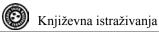**Ana Kocić**
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(RE)DEFINING THE DISCOURSE OF DISCRIMINATION: REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN AMERICAN FILM

Abstract: The paper explores the shaping and re-shaping of the discourse of racial discrimination observable in contemporary Hollywood film understood as cultural practice. The main focus of the paper is on the development of African American stereotypes in American film and their use as a means of legitimizing, perpetuating and, as of lately, subverting the discriminatory practices. The first part of the paper presents a theoretical framework for the analysis, based on the multidisciplinary perspective of cultural studies, drawing on history, film and media studies and stressing the relationship between representation, difference and power. Racial stereotypes of African Americans, formed in the colonial period of American history and disseminated through both high and popular culture have kept their relevance up to the present day and have been transferred to the film domain with little or no modification. Donald Bogle's (2001) classification of African American stereotypes in American film is used as a starting point in the analysis of one of the most popular contemporary American movies with the purpose of establishing its relevance for the contemporary context. The goal of the research is to examine the representation practices employed in contemporary Hollywood movies and their potential for subverting and reversing the long-established stereotypes.

Key words: African Americans, stereotypes, American studies, American film, discourse of inequality

1. Introduction

The inspiration for this paper is a fairly recent Hollywood trend of revisiting the American past, especially the ante-bellum years from the perspective of those who have long been silenced. Firstly, the author will set a theoretical framework for the research by considering the work of several major cultural theorists dealing with the practices of representation, particularly racial stereotypes. Then paper will detail in review the common representations of African Americans in American film and list the most common (stereo)types. Finally, following the common method in cultural studies, theoretical considerations will be applied in the close 'reading' of a recent Hollywood Oscar-winning motion picture. The main purpose of the research is to determine whether there have been any significant changes in the media representations of African Americans in the recent period and if that is case, how those representations are shaped.

2. Defining cultural representation

As previously mentioned, the paper shall first lay the theoretical groundwork by considering Stuart Hall's definitions of representation and discourse as well as stereotyping, with a special emphasis on racial stereotyping.

2.1. Towards defining the discourse of discrimination

Stuart Hall (1997: 6) defines discourses or discursive formations as:

"ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society. (…) 'Discursive' has become the general term used to refer to any approach in which meaning, representation and culture are considered to be constitutive".

The main implication of this definition is that our knowledge of, opinions about, attitudes and behaviors towards things or groups of people depend on how they are represented, i.e. constructed through language. In other words, meaning is not a given characteristic of any phenomenon, but rather a construct, "the result of a signifying practice" (*Ibid.*, p. 24). This is why members of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (du Gay *et al.,* 1997: 3☐4) mark representation, defined as "the establishment of cultural meaning through the practice of representation", as one of the most important of the five phases of a circuit of culture.[1] Cultural representation largely shapes our understanding of the world around us and thus determines our behavior towards things and people considered foreign, alien or different.

Another important feature of cultural representation that follows from the previously mentioned definition is that is always necessarily limited by and dependent on our historical, social and personal perspective (Webb, 2009: 7). Furthermore, 'cultural representation' implies the existence and the standpoint of a particular culture or a number of individuals who share values, norms, "meanings and conceptual maps" (Hall, 1997: 18). In situations of contact between two or more groups with distinctive cultural features, the differentiation between 'us' and 'them', i. e. between those who belong to a particular culture and those who do not, usually occurs. Very often, the group that is economically, politically and culturally dominant views the groups that are visibly different in terms of physical features and/or cultural traits as inferior. This is how power relations are formed and more often than not, the product of such relations is discrimination, i. e. overt disqualification of subordinate group members, based on prejudices rooted in stereotypes (Giddens, 2006: 492), the representational practice which will further be explained in the next section.

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[1] The other four phases are: *Identity, Production, Consumption* and *Regulation* (du Gay et al, 1997: 3).

2.2. Stereotyping

As we have already said, one of the most common strategies of representing other cultures and social groups is stereotyping. The term was first used in 1956 by Walter Lippman who connected this practice with the inherent human propensity for categorizing and imposing our own system of values on the world around us (Dyer, 1999). In his book on stereotyping, Michael Pickering (2001: 1, 4, 45) defines stereotypes as "major discursive device[s] in the ideological construction of social groups and categories" that "portray a social group or category as homogenous" and "socially exorcistic rituals" with the main function of "maintaining the boundaries of normality and legitimacy". This means that stereotypes are means of singling out and marking as inferior one particular group in the society on the basis of some ascribed characteristics. The power of naming, which Hall (1997: 259) calls "symbolic power", i.e. ascribing features, plays the utmost role in this process as this power comes hand in hand with the dominant position in the society.

Among the most important characteristics of stereotypes are: *inflexibility* – i. e. the fact that they are used to solidify and maintain the existing power relations in the society, *reductionism* – a tendency to single out a limited number of features and ascribe them to all members of one group, *evaluative ordering* – the role of stereotypes in creating binary oppositions in which one side, usually the subordinate group, is perceived and pictured as inferior, *naturalization* – ascribing negative features to the very nature of the members of subordinate groups and *resilience* – the fact that, once formed, stereotypes are not likely to be changed for a long time (Pickering, 2001: 3□5). Furthermore, when the members of a certain group in the society are reduced to a few essential, 'natural' characteristics, they are at the same time separated from what the dominant group considers 'normal' and thus excluded from the mainstream of society (Hall, 1997: 258), which is particularly the case with racial stereotyping.

2.2.1. Racial stereotyping

'Race' is a wildly unpopular term with social scientists[2] because of its implications and the infamous history of the term and its connection with racism. Giddens (2006: 493) defines racism[3] as "prejudice based on socially significant physical distinctions", which again emphasizes the power of ascribing on the part of the dominant group. Pickering (2004: 91) links 'race' with cultural difference. According to him, first one category becomes marked in relation to the unmarked one. In case of racial stereotypes the unmarked category is whiteness, which represents a

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[2] Eriksen (2010: 5□6) for example, insists on using it in the inverted commas to signal that "it is not a scientific term".

[3] In his brief overview of the development of racism, Rattansi (2007: 27) traces the philosophical and intellectual origin of modern racism in the works of two 18th-century philosophers – Immanuel Kant and David Hume who "were equally prone to evaluating the moral and intellectual worth of different peoples classified especially by skin colour".

standard for normality while everything that deviates from that standard is marked as racially and radically different, 'other', and thus, inferior, and undesirable. This supposed unsurpassable gap between 'us' and 'them', structured as a binary opposition between 'black' and 'white', 'civilized' and 'savage', etc. has a function of creating a false sense of irreconcilable opposition and is an important feature of a racialized discourse (Hall, 1997: 243).

Another noticeable, but not obvious, characteristic of racial stereotypes is that they are often based on conflicting premises: idealization on one hand, and a projected fantasy of deviance on the other (Pickering, 2004: 96; Hall, 1997: 263). For example, the most common stereotypes of African Americans are that they are lazy, naïve, child-like, but at the same time, violent, brutal and lusting for white women. A careful observation reveals that the image of a naïve child is hardly compatible with that of a brutal rapist, but the fact remains that both representations survive, without cancelling or contradicting each other. Slavoj Žižek (1993: 203) calls this "the theft of enjoyment" and, using Lacan's psychoanalytical insight, explains that the root of racism is in our paranoid jealousy of 'the other' which is suspected of stealing our pleasure, i. e. possessing something that we do not, while at the same perceiving that 'other' as incapable of understanding and acquiring 'our own special way of life'. Thus, fantasies and projection of the dominant group play an important part in the shaping of racial sterotypes which are imposed on the subordinate group.

2.2.2. Reversing strategies

If racial stereotypes are imposed on those who are in marginalized positions, the logical question is: can something be done about it, i.e. is there a possibility of subverting or/and reversing (racial) stereotypes?

Pickering (2004: 100) suggests that there are two immediate options for those who are stereotyped: either to internalize the alleged inferiority or idealization, thus succumbing to the representation by the dominant group or to come up with the strategies that would challenge the representation. Hall (1997: 270□277) starts from the premise that it is impossible to fix any meaning by representation, as all meanings are dependent on the context and thus prone to change. According to him, the most effective strategies for re-shaping the existing stereotypes are "trans-coding" strategies which involve "taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings" (*Ibid.*). Among the trans-coding strategies, Hall (*Ibid.*) identifies three most common approaches. The first one is the so-called "integrationist" approach, which involves acceptance of the inferior role prescribed by the dominant group in order to 'blend in' and acquire representation within the mainstream culture. The second is a more radical and reactionary one and it includes a complete and aggressive reversal and reinterpretation of stereotypes, so that those characteristics that were previously perceived and represented as negative are re-affirmed, re-represented and celebrated as positive and desirable (for example, the "Black is Beautiful" movement started in the USA during the 1960s). The third popular strategy is "contesting from within", i. e. acknowledging the ambiguities and limitations of the popular representations

and, instead of avoiding them, letting them take their own course and exploring them further, so that in the end stereotypes work against themselves as they are deconstructed and subverted from within.

The application of these strategies on the representations of African Americans in American film will be explored further in the following section.

3. Representing African Americans in American culture

The role of media in the dissemination of popular beliefs and stereotypes, especially nowadays, cannot be overstated. Teresa de Lauretis (quoted in hooks 1992: 118) emphasizes the importance of the discourses of mass media as powerful means of producing violence through discriminating and damaging representations, whereas John Fiske (2005: 2) reminds that dominance and hegemony depend on resistance and that every dominant discourse implicitly also contains contradictory voices. In the case of African Americans, stereotypical representations dating from the colonial period survived long into modernity and were transferred from the mainstream literature and culture into the media, especially film and TV.

3.1. Stereotyping African Americans

We have already said that common representations of African Americans in American culture and literature were often contradictory. Hall (1997: 263) points out that African Americans were trapped between the two most common traditions of representation: that of child-like innocence and ignorance (stupidity, idiocy) and of aggressive and threatening hypersexuality. Through the technique of naturalization (presenting some, usually negative, features as inborn and genetically pre-determined), the entire 'race' was perceived as lazy, ignorant, prone to mindless trickery and buffoonery in dominant discourses (*Ibid.*, p. 245). The purpose was to justify their enslavement, and later, their inferior political, economic, and cultural situation by representing them as natural-born servants and slaves. Pickering (2001: 125□128) notices the conflicting premises of those stereotypes: on one hand, African Americans were believed to be 'naturally' lazy and hedonistic, while on the other hand, their natural physical strength and stamina were used to rationalize their exploitation.

Physical characteristics of a black body became an important site of representation and remained so in contemporary culture. A black body was perceived as an epitome of "unlimited physical prowess and unbridled eroticism", and, therefore, it was "the body to be watched, imitated, desired, possessed" (hooks, 1992: 34), but also, the threatening body, the body to be afraid of. This is another very important implication that stereotypical representations of African Americans always carried: behind a face of a benevolent, feeble-minded, happy-go-lucky, servile and docile "Tom", "Coon" or "Sambo" belied irrational cruelty and violence which threatened white 'civilization', most often embodied in a figure of a white woman (Pickering, 2001: 125□128).

Thus, it became necessary for the white masters to keep the "black brutes and rapists" under constant control and supervision and to prevent miscegenation at all costs. This is how the discourse of discrimination operated: the oppressed were represented as both willing and 'natural' subjects as well as potential violent and 'savage' threats to the balance of the (white) universe.

3.2. African Americans in American film

When it comes to the representations of African Americans in popular cinema, several common stereotypes and their variations as well as several stages of development of 'black' characters can be identified. Representations of African Americans have changed along with the political circumstances and the development of the movement for racial equality (hooks, 1992: 117). From the very beginnings of Hollywood cinema in which there was no room for black actors, through the periods of "Blaxploitation" and "biracial buddies", up to the present-day re-visits, re-inventions and re-constructions of common stereotypes, we can trace the shift in the perception of African Americans reflected in their representation on screen.

In his seminal study on stereotyping African Americans in Hollywood movies, Donald Bogle identifies five most common stereotypical representations and their offshoots and modifications.

The first and the oldest stereotype, which originated at the beginning of the 20th century, was the so-called "Uncle Tom" – a faithful servant, who willingly and happily sacrifices himself for his white master (Bogle, 2001: 4□7). With his only purpose to serve and his immense pride of that function, "Uncle Tom" was a direct product of racist thinking, i. e. the belief that the 'black race' is naturally preordained to be below the white one. According to that logic, African Americans are happy to be servants and slaves, because that is the 'natural order of things'. At first, the character was played by white actors in blackface, as African Americans had not yet been allowed on screen. For a long time, "Uncle Tom" remained the only black character that white audience accepted – servile, submissive and happy with his 'natural' inferior position. The so-called "Servant Syndrome", i.e. representations of African Americans as faithful servants who belong in the kitchen, laundry or a pantry, providing a contrast to the white ladies and gentlemen evolved from the "Uncle Tom" stereotype (Guerrero, 1993: 33□38).

The second common stereotype was that of "The Coon" (Bogle, 2001: 7□8) or the "black buffoon". The purpose of "The Coon" characters was to represent African Americans as objects of ridicule and entertainment for the whites: lacking intelligence, ridiculous, good-for-nothing, thieves, rogues. There were also several variations of this type such as the "Pickaninny" a well-known and much exploited representation of a black child, funny, cute, but feeble-minded, with a wide grin, protruding eyes and curly hair, or the "Uncle Remus" – the cousin of "Uncle Tom" – famous for his naïve philosophizing. This was another very popular and enduring representation of African Americans: that of "jesters" – singing, dancing, comic, naïve characters, represented almost as cartoons with the purpose of proving white superiority in intelligence and reason (Guerrero, 1993: 40).

As far as the representations of African American women are concerned, two most common stereotypes that Bogle identifies were that of "The Tragic Mulatto" and "The Mammy" (Bogle, 2001: 9). The first one was a mixed-race seductress, beautiful and luscious but bound to meet the tragic ending – the message being that the mixing of two races is impossible and will inevitably end in a catastrophe. "The Tragic Mulatto" was a precursor of many mixed-race movie and music superstars as well as of another stereotype which appeared in 1970s and 1980s – that of a "highly sexualized black super woman" (Guerrero, 1993: 251□252). "The Mammy" character – that of a fat, noisy, angry black woman but good-hearted, reliable, sensible, and faithful servant, a part of a white household – also survived for a long time and had several modifications. The most notable ones were that of "Aunt Jemima" – a female counterpart of "Uncle Tom": religious and mild-tempered and "Handkerchief Head"[4] – (Bogle, 2001: 9). One very important feature of "The Mammy" characters was that they were always represented as household servants and housekeepers, the positions reserved for African Americans, but were still appreciated for their honesty and good advice. In other words, they were integrated into the white society, but only in inferior positions, as prescribed by the dominant culture. hooks (1992: 74) observes that the portrayal of African American women even in contemporary cinema continues to oscillate between the categories of "mammy" or a "slut", or, occasionally, both.

The infamous *Birth of a Nation* (1915) directed by D. W. Griffith introduced the character of the "Black Buck" – a violent, black thug, a highly sexual black male, a rapist and a threat to both white America and white American women's purity (Bogle, 2001: 10□18; Guerrero, 1993: 217). This turned out to be perhaps the most enduring stereotype of the five mentioned. The character of the "Black Buck" became especially prominent during the 1970s, when the director Melvin Van Peebles started the "buckmania" by introducing the "cool-as-a-cucumber black stud" or a "badass niger", usually originating from the ghetto, using profane language and fighting against and defeating the corrupted white system (Guerrero, 1993: 230□242). In the period from 1969□1974, over sixty action-adventure movies based on black narratives with exclusively black cast were produced in Hollywood. Due to a limited scope of plots, settings and characters and the facts that those films mostly targeted black audience and gained their popularity by exploiting and perpetuating stereotypes of black people, that era became known as "Blaxploitation" (*Ibid.*, 69).

The stereotypes of black male characters can be said to have evolved from the so-called "ebony saints", Sidney Poitier being the most famous example, submissive and well-mannered, to "superspades" (*Shaft*) – violent, angry and rebellious. Even though those categories seem completely opposite, what they both have in common is that they tailored black characters so as to fit them into the frame of reference provided by the white imagination.

Furthermore, up until recently, the majority of characters portrayed by African American actors and actresses have been either "comics, entertainers, athletes and

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[4] The (in)famous example of this stereotype is the recurring black character of "Mammy Two Shoes" in *Tom and Jerry* animated TV series.

criminals" as opposed to a significantly smaller number of well-rounded, complex characters (Guerrero, 1993: 7). The movie that will be explored in more detail in the following section can be considered a leader in a new wave of movies that broaden the perspective so as to include the point of view of those who used to be solely objects of representation.

4. 'Black' Hollywood history recreated: one recent example

"I say, no man of conscience can take the lash to another human, day in and day out without shredding at his own self."[5]

Based on a common premise in cultural studies that any cultural product – be it a book, a TV show or a movie – can be interpreted and 'read' as a text (Longhurst, 2008: 26), *12 Years A Slave* (2013), a recent Hollywood motion picture directed by Steve McQueen, was chosen for analysis. This Oscar-winning movie is widely considered the best and the most complex portrayal of slavery so far: it is almost universally critically acclaimed and immensely popular with audiences all over the world, including the USA.

4.1. Reversing stereotypes

12 Years a Slave is a film based on a slave narrative of Solomon Northup, a free African American from the North of the USA, who was abducted and sold into slavery in Louisiana, where he remained from 1841 to 1853. The director of the film Steve McQueen is an African American, as is the screenplay writer John Ridley, as well as the majority of the cast. It is a story about slavery told from a point of view of direct descendants of slaves[6] and not, as many of its Hollywood predecessors, a sentimentalized, and nostalgic reminiscence about the 'glorious' past.

The first thing we learn about Solomon Northup is that although he lives in the non-slavery territory, the respective professions of him and his wife – a fiddler and a servant, testify of the jobs 'reserved' for African Americans in that period, and perhaps, point towards the origin of the "Servant Syndrome" on film. One of Solomon's masters tells him that growing sugar cane "comes naturally" to him, again emphasizing the supposed 'racial predestination', the view prevalent in the antebellum American society, both in the North and in the South. It is not without significance that Solomon is abducted from Washington, D.C. and that at the very moment when he is about to be sent down south into slavery, we see the snow-white dome of the White House, which stands for the USA, the country based on the premise that "all men are created equal".

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[5] McQueen, S. 2013. *12 Years a Slave* [motion picture]. All subsequent quotations are from this movie.

[6] Interestingly, one of the members of the supporting cast, a British actor Benedict Cumberbatch, is a descendant of former British sugar plantation owners (Guardian 2014, available: http://www. theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/02/benedict-cumberbatch-sorry-for-slave-owners-family)

When it comes to stereotypes and derogatory terms used to describe African Americans, there are numerous instances of those practices in the movie. During a slave auction—in this scene, a particularly powerful effect is produced by a contrast between a beautiful drawing room in which classical music is played, while families of slaves are torn apart screaming—a slave-trader ironically called Mr. Freeman refers to a black boy as "a fine beast". Master Epps, the character that stands for the "bad master", uses various derogatory terms for his "property": "heathens", "godless lot", "baboons", "black dogs", "black animals". We become aware of the significance of the power of naming especially when Solomon's real name is changed into Platt so that he could be sold into slavery: it is his name that could testify to his freedom but using it would mean his death sentence. Whenever any of the black characters dare to cross the boundaries set by the stereotypes imposed by the whites, they are cruelly punished. One of the first lessons that Solomon learns in his slave life is never to reveal that he can read or write, never to show his true self that surpasses the preconception: "[survival] is about keeping your head down". However, a full-rounded treatment of characters by the director and the cast subverts those stereotypes from within. We see that those referred to as "animals" possess all characteristics of human beings – good and bad, whereas their masters who are supposed to exhibit civility actually behave like beasts.[7]

Another feature commonly ascribed to African Americans in popular representation is their alleged proneness to trickery. In a scene when master Epps accuses Solomon of using his "slick nigger ways" to deceive him, ironically, it is precisely by lying that Solomon manages to save himself. Instead of illustrating the point that African Americans are indeed deceitful, the scene makes the audience sympathetic to Solomon and his suffering: we realize that it is white paranoia and projection that are making him lie and the stereotype is made to work against itself.

4.2. Black bodies as means of resistance

The image of a black body is repeatedly used in the film to illustrate the relations between white masters and black slaves. Black bodies are tortured, scarred, beaten, whipped, dragged, abused, exposed, raped, bruised, hanged, lynched, strangled, twitching, lifeless and puppet-like, but still muscular, beautiful and desirable. A black body becomes synonymous with the African American experience: attractive and repulsive at the same time; desired, but yet in need of being disciplined and controlled; beaten and bruised, but still surviving. On several occasions throughout the movie, we have compelling illustrations of how African Americans were reduced to mere bodies by their masters, the most notable examples being the dancing scene and the rape scene.

In the dancing scene, after a hard day's work, slaves are woken in the middle of the night by master Epps and made to dance for his pleasure. Their almost lifeless bodies

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[7] The portrayal of white characters is somewhat limited, perhaps intentionally. We have an array of flat, stereotypical characters: "the cruel slave driver", "the good master", "the bad master", whereas the only honorable white man is, significantly, a Canadian.

resemble puppets on strings and the empty looks on their faces reveal the very horror of slavery – how a person is reduced to a shell or a shadow of him/herself. In the rape scene, we see a female black body abused. Patsey's lack of reaction while she is being violated and strangled is a particularly powerful representation of helplessness and victimization on one hand, and cruelty and horror on the other. What makes these scenes so compelling is the fact that we are *shown* black bodies, but we cannot help but *see* black faces which reveal enormous suffering of fellow human beings. Instead of merely being an object of observation and punishment, a black body becomes a symbol of profound human suffering and a site for resistance and subversion of the discourse of discrimination.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have attempted to give a brief overview of some of the most relevant research of cultural representation and to apply those findings to a cultural analysis of a film. The analysis has revealed that some significant changes in media representations of African Americans have been made and that, after a long period of marginalization, African Americans have moved into the media mainstream, both as authors and as subjects of representation.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that the enormous success of *12 Years a Slave* and a recent Hollywood trend of revisiting and retelling (African) American history coincides with the rule of President Obama, the first African American president of the U.S. This is in line with the argument that social and historical contexts have a crucial role in determining which course cultural representations will take. The question remains whether the story told in *12 Years a Slave* is meant to cater for the taste of the, largely white, liberal audience and critics—i.e. the dominant group, which would make this movie yet another case of contemporary 'Blaxploitation' or whether the history is finally being reshaped so as to include the voices of all participants.

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(RE)DEFINISANJE DISKURSA DISKRIMINACIJE: PREDSTAVE O AFROAMERIKANCIMA U AMERIČKOM FILMU

Rezime

Rad se bavi nastankom i preoblikovanjem diskursa rasne diskriminacije prisutnog u holivudskim filmovima koji se posmatraju kao oblici kulturne prakse. Naglasak je na razvoju stereotipa o Afroamerikancima u američkom filmu i njihovoj upotrebi u legitimizaciji, širenju, a odskora i podrivanju, diskriminatornih praksi. U prvom delu rada daje se teorijski okvir za analizu iz multidisciplinarne perspektive studija kulture, sa posebnim osvrtom na koncepte predstavljanja, razlike i moći. Rasne stereotipije Afroamerikanaca nastale su još u kolonijalnom periodu američke istorije ali su opstale do danas i gotovo nepromenjene preselile se u domen filma. Klasifikacija stereotipa o Afroamerikancima koju je dao Donald Bogl (Donald Bogle, 2006) koristi se kao polazna osnova za analizu nekih od trenutno najpopularnijih američkih filmova. Cilj istraživanja je preispitivanje praksi predstavljanja koje se u koriste u savremenim holivudskim filmovima i njihov potencijal za podrivanje i transformisanje ukorenjenih stereotipa o Afroamerikancima.

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