

Review of E. O. Hutchinson's *The Assassination of the Black Male Image* (Simon & Shuster, 1996, 207 pp.)

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Hutchinson makes the often trenchant argument that racism against persons of African heritage, especially males, has consistently flourished since the European conquest of Africa; what has changed are the social contingencies governing how this racism is expressed. For example, in 1907, Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner buttressed with Darwinism his argument that black persons were driven by fear and sensuality, and, hence, were "cowardly, cringing, cunning and false." G. Stanley Hall, President of the American Psychological Association and founder of the *American Journal of Psychology*, posited that the black man's "distheses, both psychic and physical is erethic, blatile, changeable, prone to transcoidal, intensely emotional and epileptoid states." In short, the black man was a "dimwit" and "the public had to be on alert."

At the height of the Civil Rights movement, President Johnson, puzzled by the lack of success of his Great Society initiatives, commissioned Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan to determine why the millions spent on jobs, education, housing, social service programs, and the passing of the civil right laws were failing to buy social peace. Moynihan determined that the root of the problem was that the black family was "a tangle of pathology" as a result of the absence of fathers in one fourth of black homes. A new myth, presumably sanctioned by statistics, figures, and charts, was codified. Moynihan never bothered to explain why the three out of four remaining homes with fathers in them were also poor. Moreover, the research methods that led to these findings that the black man was at the root of "Negro deviancy" were never challenged on the grounds that there were no controls for income, education and profession, and family background.

By the 1980's, the Reagan administration was able to use the black male myth to explain the growing number of black poor. Even as Reagan stripped away jobs, housing, and education programs, young black males came to have triple or higher unemployment rates compared to young white males. The huge reservoir of racism beneath the surface of American society was tapped by the Reagan-Bush slash-and-burn of social programs and, more recently, by the mean spirit of Gingrich and Pat Buchanan, to legitimize and elevate racial scapegoating to a national policy.

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Black sexuality has also been an enduring part of racism. For example, in 1903, Dr. William Lee Howard announced in *Medicine* that black males, whom he referred to as brutes, "were driven to fits of sexual madness" because of "the large size of their penises." In 1990, there was extensive coverage when a white woman was "wilded" and brutally raped by young black men in Central Park. A year later, the *New York Times* agonized over the plight of three white male students who had raped a black coed at St. John's University. The feature story played up the solid middle-class background of the students and parents, and dismissed the defendant in one line as "dropped out of St. John's after the incident." Hutchinson questions referring to a brutal rape as an "incident." He might have also pointed out that more rapes are perpetrated against black women by white men than against white women by black men.

Hutchinson also sees racism against black males as a problem within the black community, citing an incident where he quickly locked his own car door and rolled up the window when a well-dressed black male approached his car in a parking lot. He also sees signs that many black persons have swallowed the poison of racism, noting that many black women call black men "dogs," "animals," and "bastard." Many black men call black women "bitches" and "hos."

Hutchinson warns that if the assassination of the black male into the universal bogeyman is not reversed, Charles Carroll, who told the world that the black man was a beast, may have the last word. Just as racism emerged out of the rationalization for physically enslaving a people, and then, later, by enslaving the same people to a second class citizenship, the contingencies that continue to facilitate racism need to be analyzed. If, as Hutchinson suggests, racism, especially against African American males, is perpetuated without the majority of society even recognizing it as such, then racism may be so deeply entrenched that wake-up calls, such as the Los Angeles riots, may be the kind of contingencies needed.

When G. Stanley Hall, a pioneer in psychology, admonished the white public about the dangers of the "dimwit," the African American male, he was reflecting the era in which he lived. Hutchinson's argument is that today racism has become more insidious. Behavior analysts, interested in addressing this problem of racism against African American males, will need to analyze the underlying racism in media reports and social policies. This may be difficult, and at times impossible, for non-African Americans, given the subtlety of racism.

Still, behavior analysts can begin to address this problem of racism against African American males at a number of levels. First, behavior analysts can address racism through early educational interventions. Studies can be designed to assure that African American children, especially males, are called on by teachers and participate at the same rates as other children in classrooms. Similarly, behavior analysts can provide programming that assures that African American children work and play collaboratively with other children. Second, behavior analysts can conduct systematic research of racism in the media, intervening with feedback such as letters, email, faxes, and telephone calls. Third, behavior analysts can actively recruit African American males as students, and encourage them to use the

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behavioral technology to address the complex problems of racism. Finally, African American males can be elevated to leadership positions throughout the behavioral community.

The Civil Rights movement was fought through the pacifism of Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as the more forceful measures of persons like Malcolm X. Contingencies for change were as different as King's admonishment to liberals that the belief in "gradualism" was far worse than an out-and-out racism to the Black Panthers' threats of violence. As the country continues to be divided along racial lines, Hutchinson's often strident argument suggests once more the question: How long can a group of marginalized citizens be expected to tolerate such treatment?