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## A Comparative Study of African American Representations in Film from Original to Remake as Influenced by the Civil Rights Movement

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN REPRESENTATIONS  
IN FILM FROM ORIGINAL TO REMAKE AS INFLUENCED BY THE  
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by

Erica F. Berry

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Mass Communications)

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## Abstract

Racial stereotypes in American films have reflected our society's dominant ideologies and have influenced our belief systems since the film industry began. As social constructs shift and cultural norms change, so do the representations present in cinematic productions. This study is looking closely at the African American Civil Rights movement in the United States and how, and if, it correlates with changing representations and stereotypes of African Americans in film from the late 1960s to today. I begin by recognizing traditional representations of African Americans and identifying their use in two films in particular, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and its contemporary remake, *Guess Who* (2005). To compare the representations and stereotypes present in these two films, I employ a combination of content analysis and ideological criticism. My data shows that traditional representations are either removed or are racially reversed and attributed to the adverse racial group in an attempt to dismiss their use and offer new concepts and visions of racial equality.

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## Introduction

Films have always fascinated me; they are a way to escape from the mundane and can take you anywhere. I am a fan of all genres: fantasy, horror, chick flicks, documentaries, romance, and comedy— you name it; almost anything can hold my attention. I love how film can make you laugh, cry, scream, and even jump you out of your seat; it evokes emotion and has the ability to persuade people's thoughts and actions. Despite my love for the cinema as entertainment, it was not until recently that I became interested in film on a more academic level. As a Mass Communications major, my college career has been shaped around media relations, intentions, and inner-workings. I have critically examined all types of media, from commercials and print advertisements, to television shows, to film and everywhere in between. Because this attentive gaze was expected of me in the classroom, it was only natural that I would use a critical eye on media as I saw in it in my everyday life.

As this type of critical observation set in as a natural way to watch television, read magazines, look at advertisements, and view films, I began to notice more and more trends, approaches, and techniques applied across the board, depending on what message the media was trying to convey. Unintentionally, I began reading into media in a more conceptualized manner, rather than taking it for face value. While in this “analytical mode” I began to notice the use of stereotypes and the consistent representations of peoples linked by race, ethnicity, religion etc. The idea that people can be labeled and categorized based on their membership, or perceived membership, to a particular group is amazing. These labels include the well-known and widely-accepted stereotypes: Jewish are cheap, Asians are smart, blondes are dumb, white guys can't jump, as well as

numerous others which may not be as lighthearted. This concept of set representations is what really pulled me into film and hooked me into the use of stereotypes as a topic for research and discussion.

Although there are countless stereotypes I could have tackled, I chose those attributed to African Americans because they are one of the most commonly depicted non-white racial groups in American media, as well as one of the most historically discriminated against groups in our country. Blacks have also impacted society and molded present day laws through the Civil Rights movement, a social reform in the mid 1950s that has had more influence on every aspect of the United States than any other minority movement. Not only have African Americans been influential in the past, but they also represent the dominant minority in America today. In terms of current political influence and contribution, African Americans are the largest minority group represented in office. In the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress (2007), African Americans held 42 seats, the most held of any represented minority, and significantly more compared to other minorities groups such as Hispanics with 24 seats, and Pacific Islanders with five (Kittilson). Blacks not only maintain a presence in governmental affairs, but also contribute to and hold prestigious positions in a wide variety of other career fields. The prevalence, social relevance, and influence blacks have had on American culture are reason for someone to be interested in how they are portrayed in the media. However, due to their deep integration into American culture, and the many hats they have worn to reach this level of integration, there have been too many stereotypes formed around the black race to mention, much less analyze. Because of this, I did not want my study to be cut short or manipulated by choosing only a few specific stereotypes, rather I thought it would be better to choose a

film and let it do the picking of stereotypes for me. This in itself was a daunting task—an information overload, so many movies to choose from, how would I know which was the best choice? To cut down the selection size, I narrowed my search to films made in or around the Civil Rights era, and further narrowed to films in the previous category, which also have contemporary remakes. I decided to choose a film made during these times in order to see and compare how blacks were portrayed in the midst of their liberation from racist segregation versus their contemporary representations.

As a young, white, female from the North East, I have not had much experience with different races, ethnicities or cultures. I am from the whitest state in the United States, Maine, and can confidently say I only know a handful or more of people belonging to other races, ethnicities or religions outside of Christianity, and out of that handful or so, two or three are black. In my own defense, my lack of experience is not to say that I am closed-minded or racist, but simply that I have little to no personally prescribed notions of other races because I have no one to reference, other than the images given to me by the media. I have found that these images are often representations of black culture that generally attribute demeaning aspects to the group as a whole. It is not my goal to unmask these stereotypes, but rather to understand why they are in place and how they have changed. The use of stereotypes and race relations in films, especially those of African American characters, interests me because it describes how our culture positions and depicts a group of people who has cohabited this country with whites since its beginning. This reflection is a self-evaluation on my own knowledge and perceptions of race relations, and also serves as a reference point for my readers.

In order to study how the Civil Rights movement affected representations of African Americans in film, I am going to compare *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), to its contemporary remake *Guess Who* (2005), and analyze differences in race relations and representations, specifically those of African American characters. These films are significant because the original was made during the Civil Rights era in 1967, the same year interracial-race marriage bans were deemed unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court, and its remake was made over 35 years later in 2005. My main objective is to determine if and how the Civil Rights movement affected African American representations in film by analyzing the differences in these politically and socially charged films.

To identify why these changes in representation occurred (or if there even are changes) I will discuss what has transpired in the arena of race politics between the 1960s and recent history. I begin with a review of scholarly literature on stereotypes in film, their functions, and how they have changed over time, as well as critiques on my chosen films as they pertain to representations of race. Then I discuss my own data and methods of research, including the basis of content analysis and ideological criticisms. From this research and analysis, I compile findings which show that racial stereotypes and traditional representations still exist in film, but are not as stiff or confined to a particular mold. Traditional stereotypical roles are combined into “heterogeneous” expressions of different groups, such as an ill-tempered black man’s love for NASCAR, as seen in *Guess Who*. I end with a discussion and pose new questions raised by my research.

## Chapter 1

### Literature Review

The discussion of stereotypes and defining what they are and how they are conceived will begin this chapter. I will follow with a brief history of the African American Civil Rights movement in the United States and how it changed blacks' political, social, and economic place in society. I will then discuss how the movement affected societies views on interracial marriage, as noted from polls and previous studies, as well as the movement's effects on the film industry, specifically the changing representations of blacks. I will end with an overview of what has been written on *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Guess Who*, as it pertains to racial representations.

### Stereotypes

Essential to understanding the premise of this research, is the knowledge of vocabulary. Before entering discussion about stereotypes, it will be useful to first define the term. What are stereotypes? The best way to define a stereotype is to label a race, gender, ethnicity, or anything else for that matter, with the first thing that comes to your mind. Let's try this with an American Indian. Most likely, images of feathers, canoes, tomahawks, teepees, and long braids come to mind. Although these are not realistic or sensible words to describe American Indians, they are general ideas and representations that have been engrained in the psyche from television, film, books, and other types of media, as well as through social interaction and popular thought. This list therefore identifies a popular stereotype of American Indians. A stereotype, as defined in Wilson's *Race, Multiculturalism, and the Media*, is "a conventional, formulaic, and usually

oversimplified conception, opinion or belief invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group” (61).

Stereotypes are clichéd representations of groups and similar persons, which are usually naturally recognizable due to their abundant use in media and social environments. Almost all groups in society carry stereotypes—race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, hair color, class, age, gender, personal interests, occupation, and almost any other category you could group people into. They take one aspect or general characteristic of a group and exaggerate it to create attitudes that become naturalized through cultural messages such as media exposure (Bogle). However useful stereotypes may be to identify groups or attribute characteristics, they are often based on prejudices and carry negative connotations. Although the word *stereotype* holds a negative connotation, as is justified because most of them are negative, they also recognize the “separate and viable identities of other peoples and lifestyles,” and also “express a certain homage to lifestyles through an incomprehension of the successes and wellsprings of their viability,” (Bogle). In other words, stereotypes acknowledge that there are different people in the world and in a strange way communicate a sort of respect for these groups’ means of existence, which are of bewilderment to those who conceptualize these representations. This leads into the purpose behind stereotypes and why they exist, which will be discussed later in this section.

Despite their positive aspects, when combined with prejudice, stereotyping can pose as a barrier to understanding in a multicultural society. A simplistic example of how prejudice negatively affects stereotyping, as explained by Wilson, is: a white villain brought to justice by a white hero in an entirely white social environment; here the

message is good versus evil. However, substitute a black villain and the message is completely different when positioned consistently with prejudice and within historical contexts: a white hero in a white-dominated environment brings a black villain to justice; here the message is black versus white (61). This example is vital to the understanding of how stereotypes play a role in message communication because they modify the message through socially cultivated ideas. The black and white villains could be committing the same evil, but when the villain is black, the difference in characters is visibly noticeable, which triggers recollection of socially constructed ideas (black people are violent, untrustworthy, etc., see Appendix A) and the story becomes about race rather than morals, even if unconsciously perceived that way. Also, because the scenario plays out in a white-dominated society, there leaves no room for racially based ideas against white people whether they are the villain, hero, or otherwise. It is when there is a minority, weaker, distant, or just plain different group of people present that stereotypes form in order to build an understanding and make sense of those who are unknown and not like themselves.

Why are there stereotypes? Sociologist Charles E. Hurst of the College of Wooster states, "One reason for stereotypes is the lack of personal, concrete familiarity that individuals have with persons in other racial or ethnic groups. Lack of familiarity encourages the lumping together of unknown individuals," (Hurst). In other words, stereotypes are used as a means of explaining and rationalizing the dissimilarities between one group of people and those different from themselves. They are an inaccurate and oversimplified way to justify general beliefs one group has of another, especially when this judgment is made short of interaction or experience that would provide any

insight or understanding of the other group's lifestyle. Social conditions influence and change some stereotypes over time, but others stay intact as if they ring true.

Because stereotypes are a means of quickly identifying a group of people, as well as an effective instrument to fasten specific values and characteristics towards a person or persons based on their appearance or membership in a certain group, they have been employed in the media industry as dramatic devices since their earliest beginnings. Stereotypes allow audiences to identify a character's "anticipated value system and/or behavior expectations," based on their appearance, accent, name, possessions, etc. In turn, these cues allow the audience to compare the character to their own value system and recognize their character roles. For example, a villain would wear dark clothing, own a weapon and grin mischievously, while the heroin is dressed in white or light clothing, is physically attractive and well liked throughout the film. "Stereotypes, therefore, are shortcuts to character development and form a basis for mass entertainment," (Wilson 61). The association of white with good and black with evil are very apparent in cinematic productions and could provide an unconscious cue to connect these meanings to race also.

As this study is focusing on African American representations, it is important to understand how stereotypes of this particular group have changed over time. A study conducted by Divine and Elliot provides a comparison of the top ten stereotypes commonly used to describe African Americans in 1995, to a previous study on the same topic in 1933 (see appendix A for complete results.) Interestingly, these studies, conducted 62 years apart, share four common descriptors—ignorant, musically talented, dirty (physically), and very religious. I compared positioning of these four

representations from the 1933 poll to that of 1995, and found the stereotypes of ignorant and musically talented rose in prevalence, while those of dirty (physically), and very religious barely made it on the top ten. In addition, the previous top two stereotypes used to identify African Americans in 1933, superstitious and lazy, have been completely erased from the list and were replaced with more affirmative representations such as athletic and musically talented (Divine).

The number one stereotype to describe an African American in 1995 was athletic, followed by musically talented, and ignorant. This data is puzzling because it does not provide a general sense of how blacks are perceived. They are extremely good at two things, sports and music, but apparently unintelligent at the same time; that's a confusing concept. Are these results implying that blacks have the ability perform well on the field and stage, but if they are not good at either (or even if they are perhaps) then they are ignorant? Veteran radio host Rush Limbaugh answers this inquiry by demeaning blacks' intellectual capacity to handle "strategic" positions (such as a quarterback in football, which are dominated by white players), citing their athletic skill, but doubting their ability to think quickly and rationally (RushLimbaugh.com). Although athletic and musically talented are glamorous attributes, black studies scholar Ronald Hall believes highlighting "natural black athleticism" has the effect of suggesting white superiority in other areas, such as intelligence, and de-emphasizes academic achievement in black communities. This study by Divine and Elliot is only a small example of how perceptions and stereotypes can change overtime in concordance with social and political rights and representation.

Stereotypes are ill defined and difficult to put into words due to their ambiguity. Because of this, depending on which definition you rely on and which author you read, there will be varying ways to describe stereotypes. For the purpose of this study I will rely on the definition of stereotype provided by Wilson: a conventional, formulaic, and usually oversimplified conception, opinion or belief invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group. Stereotypes are based on grand-generalizations and are employed to make sense of unfamiliar groups and peoples. Stereotypes are both useful and detrimental because they create awareness of different lifestyles, cultures etc., but also can relay an inaccurate and demeaning message. The next section will provide background on the Civil Rights movement of the late 1950s in the United States in hopes to better explain why and how racial representations and stereotypes have changed over time due to the dramatic social, economic, and political upheavals that occurred during this time period.

### **Civil Rights Movement**

The Civil Rights movement, which roots took hold with rebellions and riots long before the 1950s, specifically refers to the reform movement occurring in the United States between 1955 and 1965. This movement was aimed at abolishing racial discrimination towards African Americans and providing them with civil liberties. Before the imposition of equal rights, blacks were increasingly oppressed; they had no voting rights, their schools, water fountains and bathrooms—among other public facilities—were segregated from whites, and violence against blacks burgeoned especially

throughout the South. Racial tensions were not limited to southern states; they faced discrimination in other regions across the country also.

The system of explicit, state-authorized racial discrimination became known as the “Jim Crow” system, which stayed intact until the 1950s. Under this system, public facilities and government services were to be separated into “white” and “colored” domains. They mandated *de jure* segregation in all public facilities, with a "separate but equal" status for blacks and members of other non-white racial groups (Klarman). Characteristically, those for black people lacked funds and were of inferior quality. Not only did blacks not have social equality, they also did not have representation or rights under the law.

African-Americans rejected this system of discrimination and fought back against it. They resisted oppression in numerous ways and employed lawsuits, organizations, political redress, and labor unions to create a stir and take a stand. The creation of black activist groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, founded in 1909), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE, founded in 1942), and People United to Save Humanity (PUSH, founded in 1971) all fought for racial equality and pushed for black civil rights. The NAACP was one of the first activists groups to form in the United States; it fought to “end race discrimination through litigation, education, and lobbying efforts,” (CRM). Its definitive achievement was Supreme Court victory in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that rejected separate white and black school systems and therefore overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine. Although this decision was a milestone in the efforts towards desegregation, it did not produce

immediate effects and therefore generated frustrations and the onset of civil disobedience (CRM).

Sit-ins, boycotts, and marches marked the era of African American civil disobedience in the United States. Beginning with the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, which was triggered by the arrest of Rosa Parks and was intended to oppose the city's policy of racial segregation on its public transit system, there were several instances of non-violent resistance that led to changes within society and government imposed laws. Attacking the issue of racism and oppression through unconventional means worked well for African Americans in terms of fighting discrimination and persuading officials to amend or terminate previous laws.

Under pressure from blacks and growing tensions in President Johnson's administration, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, along with the Equal Employment Opportunity Act (EEO). The Civil Rights Act "prohibits discrimination of all kinds based on race, color, religion, or national origin. The law also provides the federal government with the powers to enforce desegregation," (CRM). More specifically, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act also banned discrimination in employment practices and public accommodations. The EEO is an organization that enforces employment discrimination laws and fights for affirmative action. However, despite the new law and supporting litigation, blacks wanted more than the inherent rights they were now afforded. The Civil Rights movement was about much more than just a struggle for lawful rights; it included issues of racial dignity, respect and freedom from white oppression, as well as social and economic equality. In response to this, "a steady wave of urban riots, rebellions, and insurrections started in Watts [California] in 1965,

marking the decline of the Civil Rights movement and black people's frustration with a system that granted them legal-political rights but allowed them only the most marginal place in American economy," (Guerrero 71). Marginalization denied blacks many rights that white people had and led to violence and protests. Another great political advancement in civil rights occurred in 1967, when the Supreme Court ruled that prohibiting interracial marriage was unconstitutional. At this time, 16 states had a ban on interracial marriage, but were forced to revise their laws.

As the Civil Rights movement abated in the late 1960's with the introduction of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Black Power movement rose in significance. Unlike the civil disobedience of the Civil Rights era, Black Power advocates were open to use violence as a means of achieving their aims. The Black Power movement is yet another example of how blacks came together in order to better their race and pummel the barriers set for them by society. Despite these movements and relentless struggles, blacks have still been treated unfairly and are not always socially equal, as seen in affirmative action and employment discrimination cases, which will be discussed further as it applies to the film industry. However, the before mentioned activists groups, as well as individuals, continue to fight for social equality.

### **Social Impact and Polling**

Because films reflect the society for which they are made and illustrate social norms and interests, I thought it would be beneficial to see what research had been done in the area of community support for or against interracial marriage. I located several polls that focused around race issues and population diversity, as well as polls that

indicated how social class and education influence opinions and open-mindedness. While reviewing the data, I had the following questions in mind: how many blacks lived in America 1970 and 2005? How many whites? What percentages of these groups believe in interracial marriage? What are their education levels? Poverty levels? However, because I could not find one poll that collectively answered all these questions, I pulled statistics from several different polls and induced information from them to form answers to my inquiries. With this information, I was able to produce a general sense of population composition, social views, and racial tolerance for both polled groups (1970 and 2005), as well as a comprehensive idea of how these elements have changed over the years.

I clumped polls and data from the years 1968, 1969 and 1970 into one group, labeling this the “population of 1970” and polls from 2004, 2005, and 2006 into the group “population of 2006.” These years are relevant to the release years of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *Guess Who* (2005), as well as to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the law banning discrimination against interracial marriage, which was passed in 1967.

A United States Census conducted within the population of 1970 shows there were 200 million people living in the United States during this time. Out of this 200 million, 87.6% were white, 11.1% were black, and the remaining 1.4% were people of “other” races. A poll also conducted on this group shows that 20% of Americans approved of interracial marriages, but only 17% of the total population of whites felt the same way. Rough math and inductive skills tell me that half of the approving population was black and the other half was white.

Research also suggested that higher-education influenced outlook on racial issues. Well-educated people seem to be more open-minded and focused on the importance of social, economic, and political issues rather than the surface tensions produced by racial differences. To prove this, I researched the population of blacks and whites in the 1970 group who attended higher education, as defined by four or more years of college. The United States census shows that 11.6% of whites attended higher education, while only 6.1% of blacks completed this level of schooling. Blacks' lack of schooling could have been influenced by a number of factors: inadequate means of funding, inopportunity, discrimination, etc. Education, or lack there of, influenced the way people thought of race in the 1970s, which in turn affected acceptance or denial rates of marital rights to interracial couples.

In comparison, the United States Census conducted for the 2006 population (one year after the release of *Guess Who*), shows there were 300 million people living in the United States, 80.2% whites, 12.8% blacks, and 7% other races. However, this population was overall more accepting of interracial marriage. Out of the 300 million plus American citizens, 73% approved of racially interracial marriage (an increase of 53% from 36 years earlier.) Also, a large majority, 70%, of whites polled approved of interracial marriages, an increase of over 60% from 1970. As mentioned earlier, the correlation between higher education and open-mindedness on racial issues rings true again. A poll taken within the 2006 population indicates that 83% of white college educated adults accept interracial marriage, while only 62% of Americans (including white, black, Asian, etc.) with a high school degree or less accepts these marriages. Although this poll is missing information

on educated blacks, it still provides evidence that higher education positively influences ones outlook and increases tolerance.

Further correlative analyses have shown evidence of connections between age and racial acceptance. There appears to be a generation gap, which is consistent with data from the 1970 population, in regards to the moral admittance of interracial marriage. Data shows that older people hold stronger objections to interracial marriage, while younger generations are less concerned with racial distinctions. The 2006 population was polled on the question of interracial marriage yielding the following results: 85% of Americans ages 18-29 approved, while only 47% of those 65 and above approved (United States). In 2006, a person 65 years old would have been born in 1941, and would therefore have grown up in a racist society where blacks and whites were not equals, which explains why less people this age approve of interracial marriage. This data correlates with social ideals of the time and the progression of the civil rights era. It also adds empirical data to back up the effects of extreme social changes that have occurred from the late 1960s to the present and helps to conceptualize how society was affected in sheer numbers and not just concept.

### **Impact on the Film Industry**

Along with social integration, civil rights afforded to African Americans by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the establishment of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) came the theoretical increase of employment opportunities for African Americans. When referencing the film industry, it is vital to recognize to what extent blacks are involved (or excluded) from film production in order to better understand why films are made the way

they are, and from what point of view they are constructed. As blacks become more integrated into the industry, their views and ideas are reflected on screen, rather than simply the white persons perspective. Despite the establishment of the civil rights and the EEO, there remain discrepancies in the ratio of white to black workers in the film industry, especially in reference to influential positions.

Because film essentially imitates life and reflects its attitude upon its audience, it is a very influential medium. Film puts into motion the ideals, values, and perceived thoughts of its creators and viewers (usually the dominant social ideology), which in turn reinforces these ideas by projecting them on the big screen. “Media have their greatest effect when they are used in a manner that reinforces and channels attitudes and opinions that are consistent with the psychological makeup of the person and the social structure of the groups with which he or she identifies,” which explains why early representations of blacks on the silver screen were well accepted—whites who held these racist attitudes were the main audience and the initiators (Wilson 44).

The modern American film industry is said by some scholars to have begun with D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a racially controversial film that, “freely appropriated some of the most virulent images of black life available in American literature and popular culture,” (Rhines). These images provoked massive black protests across the country, and stirred hostilities in the newly founded NAACP (est.1909) who demanded censorship of racial slander. Although these protests were disregarded and overlooked, they provided the community with a sense of how blacks felt about their portrayal on screen and set the stage for later debate.

The effects and dawning years of the Civil Rights movement forged positive developments within the film industry during the 1970s for African Americans. Although pre-civil rights and post WWII saw little to no integration of blacks into the film industry, the message on screen changed to benefit blacks and in turn supported the cause. The early 1950s saw a type of film known as the “Negro Cycle,” which were produced and directed by whites, but humanized blacks on screen, offering a glimpse into the life of blacks struggling in a white world. “These films took advantage of the new postwar liberalism and pointed white audiences toward acknowledgment and respect for African American rights,” (Rhines 40). The implementation of African American Civil Rights certainly cannot be attributed to this variety of film, but the depiction of deplorable treatment towards blacks and the message of inequality may have sparked an interest, tugged on a heartstring, or simply raised awareness of this unjust divide in society.

Hollywood too became increasingly aware of their black viewers; blacks and black activists groups were becoming fed up and on the verge of taking action against their demeaning depictions of the African American race. “From the late 1940s through the 1960s, with a strategy of mass protest that later exploded into rebellion, blacks affected changes in all areas of American society. Black folk created a political and cultural atmosphere in which the issues of race and freedom could not be ignored,” (Guerrero 29). The NAACP, one of the first leading organizations for racial equality and black civil rights, provided blacks the gateway they needed to alter American society and activate political consciousness within their race. As Guerrero states in *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*,

“For the racial ideology and stereotypes that are but part of dominant cinema’s work are not fixed or static. Instead, they are a set of dynamic,

lived relations and social transactions; the filmic conventions and codes of racial subordination are continually being reworked, shifting under the pressure of material, aesthetic, and social conditions,” (113).

The mid 1960s saw an influx of African Americans on the silver screen. This time period includes the film of study, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), and its leading actor, Sidney Poitier, who appointed himself the “one-dimensional, middle-class” image. Along with Poitier came the introduction of other characters such as sport stars and musicians to films. As blacks began to gain civil liberties in the 1960s, more positive traits were attributed to their characters on screen. Despite these seemingly positive changes, blacks were still not perceived as intelligent as white people. Placing emphasis on blacks’ athletic ability and posing them as superstars on the court, undermined the importance of intelligence. Films also either tended to over-sexualize or desexualize black characters, as well as put them at the mercy of the white man in the form of decision-making and acceptance into their world. Blacks’ newly recognized strength, sexuality, and assertiveness in film was “almost always at the service, or under the control of white institutional power and authority,” (Guerrero 79). Although there was an increase of blacks on screen, their influence behind the camera lens did not occur for a few more years.

In 1969, famous *Life* magazine photographer Gordon Parks was the first African American to direct a Hollywood feature film, *The Learning Tree*. Parks is quoted in reference to his film; “I had 14 or 15 Black people behind the camera for the first time in the history of films. There was a Black director. The producer was Black. The scoring was done by a Black man. The third cameraman for the first time was a black man,” (Rhines 41). Because *The Learning Tree* was an autobiographical film based on Parks’

novel of the same name, it was important for him to have a crew comprised of his own race in order to relay the tone, message, and sensation that he had felt while developing the story. Although Parks broke the mold in 1969 with his African American stacked film crew, a Los Angeles hearing of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that same year found this was not the dominant trend. Much to the contrary, one studio official testified on the issue of minority employment in the movie industry, that of 81 people in management at his studio, only three were minorities: “two Latinos, one Black. The Black headed the janitorial department. Of 184 technicians five were minorities: three Latinos, one Black, one Asian. At this time, minorities comprised 40 percent of the Los Angeles metropolitan area population but only 3 percent of the movie industry labor force,” (Rhines 79). A black heading the janitorial staff has no impact on what is produced in the studio, and does not reflect any influential standing as a managerial position. With only three percent of minorities, not limited to African Americans, working in the film industry’s labor force, it can be assumed and supported by previous statistics that this percentage includes maintenance crews and entry level workers, rather than cameramen, writers, editors, and directors, which is where influence and power lies.

“Much more often than not, whites were in control behind the camera reproducing their own point of view. In fact, of the hundred or so films featuring significant numbers of African American characters and/or an African American-derived story line and produced during the blaxploitation period, roughly 1970 to 1974, fewer than one-fifth were under African American control,” (Rhines 45). Blaxploitation was a film genre that presented a “world heretofore ignored on the American screen—ghettos, whores, hustlers, addicts, pimps, and pushers, a world of racist sickness, of oppression, of black

despair and rage;” all of which were the contrary to what advocate organizations such as NAACP supported for black people (Bogle 195). These controversial films were the first to shed light on real issues facing blacks in society: “poverty, interracial marriages and finding fulfillment in the narrow confines determined by a hostile white world,” (195). Although these films may have intended to mimic reality, they did so using radical stereotypes and caricatures, which like all stereotyped representations contained a little truth, surrounded by an even larger, more menacing lie. Blaxploitation films have since made a profound impact on contemporary hip-hop culture, and we continue to see the “pimp” and “gangster” images in music videos as well as black oriented film.

As the blaxploitation genre came to an end in the late 1970s, the NAACP was organizing a massive boycott of the major film industries as a tactic to increase racial minority presence in the feature film industry; citing that 30% of America’s movie going audience was comprised of African Americans and therefore, a boycott would be a “credible threat,” (Rhines 80). Although they did not follow through with the initial plan for a widespread boycott, the threat was enough for companies to reevaluate their hiring procedures. Still in 1982, Janet Wasko, author of *Movies and Money*, assesses, “The state of black employment in U.S. feature films has not improved... and behind the camera opportunities for black filmmakers have dried up.” Over a ten-year period from 1972 to 1982, the number of black oriented feature films dropped dramatically, and it was reported that in the early 1980s, “Blacks were not even getting their traditional exploitive or stereotypical roles,” (82).

A recently conducted one-year study by the Directors Guild of America (DGA) had found “that out of 237 directors, Columbia had hired only one minority; Fox two of

146; Universal nineteen of 770; Warner Bros. one of 147; none at Paramount, MGM/UA, or Disney” (Rhines 83). These figures indicate a very low number of minorities who hold power positions in the film industry, let alone blacks. An overwhelming majority of whites occupy positions of authority, which is problematic because not only do directors influence the visual aspects of a film, they also direct what tone it should have and what an audience should gain from the cinematic experience. This extreme imbalance of racial, ethnic, and most likely gender, influences in the film industry produces a plethora of films which depict the same values, ideals, and visions and in turn skews how society views the world through the naturalization of attitudes provided by the media.

Opportunities for blacks have increased and continue to develop in the Hollywood film industry, but this development is usually at the expense of previous oppressions and prejudices. Rhines provides an example of how widespread and noticeable imperfections in the film industry leads to change, “After World War II, white America’s general sympathy for the Civil Rights movement allowed blacks to direct Hollywood films and to play heroic, non-threatening roles on screen. The Black Power movement allowed blacks to strike out at whites and to celebrate cultural traits distinct from those of white America,” (Guerrero 50). Despite these “advancements,” it was not until the mid 1980’s that the American film industry completely underwent structural changes, which allowed blacks greater access to positions of control behind the camera.

Guerrero, an African-American film historian and professor of film and African-American studies at New York University wrote,

“The important point about this frustrating chronology of fluctuating industry racism is that Hollywood is a system entirely motivated by short-term profit. Because of this, the industry is conservative and changes only

when forced to do so by the combined pressures of multiple influences, no matter how just or important any single condition may be” (93).

These multiple influences usually include economic, social, and political pressures for change. Only when Hollywood finds itself under these pressures it begins to take action, but not always in the way activists expect. Because of these attributes, representations are ever changing to meet the desires of the viewer and can never fully or realistically represent those whom they are trying to imitate. It is apparent that representations of blacks in film have changed over time due to social and political advocacy, but blacks still do not possess the same strengths that are so graciously attributed to whites. Regardless of population size, percentages, and education, we still live in a white-dominated society where prejudices and stereotypes will prevail. Filmmakers often rely heavily on stereotypes because they're a quick and simple way to establish a character's traits. The following is an introduction to the two films I studied which attempt to dismiss and exploit these stereotypes in order to traverse racial boundaries. .

### **Film Critique**

Constructing a fair critique on two films that were made decades apart is somewhat difficult due to the disproportionate amount of information available on each film. The original film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, has been critiqued in scholarly journals, analyzed, and compared to other movies of its time; there is a wealth of information provided for this film. On the contrary, the remake, *Guess Who*, has not been studied or analyzed to any great extent, other than movie reviews. Due to its recency, very few articles are available on the film and there are no significant comparisons of the two productions.

*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), has received both criticisms and praise for its depictions of interracial marriage in a time when it was barely legal. It is, arguably and according to some critics, one of the most important Hollywood films about race relations that appeared in the Civil Rights era. Some critics believed its controversial nature raised awareness of black roles in society, while others believed the subject was handled in a manner too lighthearted to be taken seriously. Because interracial marriage, especially between blacks and whites, (and any mixed race relationship for that matter) was controversial, it was difficult and nearly impossible to entertain the idea of a film that pushed the issue further than it was in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. African American history scholar Aram Goudsouzian writes, "The movie has become a sounding board for racial conviction. Liberals sought it and conservatives shunned it." It took a liberal stance in the form of racial acceptance with the onset of new social innovations, but also conveyed feelings of doubt and mistrust towards the interracial marriage dilemma.

Although it pushed the limits in plot, the story was unrealistic and ineffective in making a stand as it portrayed Sidney Poitier, who played Dr. John Wade Prentice, as a virtually sexless, vastly intelligent, kind-hearted black who was at the mercy of his future white upper-class-in-laws, the Draytons, for acceptance. Film historian and author, David Bogle, describes the film as, "pure 1949 claptrap done up in 1940s high-gloss MGM style," in reference to its "propaganda" and the "realistic," yet mythical world of fantasy and excess created by film. Because Prentice was a man of equal class status to the white family he was wishing to marry into, this evened the field and focused the controversy completely on race, which was unrealistic in the late 1960s, and also unrealistic because Prentice had all the delightful characteristics a father could want in a son in law, except

for his skin color, or “pigmentation problem,” as Mr. Drayton put in the film. Although director Stanley Kramer attempted to deal with a controversial social issue and deserves credit for shedding light on the issue, his leading black character is the main problem with the film’s credibility, for it does not reflect the conditions of American society in 1967. Film scholars Glen Harris and Robert Toplin reflect on *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*:

“Dr. Prentice is not the typical or generally representative of the American black man of the time. Few African Americans were privileged enough to have climbed the ladder of economic and professional success by 1967. Many blacks at the time were struggling because of a lack of opportunity to obtain a basic college education. Yet Kramer and Rose do not confront the Tracy/Hepburn characters with the more realistic and complex possibility of choosing to welcome a black man into their family of lesser social status. They insist on portraying Dr. Prentice as a highly elevated individual who is greatly distanced from the social realities of the times, all the while ignoring the vexing problem of the genteel relationship the Draytons have with their black maid. Kramer and Rose’s movie appears to suggest that, outside of serving as domestics, blacks of lower socio-economic standing need not apply for acceptance into white families” (Harris).

Bogle continues his disapproval of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* with the same complaints others found with the film. “By concentrating on nice decent people entangled in personal heartaches, [the film] diverted the audience from any real issues. In fact, there were no issues. There stood [Prentice], monolithic, charming, good-looking, mannerly, and brilliant, a candidate for the Nobel Prize. Who could refuse him for a son-in-law?” Critics found this film to be pretentious and too cautious in its approach on the matter of interracial marriage.

The remake, *Guess Who* (2005), produced in an era much less hostile than that of its predecessor, has also received both positive and negative reviews for its delineation of racism in America today. At the time of this film’s release, African Americans had had

civil liberties for decades, and the turmoil caused by the Civil Rights Act had pacified. Racism remained an issue, as it still does, but not to the extremes of the 1960s. However, the “foundation of the film is, after all, based on a cultural bias that still exists against interracial marriages. The hostility of the '60s and '70s is gone, but an element of suspicion remains,” (Berardinelli). In contrast to this, one critic from the Rocky Mountain News in Colorado claims the film “lacks the political relevance of the original,” (Denerstein).

Because blacks are now more able to reach and exceed the same socio-economic level of their white counterparts due to increased rights and freedoms, the characters in the film are much more believable, which consequently adds credibility to the film’s storyline. The central relationship between Simon Green (Ashton Kutcher, who plays Prentice’s equivalent character in the remake) and his fiancé is convincing due to the fact that Green is not the same grandiose character Prentice played in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. Rather, “his assignment was to be acceptable and sympathetic in a situation where he is coached through the hazards by his girlfriend,” (Ebert).

Overall *Guess Who* is neither deeply offensive nor especially revealing about the racism of modern America. It appears to be more about the ties that bind—love—than the racial divide in the United States. Roger Ebert reflects on the film’s weak portrayal of racism, “[I]f the movie had spent more time walking the tightrope between the acceptable and the offensive, between what we have in common and what divides us, it would have been more daring... Interracial relationships may be an area where the daily experience of many people is better-informed and more comfortable than the movies are ready to

admit.” It is apparent that *Guess Who*, reflects looser values than the original, but also provides open discussion of racial relations of our time.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have established the initial groundwork for my own research by analyzing stereotypes, the Civil Rights movement, and the American film industry. Defining a stereotype is an especially difficult task, as it is subjective to the person creating the definition and ambiguous in meaning. Likewise, the research on African American stereotypes and representations in film throughout the past decades is boundless as well as contradictory depending on which scholar is doing the research, thus I have limited my research to those representations which correlate most with my topic of interest. It is clear that what is portrayed on screen reflects society, or at least attempts to mimic it, and changes when outside pressures prove too tough to ignore. These films reflect the mood of their times and attack the issue of racism the most effective way they know how, cautiously and with humor. The Civil Rights movement has proven to be a significant milestone for positive changes of black representations in film and pushed for reform in the film industry. The apparent shifts in imagery are directly correlated with social, economic, and political modifications, but whether they have changed with the desire of blacks or not is still in question. In the next chapter, I will build on this groundwork and detail how I conducted my own research.

## Chapter 2

### Data and Methods

In order to better describe this comparative study of African American representations in film, I will define my research methods and elaborate on how I came to the conclusion to focus on *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Guess Who*, as well as providing a brief synopsis for both films. I will then describe the concept behind a contextual analysis along with the coding method that I used to record the race, gender, employment, and role of each character, as well as why these elements are relevant to my research. I will conclude with an overview of ideological criticisms and explain how I plan to utilize this to further investigate racial representations in the chosen films.

### Films

For the initial part of my research, I compiled a list of films that were originally filmed, before, during or shortly after the Civil Rights movement that have also been remade within the last decade or so. Because I wanted to focus on the differences (and potential similarities) between African American representations, in the original film and its remake, I concluded it would be most compelling and beneficial to center on films that were first produced during this tumultuous time in history. My research produced the following list of films: *The Longest Yard*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, *Oceans 11*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Sleuth*, *The Heartbreak Kid*, *Rollerball*, and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Although all these films fit my criteria

for further research, one stood out among the rest as pertaining particularly well to my interest in race representation—*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was first released in 1967 by director Stanley Kramer and remade in 2005 under the title *Guess Who* by director Kevin Rodney Sullivan. Not only did the release dates fit well, with 1967 in the midst of the Civil Rights era, but also because they dealt directly with race relations in terms of content and not simply the casting of African Americans. Both films are focused on the issue of interracial marriage and clearly identify it as a social anxiety. Although these films were made decades apart, they provide insight on how society perceived race at the times they were made; similarities, as well as disparities, can be found between the two. Both of these films depict a family who is surprised when their daughter brings home a boyfriend of a different race. They are forced to let go of their prejudices and accept him for who he is, rather than his skin color. The following is a more detailed synopsis of each film to provide better understanding in the analysis. These two films will be evaluated further in the form of content analysis and ideological criticism to better understand how representations in the film, as well as the message, changed over time.

#### *Original- synopsis*

*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is the story of a couple, Joanna Drayton, a young American girl, and Dr. John Prentice, an African American, who met while on vacation in Hawaii only 10 days earlier. The film begins at the San Francisco airport as the two are on their way to visit Joanna's parents, who are among the more socially prominent citizens of San Francisco; Matt Drayton, the publisher of a liberal newspaper, and his

wife, Christina, the owner of a fashionable art gallery. Joanna and John return to the Drayton household for one purpose: to tell them of their plans to marry and live in Switzerland. Because John must leave the next day for Switzerland on behalf of the World Health Organization, Joey is determined that their wedding take place immediately, and she asks for her parents' permission. Furthermore, John secretly confides to the Draytons that he will not marry Joey without their consent.

At first sight, Joanna's mother is stunned at her daughter's fiancé, for he is a "Negro," however, she keeps a level head and supports her daughters' feelings. Her father, on the other hand, is not pleased with the idea. Suddenly confronted with a test of his longtime liberal ideals, Matt finds himself in a hard-hitting situation. He disputes his daughter's claims that they are in love, and is determined to dissuade her from making a decision that could adversely affect her life. John's parents also fly up to meet Joanna and their potential new in-laws for dinner. They too are in shock by the fact Joanna is white, and similarly Mrs. Prentice is understanding, while Mr. Prentice rejects their marriage. "Less involved observers, however, quickly voice their opinions: Christina's business associate, Hilary St. George, is quick to reveal her bigotry; an old family friend, Monsignor Ryan, is confident that the couple will be able to overcome their obstacles; and the Drayton's' shocked black maid, Tillie, berates John for his impertinence," (TCM). Despite these upsets and discouraging words, the young couple is determined to receive their family's support, which they eventually gain after a day of negotiations, explanations and intense discussions of race.

*Remake- synopsis*

*Guess Who* is a complete 180 from its original. It depicts a black family, Percy and Marilyn Jones, who are introduced to their daughter's white boyfriend, Simon Green, on the weekend of their 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration. Because their daughter, Theresa, neglected to inform her parents Simon was white, they were in for a shock when the two arrived at their doorstep.

Before their meeting, Percy only knew that Simon Green was a successful stockbroker who looked impressive on paper, and for the first time, he was actually looking forward to meeting one of his daughter's boyfriends. However, to his disappointment, "the young man he has envisioned--a dazzling combination of Denzel Washington, Colin Powell and Tiger Woods--is not who arrives at his doorstep;" Simon is white (TCM). Not only was it a shock that Simon was white, but Percy and Marilyn are also unaware that Simon has already proposed to Theresa and plans to announce the engagement at their 25th anniversary party.

Percy, an excessively over-protective father, holds a general mistrust towards any of his daughter's boyfriends and especially towards Simon because he is white. To prove he is correct in his uneasiness, Percy runs a credit check and finds that Simon has recently lost his job but has not told Theresa. In an attempt to out Simon's lies to his daughter, Percy ends up revealing why he lost his job in the first place: because his boss did not want him dating a black girl. In the end, the couple resolves their differences and love conquers all, even Percy's disdain for his daughter's choice in a "white boy."

## **Content Analysis**

Content analysis is the study of human communications through social artifacts or products in the form of texts, films, interviews, and almost any other occurrence of communicated language. Content analysis is used by researchers to quantify and analyze the presence, meanings, and relationships of data or concepts found in these communications. One fundamental distinction lies between manifest content and its latent meaning. Manifest describes actual content (words, sentences, or texts themselves), while latent meaning describes what an author intended (Krippendorff). Ole Holsti, American political scientist and academic, offers a broad definition of content analysis as, "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages," (125). Content analysis can involve any kind of study where content is categorized and classified. Data in this type of analysis is classified in the form of coding, which is the process of standardizing and categorizing collected information. Holsti asserts the "creation of coding frames is intrinsically related to the creative approach of the researcher, as well as the variables that exert an influence over the content being observed." In the end, the analysis is to provide a meaningful reading of the coded content and answer the question "who says what, to whom, why and with what effect?" (Holsti). My specific coding procedure is outlined in the following section.

## **Coding**

Coding was a vital part of my initial research on the films because it helped me to categorize and assess the characters in an organized fashion (see Appendix B for coded tables.) I began my coding process by determining what I wanted to look for in the film. I

chose aspects I believed best set characters apart from one another: name, race, gender, occupation, and a more difficult to define category I labeled as “role in the film.” To keep this information in order, I created a coding sheet for each film, and a separate sheet for each gender (as this was easier to manage due to the amount of information some characters required). I chose these codes because they would prove significant when trying to describe differences and similarities between the films and characters later on. I wanted to see how occupations changed in accordance with gender and race, as well as the role each character played in the film; if they fell into a stereotyped role or presumed the character attributed by the original film.

To recognize each character that appeared on screen during the film, I came up with the “character name” code. Under this code, I wrote down the name of each character mentioned by name and shown on screen at some point during the film. I then recorded whether the character was male or female under “sex of character”, as well as their race, as indicated by skin color, under “race of character”. These codes were simple to record, for they were straightforward and left no room for interpretation.

“Character employment” is where I coded what job each character had in the films. I believed this was an important code because it determines the character’s social class, which in turn reflects their income and level of education. Under this code I also tried to indicate if it was explicitly noted what the character’s income was, if they had received higher education, and if so, where they had gone to school (also an indicator of social class).

“Role of character” was the most difficult code to define because the answer was not always apparent. Obscure cues into a characters purpose, or intended roll in the film

were easily overlooked. This code was intended to record how characters act, were portrayed, how they treated other characters, and also how they were treated by other characters throughout the film. Under this code, I recorded if this character interacted with another in an interesting way, spoke with an accent, or took on the role of a traditionally stereotyped character.

Through the coding process I picked up on subtleties otherwise missed, and began to unmask fundamental concepts and character traits essential to fully understanding these films as a pair rather than two separate pieces. Constructing a chart and coding procedure provided a simple and organized way to identify characters as well as to compare them without confusion.

### **Ideological Criticism**

Because a content analysis offers information into the content and message of the film rather than the meaning, I thought it would be beneficial to also include an ideological analysis in order to tie the social, political and cultural influences into the films. Also, because the main objective behind this research is to understand how the Civil Rights movement affected African American representations in film, it only makes sense to include these socio-political elements in the analysis. This type of criticism analyzes how the use and depiction of common values and goals in a given culture reoccur in different contexts over time, in conjunction with how they are used to validate arguments and social practices. Ideological criticisms also argue that films, in this case, reflect the dominant ideas and agendas of the society in which they are constructed and produced (Hill). Ideological criticisms ask: What ideas are dominant or marginal in a

given historical society? How are meanings socially constructed? What appears natural—gender, race, class? How does it render things to look natural when it's really not? For this research, I will examine the times in which these films were released and compare the ideology of the film to that of the culture of the time.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I discussed the films I studied and how I will relate my chosen methodologies of content analysis and ideological criticism to the overall research question of how African American representations have changed since the Civil Rights movement. I described these methodological approaches as well as my coding methods and what codes in particular I used to collect and conceptualize data on these films. The following chapter will focus on my research and findings from the aforementioned content analysis, coding system, and ideological criticism.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Findings**

After having viewed and coded for *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Guess Who*, I decided to analyze my data and approach it with two critical outlooks: content analysis, which involves looking directly at the data I coded and drawing conclusions from it, and ideological criticism, which investigates the films on a more in-depth level and attempts to read its cultural function by investigating its power structure and analyzing socially-constructed representations. Together, these methods of analysis will provide both a surface level interpretation of characters involving their roles in the films and any stereotypes they may fulfill, as well as an analysis on social constructs and how the film is a product of dominant ideologies and reflects the culture in which it was made.

#### **Content Analysis**

Because I only coded two films, which follow the same plot line, this data was relatively simple to organize once down on paper. Also, because my main objective was to determine how African American representations changed from original to remake, it was logical to group each film independently of the other for greater clarity (see Appendix A for coding procedure.) I will compare my data on the two films simultaneously as to provide a more comprehensive reflection on their similarities and differences. This will provide a brief overview of the films content, including characters sex, race, occupation and role of character, all which contribute to the formation of their socio-economic status, and provide better understanding of the representations employed

in the original and remake. Here I will discuss character roles, stereotypes, and how they have progressed, changed, or shifted between films.

### *Comparison*

Both *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Guess Who* are very similar in the fact they have very few characters actually recognized in the dialogue or who play a role in the narrative, as well as a relatively even number of blacks and whites represented in each film. In these two films, I coded for 29 characters total, 13 in the original and 16 in the remake. Of the characters coded in the original, six were black and seven white. The remake showed nine blacks and seven whites. Although these representations are relatively even, the numbers shift (by one or two characters) to give majority to which race the “accepting” family is. For example, in *Guess Who*, there are a majority of black characters because the in-laws-to be are a black family, and the same applies to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, which portrays more white characters.

It is important to notice the equality, in numbers, of racial representations in these films because they were made with the intentions to disarm tensions and breakdown racial barriers created by socio-economic and political arenas. Film theorist Ella Shohat concluded that, “black characters are often ‘guests in the narrative,’ placed there to give presence to African Americans rather than to serve the needs of the plot,” (Harris). However true this may ring for films that are not particularly about racial issues, these films include African Americans as major players in the plot who serve a purpose and tell a story. Perhaps equal representation in numbers was first an attempt by *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* to create an essence equal representation of influence, intelligence and

other modes of equality that were not entirely socially or politically existent at the time of its creation in 1967.

Delving more into the coded material, I will analyze the characters' occupations and relate to them to race. Although each character did not blatantly adhere to a certain occupation, I found that those who were recognized in specific professions were significant enough to note and examine further. Also in this discussion, I will address the code of "Role of Character." In describing a character's profession, race, and sex, one can also explain their role in the film. Although this is a separate code, I feel it will be most effectively described when combined with these other supporting aspects of the character.

The issue of race was in some ways diluted and in others blatantly expressed due to the fact social class and economic standing were of no regard—in-laws to be and their daughters' suitors were of the same social class as to remove class issues in order to focus entirely on race. Both John Prentice (Sidney Poitier) and Simon Green (Ashton Kutcher) had professional careers, maintained impressive résumés, and were of middle class families. Although Simon had a successful career as a stockbroker for big-time investment firm J.P. Oliver (before he was fired), in comparison, John overshadows him as a world-renowned doctor up for a Nobel Peace Prize. Perhaps it was necessary for John to hold many titles and have a résumé too long to list in order to overcome the racial boundaries in place during the times of its production. Because they were economically stable (or supposedly so in the Simons's case) and on level social fields with their future in-laws, the only reason they could be found inadequate for marriage was their race; in the end neither family (due to their liberal politics or contemporary influences) could stoop as low to condemn their daughters' love because of skin color.

The daughters in the films, Joanna and Theresa, also held similar roles—Joanna a student and Theresa an aspiring photographer. Both girls were immersed in the world of art, as Joanna’s mother owned a gallery by which she was very familiar with art and well studied on its workings, and Theresa planned to build a career on her love for photography. The differences between the characters of Joanna and Theresa lay more in the context of their beings. Both were aware of the pending controversy their fiancés would bring their families, as neither “warned” their parents of their race difference, but all the same, the girls repeatedly and steadfastly tried to convince themselves (and their beaus) that “it wouldn’t be an issue.” Joanna was more oblivious to her father’s dismay (not to mention completely unaware of the provocation put on the table by her fiancé to be accepted or to leave) than Theresa who used her mother as leverage to alter her fathers’ steadfast attitude. Although Joanna may be less aggressive in her approach to gain her parents acceptance, she is more upfront with the racial issue. When Christina Drayton (Katherine Hepburn), her mother, looks pale and weak, Joanna simply states, “[Mother,] he thinks you’re going to faint because he’s a Negro” (Kramer).

Other characters in the films also had comparable careers in terms of social status. Percy Jones (Bernie Mac), Theresa’s father, was a loan officer, and Mr. Drayton (Spencer Tracey), Joanna’s father, publisher of a liberal newspaper. Labeling Mr. Drayton as a liberal put him in a compromising position when it came to accepting a black as a son-in-law. His politics tell him interracial marriage is both acceptable and justified, but when it hits home his attitude changes. As editor of a liberal San Franciscan newspaper, his qualities should include objective thinking, tolerance of others, and a laissez-faire attitude regardless of whom or what it pertains to. Also, placing Percy in charge of money, the

foundation of American capitalist society, provides him with power and positions others at his mercy. This role gave him the presence he needed to be a dominant, respected, and influential character in the film. He was positioned as the one who would determine if Simon and Theresa would marry, but almost unexpectedly, his wife Marilyn (Judith Scott) came into play as a dominant female role.

Although I am not discussing gender, as that is its own thesis, I found this worth mentioning. Marilyn Jones in *Guess Who*, as well as Mrs. Drayton and Mrs. Prentice in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* all take on dominant female roles. They do not adhere to their husbands' views or take on their personalities simply because they are males. All three women agree their children should marry who they want, regardless of race and stand by their beliefs in the "glory of love" (a theme that emanates through the soundtrack of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*). Although Marilyn is more vocal in her conviction, perhaps due to increased respect for women since 1967, women in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* are still clear on their thoughts and at least attempt to convey the message to their stubborn husbands. Portraying Marilyn as a strong black female adheres to *Guess Who's* attempt to disregard black stereotypes of subordination and servitude, whether it is a product of race or gender. In terms of employment, Mrs. Prentice was not designated a specific occupation in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, very similar to Simon's mother (a character visually absent from the film) who is a jack of many trades in order to pay her bills—mini-blind sales lady, dance teacher and realtor. Mrs. Drayton on the other hand, owns and manages an art gallery and Mrs. Jones is a teacher. The occupations held by Mrs. Drayton and Mrs. Jones reflect high culture and

education, while those held by Mrs. Prentice and Ms. Green insinuate that they belong to a lower class, consisting of dead-end jobs and housewife-dom.

Several black characters in these films exhibit many qualities and take on the stereotypical aspects of blacks from different times in history. In *Guess Who*, Percy Jones portrays an overzealous, hot-tempered male, which could be seen as a dulled version of the black buck, a stereotype that black men are violent and sexually aggressive (Bogle). The athlete, although he does not actually exist as a real character, is conjured up by Percy to replace Simon as a mate for his daughter in the mind of his assistant, Reggie. He creates a false identity for Simon named Jamaal (a stereotypical black name, as is Reggie) and describes him as a “big, nice looking guy who almost went pro after graduating from Howard University,” a historically black school (Sullivan). If this is Percy’s ideal match for his daughter, what is he going to do about the “skinny white kid” who has found his way into Theresa’s heart? Marilyn and her “black sisters,” as she refers to them, also hold the stereotypical representation of the opinionated, snappy-fingered, and attitude inspired black female. Percy describes the bunch as “dangerous,” and warns Simon “not to go in there,” referring to a room filled with black women. Also, Tillie, the Drayton’s maid in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* holds a strong racial stereotype. In essence, she plays the role of the mammy, described by Bogle as an African American woman who is happy and content with serving her white family. She has succumbed to a destiny of servitude to whites and feels as though the rest of the black race should do the same. Tillie also speaks with grammatical errors and slang as to ascribe to herself a lower social status. She is clearly distraught (as is obvious by the way

she stares and rudely addresses John) at the thought of a “member of [her] own race getting above himself,” (Kramer).

This small number of stereotypical representations within African American characters is due in part to the way the films were made. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is set in an all white environment with almost no interaction with the outside world. A majority of the film is set inside the Drayton household, where the only black people are the Prentices and Tillie. This limited number of blacks in the film left little room for representations of black stereotypes. *Guess Who* on the other hand, was filmed in a predominately black environment and the white characters consisted mainly of Simon and Marilyn's party planner, Dante (who was depicted in an extremely feminine fashion). With the majority of the characters being black, there was more room to wiggle in stereotypes from the past, as well as those from contemporary times such as that of the black athlete.

From this content analysis I have concluded that character roles seem to cross races from the original to the remake. Negative African American stereotypes, and black stereotypes in general, are slim to none in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, and negative representations that would typically be attributed to blacks are mostly directed towards Simon in *Guess Who*. The viewer learns at Simon's embarrassment, that his father left his mother when he was little and that his mother does not hold steady jobs, both of which are stereotyped characteristics of blacks. Less meaningful representations that I did not mention before that are socially ascribed to whites, such as a love for NASCAR, are prescribed to blacks in *Guess Who* in order to shake up conventional stereotypes.

Overall, *Guess Who* provides a more accurate and realistic portrayal of race and does not adhere to conventional stereotypes. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* also does not adhere to conventional stereotypes of its time, but contrary to its remake, it does not portray its characters in a believable light. The message is clear and the intentions are good, but the content is lacking, especially in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

### **Ideological Criticism**

An ideological criticism of these films is ideal because it “examines the ways in which texts reflect the dominant ideas, agendas, and policies of the society in which they are produced and consumed” (Hill). It is important to understand the ideas, perspectives, and historical context behind a film in order to comprehend its true meaning.

Communication Theory Professor Carl Bybee, teaches that an “ideological analysis is based on the assumption that cultural artifacts are produced in specific historical contexts, by and for specific social groups.” Because *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Guess Who* were made in two distinct and distant time periods, the Civil Rights era and the very recent past, they reflect different cultural values, politics, and agendas. It is well known that whites controlled the dominant ideologies throughout the Civil Rights movement, and is still the dominating power over American society. However, in this discussion I will focus on the African American representations in these films through the analytical lens of an ideological criticism and I will also relate the representations in these films to the Civil Rights movement and its continual effects on society at large, as well as discuss how genre plays a role in their reception.

Ideological criticisms pose the following questions: What ideas are dominant or marginal in a given historical society? How are meanings and representations socially constructed? What appears natural—gender, race, class? How does a text render representations to look natural when they're really not? To answer these questions, it is important to first place these films in their perspective historical contexts. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* released in 1967, one year after the Supreme Court decision to lift the ban on interracial marriage, for it was seen as unconstitutional to prohibit any union between two humans based on race. This ruling created a political and civil uproar, which resulted in the making of this controversial and groundbreaking film. Although it pushed the limits as far as depictions of interracial marriage, it still held close to the ideologies and attitudes of the dominant culture. Whites were the main focus of the film and their opinions were what mattered. John Prentice (Poitier) refused to marry Joanna Drayton (Houghton) without the approval of her parents. He claimed that he would walk away from their relationship if the Draytons did not give their blessing and were not in full cooperation, which put the black man at the mercy of whites; without their approval he believed he had no moral ground to stand on and would turn a blind eye to his beloved fiancé. *Guess Who*, a film of recent years, posed a different approach to the same message of interracial marriage. This time, it was not a black man at the mercy of whites for acceptance, but rather a white man who sought the acceptance of his fiancé's black family.

The most obvious modification from *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* to *Guess Who* is the reverse racial roles of the narrative family. The original depicts an affluent white family accepting a black man into their lives, and the remake flip-flops to an

equally affluent black family who is presented with a white fiancé. In 1967, the idea that a black would want to marry into a white family was not seen nearly as twisted and unnatural as the idea that a white man would lower himself to the likes of a black family. However, in 2005 interracial marriage was sanctioned by law and generally accepted by society, and although still controversial in some sense, a blind eye was turned as not to appear racist or insensitive. For this reason, it was acceptable to portray a white in the midst of working towards gaining acceptance from blacks that judged him adversely because of his skin color. These films are simply artifacts of the time periods in which they were created, and therefore reflect the political values and social influences of their day.

When ideologically analyzing a film, it is also vital to identify what ideas are dominant or marginal in a given historical society. To answer this it is important to look at who, or what group, holds power in society, politics, and in the film's creation itself. In 1967, the year of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner's* release, society was in the final stages of the Civil Rights movement and race was a touchy subject, especially when it came to integration, marriage, and anything that brought whites and blacks together on the same level. The dominant ideology in this culture reflects that of white people, and although some held liberal views, like those of Mr. Drayton, there remained tensions within politics and society over the subject of integration and racial equality. As may be obvious to some viewers, whites dominated the power structure of this particular film. The director, Stanley Kramer, writer, and majority of the actors are whites, which by default aided in the overpowering representation of dominant white agendas. What is a "white agenda"? I define the white agenda as pertaining to the domination of a white bias or

viewpoint, as well as the persistence of their ideals, wants, desires, and attitudes. The white agenda in this film is to convey the idea of acceptance and equality in a changing society, while still allowing whites the underlying power over the black characters' actions. There is an attempt to make this move towards racial integration appear believable to the viewer by creating a sense of compassion from the mothers and basing the story on love rather than skin color.

The naturalization of ideas and representations through a mediated and repeated message is also critical to setting a scene and creating a feeling for a film. The most important question to answer in terms of naturalization is: what appears natural—race, class, gender—and what does not? In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, because class conflicts were erased, and it focused mainly on the issue of race, there were many instances of inconsistency with what was socially true and acceptable in the 1960s and what was depicted in the film. To begin with, the depiction of John Prentice does not appear natural because he is a tremendously intellectual individual with a flood of opportunities who just so happens to be wealthy and black during a time of extreme racism in the United States. Despite these clashes, the film attempts to make his character seem natural by providing him with a family of equal standing and also puts him in disposition with the Drayton's, who have control over his marriage to their daughter. Regardless of his impressive résumé, nominations for top awards, and impeccable manners, he is met with stunned faces, backtalk, and is put under scrutiny by every character in the film, including Joanna. It is also troublesome and incongruent that an educated and confident man would back down and walk away from the woman he supposedly loves so much if her parents rejected him. Why was it OK for Mr. Drayton to

oppose the marriage, when John criticized his own father for his traditional views on the issue?

Also, the way the film entertains the idea of interracial marriage seems completely unnatural. There are no outsider opinions, Joanna and John had only known each other for 10 days, and it was an irrational and hurried union regardless of the races involved. The rush to make a decision conveys the idea that the marriage may be a mistake, but they need to go through with their plans or they may find fault in them—it was now or never for their marriage. The haste in which their relationship developed and blossomed created a message completely opposite of what the film intended, although at face value love at first sight seems like a romantic gesture. These meanings and messages are socially constructed by the characters seen on screen, the information the film provides about the society in which it is made, and the repetition of these intended message.

There are many instances and inferences throughout the film that intend to set the cultural scene and construct a social power structure. John and Joanna arrive in a San Francisco airport on their way to meet Joanna's parents, which in itself is inherent to social acceptance because San Francisco was (and still is) known as a liberal city, where outsiders can go to gain acceptance into a society they would otherwise be shunned from (as is true for the gay community of today.) Also, the idea to move to Europe (Switzerland in particular) yields an underlying message of social inequality in the US and provides a way to escape the scrutiny Mr. Drayton warned the young interracial couple they would face if they went through with their marriage. Switzerland, a liberal country with little to no gripes about interracial marriage compared to those in the United

States, was a strategic choice for the film as to avoid social conflict over their union (Human Rights). The immediacy in which this decision has to be made also added to the nature of the conflict. Providing little time (12 hours) created a sense of immediacy that allowed the viewer, as well as the characters, a small window to evaluate all aspects of the idea and its potential downfalls. Allowing just enough time for the couple to fall in love and demand that their parents accept their decision to marry, was a strategic measure that permitted only surface tensions within the families to brew and disregarded the outside world, although momentarily acknowledged by Mr. Drayton, as a major player in their decision making.

The interaction between black and white families exhibits a sense of equality of the two races, and also explains that both blacks and whites held reservations about the marriage. These reservations implied that the Draytons were not being racist, and neither were the Prentices, rather they were aware of social expectations and public attitudes towards issues of race, especially interracial marriage. However, as the story progresses, John criticizes his father's generation and their adherence to social norms, "You and your whole lousy generation believes the way it was for you is the way it's got to be. And not until your whole generation has lain down and died will the dead weight of you be off our backs!" (Kramer). This is an interesting thing for John to say, as he has previously succumbed and lowered himself to the mercy of Joanna's parents. The extreme difference in generational thinking in this film depicts how civil rights have essentially altered people's mindsets. Although this film was produced in the late Civil Rights era, it expresses the lengths liberties had come from the times of the older generation to the

younger—the younger generation is more accepting of change, differences, and can see past the color line.

Interestingly, in reference to generation gaps, Mr. Drayton gripes about the slowness of changes in society, but he ironically optimizes it as his own attitudes evolve throughout the film. He begins as a liberal newspaper editor and instantly becomes a man who cannot see past race when his daughter explains she is going to marry a black man and move to Switzerland. It seems as though to Mr. Drayton, race is not an issue as long as it is not in his backyard. When he is confronted with racial issues, tensions rise and it is apparent there is uneasiness over the idea of interracial marriage not only on a personal level, but also on the greater scale of society as a whole. Drayton talks about the social problems his daughter and new son-in-law would face if they married, but he never explicitly spells them out. He lets the audience take the role of moderator in order to refrain from offending or demeaning the black race. Despite the fact Mr. Drayton does not explain his thoughts, I knew what social problems he was talking about simply because I was aware of discrimination and racial tensions of the time period.

Overall, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is in line with the effects of the Civil Rights movement and the ban on all race-based legal restrictions on marriage in the United States. It provides historically accurate information about the legalization of interracial marriage and also attempts to indicate how society perceives the idea while still leaning towards liberal thoughts. It is an early attempt to break away from black stereotypes and place blacks and whites on an even playing field, but still at the expense of excluding the characters from the outside world as to reduce the possible instances of uncontrolled racism that would transpire.

In comparison, *Guess Who*, its contemporary remake, provides a fresh look at the old, but still relevant, message. This film, unlike its original, was directed by an African American, Kevin Rodney Sullivan; perhaps an African American at the head of the film's production influenced the way in which blacks were portrayed and how they were to interact with whites. Sullivan provides his daughter as reason for creating this film, "I have a 12-and-a-half-year-old daughter who's beautiful, and I'm sure she's going to come home one day with some Lithuanian, Samoan, punk-rock drummer dude, and I thought if I did this movie I'd be able to work out my issues before that day comes," (imdb). The intentions behind this film are as important to the message as the film itself, because they reflect a deeper meaning and can contribute to the overall tone of the film. Sullivan reported that the working title of the film was *The Dinner Party* because he was unsure of how the final results would pan out. In an interview he claims he did not want to give this film a name that would be too closely associated with the original in chance the production was a flop, and also did not want to try and compete with the social significance and impact of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (imdb).

By focusing on the ideological aspects of the films, it was clear that these films were produced for mainstream audiences, by perhaps a more liberal, daring party in an attempt to ridicule and mock those who could not break past the color line. Because "cultural artifacts are produced in specific historical contexts, by and for specific social groups," in order to understand why they were made, it is vital to reveal who made them for whom (Bybee). I found that characters who were racist were approached with disdain and were portrayed as ignorant, while those accepting of others and open to new ideas were represented as caring and intelligent individuals. These traits applied across a range

of characters allowed the viewer to recognize who was playing which role in the film—racist, bigot, impartial observer etc. It is interesting that this use of characteristics to identify character roles is in a sense a use of stereotypes, which are employed as a means of quickly identifying a group of people, as well as an effective instrument to fasten specific values and characteristics.

*Guess Who* (2005) although released during a less socially controversial time than its predecessor and also directed by a black man rather than a white man, still reflected a dominant white ideology with a modern twist. Although people of all races have penetrated and influenced all aspects of American culture, I believe it is safe to say that it is still dominated by a white agenda and whites control the power structure that forms our society's values, ideals, attitudes, and film industry. Instead of attacking the issue of interracial marriage dramatically (like the original), since it is not a specifically pertinent social issue of the time, this film produced a message of equality, tolerance and acceptance through humor and shook up traditional African American stereotypes by attributing them to the opposite race (and doing the same for typical white representations). I interpreted the extreme reversal of roles and stereotypes as a way for the film to poke fun at these typical representations and draw attention to the idea of acceptance of people for who they are rather than skin color.

Like the original, *Guess Who* jumps right into the controversy of interracial relationships at the start of the film. As Theresa and Simon discuss the issue of race in a cab, driven by a black cabbie, on their way to the Jones family house, the driver provides his two cents and states that “it will be an issue” in reference to Simon's race difference (Sullivan). When they arrive at the Theresa's, her father, Percy, accidentally welcomes

the cabbie to his house as his daughters boyfriend and mistaking Simon for the driver. This scene itself depicts racial consciousness. Without realizing his actions, Percy had assumed the black man was his daughter's beau simply because of skin color. Despite the sanction of interracial marriage, the normative and natural idea is to marry someone like oneself in skin color, creed, ethnicity and so on. Famed black film director Spike Lee comments on this type "natural" or "unintentional" racial selection based on association, "It's the same situation you have in schools... you have black and white kids but when it comes time for lunch, the black kids go sit with the black kids and the white kids, go and sit with the white kids... It's a natural phenomenon," (Rhines 139). Matt Drayton in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* even says its "human nature" to care about race (Kramer).

Although society now generally accepts blacks and whites as equals, it is obvious that there are still tensions and racism alive in our culture. Simon even gets caught up in the use of black stereotypes by telling "black jokes" around the dinner table with his future in-laws. Blacks are the butt of these jokes, which demean their being and portray them as nitwits. Once particular joke refers to the stereotype that blacks don't have jobs, which is ironic since Simon is unemployed—"What are three things a Black man can't get?" he asks, and then replies, "A black eye, a fat lip and a job" (Sullivan). This joke not only adheres to conventional social representations, but also physical attributes that are believed to belong to all blacks.

As Simon and Percy become acquainted, they perceive one another as threats. They try to one-up one another by racing cars, attempting to out-drink and out-dance one another, and openly dispute whether it is actually raining or not; a typical male trait to

always needing to be right. Simon may also be using this competition to prove himself to Percy as a strong man who can take care of his daughter, regardless of his skin tone. This is interesting because as I will discuss further in the next paragraph, in the original John felt as though he needed to prove himself to the Draytons also—through manners and decency rather than physical strength and extreme masculinity.

Because Simon is visiting his fiancé's family (who is obviously black), this puts him in a vulnerable position. The depiction of a white man in a house full of blacks and at their disposal for ridicule is a social construct that is showing how races have become equal in power in personal, social and political aspects. Another way Simon's vulnerability is taken advantage of is when Percy does not allow him to sleep in the same bed as his daughter, and also forces him to discuss his family life, during which he reveals that his father left him as a young child (deadbeat dads, commonly a stereotype black males) and that he was consequently raised by a single mother (typical representation of black women) who worked dead-end jobs just to get by and raise him the best she could. Due to the fact that American society has become accustomed to integrated social hierarchies, which do not always include whites in top power positions, these representations are viewed as normal and acceptable. Additionally, the nuclear families that exist in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* are lacking in *Guess Who*, which is another a product of society, as divorce as well as many other reasons for single-parenthood are more prevalent now than in the late 60s.

Also significant in explaining why and how characters are represented in film is the genre it falls into. A genre is a grouping of related works based on similar elements such as plot, characters, and setting (Hill). Genres include action films, adventure, horror,

science fiction, drama, and comedy, just to name a few. Because genres present stories in different ways (through song, narrative, etc), use various filming techniques (angles, black and white, lighting etc.) and approach conflicts with different attitudes and resolutions (romance, comedy, drama etc.), they will inherently produce different emotions, ideas, and themes with each film. The two genres presented in this study are drama and comedy. I believe the use of two separate genres to tell the same story plays into how stereotypes are represented differently in these films, and also reflect the mood of the period in which it was made.

The first genre of film, drama, is one that depends mostly on in-depth development of realistic characters dealing with emotional themes. A dramatic film shows human beings at their best, their worst, and everything in-between (Hill). Dramatic themes often include current issues, societal ills, and problems, concerns or injustices, such as racial prejudice. The tone of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is more serious, which makes it clearly definable as a drama and forces the viewer take notice of the issues at hand. As stated above, a drama often includes themes of current issues and societal ills, and this is precisely what *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* does. It takes racial prejudice and places it at the forefront of the film. The characters are presented with serious attitudes in order to compliment the seriousness of the plot.

One discrepancy between the given definition of a dramatic character—complex, deep, and realistic—and this particular film is that the character in question, John Prentice, is not realistic for the time in which in the film was made. However, he is complex and deep in that he has many accomplishments; he is an extremely educated and well-off black man in a time when this was rare, he has been widowed, and he takes

discrimination from whites much differently than he accepts it from those of his own race. Perhaps portraying John as a white man in a black man's body was a way to remove any preconceived notions the viewer may hold towards blacks and allow the drama and plight of the storyline to shine through.

The change of genre from the original film to remake also effects how characters are represented. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is a drama and *Guess Who* changes pace as a comedy. In reference to these films and their depictions of civil liberties and racial acceptance in the United States since the Civil Rights era, Brian Lowry, critic for *Variety* magazine, comments, "Take it as a sign of progress that *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* can actually be reversed for comic effect almost four decades later." This change in itself describes how society has changed over the years, from the stern views on interracial marriage in the 60s, to the comedic response in the 2000s.

The genre may also be dependent on the target audience. As noted in an earlier chapter, there is a proven generational discrepancy in the acceptance rate of interracial marriage. Older people, who are more likely to have set ideals, values and beliefs, are less likely to be influenced by a mainstream comedy about a black girl marrying a funny white guy, but this message can reach an audience who already finds this idea acceptable and part of their culture. A comedic approach to a serious situation is an effective way to reach a younger audience. I can attest that *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was a difficult film to finish, despite its positive message. The tone was over dramatic, dull, and extremely slow paced. *Guess Who* on the other hand, "uses sitcom and soap opera formula" a younger generation can identify with (Lowry). Some critics believe it allows the characters easy ways out, but that is inherent in a comedic film. "No one in the

audience of any race is going to feel uncomfortable about much of anything on the screen,” but isn’t the message here to be comfortable with people of other races and accept them for who they are? (Lowry)

## **Summary**

In this chapter I evaluated the films through a content analysis and an ideological criticism. I came to several conclusions on why and how race was represented in the films and also observed these films are artifacts of their time and attempt to reflect that culture, or the ideal culture in the case of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, in which they were made. Although maybe not completely accurate or fair in their racial representations, they raise awareness on important social issues in regards to race that still affect society today. The representations of African Americans in these two films have clearly shifted due to social movements, litigations, and increased tolerance. The following discussion will identify how these representations changed, if they are positive, negative, or otherwise, and what influence the Civil Rights movement may have had these films.

## Chapter 4

### Discussion and Conclusion

In this research, I discussed the films I studied and how I related my chosen methodologies of content analysis and ideological criticism to the overall research question of how African American representations in film have changed since the Civil Rights movement. The concept of stereotypes and their application in these films applies to my research question because they attempt to depreciate the use of stereotypes by reversing traditional representations. In conjunction, throughout this research I noticed a major theme of the criticism of racism and intolerance towards others. To answer my research question, I found the major differences in representations did not lie between the films I studied, but rather in the films I studied and those that I did not. To clarify this statement, *Guess Who* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* used reversed stereotypes (placing blacks in roles as wealthy doctors and loan officers, and whites as unemployed and from broken homes) while other films produced in both time periods reflected traditional stereotypes such as those defined in a study conducted by Divine and Elliot, *Are Racial Stereotypes Really Fading?* (See Appendix A for complete results.) However, I believe the Civil Rights movement and its long-term effects on society and cultural beliefs did influence opportunities for blacks behind the scenes in the film industry, which characteristically altered how films were produced and what was seen on screen.

Stepping back from the researched films and looking solely at attitudes towards African Americans and their attributed stereotypes, it is clear that the Civil Rights movement has had a positive impact on representations in films and beliefs about blacks

in general. Although it is incredibly difficult to prove cause and effect, that does not mean the movement and civil liberties did not initiate this change. In defense, the movement itself may have not directly caused this change, but the consequences of the movement such as social integration, litigation, and Equal Employment Opportunity naturally resulted in evolving perspectives and ideas towards blacks. Research, as well as my own observations has indicated an affirmative shift in attitudes towards race; a comedic approach to interracial marriage is a true display of this.

Because of the limitations of my study between *Guess Who* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, a comparison between less racially focused films would provide further insight into the development and change of African American representations. If I had the opportunity to conduct further research, I would choose a set of films that did not focus on race and racial conflict as a central theme. Although the idea of studying films directly influenced by racial tensions seemed ideal at the beginning of my research, I came to realize it skewed how characters were represented and did not offer “real stereotypes,” if you will. These films were too preoccupied with dismissing the use of traditional racial stereotypes to utilize them as they would in any other given film. Because of this, I think my data may be distorted and not accurately representational of the use of African American stereotypes between the Civil Rights era and the present. Based on the representations in these two films, and the sheer lack of characters (numerically), it is difficult to assess if the stereotypes of African Americans have changed over the past 35 years.

The lack of “outside” influence on the storyline and how races are perceived provides a limited window for analysis, and also does not allow for an overall view of

popular reception of interracial marriage. The viewer could assume the general public (if there were one) in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* would have been apprehensive towards Joanna and John's marriage, but since the film was secluded to the Drayton household and its guests, there was little indication of this. Although *Guess Who* was positioned in a slightly more open venue, the isolated premise remains the same. Perhaps the families were secluded in an effort to focus on race and the personal turmoil, or as a way to avoid the real issues of race and tolerance within their given societies. Both films also adhere to racial boundaries in the sense that blacks associate with blacks, and whites with whites. These, among other issues raise several questions: Is our society unconsciously as reserved about race as it was openly in the 1960s? Is it possible to present a film that truthfully deals with race relations? How does the rising number of black individuals behind the scenes in the film industry effect production? Does their presence have any influence? In this study it is clear that Kevin Rodney Sullivan's direction of the film was a spin off of traditional stereotypes, but would the message have been conveyed the same way if the director were white? Would they have dared to present "black jokes" at the chance of being labeled racist? Would it be possible to alter representations to the point of changing dominant ideologies?

Despite this plethora of questions, I believe this project has demonstrated the impact the Civil Rights movement has had on all aspects of American culture and also raises many inquires about how media affects society's views on the world and other peoples. Although it may be impossible to answer the questions this research has posed, it is important to understand the influence media have on the observer and to question the message it is sending. We must be critical of our culture and its products so as not to soak

up every stereotype, generalization, and representation as reality, for this is how these ideas grow and become part of our ideologies.

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**Appendix A**  
**Top 10 Stereotypes of Black Americans**  
 Comparative Study  
 Conducted by: Divine and Elliot

	1933: Top 10 Stereotypes	1995: Top 10 Stereotypes
1	Superstitious	Athletic
2	Lazy/Slovenly	Rhythmic/Musical
3	Happy-Go-Lucky	Unintelligent/ignorant
4	Ignorant	Poor
5	Musical	Loud
6	Ostentatious	Criminal
7	Very Religious	Hostile
8	Dirty (Physically)	Very Religious
9	Naïve	Loyal to Family
10	Unreliable	Dirty (Physically)

## Appendix B

### Code Sheet and Character Description Breakdown

(Characters are categorized by role and matched to their equivalents in the opposing film, if such a character exists)

Coding is as follows:

E = coded as character race

N = coded as character name

O = coded as character occupation

R = coded as character's role in the film

- = omitted information

Male Characters			
Original (1967)		Remake (2005)	
E:	Black	E:	White
N:	Dr. John Wade Prentice	N:	Simon Green
O:	Physician, world-renowned doctor.	O:	JP Oliver Investment Specialist.
R:	College, Harvard. Fiancé	R:	College. Fiancé
E:	Black	E:	White
N:	Mr. Prentice	N:	-
O:	Mailman	O:	-
R:	John's father, Opposed to interracial marriage	R:	Simon's father, Dead-beat dad
E:	White	E:	White
N:	Monsignor Ryan	N:	Dante
O:	Priest	O:	Party Planner
R:	Neutral party, believed the marriage would work	R:	Metro-sexual, minority, neutral party
E:	White	E:	Black
N:	Matt Drayton	N:	Percy Jones
O:	Liberal Newspaper Publisher	O:	Loan Officer
R:	Joanna's Father, Opposed to interracial marriage yet a liberal	R:	Theresa's Father, Opposed to interracial marriage, homophobe
E:	White	E:	Black
N:	-	N:	Reggie
O:	Delivery Boy for Larry's Fine Foods	O:	Percy's Assistant
R:	Interacts on a friendly level with blacks	R:	Easily persuaded, sports fanatic
E:	White	E:	Black
N:	-	N:	Weston Thompson
O:	Cab Driver	O:	Cab Driver
R:	First character to convey racist action	R:	Insisted race would be an issue in the relationship, was confused for Simon as Theresa's boyfriend

E: Black N: - O: - R: Fought with Mr. Drayton at the ice cream stand over a car crash	E: White N: Nathan O: Simon's Boss at JP Oliver R: Reason behind Simon's unemployment, Racist
E: - N: - O: - R: -	E: Black N: Howard Jones O: - R: Grandfather, held strong objections to interracial marriage
E: - N: - O: - R: -	E: White N: Jerry McNamara O: JP Oliver & Assoc. R: Simon's friend, in at the company
E: - N: - O: - R: -	E: Black N: Marcus O: - R: Darlene's Husband, dominant male- "his house"

Female Characters			
Original (1967)		Remake (2005)	
E: White N: Joanna Drayton O: Student, some college. R: Daughter, Fiancé	E: Black N: Theresa Jones O: Photographer. College. R: Fiancé, Percy's Daughter		
E: Black N: Mrs. Prentice O: - R: Mother, in favor of pursuing love, understanding of interracial marriage	E: White N: - O: Dance Teacher, Realtor, Mini Blind Sales R: Simon's Mother, single mom		
E: White N: Christina Drayton O: Art Gallery Owner R: Mother, in favor of pursuing love, understanding of interracial marriage	E: Black N: Marilyn Jones O: Teacher R: Mother, in favor of love, understanding of interracial marriage		
E: White N: Hillary St. George O: Assistant, employee at the art gallery R: Racist, explains her sorrow for the "situation"	E: Black N: Keisha Jones O: - R: Sister, the sister "who didn't bring home the white kid"		

E: Black N: Tillie Binks O: Maid R: Disapproves of interracial marriage, “doesn’t believe blacks should get above themselves”	E: White N: Elizabeth O: Assistant/Friend at JP Oliver R: Insider at JP Oliver, informant
E: Black N: Dorothy O: Helper at the Drayton Household R: Catches the eye of John Prentice	E: Black N: Darlene O: - R: Marilyn’s sister, haven

## **Author's Biography**

Erica F. Berry was born in Augusta, Maine on March 23, 1987. She graduated from Gardiner Area High School in 2005. Erica is a Mass Communications major with a double minor in Spanish and International Affairs. She is a sister of Pi Beta Phi fraternity for women and served on the executive council as Vice President of Event Planning for the 2008 term. Erica is also member of Phi Beta Kappa honor fraternity. Upon graduation in May 2009, Erica plans to enter the work force and pursue a Bachelors Degree in Spanish.