Wealth Inequality: The Myth of the American Dream in Media Narratives

Slavery: 400 Years and Counting
- Slavery, beginning around 1606, along with loopholes within the ratification of the 13th Amendment such as Jim Crow laws and Black Codes, purposely deprived Black Americans of opportunities to build wealth. HISTORY, BROOKINGS, CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS

- Slavery is still legal today. The 13th Amendment outlawed slavery except as punishment for crime. "Nearly 2 million incarcerated people in the United States have no protection from legal slavery.” VERA, HISTORY

$14 TRILLION
- In 2019 dollars, the amount of money in terms of labor that white slaveholders extracted from their captives.

Between 1940 and 1974 white families had nearly four decades of unmitigated access to credit to build wealth before Black Americans were legally able. BLOOMBERG

Click or tap button to watch Trevor Noah on "The Daily Show" answer questions for people confused about reparations.

“The American Dream portends that with hard work, a person can own a home, start a business, and grow a nest egg for generations to draw upon. This belief, however, has been defied repeatedly by the United States government’s own decrees that denied wealth-building opportunities to Black Americans.” BROOKINGS

How White Families Recouped and Prospered After Civil War
- Jim Crow Credit: “Before the Civil War, mortgages and credit were collateralized on the backs of enslaved Africans as properties.... By 1940, low-income and working-class white families were ushered into wealth via federally backed housing and farming loans and derivative lines of credit. Black consumers weren’t able to participate in the credit market until legislation was passed in 1974.” BLOOMBERG

- White-Only Social Networks:
These helped to facilitate employment opportunities and access to credit.
BLOOMBERG, NBER

- Elite Social Clubs: These private clubs once only allowed white (and predominantly male) members, and are an example of where important business deals and political contacts were routinely made.

UPI
Pay Me What You Owe Me

Black workers are far more likely to be unemployed than white workers at every level of education

Unemployment rates by race and education, 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced degree</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: White refers to non-Hispanic whites, Black refers to Blacks alone. Educational categories are mutually exclusive and represent the highest education level attained for all individuals ages 16 and older.

Source: ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE, State of Working America Data Library, [Unemployment by race and education], 2019.

Black workers are less likely to have paid sick days and less likely to be able to work from home than white workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paid sick days</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could work from home</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In 2020, the Economic Policy Institute found that Black men are paid $.71 for every dollar a white man makes. Black women, who face gender and race discrimination, are paid even less—64 cents on the white male dollar.

3 out of 5 Black employees are in frontline positions (health care, retail, and accommodation/food service). These industries have some of the highest numbers of workers who make less than $30,000 a year. MCKINSEY

Significantly fewer Black workers can telework than white workers. This makes it harder for them to keep their jobs and stay healthy. EPI

Talent Agent Statistics by Race

The most common ethnicity among talent agents is White, which makes up 64.9% of all talent agents. Comparatively, there are 14.3% of the Hispanic or Latino ethnicity and 8.1% of the Asian ethnicity.

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Talent Agent Wage Gap by Race

Asian talent agents have the highest average salary compared to other ethnicities. Unknown talent agents have the lowest average salary at $41,745.

Discrimination in L.A. Clubs

Click or tap button to learn how then-Mayor Tom Bradley rallied city leaders to end discrimination by private clubs in Los Angeles.

The Great Land Robbery

Click or tap button to read story in The Atlantic on how 1 million black farmers and families lost their land and farms.
Wealth Inequality: The Myth of the American Dream

"The workplace is still geared to the promotion of whites over minorities regardless of the laws in place to promote equality in the work force."
- Hispanic man, engineer, 65

"People have preconceived ideas of what I am capable of doing."
- Black man, physical scientist, 39

"This 'other-ness' exists intentionally or unintentionally between those of a minority and those of a majority from lacking of common cultural background. Relationships at work appear polite on surface but reluctant tendency in willing to share limited opportunities."
- Asian woman, engineer, 56

"As a Black woman I get looked over for promotions or advancement because of stereotypes. It is believed that Black people as a whole are lazy and unqualified, which is totally the opposite. Sometimes I feel that people are threatened by me because they know I am capable, qualified and competent."
- Black woman, nurse, 34

How Writers Can Write It Right

STRIVE TO ELIMINATE THE VICTIM PORTRAYAL

1. In storytelling, try to depict how Black Americans, and all non-white characters, are not victims of individual limitations, but historical systemic powers that have kept them from exercising their political rights and attaining powerful positions in many industries.

2. "While using art to shed light on the realities of marginalized communities is important, the constant narratives of brokenness are dangerous and perpetuate the lie that America's history of systemic oppression will forever prevent Black families from prospering." 

3. Books like Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City; Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920; and Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class have provided a much needed glimpse into the lives of thriving, and wealthy, Black Americans living in societies that sought to squelch their opportunities. 

4. "Fred Miller, an Air Force veteran from CA, who was looking to buy a large house in rural Virginia for family gatherings didn’t believe he’d be able to purchase a home because he was Black. He ended up buying what he learned was the Sharswood Plantation where his family’s ancestors were enslaved."

Poverty Narratives in Popular Culture

The University of Southern California’s Norman Lear Center’s Media Impact Project published a report on "Poverty Narratives in Popular Culture." View the report to read examples of how to frame your narratives accurately, including limiting written narratives of meritocracy and "the American Dream."

Reach out to HH&S to be connected with experts and people with lived experiences to help inform your scripts and stories. To hire diverse writers, visit the INEVITABLE FOUNDATION, CHANGE HOLLYWOOD and LA LISTA. Reach out to organizations like DIVERSE REPRESENTATION and COLOUR ENTERTAINMENT to hire diverse executives and agents.