

The Complexity of American “Criminals”: Racial Formation as Resistance

By Itzamar Carmona Felipe

Society undermines the intelligence of young children, especially children from minority groups. Such youth, however, should not be thought less of. These children grow up in environments that expect them to do less than to nothing with their lives. In his essay, *A Talk to Teachers*, James Baldwin gives a clear example of this misconception. He analyzes how an African American street boy looks at the environment of which he is a part and “understands that this structure is operated for someone else’s benefit— not for his... If he is really cunning, really ruthless, really strong... He becomes a kind of criminal because that’s the only way he can live”(681). Baldwin has clearly stated that children of color who grow up in environments with a lack of resources are aware of the situation they are in. It is not because these children lack awareness that they end up as “criminals”; on the contrary, it is because they are aware of what society expects of them that they become “criminals.” It is odd to think that people would live up to a standard that is meant to harm them; however, when such a standard has been internalized through generations it is easier to understand why these children grow up to be a certain way. Given structural inequality’s relationship to “criminality,” this paper argues that the concept of racial formation has been used to uphold structural inequality and simultaneously support its resistance.

In order to understand the concept of racial formation, it is necessary to understand the definition of racial categories. When referring to race and racial categories, this essay is not referring to the biological aspect of race. Racial categories are defined as stigmatized systemic labels that have developed throughout the years— a concept not proven by science but upheld by society. Omi and Winant define racial formation as the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed”(55). This means that racial formation is not set in stone; on the contrary, it is a flexible concept that has been shaped throughout the years. Although racial formation is a concept that has been created it is important to understand the very real effects that it has on people’s everyday lives.

It is also essential to define internalized oppression as the process through which people believe the stereotypes of their racial categories and act according to these assumptions. In his essay, *Still Separate, Still Unequal: America’s Educational Apartheid*, Jonathon Kozol exemplifies internalized oppression by example. In his essay he quotes the head of a Chicago school that had been criticized for using robotic learning methods. The head of the school did not dispute the charges but instead stated “ ‘Did you ever stop to think that these robots will never burglarize your home?’ he asked, ‘and will never snatch your pocketbooks. These robots are going to be producing taxes.’”(655). This person’s response is a clear example of a standard that society has for inner city children. Inner city youth mostly consist of poor communities and people of color. Therefore, when speaking of inner-city youth the head of the school is referring to minorities. These minorities are criminalized; the person in charge expects inner city children to become criminals if they are not robotized. The person who is supposed to help those children develop as members of society believes that the best they can be is

robots. Indirectly or directly, the head of the school will pass on this belief to the children themselves. He would do this through his actions, curriculums and statements such as the one above. The children will most likely start to believe the standard the head of the school has given them. Internalizing oppression is not a conscious choice, but people who do undergo this process sometimes have a choice of how to use that oppression. Other times the outcome of internalized oppression is not up to them.

Not only is internalized oppression an issue that harms people on its own, but it also leads to the preservation of structural inequality as seen through the educational system. Structural inequalities are advantages and disadvantages for certain people that are built into a system. The person in charge of the Chicago school has such low standards for inner city children because of the stigmatized label attached to racial categories, in this case African Americans. African Americans have been one of the groups of people that have constantly had to battle structural inequality since the formation of this country. From slavery to prisons, the system has been built to marginalize people of color, as shown through internalized oppression. It is like a never-ending cycle of the oppressor and oppressed. There is an expectation for this certain group of people. The individuals in this group then intentionally or unintentionally absorb the negative stereotypes put forward by society. This then results in the individual perpetuating the standard. Schools for example do not educate inner city children to be intellectual thinkers; instead they use the banking system of education to create robots that will uphold the status quo. This allows those in power to stay at the top, hence the head of the school's comment about inner city youth as "robots" who will produce taxes. The taxes are obviously not for the benefit of the child but for the person in power just like how Baldwin states in his essay. The person in charge of the school in Chicago makes it clear that, in his opinion, there are only two options for the children in that school: to become a criminal or a robot.

This process of criminalization is only degrading because the justice system stigmatizes criminality with second-class citizenship, thereby making becoming a "criminal" the unwanted choice. This stigma is born from conflicts created by the government such as the Drug on War. The Drug on War was and is an attack on minority groups. It is no coincidence that Ronald Reagan's presidency launched the Drug on War during a time period in which crack cocaine, the main target of the program, was not a massive problem in poor inner city neighborhoods. This war led to the mass incarceration of African Americans who are forever after labeled as criminals. The word criminal carries not only an enormous social stigma but also a political one. According to Michelle Alexander, author of the *New Jim Crow*, "Once you've been labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of education opportunity...—are suddenly legal"(2). From this quote, it is clear that society justifies discrimination by labeling people as "criminals". This is an example of racial formation because the label "criminal" is used to marginalize a group of people by implying that they deserve their basic human rights to be taken away from them for not following the law. Since becoming a "criminal" in the United States means losing basic rights, people are more likely to think that this is a negative thing. They will not see that being a "criminal" is only harmful because of the way that it is structured. In reality being a criminal just means not following the norm, but by adding

severe consequences to this term, the justice system is able to control a whole group of people in and out of prisons, with the threat that they will become second-class citizens.

Despite the fact that there is trepidation within marginalized communities, there is also resistance: the ability to survive in a given environment that is meant to oppress and destroy. There are and have been movements in society that allow for slogans that emerge from social formation, such as “black is beautiful” to be used in a transformative way. There are also artists such as Tupac who influence specific groups of people with their lyrics: “they say the darker the berry the sweeter the juice, I say the darker the flesh then the deeper the roots.” These political slogans that are based on racial formation have brought people together instead of splitting them apart. Even though most people believe that racial formation leads to stereotypes, this aspect of racial formation does not always have to be negative. Even though becoming a “criminal,” as James Baldwin states, does not seem to be a form of resistance, it is. It is resisting the status quo. People who become “criminals” are the one’s who have rebelled against the system and are deviant from the rest. Although society labels them as “criminals”, if the subject were Caucasian they would be labeled as heroes, because they are standing up to an unjust system. However, the way that society portrays people of color is in a negative light. This is to make sure that everyone else does not follow his or her example and that the status quo will continue. Therefore, racial formation can be used to destroy or to aid, depending on what side of the racial spectrum one is on. Those already with power will use it to keep those without power at the bottom. Those at the bottom will use it to refuse complying with laws and standards that do not benefit them, and worst of all inflict extreme harm.

Although structural inequality has negative effects on marginalized people they have found ways to use disadvantages to their advantage. As noted above, racial formation has a great impact on internalized oppression that occurs through stereotypes. This effect then upholds structural inequality by keeping the status quo going without questioning it. Everything in society is connected and has a purpose. It is no mistake that there are extremely low expectations for inner city youth that most of the time end up labeled as “criminals”. It is in one’s power to determine how internalized oppression will play a role in one’s life. It is necessary for people to become aware of the system of which they are a part of and oppresses them. Through this awareness things would change. As Baldwin suggests, “If he is really cunning, really ruthless, really strong... He becomes a kind of criminal because that’s the only way they can live”(681). This means that one can either go along with the system as a robot or use his or her ruthlessness and strength to become “criminals,” because after all that is one of the key ways that for generations oppressed people have resisted.

Bibliography:

Baldwin, James. *A Talk to Teachers*.

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1994

Jonathan Kozol, “Still Separate, Still Unequal: America’s Educational Apartheid”

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York : New, [Jackson, Tenn.] : Distributed by Perseus Distribution. 2011. ©2010, 2011