lives on a daily basis. Due to its constant presence, the media has the power to educate, mold, and influence the public’s attitudes and their perceptions of reality. The major media outlets are controlled by a select group of powerful companies, and in turn, they have the ability to act as a dominant group, as they reflect their interests and beliefs through these outlets. The dominant groups’ priorities reflect their own groups and not the subordinate groups, such as women, minorities, and the poor; creating stereotypes in the media (Bullock et al. 2001). A study done by Gilens in 1996 demonstrated that news images reinforce Americans’ views on the poor; for example most magazine readers focus on pictures, therefore creating stereotypical images. In the study, Gilens also mentions the Marxist concept of “false consciousness,” where subordinate groups may come to share the negative stereotypes that more powerful groups hold of them.

*Stereotyping*

“Stereotypes can be thought of, then, as a particular subset of social reality beliefs: they are understandings about particular social groups that we have learned from our social world”
(Gorham, 1999, p.232). The media is known for encouraging stereotypes. American society has many images of the world, however very few of them come from personal experiences (Gorham, 1999). Devine and Elliot (1995) suggest that a stereotype is a set of associations that tie a certain group with certain characteristics. They found throughout their studies that though people have knowledge of certain stereotypes, it does not mean that they believe in them.

Gorham (1999) discusses the importance of the media being able to use stereotypes; he believes that stereotypes are important because of what they do and because of what they mean. Images that are displayed in the media and are stereotypical in nature, he believes, are not always negative, and in fact can just be a common truth. Unfortunately, the majority of stereotypical images in the media are negative in nature and make generalizations about a group of people. Scholars often wonder what impact media stereotypes have on audiences and their opinions about other groups. “…ethnic attitudes and stereotypes are part of the social heritage of a society and no one can escape learning the prevailing attitudes and stereotypes assigned to the major ethnic groups” (Devine, 1989, p.5). Stereotypes, class, and race are often intertwined. The impact of race and stereotypes are often on display in the media’s influence on the public’s opinions, whether they be positive or negative.

*Media and Class*

The media spends much of its time discussing the concerns and the problems of the upper classes in society. Though they only reflect a small portion of the population, the media behaves like they reflect the majority. The mass media often acts as a promotional tool for the wealthy (Mantsios, 2003b). They show the middle and lower class audiences what
they should “strive to be like.” The upper class is portrayed as people with special talents and skills that everyone should admire (Mantsios, 2003).

Lower class individuals are often represented on television talk shows and reality crime programs that display the poor and working class in a distorted and negative manner (Bullock et al. 2001). “In news stories, poverty includes more African-Americans, is more concentrated in inner cities, and overlaps more with gangs and crimes than national statistics indicate” (Sotirovic, 2001, p.751). The underclass is shown by the media as being criminals, alcoholics, and drug addicts (Clawson & Trice, 2000).

In between the upper and lower classes lies the middle class that the media suggests as the mainstream class of America. The media portrays the upper class as a promising alternative. The media feeds resentment to the middle class towards the poor from the media because they are given the perception that the poor are taking away their tax contribution (Mantsios, 2003b).

Deception: the Face of Poverty

After years of being ignored, the black, urban poor have become the face of poverty in the media. The amount of poor blacks in America has been greatly exaggerated due in part to the media’s representation of the poor. Their coverage of this lower class was found by some scholars to be biased, distorted, and negative. These false perceptions also reflect on the public’s idea that economic opportunity is accessible to everyone, and that many black Americans are lazy and prefer to depend on the government (Gilens, 1996).

Kaufelt (2003) found that the media’s portrayals of the poor showed these individuals as being untidy, unintelligent, low class, and without any values. The media is often unsympathetic when it comes to the poor, as they blame them for their own misfortunes, and always seem to
give a black face to these poverty-stricken individuals. They tell mixed stories about poverty in America by making it look temporary, often failing to mention that poverty in this nation is a direct result of its own economic and political policies-policies that deny people of jobs, livable wages, and support (Gilens, 1999).

_Invisible Poor_

“Although poverty is one of the most devastating problems facing the United States, stories about the poor are relatively rare on television news broadcasts” (Bullock et al., 2001, p. 232). Scholars have found that the media often provides its public with stereotypical, inaccurate images of the poor leaving the public with negative beliefs about what they perceive as being the face of poverty. Many scholars believe that the media ignores the poor and that they keep it hidden from mainstream society. The issue of the poor often does not emerge until the holiday season when concerns about inclement weather and meals arise. This type of coverage no longer looks at the poor as people, but rather as mere numbers and statistics. The media shows up few times a year, and then once the season is over, the tragedy of poverty is mostly forgotten (Bullock, 2001).
Black Americans’ portrayal in films, has always been a very controversial issue. Historically, blacks have been portrayed through the eyes of white Americans. Whites showed their audience what they believed Black Americans were like, and by doing that, the difference between African-American films and black-oriented films were established. They were defined as “…the term African-American film refers only to films directed, written, or co-written by members of the black community. The term black-oriented film denotes similar black-focused films whose directors and screenwriters are non-black” (Reid, 2005, p.1). On television, blacks have either been only seen portraying a limited number of characters, or they have been absent from television completely (Hall, 1995).

Classic roles included the Tom who was known as the “good negro.” He did what he was told without any questions and often appeared to be unable to think for himself. Then there was the “tragic mulatto” who was a person of color and half white. They lived their life in turmoil because they had black ancestry. Also depicted was the “slave figure” known as the mammy/servant who was always portrayed as being over-weight and asexual. She is known as the female coon who is dependable, simple, sweet, and jolly and never questions her white authoritative figures (Bogle, 1989).

The “Coon” was a popular role that represented blacks as being child-like buffoons who were single-minded amusement objects. The same could be said about Said’s (1978) description of the Orientals and Europeans. The Oriental were viewed by Europeans as being childlike and
different, while the Europeans were thought of as being normal, mature, logical, and kind (Said, 1978).

Before its death, the coon developed into the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes. The pure coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language. (Bogle, 1989, p.8)

Black Americans have also been portrayed as jesters, the brunt of jokes in movies, radio, minstrel and television shows. Often in these roles, they were required to appear in black face, a tradition that stems from the days of slavery when blacks were not allowed to appear on stage and white actors used cork to darken their faces in order to better mock blacks. Even after the Civil War black actors were required to appear in black face when they performed. The idea of using a black face of someone who was already dark skinned was a way to emphasize the different features of Black Americans (Bogle, 1989). These types of roles reinforced the white communities’ beliefs about Black Americans.

The movie industry often reinforces these stereotypes when they deal with black-oriented films. The brutal black buck was a character type introduced in D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film The Birth of a Nation, a depiction of the Old South, the Civil War, the Reconstruction, and the emergence of the Klu Klux Klan (Rhines, 2003). The brutal black buck was portrayed as a bestial black man out to cause trouble for society. He was portrayed as a big, stupid, animalistic, villain-like, oversexed, and savage black man who preyed on innocent white women. The brutal black buck was another form of a classic “native” character that portrayed the black man as being cunning, barbaric, and untamed (Hall, 1995).
The goal of the film *The Birth of the Nation* was to show America that blacks were savages and that they should not have voting power. It was shown at the White House to President Woodrow Wilson who praised it as: “History written with lightening” (Rhines, 2003). The film has also been studied by many scholars, “*The Birth of a Nation*…was denounced as the most slanderous anti-Negro movie ever released…Griffith seemed to be saying that things were only in order when the American Negro was kept in his place” (Bogle, 1989, p.10).

The black buck reappeared in the civil unrest of the 1960’s and 1970’s during the film era known as Blaxploitation. Blaxploitation movies were viewed as movies that featured heroic figures, but they did not touch on the real issues facing the black community (Bogle, 1989, p.242). This genre of movies has been criticized for degrading the black actors who were involved in the films, as well as the writers, and directors of its time. Critics have said that these movies have made a mockery of themselves and their people for money. The films of that time have been said to return to the movies of the early 20th century that pigeon holed black actors in jungle and plantation movies. Women of color during both film eras were portrayed as sexual gun touting vigilantes, who used their bodies to get their way. The backdrop of black movies switched from the plantation to inner-city ghettos (Bogle, 1989).

“A second qualification is that ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied” (Said, 1978, p.5). Ideas like these are like the ones that Said touched on in his book. White American filmmakers took it upon themselves to show mainstream America what the black culture was, narrowing down the life of a black person to one fighting to survive living in an urban jungle filled with drugs, criminals, welfare queens, black militants, and corrupt
police. The roles placed them in a category that was inferior to how the rest of mainstream America was living.

The movies reconfirmed mainstream America’s opinions that blacks were overly sexual creatures and/or were bumbling buffoons through misrepresentation. “When pictorial stereotypes are repeated enough times, they become part of society’s culture” (Lester, 2006, p. 95). The black women in the movies often showed their naked bodies and were used as erotic sexual objects for the white men in the movies. The black men, when not being portrayed as lazy and irresponsible criminals, pimps, and/or overly sexual creatures were sidekicks and/or the brunt of jokes who turned to white men for guidance. This was a serious blow to a group of people who were working hard to fight against stereotypes and gain equal rights in the United States (Bogle, 1989).

**Documentary**

To ensure the proper depiction of Black Americans in film many Black American filmmakers have chosen to make documentaries. The role of documentaries is to capture factual events and to reflect real life. But often with trying to portray realism one has to wonder how “real” is real. The responsibility of film makers is an important one because they help decide what is real (Andrew, 1984).

Spike Lee’s (2006) *When the Levees Broke* took an objective look at 2005’s Hurricane Katrina and its devastating aftermath in Louisiana and Mississippi. At the core of the documentary was the issue of race and poverty. Lee (2006) captured the distressed residents of the impoverished communities who were affected by the storm, the majority of those being Black Americans. Lee (2006) used people from all walks of life to tell the story of the storm and
its aftermath. Through testimonies, they shared the lack of government aid they received before and after the storm.

*Lalee’s Kin: The Legacy of Cotton* captured the voice of poverty as it followed a Black American family living in the Mississippi Delta below the poverty level. The film showed the negative results that cotton dependency caused the family. The family is headed by Laura Lee “Lalee” Wallace the grandmother who grew up picking cotton and whose entire family grew financially dependent on it. She is raising the majority of her grandchildren and her great-grandchildren in a government trailer without running water. The documentary makers Susan Froemke, Deborah Dickson, and Albert Maysles (2002) followed the family during the years of 1999 to 2001 and were able to focus on the impact that the cotton industry still has on the Mississippi Delta community and their futures. They filmed residents who wished that they could still pick cotton for income. They found residents who were unable to learn how to read and write as children because they spent all their time in the cotton fields.

**Realism**

The documentaries explained the importance of economics in the United States, by showing their audience that the treatment you receive often depends on the amount of money you have. The majority of the people in these documentaries are living impoverished lives that resulted from years of mistreatment, discrimination, stereotyping, and racism. Critics have found that the audiences of the films were often introduced to a world that they thought no longer existed. The film made the dire situation of poverty in the America real. “When a culture consistently pictures in some medium its version of reality and when these pictures are generally
swallowed by the members of that culture as reality, we are in the midst of the workings of ideology” (Andrew, 1984, p. 63).

The Black Underprivileged

Silence of Class

It is not that Americans, rich or poor, aren’t keenly aware of class differences… it is that class is not in the domain of public discourse. Class is not discussed or debated in public because the identity has been stripped from popular culture….formulating issues in terms of class is unacceptable, perhaps even un-American. (Mantsios, 2003a, p. 34)

According to Mantsios (2003a) one’s life-style and material well being are not the only things impacted by class; physical and mental well-being is impacted as well. He discussed that class, race, and sex determined equal opportunities and chances for survival and success. It is hard for a minority living at a certain class level to secure proper housing [thus becoming victims of crimes] (Mantsios, 2003a).

Education

Race and class also play a hand in one’s chances for educational attainment. “African-Americans have a harder time finding homes in good neighborhoods, even when they can afford them, and therefore more difficulty accessing good public schools” (Forman, 2006, p.33). Some feel that in order to eliminate poverty, it is necessary to place more pressure on society’s educational system. There is a longstanding belief that the gap between black and white employment numbers is largely due to racial inequalities in educational achievement. Most inner
city blacks think that education represents trying to assimilate into a society different from their own by making them adopt mainstream values and objectives. Some blacks prefer to achieve success within their own communities where they feel valued and appreciated by their friends and family. Young black youth often feel that the schools they attend are unable to adapt to them and the isolated world they come from; therefore they are looked at as failures by the system that is supposed to guide them (Glasgow, 1980). However, better educational resources facilitate employment opportunities for underprivileged Black Americans helping them turn away from self-destructive ways of making money (Tidwell, 1987). “Joblessness…is due to largely weak schooling, a lack of reading and math skills at a time when such skills are increasingly required even for blue-collar jobs” (Patterson, 2006, p.4).

Black Community

After years of fighting for civil rights, equal education, and economic opportunities, Black Americans thought they would have an easy path to economic prosperity by ending urban poverty (Morial, 2006). Historically, Black Americans do not discuss social class, even when it’s present in their group (Bell Hooks, 2003). Class groups have always been a part of the black community even when blacks were living in a legally segregated world. There was a time when the privileged black middle class served as an example for the lower class Black Americans living in their same neighborhoods. Segregated living has led to the lower class blacks living in what Bell Hooks has called “modern concentration camps.” Neighborhoods that are virtually invisible and excluded from the eyes of mainstream America and tourist magazines. These are the same ones which are often portrayed in the news as bad examples.
There are scholars who attribute poverty to a “culture of the poor,” as being intergenerational and transmitted from generation to generation because of the faults of the family (Willie, 1983). While others like Willie (1983) and Mantsios (2003a) feel that people do not choose their social class, but rather they are given restricted opportunities to improve. Glasgow (1980) believes that additional studies on economic factors affecting the black community are needed in order to help reverse its underclass growth, which in his opinion, threatens the secure balance of the entire black community.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Black Americans in films often carry what is called the burden of historical representation, the idea that underrepresented groups must work hard to insure that they are portrayed in a correct way, emphasizing their opinions and history (Stoddard & Marcus, 2006). The researcher recognized that the problem of poverty among Black Americans and their portrayal in film is deeply rooted in the way that they arrived in the country and continue to be two steps behind the rest of American society. By analyzing a documentary the researcher hopes to illustrate how the large amount of underprivileged Black Americans live as an outcome of historical occurrences that include their treatment in America and their representation in American media.

The Academy Award nominated documentary *Lalee’s Kin: The Legacy of Cotton* (2002) follows the journey of Laura Lee “Lalee” Wallace a Black American great-grand mother living in the Mississippi Delta. The original concept of the film was to make a film on the Welfare Reform Act and eventually turned into a film about poverty and the education system in a poverty filled area. The documentary takes a look at Wallace’s family and their community from the years of 1999 to 2002, following three generations of her family and the impoverished illiterate community that they live in. It explores the result of past generations being raised dependent on share cropping, the cotton crop and the impact it brings to the community’s present economic and educational standards. The documentary’s background scenes outside of the school scenes were of Lalee’s trailer and the surrounding areas. The land where the children
played, the jail where they got their water from and where Lalee picked food were all dirt-covered places that looked extremely poor. The camera angles used on Lalee and her grandchildren were intimate and revealing, thus serving as silent witnesses of their misery.

Hegemony as defined by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* is also present throughout the film. Lalee and her family are the representatives of the subordinate group accepting the ideas, values, and leadership of the dominant group as the norm, thus establishing what Gramsci explored in his views of social dominance. The film also follows the impact that the area’s current financial situation has on the struggling community’s economic system. The community portrayed in the film grew dependent not only on the cotton crop to provide them with economic means, but also on the white citizens as their providers and their decision makers.

The Study

This study takes an historical approach by analyzing the elements of the cycle of poverty through categories found in the documentary *Lalee’s Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*. A film was chosen instead of a book or still photos because a film shows all of the emotions and background studies that one can not receive with a book or still photos. The categories were derived from a combination of the Feminization of Poverty theory, the literature review and the documentary. The chosen categories are education, employment, family, female-headed households, and social class. The researcher chose nine scenes for each category from the film that covered the entire film. The researcher also chose scenes that were contributors to the Feminization of Poverty Theory. The scenes were captured as stills by taking pictures of the film with a digital camera and downloading them in the following analysis section.
**Education**

As cotton pickers, Black Americans were discouraged from pursuing an education because their families and the land owners feared that attending school would interfere with them having a livelihood. The cotton pickers felt as though picking cotton would sustain them forever, thus education was never a priority for their future. As a result of their lack of education they were illiterate and therefore they were unable to encourage their children to finish school. The new generation did not have any role models, leaving them in a disadvantage thus continuing the cycle of illiteracy.

**Employment**

The Mississippi Delta continues to be a plantation state for its Black American inhabitants. Their schools lack proper funding, unemployment is high and good-paying jobs are few. To worsen the situation most of the community is uneducated, thus unable to experience upper mobility or career improvement. The schools are unable to prosper due to the lagging economy in the area. The majority of Black Americans continue to live on someone else’s land. They continue to depend on the cotton picking season, thus paying jobs at the cotton gin are not based on a year round schedule. Lalee’s daughters work at the gin and Lalee makes homemade lunches to sell at the gins to the workers. Her granddaughter is forced to leave the area to find employment in a town two hours away while leaving her children in the care of their grandparents and great-grandparents. Their speech and communication skills are also affected by their lack of education, which was the reason behind the inclusion of subtitles in the film.
Family

The first obvious visual cue is the number of children present in the film. Lalee, like many Black Americans, comes from a long line of woman bearing many children. Lalee had 11 children, 38 grandchildren, and 15 great grand children. The majority of the families in the area are female-headed households. Lalee is often left to care for her grandchildren and great-grandchildren while their mothers go out and work. The lack of male role models is clearly present in this family while the young boys take over the roles traditionally given to men. The majority of the men in their family are either dead, in jail, or have abandoned their children to their mothers never to be heard of again. Such role models seem confusing to the children at times, which was seen in the film when Lalee’s grandson Redman at the age of five said that he would rather go to jail than attend school.

Social Class

As members of the lower class, this community often finds that they live with many barriers. They are forced to grow up faster by playing parenting roles to their younger siblings while their parents are forced to work multiple-low paying jobs to provide only basic needs for them. Their needs are great and the state’s educational system does not understand the intensity of their problems. The families have very few upper mobility role models outside of their teachers. They work hard to obtain materialistic things believing that it will help them be more accepted into mainstream society. For instance, Lalee uses her monthly check of $494 to buy furniture instead of getting running water or a working phone in her home.

As with their ancestors before them, the families turn to their faith and religion for help and guidance. The children are taught from an early age about God and his power through songs
and prayer. Lalee turns to her faith to try and guide her son along the right path and to help him stay out of jail. Lalee continues to have inspiration in God to endure because despite her living situation she continues to thank God for what she has because she continues to remind herself that things could be much worse.
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

“Two trends have characterized the American economy and women’s economic status since mid-century: (1) the increasing labor force participation of women and (2) the feminization of poverty” (Pearce, 1990a, p.11). The documentary *Lalee’s Kin: The Legacy of Cotton* displayed various categories found in the Diana Pearce’s Feminization of Poverty Theory. The categories of education, employment, family and social class were all found to be approximately equal in proportion with their distributed throughout the film. The researcher chose to make figure one a circle chart that clearly showed the equal distribution of the four categories throughout the film. The shape of a circle was chosen to show the constant flow of these categories throughout the subjects in the films lives and the women symbol in the center of the chart represents the feminine aspect of the Feminization of Poverty Theory. The researcher chose specific scenes to include in the thesis that further explained the link between the Feminization of Poverty Theory and *Lalee’s Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*.

**Breakdown**

The researcher selected areas within each of the categories to focus on. Within each of the areas the researcher also chose three scenes from the film, so that each of the categories could be analyzed. For the category of education the researcher focused on: the importance of education for a successful life and the impact that education had on employment. For the category of employment the areas chosen focused on: pay rate inequality. For the category of family the areas focused on: single female-headed households and the financial pressure that
single mothers live with in order to support their families. The final category, social class, focused on the disadvantages that Black American women face and the importance of faith in the homes of underprivileged Black Americans. A detailed analysis of each of the scenes follows in figures 2-13.
Figure 1: Feminization of Poverty Theory
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>EDUCATION/</th>
<th>Scene Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>![Image](72x536 to 270x684)</td>
<td>The medium shot has three adults talking about picking cotton and how they thought their jobs were secure and permanent. The male sitting on the left is passionate in his body language, using his hands, face and eyes to tell the story. He is now surprised about the importance an education or lack of had in his future as a man. “Didn’t nobody never think that education was gonna play such vital role in people’s life”.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>![Image](72x363 to 270x504)</td>
<td>In this scene Granny is doing her homework while the other children play on a car. The camera pans to the left and right to show us both scenarios happening at the same time. Cassandra “Granny” Wallace is Lalee’s great-grand daughter. Granny complains of not having enough time for homework since she takes care of four children (all family members) Granny helps to cook and clean, and also bath and dress all children.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><img src="300x39" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>This is a tight close-up with a voice-over narration done by Granny. We can see her smile and joyful expression since she is carrying her head high instead of low as she usually did while living with Lalee. Granny is doing well in school (B average) compared to D average when she lived with her great grandmother Lalee. In this scene Granny, 12, talks about her desire to become a nurse and go to school. Granny is thinking about going to college for the first time.</td>
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Figure 2: Education category scenes. Education is needed for success. *Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, © HBO films.
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<tr>
<th>Scene Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>Medium shot with Superintendent looking to his left and talking with a county staff while opening boxes of test results. The Superintendent is worried that the state does not understand how different his school district is. “In other schools is not like in here. The classroom is their home, and their grocery school.”</td>
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<th>Scene Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>This is the only tender moment between Granny and her great grand mother. It is the second day of school and Granny doesn’t want to go because she doesn’t have paper or pencils. Lalee gives her pens and pencils her sister picks while cleaning offices in Chicago. Lalee offers Granny and her brother Main some change to buy paper at the school. The next scene Granny covers her face with an old coloring book. The child is upset and does not want to show her face to the cameras.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Scene Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>A community volunteer work with an illiterate adult teaching her how to write her name. He reassures her that even if it is not a pretty letter is now the way that she signs her name and nobody else can do it the same. Illiterate seniors are easy target to people who might steal or use their identity.</td>
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</table>

Figure 3: Education category scenes. Joblessness is due to largely weak schooling, a lack of reading and math skills at a time when such skills are increasingly required even for blue-collar jobs. *Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, HBO films. Reprinted with permission.
### Scene Analysis

This scene is of Lalee’s grandson Redman in class as his teacher is asking the children to read words on flash cards. When it is Redman’s turn his unable to read the word and turns to his class mates for help. The children have a hard time getting any homework done at home or getting any help from the adults at their home because the adults have not progressed far in the education system.

### Scene Analysis

This scene includes Granny’s grandfather who she has gone to live with because she has gotten tired of babysitting everyone’s children. Granny’s science teacher and her grandfather are meeting to discuss Granny’s grades. Her science teacher had been trying to contact Lalee for a meeting, but was unable to. Granny’s grades had been suffering, but after moving to her grandfather’s house her grades were starting to rise again.

### Scene Analysis

The scene of children in the hallway occurs during the superintendent’s voice over as he discusses the difficulties that come with educating underprivileged children. He feels that the state does not understand the difficulties that come with teaching children from the Delta. The teachers are not just educators they also take the role of parent, grocery store, and etc. He feels that “…the hardest thing is to educate the child of an ignorant parent.”

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**Figure 4:** Education category scenes. It is felt that the high level of joblessness is due to poor schooling and a low level of reading and math skills. *Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, HBO films. Reprinted with permission.
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<th>Category/ EMPLOYMENT/</th>
<th>Scene Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>Close-up of Lalee counting her earnings after a day’s work selling food out of her van to the cotton gin workers. Lalee gets up early to cook throughout the morning for the lunch crowd. A plate with dessert is about $5 although Lalee always asks how much the customer would like to pay. This is the second time Lalee talks about having quarters and nickels. The first occasion was providing her “money” for Granny and Main to buy paper and pencils for school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The close-up shot of Lalee shows her emotion and frustration as she tells us how much money she used to make in the “good times” of picking cotton. By the 1970s Lalee was making $1 an hour picking cotton. She repeats several times how she disliked picking cotton and how much she celebrated when her family stopped working in the fields.</td>
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<th>Scene Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>In this scene Lalee is talking about the cotton gin. She might have stopped working on the fields picking cotton but she remains in the same cycle of poverty by depending on the cotton gin for part of her annual earnings when she cooks for the workers.</td>
<td></td>
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Figure 5: Employment category scenes. Pay rate of a black woman will be equal to a white male in 135 years, while a black man could catch up to a white man in 35 years- only 100 years sooner than a black women. *Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, © HBO films.
**Category/ EMPLOYMENT/**

**Scene Analysis**

The camera uses a medium shot to create a strong foreground with man talking with his hands—he repeats the same message using his eyes and face to emphasize that cotton is king in Mississippi. There is a lot of passion and vitality coming from him while the other two people stand in the back in tired and bored poses. The contrast between the attitudes of the three adults is engaging. Their stories are similar but some remain quiet as others make their point across. “It’s still basically a plantation state- Cotton is king in Mississippi”.

---

**Category/ EMPLOYMENT/**

**Scene Analysis**

The medium shot shows poor interior lighting in a back room- perhaps the dinning room area. Lalee’s twin daughters are sitting at a table. One twin is quiet with her arms crossed over her chest while the other twin talks about their learning disability and plays cards by herself.

“I get a job in the season. I work in the gin (cotton) We are slow learners. It is real hard to catch on”. One twin is the mother of Gregory “Redman” the first grader at the care of Lalee since he was six months. His mother visits him but does not take him away from his grandmother’s care.

---

**Category/ EMPLOYMENT/**

**Scene Analysis**

The medium shot is framed by the van doors. Lalee is selling her lunches to the cotton gin workers. She has to haggle since some customers want to pay her less than cost price. Lalee complains that she is not going to sell her Mamma’s dessert for a dollar. She ends up accepting $1.20 for it.

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**Figure 6:** Employment category. Women are in the secondary sector of the dual-economy theory because they work in marginal industries, low-paying jobs and seasonal sporadic jobs. *Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton,* © HBO films.
**Scene Analysis**

This scene is of Lalee trying to enroll Redman in school. It is a role that normally a mother would do, but Lalee has been raising him since he was six months old. In the scene the secretary was trying to explain to Lalee all of the items that were required for enrollment and all the school supplies that he needed.

**Scene Analysis**

This scene is a picture of former factory buildings that were once filled with jobs and workers. The voice over in the scene is done by the superintendent. He discusses the fact that the town would not be able to recruit new teachers because there is no industry and there is no financial security in the town.

**Scene Analysis**

In this scene Granny is celebrating her twelfth birthday. Granny has gone to live with her grandfather and his youngest daughter and for the first time feels free from the burdens of being a second mother to her younger siblings. Her grandfather seems to be better off financially than her great-grandmother and mother and therefore is able to provide more things for her. Notably absent from her birthday party are her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother who are no doubt off working.

**Figure 7**: Employment category. While many women are poor for the same reasons that men are poor— for example, they live in a job-poor area, and/or they lack the necessary skills or education much of women’s poverty can be traced to two causes that are basically unique to women. First, women most provide all or most of the support for their children, and secondly, they are disadvantaged in the labor market as women. *Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, © HBO films.
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<th>Category/FAMILY/</th>
<th>Scene Analysis</th>
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<td><img src="image1" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>This is a medium shot of the inside of Lalee’s new trailer. Lalee is in her kitchen with two of her daughters and four great-grand children. The daughters came to see their Mom’s new home. The trailer is dirty and needs pest control but Lalee is proud of it. “I love a house full of children” Lalee has 38 grandchildren, 15 great-grand children and 11 children but only 8 are living, 6 girls and 2 boys.</td>
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<td><img src="image2" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>The camera started close to her face as she remembers her mother’s and grandmother’s children. The camera then comes back to a medium shot to include Cassandra “Granny” Lalee’s great-granddaughter with Lalee as to imply that her legacy is right next to her in her great-granddaughter. Lalee has a soft expression in her face as if she is smiling saying that her Mom had 23 children and her Mom had 17. “I never knew my Father, so that’s the way it is” says Lalee.</td>
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<th>Scene Analysis</th>
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<td><img src="image3" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>The camera shot is intimate and close showing Granny’s facial expressions as she listens to her grandmother Lalee talk about her as if she is not in the room. Granny looks sad. Granny’s Mom, San, works in Batesville two-hours away from Granny. San does not have a car and can’t commute daily.</td>
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Figure 8: Family category scenes. Single-women are more likely to support minor children than are single men and their household income is much lower. *Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, HBO films. Reprinted with permission.
### Scene Analysis

The camera is concentrating on Lalee’s hands and the sink full of pots she is cleaning. The motion of her cleaning is perhaps a synonym of how she goes through rough times every day in that cycle of poverty that doesn’t seem to end for her and her family. Looking out the window as she cleans her old pots and pans with water from a bleach jug, Lalee mentions how she doesn’t like to ask for money or help because people consider that begging.

### Scene Analysis

This is a medium shot with one camera. The scene does not follow any action and the camera remains showing only one perspective. Lalee is helping Granny with the chicken. They are working out of a bucket placed on a chair outside of their trailer house. Lalee talks while Granny remains silent and obedient. You could wonder if Granny’s pose seems tense.

### Scene Analysis

The medium shot finds Granny and the children outside of the trailer home. Granny is trying to comb the baby’s hair while trying to keep her brother from bothering her. Granny is taking a parenting role with most of the children although she is a child herself. Who takes her of her? The camera is late showing us who she is talking to on the right of the screen. The view remains still without panning.

Figure 9: Family category. Most of the work women do goes unpaid. *Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, © HBO films.
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<th>Category/ FAMILY/</th>
<th>Scene Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td><img src="https://example.com/image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>In this scene Lalee discusses her past experiences with men. She never knew her biological father and she has raised her all of her children on her own. She feels that men are more of a burden to a family than helpful to a family. Her daughters and granddaughters continue the family cycle of raising children without their biological fathers.</td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="https://example.com/image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>This scene shows that when single-mothers are working or busy with other things outside of the home the burden of house hold duties often falls on the older children. In this scene Granny is responsible for bathing her younger siblings and cousins and she is also in charge of getting them ready for bed.</td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="https://example.com/image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>In this scene Lalee and her daughter discuss the items that her grandson Redman needs in order to enroll in kindergarten. The responsibility of enrolling him has fallen on Lalee because his mother works odd jobs and has left him in her custody since he was six months old.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10: Family category. Female-Headed Households- females carry the majority of the financial responsibility. *Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, © HBO films.
Scene Analysis

This scene is of Granny in front of her mother’s home after her mother has forced her back home to Mississippi for the summer to take care of her younger brothers. Granny was upset that she had return from living with her paternal grandmother in Tennessee and after having a successful school year there. She showed great pride discussing the scholarship offer that she received to attend the University of Tennessee if she kept her grades up.

Scene Analysis

This scene is of Granny and her younger Main doing the daily task carrying former bleach bottles that the family now uses as water jugs to their great-grandmother’s home. The family does not have running water in their trailer and collect water from the local county jail because it is free.

Scene Analysis

Lalee’s trailer is surrounded by broken down car and trash. In this scene Lalee’s grandsons and great-grandsons are playing in one of the broken cars. Toys are rarely seen throughout the documentary. The children are shown playing with whatever they can find lying around.

Figure 11: Social Class category. American women of color are doubly disadvantaged but they area also said to be doubly ignored, overlooked in analysis that are concerned with either racial or gender inequality. Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton, © HBO films.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Category/ Social Class/</strong></th>
<th><strong>Scene Analysis</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>This scene shows the family collecting water in jugs from the local county jail. The family does not have running water, but they are able to collect from the jail because it belongs to the county and is included in their local taxes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>In this scene Lalee is preparing dinner with what little food her meager SSI check allows her to buy. She discusses how she able to stretch food so that it is enough for the entire family to eat. She is also reminiscing about growing up in a sharecropping family where they were able to eat whatever food they grew on their land.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>In this scene a volunteer from a local big brother mentoring program coming to Lalee’s home to talk to her great-grandson Main about joining the program. The young boys in the family do not have constant positive male role models in their lives and Lalee is happy to see that someone wants to take and interest in Main because he is having serious problems in school and with authority. This she feels is due to the fact that he wants to go live his father who has denied him.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 12: Social Class category. The analysis of poverty by gender has been criticized for overlooking or downplaying racial and ethnic inequalities. *Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, © HBO films.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category/ Social Class/</th>
<th>Scene Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>This scene shows Lalee talking to her son who has just been released from jail (who is off camera) about living life right. She feels that in order for him to stay out of trouble and on the straight and narrow that he must live his life according to God’s will.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>This scene captures Lalee singing spirituals and saying prayers with her young grandchildren and great-grandchildren. This scene shows that spirituality is deeply rooted in the children starting at a young age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>This scene shows Lalee discussing her sons and the lives that they have chosen to live. All of her sons are dead except for one who continues to go in and out of jail. She prays to God to help her through all of the tough trials that she has faced in her life and will continue to face.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 13: Social Class category. Faith is often at the core of poor Black Americans. It is often used to help them get through tough times. *Lalee Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, © HBO films.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Not only has the proportion of the poor who are in families maintained by women increased, but the nature of women’s poverty has shifted, reflecting the changing economy and the changing nature of women’s participation in the labor force. The story is one of more women entering employment and taking newly created jobs that pay less and have fewer benefits and protections than the old jobs. At the same time, women workers have seen little change for the better in the levels of occupational segregation or pay change for the better in the levels of occupational segregation or pay inequity (Pearce, 1990a, p.12).

The researcher came to the conclusion that the cycle of poverty among Black Americans does have something to do with the high level of single black mothers with children. However, it is not the sole contributor to the high level of underprivileged Black Americans in the United States as the Feminization of Poverty Theory might suggest. The actual theory comes across as being one-sided, but as this thesis suggests there are many more sides to the “who is to blame for poverty” story. There are many factors that contribute to the poor financial state of many Black Americans such as environment, educational system lack of jobs, and limited opportunities.

Limitations

The limitations faced by the researcher were few. There were no known previous studies of the Feminization of Poverty Theory in conjunction with women of color and with a film, so finding previous studies to turn to was a problem that the researcher faced. Also, the researcher had a difficult time getting in contact with the makers of Lalee’s Kin: The Legacy of Cotton,
Maylses Films, to gather background information about the making of the film. The researcher also faced many roadblocks while trying to contact HBO Films for permission to reproduce scenes from the film as still photographs in the analysis section of the thesis.

Future Studies

This study has the ability to expand into many other fields of study. One way is to continue following Lalee’s family beyond the years of the documentary. The film makers could have followed Granny through high school to see if she was going to take the same path as her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother. That would have shown the additional information that the researcher of this study received after contacting the production company. It was found that Granny got pregnant at the age of 14, thus continuing the cycle of single motherhood and poverty in her family. The study could also be expanded if a researcher were able to personally interview the subjects in the film (i.e. Lalee, Granny, the superintendent, and etc.).

Given more time a researcher would be able to look into possible solutions to the problem of the high level of poverty among Black Americans and single mothers. A researcher could follow a young single mother before conception, from her being a pre-teen to the point that she was raising her children. It would allow the researcher to see what factors may have contributed to the young lady become a young single mother. The study could also compare different racial groups in the same financial state against the Feminization of Poverty Theory and see how the categories apply to them as well. The researcher would suggest a long term study on the topic on the Feminization of Poverty Theory and its link to Black American poverty due to the lack of studies on the two topics.
Ms. Werner,
Thank you for your help and for allowing us to use stills from the HBO FILM "Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton" in Ms. Bryant's Masters Thesis. I will let Patience know of your decision. She might inquire later for further permission if she is publishing a version of her thesis in a scholarly journal.
Her defense date is March 29 and she is very happy this long year is almost over. Would you like a copy of her thesis?
Again, thank you.
MC Santana

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Dear Dr. Santana:

HBO is happy to grant your graduate student Patience Bryant permission to include stills from the HBO documentary "Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of
Cotton" in her master's thesis as a point of reference to her Feminization of Poverty Theory. Please understand that this permission does not extend to any publication of Ms. Bryant's master thesis. Any further use or duplication of the Lalee's Kin materials will require additional permission from HBO.

We wish Ms. Bryant all the best in her academic career.

Sincerely,

Sharon Werner
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New York, NY 10036
212-512-1474

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