

A Crash Course on Stereotypes

(by Earl Ofari Hutchinson, AlterNet, May 20, 2005) While Crash pierces and pokes fun at racial stereotypes, it's the Black perceptions about those stereotypes that make the film especially compelling.

In the stereotype busting film Crash, two young Blacks come out of a restaurant steaming mad. In the course of their stroll down the sidewalk one of them claims that a waitress ignored them, then gave them lousy service, that the whites in the restaurant gave them hostile stares, and that when a couple passed them on the street the wife locked arms with her husband for fear they'd mug them. In his angry tirade, he covered the wide gamut of myths, stereotypes and negative perceptions that whites supposedly have about blacks.

While Crash pierces and pokes fun at racial stereotypes, it's the Black perceptions about those stereotypes that make the film especially compelling. Many Blacks take it as an article of faith that that most whites are hopelessly racist. A comprehensive Harvard University opinion poll in 2002 found that the racial attitudes of many whites about Blacks are tightly enshrouded in stereotypes. The poll reinforced the fervent belief of many Blacks that white racially disdain them. But it's hardly that simple.

I often discuss race relations on radio talk shows on smaller stations in cities throughout the South and the Midwest. The callers are mostly white, working class males. Many proudly identify themselves as devotees of conservative talk show host, Rush Limbaugh. Some of the callers repeat the crime-drug-violence-poverty stereotypes about Blacks, but they are a minority of the callers.

The majority of the callers seem genuinely convinced that America is a color-blind society, and that equal opportunity is a reality. The majority of whites repeatedly told the Harvard pollsters that they believed that Blacks and whites have attained social and economic equality. The figures on income, education and health care show a gaping racial lag between Blacks and whites. However, perception drives reality. If many whites think racial equality is a reality, that's more proof to many Blacks that whites are in deliberate racial denial.

This is a mistaken notion. Many whites don't claim Blacks are treated the same as them simply to mask racial hostility to Blacks. They no longer see "whites only signs," and redneck Southern cops unleashing police dogs, turning fire hoses on, and beating hapless Black demonstrators. They turn on their TVs and see legions of Black newscasters and talk show hosts, topped by TV's richest and most popular, Oprah Winfrey. They see mega-rich Black entertainers and athletes pampered and fawned over by a dotting media and adoring public.

They see TV commercials that picture Blacks living in trendy integrated suburban homes, sending their kids to integrated schools, and driving expensive cars. They see Blacks such as former Secretary of State Colin Powell, and his successor, Condoleezza Rice in high profile, important policy-making positions in the Bush administration. They see dozens of Black congresspersons, state legislators, and mayors. They see Blacks heading corporations, and universities. Many actually believe that racial problems are a thing of America's bygone past, and that Blacks that incessantly scream racism about their plight are afflicted with racial paranoia.

Many Blacks erroneously assume that whites live an Ozzie and Harriet life of bliss and are immune from personal and social angst. They are puzzled when middle-class whites shoot up their suburban schools, and neighborhoods, bludgeon their children in their homes, use and deal drugs, have high suicide rates and commit bizarre anti-social acts. They don't hear and see their pain.

In Crash, a middle-class white couple live in a cloistered world. They are scared of, and angry with minorities and in perpetual turmoil. Many Blacks don't recognize that millions of whites are also trapped in a downward cycle of need and poverty, and have about as much chance of crashing into America's corporate boardrooms, joining university faculties and getting elected to Congress as poor Blacks.

The sense among many whites that they are fast losing economic and social ground in America fueled much of their anger over affirmative action programs. In the film, a white LAPD officer comes off as an unreconstructed bigot. But he's also beset by the psychological pressure and financial burden of how to take care of his ailing father. He blames his

father's medical and financial slide on the loss of his janitorial company's contract to a minority-owned company. Maybe, maybe not, but that's what he believes.

Many whites believe that society is spinning out of control and that they have little power to control their lives. They see the federal government as the culprit. They blame it for being pro-higher taxes, pro-bureaucracy, pro-immigrant and pro-rights of criminals.

A mix of economic slippage, political cynicism and personal alienation, and not blind racial hatred, drives much of white anger. That was the subtle message of Crash. That's a message that many Blacks that attribute every negative thing whites say about them and do toward them as racist or mean spirited miss.

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