

# BRAINWASHED: Challenging the Myth of Black Inferiority

by Tom Burrell

From *The Scorch at the Bottom of the Melting Pot*

“The illusion that anyone can succeed—what I call the “paradox of progress”—solidifies the myth of a “post-racial society.” It weakens the impulse to understand or help those still scorched at the bottom of America’s melting pot. It fuels the perception that all is well and “racism is dead,” and suggests that those still wallowing in poverty made conscious choices to live in that stratum. If not, many reason, they’d simply follow Halle, Tiger, Oprah, or even Tom Burrell’s lead. They’d quit bellyaching, grab those bootstraps, and go to work!”

“In the so-called “post-racial era,” internalized black inferiority combined with this new media reality means the rules of engagement have changed dramatically. America’s racial fatigue, coupled with the election of the nation’s first African American president and the illusion of the acceptable exceptions, present new challenges for the best of us and, most importantly, for the rest of us.”

From *Relationship Wrecks: Why Can’t We Form Strong Families?*

“Our family crisis is inseparable from our black male and female identity crisis, and brainwashing has left a great many of us fearful, confused about our identities, and hopelessly caught in a cycle of relationship underachievement.”

“Blacks not only dance to the beat of family destruction, we patronize films by black producers and directors that bombard our brains and reinforce all the bad we’ve been fed about ourselves—first by the white ruling class, and now abetted by our brainwashed brethren. Whether it’s sagas like Chris Brown and Rihanna, or negative, self-demeaning movies, or characters like those depicted in HBO’s gritty urban drama *The Wire*—black relationships and families are seen as hopelessly at odds, dysfunctional, violent, and unsubstantial.”

“I’m not condoning domestic violence in any way. I’m not sho’ ’cause I’m not a lawyer... I think when they turn 18 you can put yo’ hands on ’em a little harder than when they was a minor. I think if they 18, [it] can just turn into full-blown ass-whoopin’s... Check your local law... Find out what you can do. Can you choke her? Can you shake her? Find out how by law what it is you can do... how far can you put your foot up her behind before it becomes a felony?”

— Steve Harvey, *The Steve Harvey Radio Show*/February 23, 2009

“To be black in America is to be tense, anxious, and often fearful if not outright angry. Intimate relationships often become the central arena where black men today can vent racial frustrations. While he struggles to grasp “manhood” in a society that holds it from him at arm’s length, the befuddled black man lashes out violently at the woman he feels is undermining his fragile authority.”

“I hate my baby mama. I wanna choke her and slap the shit out of her ass, but I can’t afford no domestic violence case right now, you know? But I told her, ‘When I save \$2,500, I’m slapping the shit out of yo’ ass, bitch!’ Like most of you women don’t know, you \$200 from getting yo’ ass choked right now.”

— Malik S., *Def Comedy Jam*/February 24, 2008

From *Studs and Sluts: Why Do We Conform to Black Sexual Stereotypes?*

“Halle Berry can go on film and get the dog shit freaked out of her, and she wins an Oscar,” Nelly said, referring to Berry’s role in *Monster’s Ball*. “I swipe a credit card down the crack of a girl’s butt, and I’m demoralizing women?”

— Nelly

“During slavery, black men were encouraged to see themselves as licentious heathens, subhuman, simian sex machines, and natural-born breeders with no emotional attachments. Today, our dilemma is an existential crisis that collectively we’ve been unable to resolve: How can a black male be a man in America? If we reflect honestly, we’ll concede that our perpetual quest for the next conquest—the need for instant sexual gratification—stems from a deeper personal crisis, the compulsive need to scratch an itch that will not go away.”

“Somewhere along the line producers of hip-hop came to realize that the real money, the real avenues to fortune and fame, came via music about sex, drugs, and violence; how they “made it” on the carcasses of those who trespassed on their turf—either in the streets or in the industry. Along the line, powerful forces realized there was gold in black music divisions.”

“The Jezebel stereotype was used to excuse rape and justify the slaveowner’s carnal desires. After all, how could it be rape, if the victim is property designed for seedy sexual indulgence? During the first half of the 20th century, the myth manifested itself in the form of everyday objects—from postcards to novelty items. Today, the depiction of black women as Jezebel-like whores continues, thanks in large part to bestselling, black female rappers who probably have no clue that they’re playing myth-personified roles.”

From *Uglified: Why Are Black and Beautiful Still Contradictions?*

“heart throb, never, black and ugly as ever  
however, I stay Gucci down to the socks”  
— Notorious B.I.G., “One More Chance”

“I grew up thinking I was ugly, and my mother reinforced that. She’d say things like, ‘Stop poking out those lips, they are already too big, they look like two sausages.’ My mother never told me I was a beautiful woman.”  
— Tanya, 52

“When the colonies became America, the primary campaign to “uglify” African slaves became more intense, pervasive, and codified. The message was reinforced in a myriad of ways, including Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia, where he demeaned blacks while defining the standard of superior (white) beauty.”

“For most of our history in the New World, we openly coveted light skin and straight hair. Today, the pinnacles of black female beauty remain almost white-looking. It is disturbingly telling that the long weave seems to be a prerequisite for black singers, actors, and models. Hip-hop videos feature light-skinned black, Latino, or Asian women—to the exclusion of darker-skinned black dancers. In these befuddled musical sketches of black life, blinged-out heroes surround themselves with lighter-skinned trophies. The darker women in such videos are rarely positioned as the Pedestal Prize—that place is usually reserved for the surrogate white girl.”

“The remnants of brainwashing linger and one of the strongest signs of its persistence is in black males who prefer women who look nothing like them.” From *Homey-cide: Why Do We Keep Killing Each Other?*

“Mental health experts are in general agreement that persistent exposure to humiliation, brutality, and abuse, physical or emotional, can program people to humiliate, brutalize, and abuse others. Apart from the indigenous people of this country, no other ethnic group has been subjected to the centuries of abuse that Africans and their descendants have experienced.”

“Our rate of domestic violence, where spouses and intimate partners kill each other, is far greater than that of any other ethnic group. Black males are not only the most likely victims of homicide; they dominate as killers, especially in taking the life of another black male.”

“We will...tsk-tsk, moan, and wail about a lost life in front of news cameras and dutifully deliver teddy bears to the porches of murdered children. We perpetuate the myth. If we expose the Founding Fathers’ contribution to America’s creation of the heartless monsters roaming 21st-century concrete jungles, we’re afraid we might be dismissed as radical, paranoid, or “stuck in the past.” What we won’t do is recognize that, collectively, we have the inherent power and responsibility to address black-on-black violence.”

From *Diss-Unity: Why Can’t We Stick Together?*

“Everything white people don’t like about black people, black people REALLY don’t like about black people!”  
— Chris Rock, 1997

“Why is it that other ethnic groups, some who’ve suffered atrocities in their native lands, can come to this country, work together in unison, and outperform blacks who’ve been here for centuries? The answer to that question is also connected to our initial sojourn to America. Had Africans come to this nation voluntarily, with their cultural heritage and languages intact, we could have, like other ethnic groups, adapted those anchors for use in this new land.”

“Crabbin’ and backstabbin’ are but a symptom of a much more sinister infirmity—disunity or, as we will often refer to it in this discussion, “diss-unity.” In the civil rights and political arenas, crabbin’ and backstabbin’ are as old as the categories themselves. Some of our history’s most impressive, far-reaching agendas have been nullified due to black backbiting and orchestrated disruption. Killing each other is not limited to young brothers on the streets. There are black-on-black drive-bys in the political, entertainment, civic, and business arenas.”

From Neo-Coons: Why is the Joke Always on Us?

“I don’t know how I’m a stop saying ‘nigger’ when it describes some motherfuckers I know so perfectly. Everybody knows that one motherfucker that can only be described as ‘That nigger there, goddamn, whew!’”  
— D.L. Hughley

“You know how you know when you lost a fight to your woman? When the cops come to your house and ask you, Do you want to press charges?”  
— Kevin Hart

“I bought a gun because ‘POW POW’ sounds a lot better than ‘Hey, put that back!’”  
— Joe Torry

“A deep-rooted addiction to the Black Inferiority brand allows us to laugh at the antics of black entertainers who call us “niggas” and denigrate black men and women in comic routines, songs, and music videos. Woven into the black American experience is a strong thread of avoidance, an aversion to critical thinking, and an abnormal embrace of anything that appeals to our emotions rather than our reasoning. The unspoken trauma of pain, and powerlessness has led too many of us to prefer laughter to learning, and pretending over mending.”

“Over the past century, the Coon concept—instead of dying with slavery—has spread like a virus far beyond its blackface minstrel music hall origin. Although many of its most visible promoters today have black bodies as well as faces, they seem to have the same disregard for themselves as did their painted progenitors.”

From Buy Now, Pay Later: Why Can’t We Stop Shopping?

“Get a good look at me, dummy I said I look, I feel, I smell like money...”  
— Three 6 Mafia, “Like Money”

“Unlike whites, we were denied the basic right to be free-willed consumers. Restrictive, but legal, covenants excluded African Americans from purchasing homes in neighborhoods considered white. We could not patronize white-only diners, theaters, clubs, and colleges or shop in many stores. For centuries, spending money “jes’ like white folk” was not even a possibility. That all changed after we fought for the right to force our money upon whites.”

“Prevalent socio-economic conditions, combined with historic prejudices, have resulted in a case of low self-esteem, or low “race esteem,” that has affected our purchasing behavior. I myself haven’t exactly been immune to these feelings of inadequacy. I was raised during a time when blacks seemed grateful that car dealers wanted their money. “I may be discriminated against, but General Motors will sell me anything I want,” we’d say.”

From D’s Will Do: Why Do We Expect So Little of Each Other—and Ourselves?

“Perhaps in no other area has the African American story seen so many twists, dead ends, and sinkholes than in the dominion of education. More important, perhaps, no other discussion makes African Americans as uncomfortable as the topic of why our children lag so far behind the children of other races”

“As a young black man, I can’t even recall how many times I heard ‘nerd’ or ‘geek’ or ‘college boy’ or ‘You sound like a white boy’ used as an insult. It’s not about ‘white,’ it’s about education and power. They didn’t want me to have either.”

— James, writer

“In many ways, African Americans have romanticized and institutionalized low expectations. Often our goal is not to be “the best” but to be “the best black”—as in “best black business” or “best black doctor” or “best black college.” Inherent in these labels is a subliminal acceptance that our “best” is somehow naturally inferior or somehow different from the white “best.””

## Q & A with Tom Burrell

Q. What motivated you to write this book?

A. As a black ad man, I was compelled to understand the way that words and images have been used to manipulate how blacks are viewed in this country and the way many of us unconsciously view ourselves. Connecting the black dots on a larger level early on—from slavery and Jim Crow segregation to contemporary commercial and social propaganda—became my passion.

Q. What makes you an expert on the so-called Black Inferiority complex?

A. As the former founder and CEO of one of the top ad agencies in the country, I bring more than 45 years of advertising and marketing expertise with black consumers and social behaviors to the table. Brainwashed, to my knowledge, is the very first book that talks about the selling of race-based inferiority from both a historical and contemporary marketing perspective, and its devastating impact on both blacks and whites. I wrote this book to serve as a catalyst for deprogramming society from the myth that blacks are innately inferior to whites.

Q. What is the genesis of the White Superiority/Black Inferiority brainwash attitudes?

A. American slavery. It was in America that Africans were chained and branded, both physically and psychologically, as subhuman beasts of burden. It was here that we were first indoctrinated with the idea that we were, in fact, not humans at all, but property.

Q. How do propaganda and brainwashing fit together? Why did you choose such a strong term?

A. Propaganda is the outer layer of this brainwashing onion. In the marketing world, propaganda is the first tool of persuasion. Brainwashing is the outcome, but propaganda got us here, and its continued use keeps the inferior/superior mind game in play. Instead of using torture and other coercive techniques, the stealthy, media-savvy propagandist uses mass media and other forms of communication to change minds and mold ways of thinking. I have no intention of shying away from the term propaganda. I say we use it—take what was thrown at us, shuck it off, and replace it with “positive” propaganda.

Q. Many of the events covered in your book took place hundreds of years ago. Aren't you encouraging readers to wallow in the past?

A. The Black Inferiority campaign has left us with centuries of unresolved trauma. We can't move forward as a collective until we have honest and detailed conversations about the painful influences of our past and the connections to the present. Until we are fully cognizant of the triggers that enable social, political, familial, and personal dysfunction we will be forever trapped in a counterproductive cycle.

Q. Didn't the media brainwashing that you speak of die in the wake of the Jim Crow and the civil rights era?

A. While some might argue that racist media practices died with the end of the Jim Crow era, a few thousand folks stranded for days on sweltering rooftops or in neck-deep, toxic floodwater in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 might disagree. We now know that many of the 24/7 news accounts of black-on-black sniper attacks, mass murders, and the rape of women and babies were largely unfounded. As if stuck in a vortex, mainstream news outlets today still heavily focus on the negative aspects of African American life while ignoring or downplaying our positive contributions and efforts.

Q. You say that “Black people are not dark-skinned white people.” Explain.

A. Too often blacks and whites live in different worlds. My point is that black Americans, because of our heritage and history, have a unique culture that could best be reached through strategies, words, and images subtly or overtly related to those historical and cultural factors.

Q. What are some of the lessons you learned about black Americans during your tenure in the advertising business?

A. Burrell Communications' research of the 70s and 80s showed that African Americans have distinct psychosocial needs, desires, fears, hopes, and aspirations, all born of the circumstances arising from slavery and a history of racial oppression. We discovered, for example that:

- Black preference for high-end status brands was driven by the need to compensate for feelings of low self-esteem.
- Our penchant for a lopsided spending/savings ratio grew out of our need for immediate gratification, based on a chilling pessimism about an uncertain future.

Q. Did the “black pride” feeling of the 60s and early 70s weaken the Black Inferiority brand?

A. Yes and no. During that exciting time in our history, we paid lip service to being black and proud, but the sudden conversion was not supported by the necessary psychological machinery to make the change permanent. Even today, we have no permanent cultural mechanisms to undo what a 400-year marketing campaign has achieved.

Q. Have you had first-hand experience with race-based inferiority issues?

A. I’ve experienced race-based lack of self-esteem first-hand. It was not based solely on low income or poor education. As upwardly mobile as I was, that programmed sense of innate inferiority climbed every rung of the ladder of success right beside me. Over time, I’ve learned that the root of the problem wasn’t what was being done to me—it was what I’d been brainwashed to believe about myself.

Q. How does the election of President Obama impact the Black Inferiority campaign in America?

A. Images are powerful. Never before has America seen a black man occupying the highest office in the land, delivering the State of the Union address, drafting and promoting national policy, or disembarking from Air Force One with his black wife and daughters. From a marketing perspective, this is powerful, life-altering stuff. Barack Obama, through intelligence, will, self-determination, and yes, not a small confluence of favorable circumstances, may have reached his Promised Land, but tragically too many black Americans are still wandering in the wilderness.

Q. Are black Americans finally making measurable progress in this country?

A. The National Urban League’s annual report, *The State of Black America*, presents some pervasive and depressing themes: social chaos, irresponsible spending, economic stagnation, and disproportionate death and incarceration rates. No matter what the category, blacks statistically trail behind whites and other ethnicities, and in some areas, such as educational achievement and overall life expectancy, our numbers are actually getting worse.

Q. Your book stresses that whites as well as blacks have been influenced by the Black Inferiority campaign. If that’s the case, why don’t you have tools and/or suggestions to help whites overcome this toxic mindset?

A. My expertise is with African Americans—our history, our motivators, and our behaviors. I wouldn’t presume to offer effective solutions to counteract the effects of brainwashing on whites and other ethnic groups. However, I submit that positive propaganda, like negative propaganda, has the potential to not only change how we see ourselves, but how others view our race. I want to be a part of a movement that flips the script and promotes a truer picture of our potential and our contributions to society.

Q. What are some of the disturbing brainwash messages that black adults often unconsciously pass on to children?

A. At a very young age, black men and women are inundated with messages that they cannot trust or depend upon one another. Children hear comments and jokes about lazy, greedy, irresponsible, or otherwise flawed black adults. They are warned to be tough, trust no one, and always, always be prepared for the doomed relationship. It is not really a revelation that incompatibility, lack of love, and oftentimes violence become the inevitable conclusions of these tainted individuals’ relationships.

Q. What messages dominate media portrayals of black men?

A. The message that black men are America’s demons is peddled relentlessly on the nightly news and crime shows and through entertainment media. Through slick propaganda, the criminal code of respect is now regarded as a “black thing.” These messages hit black boys everywhere—on the basketball court, in the schoolyard, and when they gather on the street. Negative media reinforcements not only influence how cops, judges, employers, and others view black males, they affect how young blacks view themselves.

Q. Why should we care about the controversial image of NBA star LeBron James looking “King Kong-like,” posing with a white model on the cover of *Vogue*?

A. The reason we should care about LeBron’s image is the same reason we should care about the image of Tiger Woods on the February 2010 cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine. In framing James as King Kong and Woods in the classic *Boyz n the Hood* pose, *Vogue*, which reaches 1.2 million readers a month and *Vanity Fair*, perpetuated one of the most enduring stereotypes of black sexuality—the Brute. Depictions of LeBron as the modern-day rendition of the brutish, ape-like menace and Woods, angry and muscled in a prison-yard pose, with the not-so-

subtle reminder that both men preyed on fair-skinned maidens, do indeed matter—especially in a society still fixated on warped, racial images of oversexed black men.

Q. Your book challenges the work of black entertainers such as Tyler Perry, Steve Harvey, Lil' Wayne, and other high-profile individuals and organizations. Is it your intent to embarrass or chastise these individuals?

A. No, not at all. We are all victims of the overwhelming BI campaign. The idea is to challenge everyone, including myself, to question what we put out, what we take in, and what influences we promote in our communities and the wider world. If readers agree with the material I detail in the book then new awareness must turn into conscious action.

Q. Many of the successful blacks entertainers have helped extend what you call the “BI brand—rappers, comedians, TV, films, and others. How do you feel about this?

A. In the book, I explain in great detail how many of us contribute and continue perpetrating stereotypes developed to forever keep us branded as inferior. More important, however, I explain the historical motivators that cause us to respond to such disinformation negatively. I'm no position to condemn anyone. I'm a firm believer that once we know better, we will do better.

Q. Why do you feel black American unity is so important?

A. There's strength in numbers. African Americans share a legacy of resilience and strength but also a history of understandable division based on Black Inferiority conditioning. If we can unite around a very basic but necessary agenda of reprogramming ourselves and promoting uplifting images and messages about ourselves, I believe we will have finally laid a foundation for exponential progress. Instead of crabbin' and backstabbin', this generation can be the pioneers who pool their resources and talent, the generation that soars. This can be the generation that says, “Enough. The master puppeteer will no longer pull our strings.”

Q. What's the most important lesson you want readers to take from Brainwashed?

A. More than anything, I want readers to understand the effects of a centuries-long propaganda campaign. I want them to start scrutinizing everything we see, hear, or say about African Americans. I want us to hold ourselves accountable and realize that we all can play a part in flipping the propaganda script.

Q. What is The Resolution Project?

A. I created the nonprofit Resolution Project in 2007 with the goal of sparking intra-racial dialogue and sharing ideas about ways we can challenge and change how we perceive ourselves. Brainwashed is the project's first tangible product. Our task from here forward is to create a coalition of engaged citizens dedicated to using positive propaganda to eradicate negative images and replace them with a bombardment of positive words and images.

Q. What is the “Flip the Script...Stop the Brainwash” competition? Who can enter and how?

A. In order to recruit “evangelists for positive propaganda,” I established The Resolution Project, an organization dedicated to promoting community-based new media campaigns. One of The Resolution Project's first activities will be to sponsor the 1st Annual “Flip the Script...Stop the Brainwash” campaign. This worldwide competition will honor the best positive propaganda campaigns in video, art, creative writing, poetry, music, and other media based on a theme inspired by Brainwashed.

<http://www.stopthebrainwash.com/>