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**SAVANNA WASHINGTON**

City University of New York, United States

## **BLACK LIVES MATTER: HOW THE PORTRAYAL OF RACE IN THE U.S. MEDIA FRAMES RACIAL OPINION, DISCOURSE, AND VIOLENCE**

### **Abstract:**

In 1915, "The Clansman," a 3-1/2 hour film, opened at Clune's Auditorium in Los Angeles seating 2500 people. At the time most films ran 15 minutes or less and screened at "Nickelodeans," cheap store fronts that generally seated 200 people or less. Later re-titled, "Birth of a Nation," it was the first movie to introduce modern shot composition, editing, and theatrics in a way audiences had never seen before. Donald Bogle writes, "The film's magnitude and epic grandeur swept audiences off their feet." Then president, Woodrow Wilson, said of the film, "It's like writing history with lightning." Only the film wasn't history, it was single-minded propaganda written by Thomas Dixon.

The film was based on the book written by Thomas Dixon - a Southern white man, entitled, "The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan," Dixon lived in North Carolina during the "Reconstruction" period immediately after the American Civil War. Reconstruction was a period marked by the beginnings of enfranchisement for former black slaves, including advances in elected office, which horrified whites in North Carolina (and throughout the South).

The negative stereotypes of Blacks in Birth of a Nation, "Literal and unimaginative as some types might now appear, the naïve and cinematically untutored audiences of the early part of the century responded to the character types as if they were the real thing." (Bogle) It is estimated that by 1930 almost 50 million Americans had seen the film - fully one-third of the population of the country. In 1934, the Payne Fund Studies argued that, "Birth of a Nation showed how great an impact films could have in encouraging audiences' racism."

Birth of a Nation gave rise to negative black archetypes that continued to be perpetrated in the media for decades after the film and these negative archetypes still frame racial opinion, public discourse, and violence in the United States, 100 years after it was released.

In 2014-2015 in the United States, several deaths of unarmed black men at the hands of police renewed public discourse about race in contemporary America. How are African-American communities perceived by the police and the majority culture as a whole? Where do these perceptions emanate? This paper focuses on the history of the perception of Black people in America and how the film, "Birth of a Nation," distributed 100 years ago this year, continue to shape the narrative of Black people in America.

### **Keywords:**

Black images in media, Black Lives Matter, Birth of a Nation, D.W. Griffith,