

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# THEM BOYS ARE COMIN' FOR YOU: BLACK AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO *COPS*

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Now if you're white you can trust the police  
But if you're Black they ain't nothin' but beasts

—Ice Cube

*COPS* is a long-running reality crime television program that is still very popular among viewers even as it approaches two decades on the air. The premise of *COPS* is simple: cameras mounted in police cars capture police encounters, offering audiences a front-seat view of the police in action. *COPS*'s lasting popularity presents a seeming contradiction in that, despite their positionality within the state, viewers are generally able to derive some level of pleasure from a program that encourages identification with state authority rather than with the accused. Reality crime television programming such as *COPS* serves to sensationalize policing and street crime (Fishman and Cavender 1998; Heckman 2008) and continually reinforces policing as the natural order rather than a social construct (Ginsberg 1986; Wilson 2000).

This study explores the *COPS* viewing experience for Black audiences. Vastly understudied within audience research, this population is more likely to experience negative encounters with the police and is figured in the public consciousness as having a higher propensity to commit crime. Most of the participants of this study had experienced negative encounters with law enforcement and exhibited emotional responses to the pro-police imagery presented in *COPS* (Doyle 2003; Fishman and Cavender 1998). Most reported being distrustful of law enforcement, regardless of the race of the individual cops. Respondents in this study were not regular viewers of *COPS* and noted finding the show's content troubling to watch. For many interviewees, the show's privileging of the police point of view

prompted viewers to question the reliability of the police's (and the show's) account of the interactions depicted in the clips. Interviewees were critical of the police's treatment of suspects on the show; in particular, they saw racialized suspects as treated unfairly by law enforcement.

### **The political climate of *Cops***

By the March 11, 1989 debut of *COPS*, the political climate was ripe for such a show. It debuted at the height of the Reagan-Bush-Thatcher era of neo-liberalism. The strain of conservatism made popular by Ronald Reagan appealed to an overwhelming segment of the White male population. Reagan was able to corral an astounding 66 percent of White males nationally, across various class divisions, despite economic policies that were contrary to the best interest of a significant portion of his support base (Omi and Winant 1986). Reagan's popularity was arguably a very strong reaction to a previous era of policies intended to address structural causes of racial disparity. Reagan's election initiated a reversal of a number of moves toward addressing racial inequality so intrinsic to American society.

Policies intended to address racial injustice had been reversed; indeed, conservatives had appropriated the very rhetoric of racial injustice, so that in an instant, the very term "racial justice" came to signify a restoration of the privileged positioning of White males (Omi and Winant 1986). The Reagan-Bush-Thatcher era saw a new, imminent threat to the livelihood and well-being of decent, hardworking Whites. The specter of violent street crime of the racialized underclass became the most insidious threat to the "moral fabric" of society, and the proposed solution was tougher policing (Fishman and Cavender 1998). The period also saw increased privatization across all sectors of civil society. One consequence, the prison industrial complex, led to a "punishment" imperative that was at once politically expedient and an avenue for vast corporate profits. Law-and-order displaced a different set of meanings that linked crime with structural causes such as poverty and unemployment (Fishman and Cavender 1998).

The "tough on crime" stance popularized during the Reagan-Bush-Thatcher era was followed by Clinton administration policies with similarly harmful effects for certain sectors, chiefly the racialized poor. Clinton successfully touted Black deviance (in particular, the "welfare queen") as a major social ill (Hancock 2004). Post-Reagan liberal policies failed to offer any approaches to crime that challenged the rhetoric of the

previous era, for fear of alienating White constituents. The tough-on-crime rhetoric (notoriously tough on racialized communities) continued under the Bush/Cheney regime, resulting in exploding prison populations, multiple prison expansion projects, increased police recruitment efforts, a resurgence of the death penalty, and increased legislative implementation of rigorous minimum-sentencing standards, e.g., California's Three Strikes law (Davis 2003; Gilmore 2007).

With its built-in pro-police stance (that privileges law enforcement's perspective), *COPS* continues to successfully promote law-and-order ideology. *COPS* also successfully reifies the association between racialized populations and criminality. After decades of punitive measures and increasingly repressive action from the state, we face the stark reality that Black males compose 41 percent of the prison population in the United States. Latinos face a similar reality: for every Latino living in a college dorm, there are 2.4 Latinos subsisting in a prison cell (CNN 2008). These dire statistics reveal the effects of years of law and order policy on marginalized groups, and the failure of such policy to reduce crime. Arrests for drug-related offenses have increased rather than decreased. However, despite the failure of law and order policy, and its devastating effects on marginalized communities, media programming such as *COPS* continue to sensationalize policing in racialized and socioeconomically depressed communities. The continued celebration and normalization of law and order policy belies its inefficacy and overshadows the destructive legacy such policy has left for the nation in general and socioeconomically disadvantaged and racialized populations in particular.

### **“Black” Viewers**

This study explores spectatorship of *COPS* with a focus on the decoding processes of Black viewers. Race remains the central axis of social relations in the United States (Hunt 1997). As Darnell Hunt notes, race is the dimension of identity most salient in decoding media images, taking primacy over other aspects of identity, e.g., gender, class, and sexual orientation (1997). Hunt asserts that racial subjectivity informs decoding processes; he terms these decoding processes “raced ways of seeing” (1997, 127). This study considers the primacy of race in decoding processes, with regard to the particularities of the life experiences and viewership practices of Black audiences. It should be noted that use of the term “Black” within this study is not a moment of “strategic essentialism,” to borrow Stuart Hall's (1996, 472) engagement of Gayatri Spivak's term; rather, it carries an awareness of the diversity within this categorization.

The term “Black” is deployed within this study in full consideration of the particularities of the US context, and carries a subscription to the idea of Blackness as an identity, with Blackness the idea of a shared consciousness, linked fate, and racial group identity among people of African descent (Cohen 1999).

This study focuses on the decoding practices of Black audiences not only because of the marginalized nature of Black spectatorship within audience research (Seiter 1999), but also because of the stark realities of how conceptions about Blackness are continually circulated within popular culture. As Oliver and Armstrong (1998, 30) point out in bold terms, exposure to reality crime television shows like *COPS* and the news “is associated with higher estimates of crime prevalence among African Americans.” Deep-seated conceptions about racialized groups continue to be recycled, leading to the continued production of images solidifying the association between Blackness and criminality. It is useful to understand the varied ways in which affected audiences perceive these images and might potentially intercept this cycle. Moreover, focusing on the particulars of Black spectatorship afforded this study the opportunity to completely engage the particulars of Black spectatorship, uncovering intra-racial differences in decoding practices.

### **Race, class, and reality crime television audiences**

In a study of audience responses to *COPS*, Kathleen Curry (2001) found that audiences were reluctant to see themselves as the show’s target audience. Respondents identified *COPS* with a lower-class sensibility and located its target audiences within this class position. One of Curry’s (2001, 9) respondents termed this imagined archetypical *COPS* viewer “John Factory Worker,” and described him as someone “who works all day and comes home, wants some excitement and turns on *COPS*.” Regarding the pervasiveness of middle-class identification, Bullock, Wyche, and Williams (2001) assert that through the media’s downplaying of economic insecurity and representation of “middle class” as a “state of mind,” working-class individuals are encouraged to identify with a politically neutralized “universal middle class.”

Meaningful discourses around race are typically absent within the mainstream. Structural causes of racism, the perpetuation of racial inequality, and the interconnectedness of racial and economic disparity are rarely taken up within popular discourse. Through continuous and considerable effort, ultraconservative policies have removed racial progress from mainstream consciousness and the national political agenda

(Klinkner and Smith 1999). The ideal of racial progress has been usurped by a politics of colorblindness (Klinkner and Smith 1999). Colorblind rhetoric was a hallmark of Barack Obama's successful presidential campaign. The promise of a new era, a divergence from the neo-liberal politics that had marked the previous three decades of US presidential politics, was being ushered in using similar rhetorical strategies of the previous era.

Similar to its treatment of race, popular discourse is largely devoid of meaningful engagement with economic class disparity. The existence and maintenance of economic classes, the structural causes of poverty, and the interconnectedness of racial and economic disparity are rarely taken up by the mainstream with any regularity. Consequently, policies that serve to maintain economic disparity continue to gain traction, and social problems continue to be discussed in isolation from their root causes. Moreover, the very policies at the root of economic and racial disparity escape scrutiny and continue to gain legitimacy in the public sphere.

*COPS* perpetuates this disconnect between crime and its structural causes by emphasizing the cop's background and identity, while obscuring the identity of the suspects. This ensures that audience sympathies lie with the state agent (already deemed the hero by the cultural narrative). The attendant facelessness of the suspects ensures that audiences continue to see them as criminals committing "senseless" crimes (Hall, et al. 1978). Senseless crime is by definition without cause or reason. These criminals are cast as wanton, lazy, or just plain *bad people* who deserve the emotionally charged associations typically made against the poor (Jones and Novak 1999; Hancock 2004). They are most definitely not represented as victims cast into hardship through years of economic, political, and cultural marginalization (Hall, et al. 1978). Additionally police point of view fails to engage how any of the segments might be interrelated; the show treats each case as an isolated incident—the bad guys are caught, the case is solved. How these individual crimes might be traced to similar root causes is never taken up by the program. Also eschewed is any consideration of the state's role in perpetuating social problems. Instead, the state is always cast as the solution to social problems, and never the cause. Drug arrests, for example, are never traced back to the CIA's role in the crack epidemic in poor and racialized communities during the 1980s under the Reagan administration (Reeves and Campbell 1994).

Representations of race tend to be of a highly proscribed nature (Bogle 1973; Hooks 1992). Images of the poor are similarly limited. The poor are typically relegated to the margins of mainstream media, located almost exclusively within reality programming such as daytime talk shows (e.g.,

*The Jerry Springer Show*) and reality crime television such as *COPS* (Bullock, Wyche, and Williams 2001). Additionally, mainstream culture is rife with negative values associated with poverty. The poor are commonly blamed for their condition (Jones and Novak 1999). Dominant ideology promotes, as evidenced by the pervasiveness of law and order policies, a punitive approach to poverty (Jones and Novak 1999). The mainstream's disengagement from the structural causes of economic disparity, the deliberate disassociation of class from matters of the economic (Frank 2004), and the continual marginalization and stereotyping of the poor within mainstream media factor into the reticence of audiences to identify with either the suspects on *COPS* or the show's perceived, similarly lower-classed audience.

This study uses Hunt's (1997) concepts around the primacy of race in decoding practices and Curry's (2001) insights into the complex ways audiences read *COPS* as a starting point to explore further the ways in which race complicates the decoding of *COPS*. By focusing squarely on racialized subjects, this study seeks to symbolically re-center the perspective of marginalized audiences while exploring the significance of race in decoding practices. The present study considers the impact of racial subjectivity on lived experience and spectatorship practices, particularly relevant in light of the proscribed manner in which raced and classed populations have continually figured in reality crime shows like *COPS*.

## Methodology

The study employed a combination of focus group and individual interviews. The focus groups comprised 3-5 participants. Group members identified under the racial category Black/African American. Subjects ranged in age, from 18 to 38, although most were 25-30 years old. Most of the groups were either mixed gender or exclusively female. There have been 26 interviewees up to this point in the research. Each group reviewed the same set of clips from *COPS*, and responded to a prepared set of interview questions. The clips were taken from a randomly selected episode taped from broadcast television. Interviews were audio-recorded.

The focus groups were composed of respondents with an existing connection amongst group members; they were friends, co-workers, and in some cases, relatives. This familiarity and amity amongst group members positively impacted the interview dynamic. Group members were relaxed and at ease, more closely resembling a much more naturalistic viewing environment. Other interviews took place in a conference room on the University of Southern California campus. The room is outfitted with

couches and is something of a common, multipurpose meeting location, creating an environment less “sterile” than traditional, clinical focus group settings.

The clips selected for the study were chosen at random, culled from episodes of *COPS* broadcast on the local Los Angeles syndicate. The selected clips are taken from an hour-long block of *COPS*; because *COPS* is so heavily syndicated, it is difficult to pinpoint the original airdates of individual episodes. Shown in the order in which they were broadcast, the clips used in this study display a cross section of filming locales and offenses. This range exposes study subjects unfamiliar with *COPS* to the varying types of suspects and criminal activity that tend to be the focus of the show. Below is a brief description of the clips:

- *Clip 1*: Boston: Two White officers pursue two suspects, one Black, one White, on drug charges. The suspects are pursued and apprehended in the middle of an alleged drug transaction, where the White suspect identifies the Black suspect as a drug dealer. The White suspect, although caught with drug paraphernalia on his person, professes innocence and implicates the Black suspect, who was not seen with any drug paraphernalia. Cops release the White suspect and arrest the Black suspect.
- *Clip 2*: Lowell, MA (outside of Boston): Road rage incident: Two White officers pursue two suspects, both young White males. The suspects are accused by a middle-aged White couple of throwing a glass bottle at their car in an unprovoked episode of road rage. The clip follows a clear narrative, with good and evil firmly established. In keeping with the narrative, the young males are arrested.
- *Clip 3*: Ft. Worth, TX: Robbery: Several White officers pursue a Black suspect, who is also being chased on foot by a civilian, also White. The suspect is accused of stealing beer from a convenience store. During pursuit, the suspect raises his arms in surrender and is immediately pepper-sprayed and violently tackled by several police officers, and is told to “shut up” numerous times throughout the clip.
- *Clip 4*: Las Vegas: Domestic dispute. A Black cop narrates the scene, involving a White female threatening her husband, also White. In addition to barring the male from retrieving his belongings from their home, the woman, an obvious drug user, has also drawn a picture of her husband on the living room wall and has thrown darts at the drawing. (This clip was only shown to the first two focus groups, after specifically inquiring about the appearance of Black cops on the show.)

## Discussion

The particularities of the decoding practices of Black viewers correspond with the ways in which Black people experience US culture and society. In her study of middle-class Black university students, Annie Barnes (2000) found that most of her interview subjects had had negative encounters with the police, based on the cultural script that equates Blackness with criminality and the racial formation that perpetuates this script. Cathy Cohen (1999, 10) deftly notes, “years of economic exploitation, residential segregation, political disempowerment, and cultural appropriation define the experiences of most African Americans...”

Indeed, most of subjects for this study told of negative experiences with the police. This shared history with law enforcement was a common thread among subjects across other identity categories. Several respondents recounted tales of racial profiling and unprovoked police harassment. One respondent recalled an incident where, as a young child, he had been pulled out of the car and witnessed his father being ordered onto the ground because they supposedly resembled a set of wanted suspects:

KEFFLAR: It was late. 7:00, 8:00. We got pulled over. They made us both get out of the car. Made him get out and get out in the middle of the street. They had guns and lights.

AMM: What did y'all do?

KEFFLAR: Oh, we were driving while Black.

This respondent makes direct mention of his experience with racial profiling. Dubbed by affected communities as Driving While Black (and Driving While Brown, as experienced by Latinos), racial profiling has been employed by law enforcement agencies as an institutionally implemented policy in order to ostensibly preempt criminal activity. In keeping with law and order discourse, such policy presupposes a relationship between race and criminality. The policy promises to ward off criminal activity by zeroing in on a particular type of suspect, often racialized. Because such policy is founded on deep-seated beliefs about the propensity of certain groups to exhibit certain (deviant) behaviors, popular support for racial profiling can often be gained because of the continual deployment of fear around the affected groups. After September 11, fear of people of Arab and South Asian descent was successfully promoted, leading to widespread support for the profiling of such groups.

A particular historical relationship to law enforcement, marked by racial profiling, constant looming suspicion of wrongdoing, and police violence, led many respondents to express very negative feelings about the police, particularly feelings of distrust. Viewers find themselves occupying a liminal space with respect to the “good guy/bad guy” binary presented by *COPS*. The cops are good, keeping the public safe from the bad guys. These viewers did not identify fully with the suspects; while they thought the suspects were treated unfairly by law enforcement, they were reluctant to identify with figures they believed to be engaged in criminal behavior. On the other hand, they did not identify with police whose function, popular discourse maintains, is to corral deviant behavior. Essentially, they identified with neither the “good guys” nor the “bad guys.”

### Treatment of suspects

Study subjects were vigilant regarding the treatment of Black suspects on the show. *COPS* strictly adheres to certain narrative and structural conventions, which include police point of view, whereby the cop is granted the power to frame the narrative, and the formulaic conflict-resolution format, where the “bad guy” is always apprehended within the seven-minute timeframe (Doyle 2003; Gitlin 2000). These conventions encourage audience identification with the police. Historically critical and distrustful of the police, Black viewers rejected the dominant reading of the show and did not identify or sympathize with police.

Participants overwhelmingly expressed that the treatment of suspects differed based on race. Clip 1 (Boston drug scene) was noteworthy in its different treatment of two individuals suspected of the same crime. The White suspect, who was clearly under the influence and found with drugs on his person, fingered the Black suspect as the dealer in their transaction. The lead cop is shown telling his partner, another White male, “He [the Black suspect] tried to sell crack to that White gentleman over there.” The narrative then follows the cops interrogating and arresting the Black suspect and subsequently releasing (and *apologizing to*) the White suspect. Interviewees expressed shock at the White suspect’s release:

SHIRLEY: I don’t understand why he didn’t go to jail, too. He had the drugs on him. [The Black suspect] had nothing on him.

This clip sparked vociferous commentary from interviewees, who expressed skepticism of the police’s account of the interaction between the two suspects. The clip depicts police eyeing the suspects from afar, labeling the transaction a drug deal, and pursuing the suspects, who fled as

the police approached the scene. According to the officers featured in the clip, the Black suspect was attempting to sell drugs to the White suspect. Interview subjects questioned the true nature of the interaction, noting that the audience has only the word of the police to identify the nature of the interaction. In keeping with the cultural narrative of police power as trustworthy and rightful, the show posits the police's account of events as the official narrative. For these marginalized viewers, however, the police's account of who did what in this clip prompted distrust and apprehension. Viewers made note of the clip's racially tinged interactions. For these viewers, race was central in the police's account of the suspects' interaction. In keeping with unquestioned assumptions surrounding Black criminality, the Black suspect was labeled the aggressor, the White suspect the victim, and both were treated accordingly.

Viewers also thought race was central in determining the treatment of suspects. In continuing reference to Clip 1 (Boston drug scene), interview subjects were wary of the interactions between the police and the suspects. Viewers deemed the treatment of suspects to be disparate, and they perceived race as the central cause of this uneven treatment:

DARNELL: [*in mock cop voice*] Sorry you had to drop that crack back there.

LESLIE: They should have been taken in. If I was Bob and John [*mock names for the cops*], I would have taken both of them down. You mean to tell me that they didn't question the White dude about his background and ask if he's ever been arrested before? [The White suspect] could have bought off of [the Black guy] to go sell it down the street to these little kids and nobody would know because they didn't even ask him.

Law enforcement's treatment of the Black suspect differed greatly from that of his White counterpart. The White suspect was treated in a strikingly gentle manner: he was presumed innocent and treated as a victim of the Black suspect and coaxed for—and coached with—information about the Black suspect. Conversely, the Black suspect, cast as the guilty party, was questioned abruptly by police. In the end, the White suspect was released despite cops having found drugs on his person. The narrative presented by *COPS*—White male innocent, Black male guilty—lied in stark contrast to the footage presented. In this case, the White male, found with drugs, is innocent, whereas the Black male, not shown in possession of drugs, is guilty. This discrepancy is never addressed within the clip; viewers are left to fill in the blanks. For interview participants, race figured prominently in the differing treatment suspects received. As members of a racialized group, subjects are familiar

with the association of Blackness and criminality, and sympathized with the Black suspect, who they viewed as subject to similar suspicion on the basis of race.

For mainstream viewers, without a similar history of maltreatment by law enforcement or the continual cultural association with deviance, the cop's judgment might go unquestioned. The legitimacy of police power necessitates trust on the part of the citizenry. This unquestioned belief in the righteousness and professionalism of the police is a naturalized concept within the cultural narrative around policing and on *COPS*. Within law and order discourse, the police enjoy a solidified position as benevolent protectors; they serve a pivotal role in keeping mainstream society safe from the dangers presented by racialized populations (Hall, et al. 1978). Members of those racialized populations, understandably, hold a quite different perspective on the purported altruistic function of police. For racialized viewers, the police's comportment on the *COPS*—including targeting racialized suspects and employing physical force to contain them—was problematic and a source of apprehension rather than safety or comfort.

### Who watches *COPS*?

*COPS* is broadcast several times per day across several different networks. Nominated for four Emmy Awards, *COPS* continues to be a ratings bonanza, dominating top ratings spots for general audiences as well as the 18-49 year old demographic (Seidman 2008). *COPS* is FOX's longest continuously running series as well as one of the most successful and profitable shows on television today (Grossman 2005).

The question of *COPS*'s target audience was a recurring theme amongst interviewees. Interview subjects by and large did not identify themselves as the program's target audience. As one respondent voiced,

GLADYS: I don't really see the point. I don't like the police. And like I said, honestly I don't think I watched it maybe three times ... All I've seen [are] cops doing domestic violence or something stupid. This is dumb. I just don't see a point in it. [Law enforcement] has a place, but I don't feel like we need—there's no need to have it on TV.

These comments are reflective of a general trend among interviewees, who tended to express a lack of interest in the show's content and exclude themselves as members of the program's audience. Most respondents reported not watching the show. Respondents had already located themselves outside the show's target audience even before ascertaining

which demographics the show considers its target audience. Interview subjects expressed awareness of their “raced ways of seeing,” to borrow Hunt’s (1997) term; they realize their reading of the show is likely in opposition to the reading intended by the program’s producers. Viewers are acutely aware of the show’s pro-police stance and perceive that their distrust of law enforcement excludes them from *COPS*’ more pro-police target audience.

In one interview, the discussion of the intended audience came up after Clip 1, the Boston drug scene. Group members balked at the arrest of the Black suspect and the release of the White suspect, since only the White suspect was actually found with drug paraphernalia.

LESLIE: [W]e would assume the viewership is poor-white trash—right?  
For *COPS*?

This comment paints a vivid picture of the imagined loyal *COPS* viewer. *COPS* is seen as appealing to an undereducated sensibility. Respondents tend to associate *COPS* with a lower-class viewership; for interview subjects, the typical *COPS* fan is White, male, likely poor, and certainly pro-police. These sentiments are in line with the respondents from Curry’s (2001) study, who excluded themselves from *COPS* target audience, which was seen to comprise low wage, blue-collar workers. This imagined loyal *COPS* viewer is actually strikingly similar to Oliver and Armstrong’s (1998) profile of reality crime television viewers, who tend to positively associate authoritarianism with enjoyment of reality-based scenes portraying police aggression against criminal suspects, *but only if the suspect is Black rather than White* (31, emphasis added). This profile confirms at least some of the interviewees’ preconceptions about who watches programs like *COPS*. As one viewer notes:

SABRINA: I think that people who don’t live in the area [in which the scene is taped] watch it, they watch it for the humor and the stereotypes.

These comments are illustrative of assumptions made about the profile of the imagined *COPS* viewer. Research subjects imagined that the show’s target audience would derive pleasure from the racialization of criminality and the exaltation of law and order. Indeed, the show is unfailing in its formulaic depictions of race, class, and power relations. For certain viewers, these depictions might offer a degree of satisfaction, evidenced perhaps by the show’s twenty-year history.

Oliver and Armstrong’s (1998) profile of the typical reality crime show viewer demonstrates the pervasiveness of dominant ideology. The image

as described by interview subjects very closely resembles the pop political figure “Joe the Plumber.” Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher, nicknamed Joe the Plumber, burst onto the political stage as something of a human mascot for John McCain’s 2008 presidential bid against Barack Obama. Joe the Plumber was a caricature crafted to embody ultraconservative values while appealing to the sensibilities of working class, White voters. Joe the Plumber vociferously touted the benefits of the continuance of neo-liberal economic policies. When the antagonisms between Joe’s political allegiances and his actual economic position were uncovered, Joe’s pro-gun, anti-welfare, pro-corporate tax cut rhetoric became even more fervent. That Joe himself had received welfare during bouts of unemployment and that continued corporate tax cuts would consequently increase the tax burden on Joe’s small business seemed to only strengthen his personal commitment to the hegemonic ideals surrounding wealth distribution.

Joe the Plumber is a popular example of the phenomenon of aligning politically against one’s own interests. The success of *COPS* for the pro-authoritarian viewers described by Oliver and Armstrong (1998) is a testament to the ability of ruling class ideology to become hegemonic. Throughout the campaign period, Joe the Plumber and other conservatives (including Alaska governor and vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin) received criticism for encouraging, explicitly and implicitly, racially incendiary remarks from supporters, in an appeal to rally the conservative base (Palermo 2008). Racially tinged rhetoric pervaded the 2008 campaign (Daniel 2008) and was profoundly effective in garnering support for conservatism from those who stand to benefit very little from conservative economic policies. It is this deep-seated fear of the racialized Other (Hooks 1992) that is the selling point for dominant ideology. Law and order discourse promised to corral the racialized threat. *COPS* and similarly pro-police programming offer viewers an on-the-ground view of the state following through on its promise. For viewers like Joe the Plumber, who take political stances contrary to their own interests, and who desire assurances of safety from the threats posed by racialized populations, pro-police programming such as *COPS* can be rather satisfying. As one respondent described her views on *COPS* intended audience:

BAHATI: Well, it’s a show to show White people, “Look we’re trying to protect you. Look what we’re doing to the [Blacks] and poor White trash.”

The often problematic racial and class dynamics in *COPS* causes respondents to apply an oppositional reading to the content, and to assume it was never intended for their consumption in the first place. An

overwhelming majority of respondents (almost all) reported not watching the show.

### **Serving two masters: The dilemma of the urban Black cop**

Clip 4 (Las Vegas domestic dispute) was the only clip in the random sample that featured a Black cop narrating the scene. The appearance of a Black cop did not sufficiently spur the interest of viewers; many retorted that it lacked the “action” of the other clips. An open and shut domestic dispute case, the scene lacked the sensationalized (often racial) interactions of Clips 1-3, and failed to invoke the type of visceral reaction as the other clips, although respondents who watched the clip noted that the Black cop was “professional.” It is worth noting that the clip featuring the Black cop was not shown to all respondents. The clip was included initially, but it did not tend to spark much response from viewers (a few noted that, because of the Black cop’s by-the-book comportment, viewers found it less interesting than the other clips). Thus, for later groups, the clip was reserved and shown only when respondents specifically asked about Black cops on the show.

The dynamic of the White cop/Black suspect has become naturalized, cemented in the public imaginary. As Oliver and Armstrong (1998) note, reality crime shows tend to overrepresent racialized suspects and underrepresent racialized cops. Many interview subjects reported being distrustful of law enforcement despite the racial identity of individual cops. One respondent offered her view on Black cops:

KENA: There’s plenty of black cops out there, you know, [but they act] like they’re trying to get the approval of the other White cops. There’s plenty of them that I fear.

Most expressed distrust of the police regardless of the racial makeup of individual police, as many Blacks see Black cops as just as threatening as their White (and other non-Black) counterparts. Despite conventions *COPS* employs to encourage identification with law enforcement—police narration, the filming of footage from law enforcement’s POV, and the anonymity of suspects (Doyle 1998, 2003)—respondents did not identify with the Black cop. They did not identify his behavior as problematic because they thought him to be very straight laced and “by the book,” and they considered his scene to be less controversial than others. Nonetheless they continued to sympathize with suspects.

Respondents tended to be skeptical of the motives of Black cops. Many study participants recounted negative encounters with Black cops. They

perceived Black cops as occupying two separate and, at times, conflicting identities; to borrow loosely from Du Bois' (1997) concept of double consciousness, respondents regarded Black cops as members of dueling identity groups: Black and blue. The world of policing can be very secretive and very self-protecting (Ericson 1989; Wilson 2000). Distrust of law enforcement is pervasive within Black communities (JBHE Foundation 1998). Study participants expressed skepticism as to the placement of Black cops' allegiances. As one respondent characterizes law enforcement,

EVAN: It's that old good ol' boy club. You know they're going to cover for each other. Yeah, they're going to cover each other because they feel like they're out there against the world.

As members of often warring identity groups, Black cops are faced with often conflicting sets of expectations; Black cops are expected to reconcile their allegiance to serve the needs of the state apparatus with their membership in a marginalized, racialized community. Study participants did not see the race of individual cops as a guarantee of racial solidarity and safety from police maltreatment and abuse; in many cases, interviewees expressed being more likely to be mistreated by Black cops, who they presumed to be more beholden to their identity as cops than any imperative toward racial solidarity with Black civilians.

Omi and Winant (1986, 78-9) describe the US as racial state, whereby the racial order is continually constructed via intense negotiations between racial movements and the state. The state has always been concerned with racial politics (Omi and Winant 1986, 81). Regardless of the racial identity of individual cops, the police as a whole function on behalf of the state to maintain the racial order. Many Blacks express a natural distrust of the police. The police have historically committed acts of violence against Blacks with impunity (e.g., Amadou Diallo, shot 41 times when his wallet was mistaken for a gun, and Sean Bell, gunned down by police by a barrage of 50 bullets the night before his wedding, and countless others, all cops exonerated). The presence of Black cops has not been a guarantee of protection against police abuse; in many instances, police abuse has occurred in the presence of, and at the hands of, Black cops. Given this historically problematic relationship with law enforcement, certain populations perceive pro-police programming with a degree of apprehension toward the police as a whole, regardless of the racial makeup of the individual cops involved.

## Conclusion

This study looked at the ways in which Black audiences create meaning from a show that sensationalizes police encounters. The clips employed in this study featured Black and White suspects and cops, all male. Possibilities for future research might employ a gender analysis, exploring the masculine and heterosexist world of policing and *COPS*. Possibilities also include a multiracial subjectivity analysis; a class analysis might also uncover new insights into how audiences perceive *COPS*.

US racial politics has inspired a marked distrust of the police in black communities. In this study, the racial identity of the subjects informed their decoding processes. Respondents found *COPS* problematic; they thought race played a central role in the treatment of suspects. Because of a fraught historical relationship with law enforcement, respondents were skeptical of the police and did not identify with police on the show. This apprehension toward police was apparent without regard to the race of the individual cops; Black cops were still perceived as representing the interests of the state. Subjects did not see themselves as the show's target audience, and are not regular viewers. These findings are in alignment with Hunt's (1997) assertion of the primacy of race in decoding practices.

The overwhelming success of *COPS* is particularly notable considering the current political and cultural climate. The US is the world's leading jailer. Close to *a quarter of the world's prison population* is incarcerated within the US (Davis 2003; emphasis added). The naturalization of law-and-order discourse has led to prison and military industrial complexes that show no sign of slowing; instead, the proposed solution continues to be *more police, more prisons*. *COPS* was born out of the writers' strike of the eighties. It is not surprising that the 2007 writers' strike saw *COPS* producer John Langley introduce a new show, *Jail*.

The US political landscape is currently undergoing an epic transformation, including a departure from neo-liberal policy, as promised by Obama's presidency. It remains to be seen whether Obama's assurances of a departure from Neoliberal policies will have a sustained positive impact on racialized communities. Presently, Black communities face unemployment rates twice as high as their White counterparts, with Black males facing unemployment at the highest levels since WWII (Muhammad 2009). Education budgets are ever-decreasing (AP, April 7, 2009) in the midst of prison expansions (New York Times, April 19, 2009). All the while, violence against racialized populations at the hands of state agents continues (Stannard and Bulwa 2009; Witt 2009). Amid a

period of economic strife and tightening budgets at every level of government, the city of Oakland, California has just hired a cadre of private armed security guards to patrol the streets on behalf of the police, in an effort to “improve safety while reducing spending” (White 2009). This move is in keeping with the privatization and commodification of the prison system that marked the ostensibly bygone neo-liberal era. Only time will tell just how President Obama’s policies might positively impact racialized and poor communities over the long term, and how these changes might be reflected in the realm of cultural production.

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