



## Representations of Ethnicity II – Case Studies

The aims of this Factsheet are to:

- apply the theories outlined in the previous Factsheet (Representations of Ethnicity 1 – Theory) to examples

This Factsheet will focus on detailed case study examples and in depth analysis of representations of people of African descent. For more information on the theories used, see part 1 of this Factsheet. For an analysis of a different minority ethnic group see Factsheet 085. Representations of Islam and Muslims in the British Press.

### Case Study: Lil Wayne - *How to Love Music Video*

The full music video can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8Gf4-eT3w0>

Image from video	Textual Analysis	Theory
	The video opens with a long shot of a hospital room. A black woman is laid on an operating table and it becomes apparent from the characters' dialogue that she is about to have an abortion. Both doctors are white which suggests their superiority to the woman in this situation; they are experts and she is relying upon their expertise. There is no male present, which implies that the father of the unborn child is also not present in the woman's life. Stereotypically, he has left her to cope with this issue alone. Ultimately, she chooses to not have the abortion.	The <b>binary opposition</b> of white and black in this scene supports <b>Hall's</b> (1981) idea of the ' <b>white eye</b> '. The video, though featuring a black artist and a predominantly black cast, still supports the white dominant ideology. It supports the idea of white people being superior to black people through roles they have been assigned in the narrative. The majority of characters in the video are black or ethnic minority but the doctors, the educated professionals, are white.
	Lil Wayne is introduced through a close up of his waist. He is topless throughout the video, which emphasises his physique and implies he is strong and powerful. The camera moves upwards to show the designer label on his underwear, making the audience aware that he is rich enough to afford such clothing and that he is proud of this. Lil Wayne is heavily tattooed, including his hands and face. Typically, such extensive tattoos would exclude people from mainstream work and the connotations of tattoos are often associated with criminality.	The focus on Lil Wayne's designer clothes supports <b>Wilson and Guterrez's</b> (1995) notion of conspicuous consumption and creating a sense of pride in material possessions in black representations. Whilst this technique is not exclusive to black people, as a genre, hip-hop music is principally about monetary gain. The audience is supposed to envy Lil Wayne's belongings and, if they can achieve this lifestyle themselves, it is something to be proud of.
	Returning to the narrative of the music video, the woman has suffered domestic violence at the hands of her child's father and he has gone to prison. This again focuses on the stereotype of black men as being criminals and poor partners and fathers. During the visit, the couple argue which again emphasises the idea that they do not have a successful relationship.	<b>The Opportunity Agenda Report</b> (2011) claimed that negative associations are exaggerated with regards to black men and this is certainly evident in this music video. The men featured are shown to be connected with criminality, mainly associated with domestic violence and child abuse. In the whole narrative, at least three men are shown to be abusive to black women across two generations. This supports The Opportunity Agenda Report's suggestion that black males tend to be associated with problems that are impossible to solve, such as systematic criminal behaviour and violence.
	Skipping forward in time, the child is shown to be older and her mother has a new partner. It is implied in the video that he sexually abuses the girl. Yet again, the black male character is shown to be deviant and lacking in the usual moral codes of society. When the girl grows up she is shown at high school kissing a 'bad boy'; he is black, heavily tattooed (despite supposedly being at school) and wearing a white vest, which is sometimes called a 'wife-beater' as it has connotations of men who are violent towards women.	
	The narrative implies that the boy from school gets the girl pregnant and she is next shown as a grown woman with two children but no male partner. They argue on the phone, again reiterating the idea that black men are poor father figures and absent fathers. The woman works as a stripper and, ultimately, turns to prostitution to make money to support her children. This suggests that their father makes little or no financial contribution to their lives. This woman also visits the white doctors where she is told she is HIV positive.	<b>The Opportunity Agenda Report's</b> (2011) claim that negative associations are exaggerated is also true to depictions of unemployment and poverty. The implication that the man is not providing for his children suggests he is either unemployed or living in poverty himself. According to the report, the historical reasons for black poverty are not included in media representations and this is the case here. The stereotype of the 'deadbeat dad' ignores the possibility that institutional racism may operate to keep black men out of jobs.
	Following rapid sections of the narrative replaying in reverse, an alternative version of the daughter's life is shown. Her mother marries and she is shown to be succeeding in work and graduating college. She has a boyfriend who has no tattoos and wears more conventional clothing, such as shorts and a t-shirt, to school. She too visits the white doctors who tell her she is pregnant but it is good news this time. Despite the obvious joy of the woman and her mother, the man is still not present, though it is implied that he is a part of her life.	<b>Ross</b> (1996) claimed that white people's attitudes towards non-white people are affected by media representations. In this case, the overwhelmingly negative representation of black men in the video could be seen to have a negative impact on real life attitudes. <b>The Opportunity Agenda Report</b> suggests that such portrayals as those in this video can lead to exaggerated views of criminality and violence by black men and, subsequently, a lack of identification with, and sympathy for, black males. Though the video does suggest that there are black men who are 'good guys' and support their families, they are in the minority in the narrative and on screen for much less time.

**Activity**

Choose a music video that features representations of black people and carry out your own textual analysis. Firstly, outline the stereotypes in the narrative and then apply the theories. More detail on each theory can be found in part 1 of this Factsheet: *Representations of Ethnicity 1 – Theory*.

You could look at:

- *The Game – My Life ft. Lil Wayne*
- *2Pac – Ghetto Gospel*
- *Lil Kim – Lighters Up*

**Case Study: Idris Elba**

Idris Elba is a black British actor, DJ and recording artist who grew up in Canning Town, London. His father is from Sierra Leone and his mother is from Ghana meaning Elba is of mixed-African descent. Despite starting his acting career playing stereotypical roles for black men, namely in reconstructions of murders on BBC's *Crimewatch*, Elba has also had several roles which have subverted, or offered alternatives to, the usual black representations.

**Stringer Bell in *The Wire***

(<http://joevince3.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/stringer-bell-in-court.jpg?w=500>)

*The Wire* was a crime drama television series that ran for five seasons from 2002 to 2008 on HBO in America. Each season focused on a different aspect of policing in Baltimore, Maryland (referred to as Bodycount, Murderland in the opening credits). Much of the action centred on the interactions between the law enforcement officers in the city and the drug dealers and pushers in the rundown housing projects. Elba plays Russell 'Stringer' Bell, the second in command to local drug lord Avon Barksdale and the leader of the drug crew when Barksdale is in prison. Whilst this may seem to be stereotypical in that it presents a black, male character as a criminal, Bell is more complex than most representations of black criminality.

Stringer Bell attends economics classes at the local community college and he has a private library at his home that includes copies of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (a book about economics written in 1776 that introduced the notion of free market economics, the principle that modern capitalism is based upon) and Robert's *Rules of Order* (the rule book followed by parliaments and government). He has a desire for material wealth but this is coupled with a yearning for education and higher learning. Bell runs meetings of drug dealers as if he was in a corporate boardroom and he wants the 'business' to be legitimate.

He wants to avoid the appearance of being a gangster or a thug by presenting himself as an intelligent businessman who is devoted to his work. Despite his best efforts, Bell is ultimately unable to move into the world of legitimate business. His attempts to invest in housing are thwarted when he is conned by a corrupt state senator who knows Bell cannot complain since he is using illegitimate means to achieve a socially acceptable goal. In the end, Bell betrays Barksdale who, in turn, betrays him. Bell is killed inside one of his own housing developments by a rival drug lord.

**The Opportunity Agenda Report** (2011) suggested that representations of black men exaggerate negative aspects of their lives and focus on criminality, unemployment and poverty. This is true to some extent of the characterisation of Stringer Bell. He is a drug kingpin who is originally from the impoverished projects (the name given to the American equivalent of council housing) where inhabitants, who are mainly black or ethnic minority, are uneducated and unemployed. These are the 'big problems' that the Report says black males are often associated with in media representations and, despite Bell's desire to rise above his beginnings and become a legitimate businessman, he dies at the hands of a fellow drug dealer which is a stereotypical ending for his character. *The Wire* does subvert some representations in more interesting ways though. The Report claims that the historical context and reasons for black poverty are rarely considered in media texts but this is not true of *The Wire*. Much of the narrative focuses on how corruption and inadequacy within local and national government contributes to the problems faced by the people living in Baltimore. Issues of racial inequality are discussed and black men are shown to be in positions of power.

Cedric Daniels, the Deputy of operations in the Baltimore police department.

Howard 'Bunny' Colvin who, after retiring from the police force, worked as an academic aide with the University of Baltimore's Social Sciences Research Department.



([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Wire\\_Cedric\\_Daniels.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Wire_Cedric_Daniels.jpg))

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Wire\\_Bunny.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Wire_Bunny.jpg))

**Activity**

Analyse the mise-en-scene in this image from *The Wire* and explain how it shows Stringer Bell (on the left) as different from Avon Barksdale (on the right). What does the costume suggest about the characters? What do their facial expressions suggest about who is dominant? Apply theories from part 1 of this Factsheet to your analysis.



(<http://blogs.pioneerlocal.com/entertainment/Stringer-and-Avon-Wire.jpg>)

**Heimdall in *Thor* (dir. Branagh, 2011)**

Heimdall is the fictional Marvel Comics character based on the Norse god Heimdallr. He has superhuman strength and stamina, can move at great speed, is exceptionally agile and has above average vision and hearing. Heimdall is able to look across time and space. He is also typically portrayed as a white, blue-eyed, blond haired Viking and this is what made the choice of Idris Elba to play the role so controversial for some members of *Thor*'s audience.

Heimdall as he typically appears in Marvel Comics' representations.



(<http://front-free.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/HEIMDALL.jpg>)

Elba as Heimdall in Branagh's *Thor*.



(<http://replyreplyreply.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/heimdall.jpg>)

In response to some of the negative comments made by fans of the original Marvel depiction, Kenneth Branagh told comicbookmovie.com: "Idris Elba is a fantastic actor, we were lucky to get him. He provides all the characteristics we need from Asgard's gatekeeper . . . If you have a chance to have a great actor in the part everything else is irrelevant. If you're going to say the colour of his skin matters in a story like this, look at fifty years of *Thor* comics to see how many ways great artists have bent alleged 'rules'. Look at the Norse myths to see the way they confounded and contradicted themselves. That whole 'controversy' was a surprising - and daft - moment." Elba himself added in *The Guardian* on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2010: "I was cast in *Thor* and I'm cast as a Nordic god. If you know anything about the Nords, they don't look like me but there you go. I think that's a sign of the times for the future. I think we will see multi-level casting. I think we will see that, and I think that's good."

Whilst the casting of Elba as Heimdall does subvert stereotypes because he is playing a character that is usually white, the backlash against the casting illustrates Hall's idea of the 'white eye'. According to Hall, representations of white people are 'invisible' to the audience as they are the norm and what is expected. However, any deviation from this becomes glaringly obvious to the white audience and it makes them uncomfortable to see non-white people in 'their' media texts, playing 'their' roles.

Activity	
<p>Apply theories of representation of ethnicity to the role Idris Elba played in BBC's <i>Luther</i>. Use the analyses on this Factsheet as a guide plus the detailed explanations of the theories on the first part of the Factsheet to fill in the gaps.</p>	
Representation in <i>Luther</i>	Theory
<p><b>Detective Chief Inspector John Luther works in the Serious Crime Unit. He is dedicated to his job and legendary amongst his colleagues for his ingenuity.</b></p>  <p>(<a href="http://ichef.bbci.co.uk/images/ic/640x360/legacy/brand/b00vk2lp.jpg?nodefault=true">http://ichef.bbci.co.uk/images/ic/640x360/legacy/brand/b00vk2lp.jpg?nodefault=true</a>)</p>	<p><b>HINT: How does this representation subvert Hall's idea of the 'white eye'? How does this representation support Pilkington's idea that black representations have become more complex?</b></p>
<p><b>Luther has a violent temper and he does not always follow police protocol. He can be incredibly vindictive.</b></p>  <p>(<a href="http://filmreviewonline.com/wp-content/gallery/luther/01_12_15mb.jpg">http://filmreviewonline.com/wp-content/gallery/luther/01_12_15mb.jpg</a>)</p>	<p><b>HINT: How does this representation link to theories that claim black men are shown in a negative way?</b></p>
<p><b>In series two, Luther lives in a flat on the Aylesbury Estate. This is an area notorious for its high levels of crime and it is often used as an example of urban decay.</b></p>  <p>(<a href="http://danieljlewis.org/files/2010/02/Aylesbury.jpg">http://danieljlewis.org/files/2010/02/Aylesbury.jpg</a>)</p>	<p><b>HINT: How does this representation link to theories about black poverty and problems that cannot be solved?</b></p>

**Exam Hint:-** It is not enough to just know theories of representation of ethnicity, you must also be able to apply them to examples. Practise doing this when you are consuming a media text. For example, when you are reading a magazine or watching the news on television, think about how the representations you see support or subvert the theories you have learnt.

### Elba as James Bond?

It has also been rumoured that Elba could be the next actor to play James Bond. This would be the first time the character has been portrayed by an ethnic minority actor but Elba has said he has no interest in playing the role if it is simply to make the franchise 'different'. Speaking to National Public Radio, he said: "I just don't want to be the black James Bond. Sean Connery wasn't the Scottish James Bond, and Daniel Craig wasn't the blue-eyed James Bond, so if I played him, I don't want to be called the black James Bond."

The examples discussed here illustrate how the roles Elba has played have offered complex and sometimes subversive representations of black men. Though some of his parts have been partially stereotypical, such as Stringer Bell being a drug dealer in *The Wire* or DCI John Luther having a violent streak in *Luther*, there is always more depth to the characters and other sides to their personalities that are not always evident in other representations of ethnic minorities.

Both Bell and Luther deal with everyday issues such as loyalty amongst friends and relationship problems, which make them more human and less stereotypical. In addition, Elba's role as Heimdall and possible role as James Bond show that he also takes on roles which have no bearing on his ethnicity at all and are simply parts for an actor to play. As Elba himself said, this could be a sign of the times, a sign that ethnicity is becoming less of an issue in casting and that, in the future, stereotypes of ethnicity may be less of an issue in mainstream media texts than they have been in the past.



(<http://cdn1.screenrant.com/wp-content/uploads/Idris-Elba-James-Bond.jpg>)

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