

## REMEMBERING SLAVERY MATTERS

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**ABSTRACT:** Reckoning that the audience is no longer a passive receiver of any message, Stuart Hall developed his encoding/ decoding model of communication in which he argued that the decoding process of any message can result in one of the following positions: the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position, or the oppositional position. Based on this premise, the crux of this paper has been established. In other words, this paper argues that the American miniseries *Roots* that first aired on May 30, 2016 and treated slavery as its pivotal theme is a dominant-hegemonic response to the Black Lives Matter Movement's cause. The findings confirm the idea and reveal that the miniseries was produced not only to address the generation of Black Lives Matter but also to entrench the memories of the slavery regime that was inflicted upon Blacks years ago in America. This work, thus, does not only approach the study of *Roots* differently, but also offers insight into the nature of the movement and the ideologies that directed the creation of *Roots*.

**Keywords:** *Black Lives Matter Movement; Remember; Roots; Slavery; Stuart Hall.*

### 1. Introduction :

Following the acquittal of George Zimmermann in 2013, the question of anti-black racism in the United States was broached in a form of a new Civil Rights movement called the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) to address violence and police brutality against Blacks. It was launched at the beginning using social media that helped in a great deal to circulate the movement's message. Drawing upon Stuart Hall's encoding/ decoding model of communication, the movement received three different responses. The first one endorsed the message of the movement and reiterated that lives of Blacks matter. The second one opposed the message and believed that lives of Whites and police matter instead. The third one insisted that all lives matter which is considered as a negotiated reading that neither opposed the founders of the BLM nor completely supported them. Working on the basis of the first position which positively received the BLM Movement's cause, the question that underlies this present work sprang by relating the movement to the American miniseries *Roots* that was aired in 2016. According to its executive producer Mark Wolper, *Roots* was intentionally produced to fit the generation of this era. He confirmed, "The original *Roots*, the classical *Roots*, was absolutely the best that it could be for the seventies. We, in this *Roots*, are the best that we can be for 2016." (VICE, 2016). Hence, the research question is as follows: how was the BLM Movement's message manifested in the American miniseries *Roots*? Since the study

is exploratory in its nature, a hypothesis does not figure in the beginning of the work, but it can be generated by the end instead, through the results and findings of the work. (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

## 2. The Black Lives Matter Movement's Cause

Born out of a social media post, BLM Movement sparked discussion about race and inequality in a period wherein anti-black racism was thought to have ended years ago with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting rights Act, and other achievements African American could attain throughout the 1970's and 1980's (Penrice, 2007). Actually, BLM Movement is one of the most remarkable movements that appeared in the twenty first century in the United States. In 2012, an unarmed 17-year-old African American Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by a local resident called George Zimmerman, yet this latter was acquitted igniting flames of anger, resentment and outrage among those who were impatiently and anxiously awaiting for the Court to decide a verdict of guilty. This stance eventuated in the emergence of the BLM Movement. The phrase, in fact, was first coined in 2013 by three African American women; Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi to express their refusal to the Court's decision and to empathize with Martin's parents and supporters. Garza revealed, "I remember feeling frightened most of the time...it actually felt like I got punched in the gut, so I went on social media to try to find words for what was happening, and what I wanted in that moment was some love for us and so I wrote a love letter to black people, 'black people, I love I, I love us, we matter, our lives matter, black lives matter.'" (EmergingUS, 2016).

The phrase, however, did not spread until August 9, 2014 when Michael Brown was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, and similar events occurred in different states in America, such as the death of Eric Garner who was put in a chokehold in front of camera by a white officer in 2014 in Staten Island, New York; Dontre Hamilton who was shot in the same year and killed by the police officer Christopher Manney, at Red Arrow Park in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; the shooting of John Crawford in Beavercreek, Ohio, near Dayton ; to name but few. Consequently, what started as an online campaign turned to a movement of its own and generated a rallying cry for change and equal treatment. Alicia Garza highlighted, "The lives of black folks over the country have been unfairly targeted for demise. Sure that no longer will we live in a country where every 28 hours a black person is murdered by police vigilantes or security guards (MSNBC, 2015).

Albeit the movement's primary cause was to condemn police brutality that addressed Blacks more than Whites in America, it shifted –according to its founders– to resonate internationally by revealing the real situation Blacks were compelled to endure. When interviewed by Mia Birdsong and asked about the significance of such movement, Patrisse Cullors asserted that Black Lives Matter was a call to action and a tool to re-imagine the world because she believed that Blacks were still second-class citizens (TED, 2016). She proceeded, "I think our work ... is not just about our own visibility, but rather how do we make the whole visible (TED, 2016). In the same vein, Opal Tometi emphasized, "I am because you are. You are because I am"

(TED, 2016). They accentuated the notions of unity and otherness. While the former asserts that Blacks are one, the latter emphasizes that Blacks will not accept to be treated as the other just because they are ‘blacks’ in a country they believe to be theirs as well. Not only this, what the movement wanted to insist upon was the dignity of Blacks. The founders made it clear that the cause of the movement they launched went beyond only defying police brutality or only elevating Blacks’ Lives over others’ to demanding respect and dignity to every black person in the country (EmergingUs, 2016; MSNBC, 2015; Originals, 2016). All in all, the BLM Movement strove to spotlight four main themes: otherness versus unity, perseverance, and dignity.

### 3. The American Miniseries *Roots* (2016)

The African Americans’ experience in attempting to be integrated in the American society was considered as a hot topic to be dealt with in the American cinema and television. In 1977, the American television aired the miniseries *Roots* which was based on Alex Haley's 1976 novel, *Roots: the Saga of an American Family*. This miniseries depicts the harsh aspects of slavery in America from 1750 till the end of the American Civil War in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is considered as a multigenerational work that told the story of Kunta Kinte and his descendants from the moment Kunta Kinte was brutally and unwillingly kidnapped as a slave from his homeland in Africa enduring the harrowing journey across the Atlantic in a slave ship to the instance when his grandson George and his family were freed. Indeed, the novel itself was based on Haley’s own family and presented a determined search for freedom and dignity.

*Roots* could successfully entrench its stamp as being an audacious drive towards depicting the very cruel aspects of the atrocities of slavery. It received a highly critical attention and a certain amount of nominations for awards (Rosenthal, 1999). The *Time* magazine reported that when *Roots* was on the air, restaurants and shop owners witnessed profit decline and bartenders could keep customers by turning the channel selector at stations that showed *Roots* (D.Tovares, 2013). Not only this, but parents named their children after characters in the miniseries (D.Tovares, 2013). In 2016, a remake for the miniseries seemed necessary. The new *Roots* was reproduced to retell the history of slavery through the story of a black family to the modern generation in the BLM era. Mark Wolper confessed that at the beginning he approached the idea of remaking *Roots* with hesitation and refusal (Screen, 2016). Yet, when his 16-year-old son appreciated the significance of *Roots*, but could not enjoy it while watching, Wolper changed his mind. His son expressed, “I understand why *Roots* is important, but, Dad, it is like your music; it does not speak to me.” (Screen, 2016). It was at that moment that Wolper realized that the story should be told again “to all the people like [his son].” (Screen, 2016). The new *Roots*, therefore, was made with the attempt of teaching the new generation an essential part of the American history which is cautiously pointed at. Wolper, himself, decided that slavery in general and *Roots* in particular should never be consigned to oblivion for they constitute a crystal part of the American history. He contended, “Every

generation has an obligation to teach [history] to the next generation... anyone under the age of 37 hasn't heard the story. Maybe they've heard of 'Roots' or heard of Kunta Kinte. Then you realize it's a story we have to keep telling over and over again (Otterson, 2016). The decision, thus, was turned into tangible results and *Roots* was re-created. The History channel acquired rights to *Roots* by Mark Wolper. The trailer was released on February 11, 2016, and the miniseries was premiered on May 30, 2016.

#### 4. Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model of Communication

Known for his salient contributions to the field of cultural studies, the Jamaican-born British leading cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall participated in founding the interdisciplinary British school of Cultural Studies and in revolutionizing the field of communication. He was director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in England and later became a professor of sociology at the Open University. Hall's work centered on the issues of race, gender, African Diaspora and the media studies. Due to the remarkable role he played in enlarging the scope of cultural studies, the British newspaper *The Observer* has called him, "one of the country's leading cultural theorists" (Hobbs & Rice, 2018:262).

From 1973 till 1980 he was able to develop his encoding/decoding model of communication that defied the previous linear model and explained the process of sending, receiving and interpreting any message. According to Hall, the consumers of the information are at the same time producers (Sender & Decherney, 2016). He altered the misconception of the previous model that treated the audience as passive receivers. James Procter points, "Traditionally, the meaning of the media message was viewed as static, transparent and unchanging throughout the communication process." (Procter, 2004:57). To put it differently, the model that preceded Hall's stated that the meaning of the message is fixed and determined by the sender only, whereas the receiver does not have the ability to alter the meaning. This view was totally refuted by Hall who asserted that a recipient receives and gives meaning to the message according to his knowledge, cultural background, experiences and context (Procter, 2004).

Furthermore, he believed that both senders and receivers are communicators sending and receiving messages, i.e. the message is not static and can be changed throughout the process of communication. A receiver's understanding may not be as the sender's original intentional message. Accordingly, he created the encoding/decoding model in which he explained that the process of communication passes by what he named as moments: production, circulation or distribution and finally consumption. He proceeded by arguing that the receiver can either agree with the sender's message which is the dominant-hegemonic position, or accepts the message but negotiates it which is known as the negotiated position, or finally opposes the whole message and produces his own and that is what Hall calls the oppositional position (Procter, 2004).

Decoding for him is the most neglected part of the communication process, yet it is the most important one because for a message to be effective it must be decoded by the receiver (Procter, 2004). Procter uses the 9/11 to exemplify the three decoding positions. The news coverage of the 9/11 event tried to send the message that the event was a terrorist attack on the civilized by Muslims. The dominant reading would be to get and accept the same message, the negotiated reading, to condemn the terrorist attack but refuse to attribute to it Muslim; the oppositional reading, to totally rebut the message and consider it as a war against Islam only (Procter, 2004).

## **5. *Roots* (2016) as a dominant-hegemonic position to the Black Lives Matter Movement**

Based on the assumption that *Roots* (2016) adopted the dominant-hegemonic position to the BLM Movement's message, the present paper aims at exploring how this stance is manifested in the miniseries. In fact, *Roots* aired for the first time on May 30, 2016 and took four instalments of nearly two hours for each to be accomplished. It stars a number of white and black actors like Malachi Kirby as Kunta Kinte, Anika Noni as Kizzy, Forest Whitaker as Fidler, Jonathan Rhys Meyers as Tom Lea, to cite but few. The whole cast and crew of the mini-series strove to present *Roots* with a contemporary perspective to reach the BLM's generation. As it was discussed earlier, the BLM Movement's founders endeavoured to spread the following notions: unity versus otherness, dignity, and perseverance. Focusing on the main character Kunta Kinte, the following lines will help answer the above raised question.

### **5.1. Unity versus Otherness in *Roots* (2016)**

Themes of unity and otherness were the main reasons that led the founders of the BLM to launch their campaign. Both themes were conspicuously highlighted right from the first moment the producers of *Roots* were mulling over the idea of remaking the mini-series. Mark Wolper averred, “[*Roots*] prompted me to be interested in who I am...motivates us to be interested in who we are and if we understand who we are we will...realize that we are all connected.” (HISTORY, Know Your Roots: Mark Wolper | History [Video], 2016a). He proceeds by emphasizing that if they are all connected, no one would go out in the street and to fight and shoot the other.” (Ibid). Accordingly, he stressed that making *Roots* will undoubtedly triggers one's curiosity to question his own roots and identity, and this in turn will engender a sense of belonging and acceptance between everyone. It is worth mentioning that Mark Wolper is a white American who worked hand in hand with the black co-executive producer Levar Burton who played the role of Kunta Kinte in the original *Roots* of 1977. The combination of the two encouraged the acceptance of the other as part of a whole. When Wolper addressed his speech to Burton, he confirmed, “You and I are related... we realize that we are not separate different” (HISTORY, 2016b), and



Burton assured, “We are related... We are all the same species” (HISTORY, 2016b). In the same vein, actress Anika Noni who played the role of Kunta kinte’s daughter Kizzy hinted at the theme of unity *Roots aims to* dispatch when she kept reiterating the words family and together. She noted, “People do not even eat dinner together anymore... when families feel that something for a family, they will come together and [Roots] is a family story...whole family could and would watch it together (HISTORY, 2016b).

Regarding the miniseries itself, in the thirty eighth minute of the first episode, the scene features Blacks from different tribes chained tightly, speaking different languages; yet, they decide to unite to create a mutiny when one of them screams, “Come on! Brothers, I am Silla Ba Dibba from Juffure... we must help each other...brothers” (Beresford, Carter, Noyce, & Van Peebles, 2016). The BLM founders did the same when they first shared their emotions with every black in America through social media. They did not only empathize with the victims, but also appealed to the benevolent conscience to remind them that Blacks are the unified other with the other.

## 5.2. Perseverance in *Roots* (2016)

Perseverance permeated every instance in *Roots*. The expression “Mandinka warrior” is frequently used in the first episode of the series (Beresford, Carter, Noyce, & Van Peebles, 2016). It denotes that Blacks are born strong and full of stamina to defend themselves and their families and towns. The first thirty minutes of the first episode express the process of creating a Mandinka warrior as part of the rituals that the Mandinka kingdom in West Africa performs. It is a process by which Africans receive a training that teaches them how to fight heart and soul, bear the harsh treatment and conditions to become real responsible warriors who can protect themselves, their families and tribes; especially with the ubiquity of slave catchers in Africa in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

As depicted in *Roots*—some Africans are conspiring with the Europeans to catch and sell slaves for weapons. Furthermore, when Kunta Kinte is trapped by his rivals who decide to sell him to the English as slave, the process of his capture is portrayed as being very hard to be achieved. Had they not stabbed him in the back, they would not succeed in holding him as a captive. Another illustration is tangible during the scene where slaves are shackled but obliged to eat. Kunta adamantly refuses to coerce into Whites’ orders, and because his life, as any other slave, is so precious to the Europeans, the scene shows him being forced to gulp a drink; yet, he succeeds in not doing so.

When the overseers in the ship punish an African to scare the rest and to compel them to succumb to the slave-owners’ orders, the result is the opposite. The Africans stanchly insist upon fighting for their freedom. Silla, Kunta Kinte’s teacher who is captured with him, asserts, “I will fight, and if we die, the spirits of our ancestors will tell our families that we tried to come home to them.” (Beresford, Carter, Noyce, & Van Peebles, 2016). Despite of the pain Silla suffers from, the fifty ninth minute of the first episode shows him and Kunta grappling their hands and the other Africans

shouting, insisting upon fighting to take the ship back to Africa. In the light of the BLM Movement, Garza maintained, “ [This movement] is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression (Thomas, 2019).

It is clearly noticed, then, the points that both *Roots* and the BLM Movement converge on. The spirits of persistence and perseverance in front of slave catchers and Whites in *Roots* are the same Blacks hold during of the BLM era in front of police brutality and Court’s bias. On the one hand, Garza’ use of ‘affirmation’ and ‘resilience in the face of deadly oppression’ expressions indicates that Blacks have always been and are still fighters against any kind of ill-treatment and cruelty. On the other hand, the examples mentioned above in *Roots* could have been depicted differently, but the makers of the miniseries made sure that they are addressing new generation and at the same time backing up the BLM’s cause and supporters.

### 5.3. Dignity in *Roots* (2016)

As it was spelled out earlier, one of the chief themes of the BLM Movement is dignity. Garza asserted, “We’ve been fighting for the whole time...but not for citizenship like papers...it is citizenship like dignity.” (EmergingUS, 2016).The feeling of being humiliated and their lives were not honored, propelled Blacks in America to rise for they did not want to be deprived of their own dignity. *Roots* depicts the adherence to dignity when Kunta Kinte is obliged to change his name to Toby. As the final scenes of the first episode portray, Kunta is ruthlessly whipped more than 15 times to accept his new name, and he reluctantly does. The closing scene of the first episode ends with the character Fiddler, who is another slave, reassuring Kunta by saying, “It don't matter what the Massa call you. You keep your true name inside. I'm gonna keep it there, too. Promise... Kunta Kinte. Son of Omoro Kinte. You live, Kunta Kinte. You live (Beresford, Carter, Noyce, & Van Peebles, 2016).

Kunta Kinte, the headstrong character refuses to accept the name assigned to him by his master, for he believes that being deprived of his name, is being deprived of his identify and therefore of his dignity. Comparing the 2016’s whipping scene of the miniseries to the 1977’s demonstrates the aim of the producers to create the new *Roots* differently. The whipping scene differs drastically from the original one in terms of the length of the scene, the number of the lashes Kunta takes, and the instances the harsh overseer keeps demanding Kunta to pronounce his slave name, Toby (Beresford, Carter, Noyce, & Van Peebles, 2016). On the making of the new scene, LaVar Burton asserted, “We live in a... more violent society, and that's certainly reflected in our storytelling...we can handle a more graphic representation of the reality that we are portraying... they give us a much deeper sense of the actual brutality that the ancestors of black people survived (Aminosharei, 2016). Indeed, Burton wanted to insist that the scene was necessary to be made as such because what happened to the African Americans by the policemen was more brutal.

Another palpable example from the first episode is the instance Kunta decides to take the horse of his master's wife to escape. Fiddler mocks at him for the horse is accustomed to be ridden only by the master's wife and for Kunta to do it, he needs to be well-trained. Yet, Kunta replies, "do not ride like English lady. Ride like Mandinka warrior." Not only the words he uses are strong, so is the way he pronounces them. His sharp tone and gaze demonstrates the extent he clings on all what defines his dignity.

In the same line of thought, *Roots* depicts the process of enslaving Kunta from the first moment he was ambushed to the moment he reached America and was coerced into slavery as being very challenging for Kunta never accepts to be controlled by someone else. Again, had the master not cut his toes, Kunta would never stop trying to escape slavery in search for dignity and freedom.

## 6. Conclusion:

This paper attempted to explore how the cause of the BLM movement is manifested in the American miniseries *Roots* (2016). The results reveal the presence of four main themes: otherness versus unity, perseverance and dignity. In fact, the movement started as an online outcry against the pervasive injustice that followed the consecutive deaths of Blacks from 2012 till 2015 at the hand of policemen whom the Court never judged guilty. Bearing the situation meant humiliation and cowardice for Blacks. Hence, the necessity to campaign and bring to the forefront the racial discrimination issue was highly needed. Upon its spread, the movement received different responses. In the light of Stuart Hall model of communication, the BLM Movement was not totally accepted by the American audience. It was either backed up or negotiated or totally opposed. *Roots* falls in the first category by emphasizing through its main character Kunta Kinte that though Blacks are subject to ruthless and brutal violence, they never surrender, or acquiesce in the status quo. *Roots* portrayed Kunta as a determined headstrong African who despite all the dreadful moments he undergoes; he never succumbs to neither the slave catchers nor the landowners. His resistance, adherence to his identity and dignity prevails in the whole episode that features him. All in all as the BLM Movement asserts that Blacks' lives are valued, *Roots* affirms that remembering slavery to Blacks matters. In this respect, further research can expand on this point by comparing similar productions during the same period with the aim of gaining more insights on the depth of racial tensions in the USA through the directors' visions, mainly directors from different races.

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