

## **Introduction**

“Black people are just not that smart. It is not possible that they invented all of that stuff,” a co-worker said to my mother.

She interjected, telling him that a black person invented the traffic light, the ironing board, and a whole host of inventions. This co-worker is college educated and yet still deems blacks as less than. How is that?

After hearing this from my mom, it only further proved the need for a new conversation about black people. To say to a black person that their entire race is unintelligent is disrespectful but more importantly speaks to these gaps in knowledge that other races have towards one another – a big proponent of that is perception. Black history is so often separated from American history when American history would not be possible without blacks’ contribution. The free labor from the enslavement of Africans moved the United States dramatically forward economically and politically.

Although blacks have been an integral part of American society, blacks are often seen as the problem repeatedly portrayed as villains, criminals, and thugs in the media (television, Internet, radio, and any print medium). Media reaches every corner of the world. Media, especially television, work as the bridge between a person’s world and the “real” world, it allows for an illumination on other’s cultures, acting as a window into other people’s lives. Media portrayals, therefore, have a profound effect on people’s perceptions of race, gender, sexuality, and class, mitigating ignorance of the unknown about certain groups of people. Thus, media acts as a form of advertising, branding these perceptions of others on the brains of the ignorant. So, this co-worker’s idea of the unintelligent black man and woman cannot fully begin to change when there are few positive images of blacks in comparison to the hoards of negative images and

stereotypes. His ignorance directly explains why my thesis project *Can We Live?* is important. *Can We Live?* is about showing the impact that African Americans have had on American society through acknowledging unrecognized African American inventors. Blacks are rarely shown as resourceful or innovative or intelligent. By choosing black inventors, the narrative of all that African Americans are and can be begins to open.

### **Contextual Background**

To understand the complexity that comes with African American representation in America, one must examine slavery's influence on the perceptions of blacks. In 1712, Willie Lynch, a British slave owner, gave a speech describing how to pit slaves against one another. In the speech, he stressed creating distrust and envy amongst them, arguing that it was stronger than anything – trust, respect, or admiration.<sup>1</sup> He stated that the slaves could be divided by age, color, intelligence, size, sex, and hair texture.

Because of these diverging categories, many different issues in the black community were created. I feel that the main issues from slavery that corrupt the black image are colorism and racial stereotypes. Colorism is the intra-racial discrimination based on color where light skin people are favored over dark skin people. It started in slavery by the division of light slaves and dark slaves; the light slaves, mostly women, were allowed/forced to live in the house and the dark slaves were out in the field. The house slaves lived a “better” life than field slaves, therefore creating a rift between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks.<sup>2</sup> This was reinforced by the treatment of whites as the superior beings – the closer to white, the better your life would be.

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<sup>1</sup> Finalcall.com News, “Willie Lynch Letter: The Making of a Slave,” *The Final Call*, May 22, 2009, accessed November 15, 2015, [http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/Perspectives\\_1/Willie\\_Lynch\\_letter\\_The\\_Making\\_of\\_a](http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/Perspectives_1/Willie_Lynch_letter_The_Making_of_a)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Regardless of being light skin or biracial, living as a black person is never easy. Take for example Norbert Rillieux, the inventor of the multiple effect evaporator, was a biracial man. As a free man in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he was “better” than a slave but not seen as equal to whites. Although a successful inventor, he was still not allowed to stay in the master’s house when he was installing his invention on plantations and it did not protect him from the strict, discriminatory laws enacted during the Civil War.

In addition to colorism, there are seven racial stereotypes that still shape the negativity and misrepresentation of blacks: Jim Crow, Savage, Sambo, Mandingo, Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. Jim Crow is a clumsy buffoon, always dancing and wisecracking. The Savage was a brute, violent – stupid, unevolved, and apelike – and was associated with both sexes but was typically talked about with men. The Sambo is the simple-minded, docile, happy male slave and is seen as naturally lazy therefore needing the master to give him direction. The Mandingo is a well-endowed, aggressively sexual man. The Mammy is an asexual, fat woman, typically depicted as dark-skinned, and has an unnatural devotion to white domestic concerns. The Jezebel, the counterpart to the Mandingo, is sexually promiscuous – this stereotype was created to explain why white men “slept” with their female slaves. It was not the man’s fault, he was innocent and fell victim to her allure. She is typically depicted as light-skinned with “good” hair. The Sapphire is the brash, emasculating woman with a bad attitude and a big mouth; this stereotype was not derived from slavery but from a character on the television show *Amos ‘N’ Andy* in the 1950s (which was based off of the 1930s radio show with the same title). Every subsequent stereotype of blacks can be originated from these seven.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Yarbrough and Crystal Bennett, “Mammy, Jezebel, and Sistahs,” *Race, Racism and the Law*, unknown, accessed November 20, 2015,

### Overrepresented Yet Misrepresented: Representations of African Americans

Before the 1960's Civil Rights Movement, there were few representations of blacks that were not in some way derogatory or degrading to blacks' image. Although there is a natural inclination to believe that there is no racism in the United States anymore, the racism enacted throughout US history has had continual effects on the discriminated. Unlike the '60s, blacks are actually overrepresented on television. Blacks only make up 12-13% of the population yet 14-17% of blacks are primetime television characters.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, that 14-17% is not all positive representations. On top of that, women in general are portrayed differently than men in film and television. After a certain age, the average being 30 to 35, women are no longer casted as sexual beings and begin to play mothers or grandmothers.<sup>5</sup> Even in G-rated films, women tend to be young and sexualized.

Therefore, African American women are basically double minorities (female and black; although women are not a minority, they are treated as such as seen through the "expected" roles of women as mothers and housekeepers as well as the pay gap). For example, think of a famous black female inventor. Madame CJ Walker is probably who comes to mind – she is one of the few black female inventors that one can find more than a page on. Take the women I am looking at for my project. Sarah Boone (ironing board), Madeline Turner (fruit press), and Sacramenta Tankins (pressing comb and hair products) are women that have contributed to society, moving the pendulum forward in each of their respective fields, yet I cannot find much on any of these women. I literally had to piece together elements of their lives by searching through historical

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[http://www.racism.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1277:aawomen01a&catid=72&Itemid=215](http://www.racism.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1277:aawomen01a&catid=72&Itemid=215)

<sup>4</sup> Jennings Bryant, Susan Thompson, and Bruce W. Finklea, *Fundamentals of Media Effects: Second Edition* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, Inc., 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



documents on Ancestry.com and other similar websites. However, I did not struggle at all in finding information on the male inventors. I found books and articles, even finding information on their personalities. The neglect is ever present throughout history for women and so black women fall even more victim to being forgotten. Starting in the 1990s, the Inventor Hall of Fame started to induct African Americans and there has yet to be a black woman inducted.

#### What One Sees Makes A Difference

African Americans are among the heaviest viewers of television. Black households have the television on about three hours a day longer than white households.<sup>6</sup> Due to this, blacks are more prone to cultivation effects. Cultivation proposes that over time, heavy viewers of television develop or cultivate views of the world similar to what they see on television. The implication of blacks seen in an inherently negative light through the media promotes an unconscious self-hate to minorities in an effort to maintain the everlasting white supremacy and privilege. These negative images can be mitigated by parents, but never truly destroyed and can possibly cause self-esteem issues. Cultivation also affects white viewers. White viewers who heavily view media with stereotyped portrayals of minorities tend to believe those stereotypes.<sup>7</sup> These mediated stereotypes permeate cultural racism (the idea that cultural images and messages affirm the assumed superiority of whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color). The media may not have caused these problems, but they definitely reinforce them. “In the last couple of years, there has been a major increase in crimes against minorities by white citizens or by the police. Local TV news coverage disproportionately shows black criminals and white victims, according to the Entman and Rojecki study. White, middle-class citizens, therefore, always think there’s some black attacker lurking in the shadows ready to pounce with little

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

reason.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the misrepresentation in the media, blacks, especially black children, are given the ideas of what success looks like as a black person through the media, creating these black heroes. These “black heroes” are the ones that are successful at their job, doing well financially. They tend to be actresses, actors, singers, musicians, and athletes. Too many black people harp on finding success as a singer or actress or basketball player because that is so often what they see on television as positive representation. These “black heroes” are seen as a means to a financially successful life. For many black people, especially those who live or grew up with less than, that is a huge goal in life – to not struggle as your relatives have. Due to the negative and/or stereotypical narrative and the lack of diversity in black role models (black heroes), the importance of focusing on blacks’ contribution to American society through the scope of black inventors is evident. So the question becomes, why did I choose inventors for blacks’ contribution?

When you probably think of contributions that blacks have made, they are usually talked about in terms of these “black heroes”, not saying that their contribution to society –that the barriers broken through their accomplishments – aren’t important or valuable. But I think that the media primarily shows these as black accomplishments, and are typically seen as the only “benefits” that blacks have made to society. The implication of blacks seen in an inherently limited view causes a stereotype as well. We are talented and athletic but never really portrayed as intelligent.

The racial stereotypes that I talked about earlier (on page 3) along with the negative and

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<sup>8</sup> Layla A. Jones, “#Iftheygunnedmedown: How the Media Killed Michael Brown,” *Philly.com*, August 21, 2014, accessed February 1, 2017  
<http://www.philly.com/philly/blogs/lifestyle/Iftheygunnedmedown-How-media-the-killed-Michael-Brown.html>

limited portrayals of African Americans throughout history created a negative attitude around being a black inventor. Black inventors were considered slightly better than other blacks – they escaped the animalistic nature in every black.<sup>9</sup> These assumptions of dangerousness and guilt follow every black person around. Education does not denounce skin/blackness but fostering the mind and imagination lead to possibilities other than a musician, singer, actor, or athlete.

Inventors are important because they emulate the idea of innovation, creativity, brilliance, and resourcefulness. Many black inventors, especially ones that invented prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, battled many deterrents, whether that is racism and discrimination or lack of resources or limited by education. They created processes or objects that improved life – things that were never thought of before or finding a way to improve something that wasn't working well before – that takes creativity and intelligence to do.

#### Challenging and Changing the Conversation: Artists Who Deal with Blackness

There are many artists whose work recognizes blacks and blackness such as Kehinde Wiley, Kara Walker, Romare Bearden, Kerry James Marshall, Sanford Biggers, K.A. Williams (WAK), and Hank Willis Thomas to name a few. Kehinde Wiley addresses the eradication of blacks through the visual depictions of history, honoring those forgotten while speaking upon the tendency of blacks to be seen as invisible historically and currently. His paintings are photorealistic and are typically larger than life, looming over the viewers prohibiting these black figures from being ignored. Kara Walker addresses slavery and segregation issues, making sure that these unnamed, “irrelevant” people are not ignored. She sparks controversy with her work – it is either seen as degrading or empowering, but regardless her work incites the viewer's attention by calling to the uncomfortable topic of slavery for inspiration. In calling to slavery,

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<sup>9</sup> Rayvon Fouché, introduction to *Black Inventors in the Age of Segregation: Granville T. Woods, Lewis H. Latimer, & Shelby J. Davidson*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), xxv.

she comments about the injustice and its effects to the black community currently. Walker primarily works in black and white silhouettes – I chose to do the same for my project.

Romare Bearden celebrates the African American experience, recognizing the beauty of black culture. Kerry James Marshall displays scenes that blacks were historically excluded from due to their blackness. He shows the cruelty of the past while displaying a sense of black pride by emphasizing skin tone. His characters are beautifully dark, unequivocally black and are shown enjoying the things that their ancestors could not. Sanford Biggers primarily speaks upon ignored, black history through multiple mediums. K.A. Williams (WAK) typically creates multimedia paintings regarding black history. Biggers and Williams always include historical documents into their work, not only adding content to their works but inherently adding real context to it. The historical documents are undeniable pieces of history therefore their work truly talks about the injustices that blacks faced throughout history. Hank Willis Thomas finds connections and comparisons to the present issues within black and pop culture to the past, recognizing and acknowledge the past in and with the present.

Yet none of the artists I know of speak about it through the narrative of inventions or inventors. Most inventors and inventions tend to be in children's books typically described in the most simplified manner. Although there is adult content on inventions and inventors, there are rarely visual aspects within them. When there are, they are portraits of the inventors, images of the invention, and maybe explanations of how the invention functions. All too often when addressing inventors, the person is forgotten but for their achievement. Who they were are seldom included in the history books but what they discovered or created becomes a permanent mark in history yet no one knows Dr. George Washington Carver's favorite book or Lewis Latimer's favorite meal. Inventors are amounted to nothing more than a bullet list of

accomplishments and if that inventor is a minority or a female or both, they are seen as a national treasure for their respective groups. They advanced their people through their accomplishments. Therefore, my project primarily addresses who the inventors were while their invention(s) and its impact on society is secondary information. This in an effort to show the impact that these unrecognized African American inventors have made while also acknowledging them as individuals not as a collective to advance African Americans.

### **Methodology**

When originally looking at my project, I wanted to create posters about the inventors, their inventions, and the impact of their inventions and months into my project, I decided on five accordion-fold books about five inventors, using printmaking for the images and hand-lettering the text for the books. The primary things that helped me get to this conclusion were observation, brainstorming, drawing, experimenting, and writing. Initially, I looked into other artists' work to see what I liked, what I thought would be fitting in terms of form and function, and what other people who had related topics decided to do to convey context and content. More importantly, I think through writing so I did a lot of brainstorming to figure out what I wanted to say and what inventors I wanted to focus on. I decided upon posters because I wanted to do something that would grab attention and I wanted to something within my wheelhouse. I am a 2D artist, focused on drawing, painting, hand lettering, printmaking, screenprinting, and graphic design. Within the first two months of my project, I created mock posters for one of my inventors. I drew and painted the images then scanned them into the computer and then I arranged them with my text to create the posters. From this exploration and the critique, I realized that posters were not going to be effective. The posters had entirely too much text on them and the posters felt so removed and dull. They did not do justice for these unrecognized people at all. I discovered that I wanted

to do a handmade/ hand-done process, debating between screenprinting and printmaking, to honor the hard work and dedication that inventors had to put in to create their inventions.

I learned to screenprint studying abroad in Italy so I started by printmaking, which I had not done since freshman year. I knew that I wanted to tell a story but I was not quite sure in what way yet, I created a lot of sketches to decide on the silhouette figures that I would use for the images in the books. I was inspired to use silhouette figures because I love Kara Walker's work and I think that you can say so much with something so simple. At first, I wanted to create something (I wasn't quite sure on the form) that primarily told the story visually with minimal text. But when sketching for it, I decided against it because the inventor I was focusing on at the time (Norbert Rillieux) was more obscure and I thought that some of the situations in his life were too complicated to be depicted in black and white silhouette. Instead, I created prints focused around the inventions. I made print after print, experimenting with materials along the way.

With all of the experimenting, my mind came across a problem I had at my internship. I needed to figure out a fold for a pull out map in a brochure and since I had been only working on flat surfaces, I took one of my prints and folded and cut it up, making a small zine from it. (A zine is a low budget, self-published magazine that is outside of mainstream, used as a form of self-expression.) In critique it was the one experiment that received the most response and so I began to explore that more. I created text for the zine and hand-lettered it. Then, I began to examine scale, making mockups of different sizes. Finally deciding to make the zine 5 by 5 inches. Within this, I also examined the use of hand-lettering (would the text be large enough to read, color of the text, and things of that nature). Due to the folds and cuts in the zine, the hand-lettered text created a non-linear narrative, which could be hard to follow. For clarity, I decided

to create an accordion fold book. The text with limited images would be on the front side and the imagery would be on the back. After finally deciding on my form, I needed to finalize which inventors I would be focusing on. Choosing lesser-known inventors was a conscious decision. Although having made significant inventions that have bettered modern life, their names remain unknown. Also, in choosing the five, I wanted to choose more women than men. Black female inventors are highly ignored in history, as I've stated before, and I wanted to honor them by consciously choosing to recognize more women than men.

Lastly, writing was a huge influence on my project. I had to rewrite my text about four times. I struggled so much with finding the content for these inventors because I wanted it to be more than facts. So, I started writing in the way I think. I am always talking to myself in my head and out loud. I began to think about ways to connect these long dead inventors to people of the 21st century. What could they have in common? And then it hit me; we are all humans regardless of race. Everyone has experienced happiness, grief, anger, sadness, and a whole host of other emotions. So I aimed to find a moment in these inventors lives that were relatable in some way. I imagined finding this information through having a conversation with them. The text ended up being me having a fictional conversation with these inventors. That may sound odd, but I believe that in conversation, you can see someone. You can forget about all that they have accomplished and just see them as another human being trying to live their life. They have struggled and overcome obstacles in their lives as everyone has and will. I wanted to constantly keep in mind, through choices in imagery and content, that they impacted American society but they are not just historical figures, they lived.

### **Creative Work**

For the books, I utilized the capabilities for the accordion fold book, using the front of the book for the content/text and the back for imagery as seen by the following images of the book for Madeline Turner. I chose to have a few prints of the imagery on the front to give a little hint of what they invented and on the last page on the back, I wrote all of their inventions and the day of their patents to thoroughly inform people of what they actually invented if it was not obvious through imagery or the text on the front.



This is the front of the book for Madeline Turner, inventor of the fruit press. Note the question marks regarding her date of birth and date of death.





This is the back of the book for Madeline Turner.



This is the front of the book for Lewis Latimer. Note how much text is in his book.

All of the books have the same number of pages. This visually allows for the examination of the lack of information on black female inventors. Look at the front of Madeline's book and the front of Lewis's book. He has a wealth of information while she has question marks regarding something as simple as her date of birth and date of death. It was extremely difficult to

find any information on her personal life while finding his was easy. I think this visual comparison is one of the strongest points with the books because it is not something that had to be written down for viewers to understand.

## **Conclusion**

I am very happy with my books and I know that they fulfill the goals that I wanted to achieve. My goals were to acknowledge black inventors' contributions to American society, to acknowledge the oversight of black female inventors, and to make the text more personable and compelling. The only thing that I wish that I had done was to think and plan out an effective way to replicate the books. I struggled with that because I would want each replica to have the same physicality of the originals but that would take a lot of time to make multiple copies by hand. (By physicality, I mean that I want the viewer to be able to feel the print and the cloth of the book cover as you would if you touched the original.) Exploring different processes of replication as well as creating more books about different black inventors is one of the ways to continue with my thesis. I would love to continue because there are so many forgotten and neglected black inventors to bring to light and acknowledge.

While doing my thesis, I took a class on patterns. I think this would also be an interesting way to think about my thesis. For my final project in the course, I created patterned posters. I used my three women from my thesis as my subject, using the same imagery only creating it digitally. With minimum text, only have the women's name, date of birth and death, the title of their invention, and the day it was patented, my classmates still understood that these women were neglected in history. Experiencing that critique, I know that that is a possibility to explore. Lastly, after my exhibition, I would love to have another one for my books. I would like for it to

be in a library (like the Detroit Public Library or the Southfield Public Library), since the primary goal is to educate others that these people existed, what better place is there.

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