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Nyambura Njee

Eastern Michigan University, nnjee@emich.edu

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SHARE-CROPPING BLACKNESS:
WHITE SUPREMACY
AND THE HYPER-CONSUMPTION OF
BLACK POPULAR CULTURE

Nyambura Njee
Dyann Logwood, Mentor

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study will explore the impact of the way that “Blackness” is constructed and commodified for consumption within a White supremacist culture, and examine the effects of this construct on the Black community. According to Leonard and King (2012), in their book *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African Americans in Contemporary Sports*, “The process of commodification is not simply about selling an essentialized Black culture, but rather a particular construction of Blackness that has proven beneficial to White[s]” (p. 10). This paper will discuss some of the twenty-first century consequences of this phenomenon. The methodology will be conducted through a literature review and a content analysis of various cultural texts including films, interviews, and art that depict Blackness. My belief is that the popular consumption of commodified Black images is related to the maintenance of White supremacy, and thus the systemic oppression of Blacks in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

New racism, although articulating dominant White narrative and stereotypes, is equally defined by the consumption and celebration of commodified Blackness.

– Leonard & King, 2012, p. 8

Color-blind and post-racial rhetoric and ideology underpin the notion that the voracious consumption of Black popular culture is a testament to the acceptance of Black people. This qualitative study will explore the process and the impact of the ways that “Blackness” is constructed and commodified for consumption within a white supremacist culture, and examine the effect of this construct on the Black community. As consumption of Black popular culture remains popular in the United States, Black people lose their lives daily to systematic anti-blackness. These two seemingly unrelated phenomena should be best understood as interconnected facets of contemporary White Supremacy.

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Agency: An individual or social group’s will to be self-defining and self-determining (Hill-Collins, 1990, p. 298).

Appropriation: the “use of a [historically subordinate] culture’s symbols, [language], artifacts, genres, rituals, technologies” etc., by members of a historically dominant group (Richard, 2006). Combining three interrelated frameworks, I will also define “appropriation” through bell hooks’ notion of “eating the other” (hooks, 1992), Bill Yousman’s concept of “Blackophilia / Blackophobia” (Yousman, 2003), and Watts and Orbe’s conception of “Spectacular consumption” (Watts & Orbe, 2002).

Blackness: the construct of an essentialized Black culture, “or Black cultural identity [that] involves [and relies] on persons and other symbolic and material representations socially and historically constructed as ‘Black’ (e.g. speech and phonetic conventions, folklore, style, fashion, music, use of the body and Black physical form)” (Crocket, 2008).

Black community: “A set of institutions, communication networks, and practices that help African Americans respond to social, economic, and political challenges confronting them. Also known as the Black public sphere or Black civil society” (Hill-Collins, 1990, p. 298).

Blackface/Minstrelsy: “The first appearance in U.S. history of black culture as property was blackface minstrelsy”; “Minstrelsy

was an established nineteenth-century theatrical practice, principally of the urban North, in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit. It has therefore been summed up by one observer as ‘half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy.’ While it organized around the quite explicit ‘borrowing’ of black cultural materials for white dissemination, a borrowing that ultimately depended on the material relations of slavery, the minstrel show obscured these relations by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural” (Lott, 1993, p. 3).

Black Lives Matter: A movement based “on a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements. Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (Garza, Tometi, & Cullors, n.d.)

Blackophilia: Used to describe the ambivalent interest in Black culture by non-Blacks as a source of both pleasure and anxiety (Yousman, 2003). Characterized by consumption and simultaneous fascination/disgust, attraction/repulsion, hypervisibility/invisibility of Black pop culture. Equally, *Blackophobia* will refer to irrational fear, dread, and anxiety toward Blacks (Yousman, 2003).

Colonialism: “A practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another. The practice of colonialism usually involved the transfer of population to a new territory. The term colonialism is frequently used to describe the settlement of North America, Australia, New Zealand, Algeria, and Brazil, places that were controlled by a large population of permanent European residents” (Kohn, 2012, para. 1).

Commodification/Commodity: For the purpose of this study, “commodification” and “commodifying” will refer to the process of turning unconventional entities into a marketable good that can be *bought* and *sold*. For example, referring to the commodification of the Black male body in contemporary sports, Leonard et al. (2012) stated that “Black male bodies are increasingly admired

and commodified in rap, hip hop and certain sports such as basketball” (p. 8). Thus, a “commodity” will refer to anything that has been transformed into a buyable and sellable good. “In capitalist political economies, land, products, services and ideas are assigned economic value and are bought and sold in market places as commodities” (Hill-Collins, 1990, p. 298).

Cultural imperialism: Used to describe the phenomenon where around the world “the same kind of knowledge, fashion, music and literature, the same kind of metropolitan mass culture is manufactured, bought and sold. Western ideologies, political beliefs, western science, western laws and social institutions, western moral concepts, sexual symbols and ideals of beauty, western working methods and leisure activities, western foods, western pop idols and the western concept of human existence have become objectives, examples and norms everywhere in the world” (Sarmela, 1977, p. 1).

Essentialism: “Belief that individuals or groups have inherent, unchanging characteristics rooted in biology or a self-contained culture that explain their status. When linked to oppressions of race, gender, and sexuality binary thinking constructs ‘essential’ group differences” (Hill-Collins, 1990, p. 299).

Hip Hop culture: “Encompass[es] more than just rap music—hip-hop has created a culture that incorporates ethnicity, art, politics, fashion, technology, and urban life” (Smiley, 2013).

Ideology: “A body of ideas reflecting the interests of a particular social group. Scientific racism and sexism constitute ideologies that support domination. Black nationalism and Feminism constitute ideologies that oppose such domination” (Hill-Collins, 1990, p. 299).

Institutionalized racism: “As a system, racism is an institutional arrangement, maintained by policies, practices and procedures—both formal and informal—in which some persons typically have more or less opportunity than others, and in which such persons receive better or worse treatment than others, because of their respective racial identities. Additionally, institutional racism involves denying persons opportunities, rewards, or various

benefits on the basis of race, to which those individuals are otherwise entitled. In short, racism is a system of inequality, based on race” (Wise, 2014).

Oppression: “An unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity constitute major forms of oppression ” (Hill-Collins, 1990, p. 299).

Rhetoric of color-blindness: “A view of the world that resists talking of race because to do so is believed to perpetuate racism” (Hill-Collins, 1990, p. 300). Also, *post-racial*: the belief that America has moved beyond racial prejudice or discrimination to create a “color-blind” society.

Sharecropping/Peonage: “After the Civil War, former slaves sought jobs, and planters sought laborers. The absence of cash or an independent credit system led to the creation of sharecropping. Sharecropping is a system where the landlord/planter allows a tenant to use the land in exchange for a share of the crop” (Pollard, 2012, para. 1 & 2). The development of the capitalist state is integrally related to the underdevelopment and oppression of Black America. “Development was...the institutionalization of the hegemony of capitalism as a world system. Underdevelopment was the direct consequence of this process: chattel slavery, sharecropping, peonage, industrial labor at low wages, and cultural chaos” (Marable, 2015, p. xi).

White supremacy: “White supremacy is an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent; for the purpose of maintain and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege” (Martinez, n.d., p. 1). “Furthermore, ‘White supremacy’ is a much more useful term for understanding the complicity of people of color in upholding and maintaining racial hierarchies that do not involve force (i.e., slavery, apartheid) than the term ‘internalized racism’” (hooks, 2014, p. 113).

White/White People: “WHITE (as in ‘white people’): The term white, referring to people, was created by Virginia slave owners and colonial rulers in the 17th century. It replaced terms like Christian and ‘Englishman’ [*sic*] to distinguish European colonists from Africans and indigenous peoples. European colonial powers established white as a legal concept after Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676 during which indentured servants of European and African descent had united against the colonial elite. The legal distinction of white separated the servant class on the basis of skin color and continental origin. The creation of ‘white’ meant giving privileges to some, while denying them to others with the justification of biological and social inferiority” (Martinez, n.d.).

White privilege: “Refers to any advantage, opportunity, benefit, head start, or general protection from negative societal mistreatment, which persons deemed white will typically enjoy, but which others will generally not enjoy. These benefits can be material (such as greater opportunity in the labor market, or greater net worth, due to a history in which whites had the ability to accumulate wealth to a greater extent than persons of color), social (such as presumptions of competence, creditworthiness, law-abidingness, intelligence, etc.) or psychological (such as not having to worry about triggering negative stereotypes, rarely having to feel out of place, not having to worry about racial profiling, etc.)” (Wise, 2014).

White supremacist capitalist patriarchy: Used to describe the interlocking systems of domination that function simultaneously at all times in our social experience (hooks, 2006).

SHARE-CROPPING BLACKNESS

What would America be like if we loved Black people as much as we love Black culture? – Stenberg, 2014

Africans/African Americans have long played an integral and influential role in the meta-fabric of American culture. However, our unique contributions, especially to popular culture, have been and continue to be regarded as invisible, despite our hyper-visibility within pop culture. Historically and contemporarily, dominant

groups have constructed Black images in simplistic and stereotypical representations (Hill-Collins, 1990). These representations, particularly in the mass media, have a long political history dating back to images popularized from the time of slavery (hooks, 1992) and mirror White ideas of Blackness, or how “Blackness” is imagined through the perspective of “Whiteness” (hooks, 1992). The White male consumer has played an essential role in the shaping of these images; as a consequence, “spectacular consumption is a process through which the relations among cultural forms, the culture industry, and the lived experiences of persons are shaped by public consumption” (Watts & Orbe, 2002, p. 1). For example, bell hooks noted that rap music, an arena of high consumption,

is the perfect paradigm of colonialism. We think of rap music as a little third world country that young White consumers are able to go to and take out of it whatever they want. We would have to acknowledge that what young White consumers, primarily male, often times suburban, most got energized by in rap music was misogyny, obscenity, [and] therefore...rap came to make the largest sum of money. (hooks, 2006)

Here the relationship between the White consumer appetite and the popularization of certain racialized representations is noted. This is part of the process of “eating the other” (hooks, 1992), “or the tendency for cultural difference to be commodified as a source of titillation and pleasure for White consumers” (Yousman, 2003, p. 378). These representations have had adverse social, political, and economic consequences for the Black community; the violence of Jim Crow against Black Americans was partially justified through the dehumanizing Blackface minstrelsy representations that were dominant and popular during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. White actors donning Blackface and parodying behavior they attributed to Black people propagated some of the most damaging stereotypes of Black Americans in history (Riggs, 1986). These same dehumanizing representations are still dominant and popular. Such representations of “Blackness” allowed ideological

justification for racism and incited the anti-Black violence of Jim Crow segregation. Today, the commodification of Blackness within our mainstream media serves as a kind of pervasive symbolic blackface, acting with the same political motives on minstrelsy. Just as minstrelsy justified and bolstered Jim Crow violence, contemporary symbolic Blackface burgeons and buttresses contemporary anti-Black violence (Yousman, 2003). Hooks writes,

Should we not be suspicious of the way in which white culture's fascination with black masculinity manifests itself? The very images of phallogentric black masculinity that are glorified and celebrated in rap music, videos and movies are the representations that are evoked when white supremacists seek to gain public acceptance and support for genocidal assaults on black men, particularly youth. (hooks, 1992, p. 9)

From the misrepresentation of Black culture, to the commodified images of Black bodies, Blackness serves as a "sharecrop" that is simultaneously consumed and criminalized. While Blacks are used to sell everything from clothes to detergent to cars and soft drinks, they are also disproportionately represented within the criminal justice system (Leonard & King, 2012). The exploitation and consumption of the "exotic other" for pleasure are linked, and patterns of this exploitation have taken many forms. Often fantasies of the "other" are exploited in a manner that maintains relationships of domination (hooks, 1992). So, why Blackness? Within our contemporary space and time, the conversion of societies from industrial to post-industrial, the explosion of media and cultural institutions, and the persistent challenge to White Supremacy have uniquely altered Black social identity (Yousman, 2003). The dialectical relationship between Black resistance to systemic oppression and the continued maintenance of White privilege have resulted in a crisis within the Western world and White identity (Yousman, 2003). As a consequence, "spectacular consumption arises in part out of the desire for white folk to reconstitute their identities through acts of black consumption" (Watts & Orbe, 2002, p. 7).

Response to this push and pull of the status quo has “led many White youth in two seemingly opposed but actually interconnected directions: retrenchment in White supremacy and voracious consumption of African American popular culture” (Yousman, 2003, p. 375). In our commodity consumer culture, just as one’s body can be bought and sold on the open market (Hill-Collins, 1990), one can purchase “identity.” Most importantly, this identity may be found through “eating the other”:

It is this current trend in producing colorful ethnicity for the White consumer appetite that makes it possible for Blackness to be commodified in unprecedented ways, and for Whites to appropriate Black culture without interrogating Whiteness or showing concern for the displeasure of Blacks. (hooks, 1992, pg. 154)

As spectacular consumption of Blackness runs rampant, Black Lives Matter forced its way to the forefront of popular culture through its critique of White appropriation and consumption of Black culture. Black Lives Matter condemns the lack of genuine engagement or realistic understanding of the Black racial struggle in the creation of Black images consumed by Whites. As noted by the Black female rapper Azealia Banks, amongst others, non-blacks who partake in hip hop culture and perform “Blackness” fail to speak on, or critically acknowledge, the racism that inseparably comes with having a Black identity (Stenberg, 2014). Contrary to popular belief, the consumption of “Blackness” has not resulted in reduced anti-Black attitudes, prejudices, or inequality. The tendency to identify Blacks as “exotic others” is rife with conflict (Yousman, 2003). Just as the “White identification with African American cultural styles has been noted since the first White performer burned a cork and darkened his face, we see the contemporary manifestation of the ambivalent consumption of ‘Blackness’” (Yousman, 2003).

I argue that the essentialized and simplistic construct of “Blackness” that is popularly consumed and applauded by Whites harms the Black community, as it is in fact linked to the

maintenance and perpetuation of White supremacy: “As White cultural imperialism informed and affirmed the adventurous journeys of colonizing Whites into the countries and cultures of ‘dark others,’ it allows White audiences to applaud representations of Black culture, if they are satisfied with the images and habits being presented” (hooks, 1996, p. 287). I posit that the spectacular consumption of “the Other” has not and does not challenge systemic and institutionalized racism, despite providing a shared cultural space with much potential for political intervention.

Commodifying, Consuming, and Appropriating “Blackness”

We should recognize the Blackophobia that lies behind much Blackophilia, and that both may be representative of the continuing ideological and cultural power of White supremacy in the 21st century. (Yousman, 2003, p. 371)

There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of White supremacist [capitalist] patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, [and] of Blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all Black people. (hooks, 1992, p. 2)

In American popular culture Blackness is both *hypervisible* and simultaneously *invisible*, and “While Black youth prominently figure in the war on drugs and in prison populations, they are equally prominent in film, music, TV, sports, and advertising. All kinds of commercial industries use their creative expression to remain commercially viable” (Watkins, 2014). From stars such as Elvis, Madonna, Eminem, and Iggy Azalea, to teenagers in distant nations, to powerful corporations, there is a racialized fascination with Black people and Black popular culture. Indeed, we live in a society and culture that believes itself to be “post-racial” and “colorblind,” yet we are seemingly color-struck with “Blackness” (Rose, 2014).

Despite Black people's hypervisibility within pop culture, and the unprecedented consumption of Black images, our contributions to American society are often ignored, and Black culture is still viewed as deficient. This comes with the disregard of, and refusal to acknowledge Black cultural contributions and enrichment to American culture (Ford, 2003). The notion that consumption of constructed images of "Blackness" will bring about reduced anti-Black feelings, attitudes, and prejudice in a White supremacist culture is spurious; it is telling that slogans such as "Black Lives Matter!" have been appropriated by White culture and, without acknowledging the painful reality that generated the term, altered it to "*all* lives matter." The simultaneous fascination and dread, attraction to and repulsion toward Blackness can be described as the "Blackophilia / Blackophobia" conundrum:

Blackophilia (manifested by White consumption of Black popular culture) is linked with Blackophobia (fear and dread of African Americans). Coexistent with White youth fascination with hip-hop culture and African American athletes and celebrities is the continuing manifestation of White youth resistance to programs that challenge institutional racism...[T]hese phenomena may be best understood as interrelated aspects of White supremacy. (Yousman, 2003, p. 366)

These interrelated aspects have been present within the historic blackophilic consumption of Blackface, which was speculated to have assuaged blackophobia. Through the derision of Blacks, simultaneous fear and fascination of Blackness could be mitigated and contained. Consequently,

White youth adoption of Black cultural forms in the 21st century is also a performance, one that allows Whites to contain their fears and animosities towards Blacks through rituals not of ridicule, as in previous eras, but of adoration. Thus, although the motives behind the performance may initially appear to be different, the

act is still a manifestation of White supremacy, albeit a White supremacy that is in crisis and disarray, rife with confusion and contradiction. (Yousman, 2003, p. 369)

As spectacular consumption of Blackness runs rampant, critiques of the adoption of Blackness by non-Blacks without the “burden,” or consideration of a racialized Black experience, have grown. Blackness is rampantly consumed, commodified, and appropriated, while Black people daily lose their lives to police brutality and systemic racism. Being the object of spectacle, “the meaning of ‘authentic’ Black life and culture is partly generative of mediated and mass marketed images” (Watts & Orbe, 2002). Upon its release, the rap song “CoCo” by O.T. Genasis gained quick and widespread commercial support, climbing the top 100 charts in little time. At the time of the Michael Brown killing in August, 2014, and during the November 2014 trial of the police officer responsible for his death, the music video for “CoCo”—released in October of that year—depicted large, dark-skinned Black men in plain white tees wielding guns at the camera while consuming illicit substances. There was a strong similarity between the way these Black men were being represented and the rhetoric that surrounded the Brown murder; they seemed to align and even complement each other. On closer analysis, the connection between the consumption and representation of Blackness and the justification of violence against Black bodies becomes clear:

One could make the argument that the cultural industries’ relentless marketing of black...violence and corruption in television, films, and popular music makes a clear and consistent contribution to a social reality in which black[s] are shot by police without provocation, people of color are jailed at rates far exceeding the incarceration rates of white criminals, and candidates win elections by preaching racially coded law-and-order messages. (Yousman, 2003, p. 382)

I postulate that such widespread and uncomfortably popular anti-Black images of Black men around the time of the murder worked to assuage the cognitive dissonance that surrounded the

case. The same way that Blackface justified Jim Crow discrimination and slavery, modern images of threatening Black men work to justify and normalize violence against Black bodies as “natural” (Hill-Collins, 1990). Representation thus has profound power in our socio-historical-political experience. It is necessary both to critique and analyze constructs of Blackness that dominate mass media and pop culture; becoming conscious of the way cultural productions are framed by, and through, White supremacy (Watts & Orbe, 2002) helps us understand how the mass media serve as a system that maintains White supremacy (hooks, 1996). According to Feagin (2006), “another type of intergenerational reproduction and transmission of cultural understandings that sustains systemic racism involves the perpetuation of critical racial images and stereotypes by such cultural institutions as the mass media, which have mostly been controlled generation after generation by Whites in power” (p. 45).

The Black community has historically had little agency in the way our images are represented, and the very real ways that these images affect the Black community from the macro level (institutional) to the micro level (healthy development of self and identity, self-esteem, etc.); (hooks, 1992; Hill-Collins, 1990; Yousman, 2003). Dominant images of Blackness have long been in the control of White elites who have used images to maintain systems of social, economic, and political domination (Feagin, 2006; hooks, 1992; Hill-Collins, 1990). Long before the arrival of settler colonialists in what we now call “America,” White supremacists constructed racialized representations of Blackness and Black people to assert their superiority (hooks, 1992).

“Blackness” is reliant upon essentialized and stereotypical notions that were constructed to affirm White domination over Africans. These notions are both deeply embedded and in the American psyche, institutions, and culture and are continuously exploited to maintain the status quo (Feagin, 2006; hooks, 1992; Youman, 2003). These centuries-old images are propagated contemporarily through mass media, commodification of culture, and spectacular consumption of the “other” (hooks, 1992; Watts & Orbe, 2002). On the surface this may seem innocuous, even

flattering, to the communities being consumed. The spectacular consumption of commodified Black cultural expression appears harmless when one does not understand the deeply embedded politics of representation and how these images are multifariously linked to the systemic oppression that Black American's experience (Yousman, 2003).

Because these images are in fact meant to perpetuate White supremacy, it is no wonder that the consumption of "Blackness" has not resulted in reduced anti-Black prejudice, discrimination, attitudes, habits, feelings, or actions, but in fact it has worked to perpetuate them (Feagin, 2006). While the Black body continues to invoke feelings of fear and danger, this same body is admired and commodified in the music and sports industries (Leonard & King, 2012). As hooks (2006) writes,

One could talk about American mainstream culture as being obsessed with Blackness but it is Blackness primarily in a commodified form that can then be possessed, owned, controlled, and shaped by the consumer...and not with an engagement in Black culture that might require the want to be a participant and therefore to be transformed in some way by what you are consuming. (hooks, *Cultural Criticism*)

Engagement in these images often equates to participation in the negation of "authentic" Black experience (hooks, 1996). These mass-produced images are decontextualized and stripped of authenticity in the process of distribution for mass consumption. Further, these images rely on centuries old racist stereotypes that are still used to justify Black oppression as "U.S. institutions [and culture] have been thoroughly pervaded by enduring racial stereotypes, ideas, images, emotions, proclivities, and practices" (Feagin, 2006, p. 8). Feagin (2006) notes that most White Americans' ideas about race include collections of negative stereotypes concerning African Americans. Racist images such as Blackface are transmitted inter-generationally and become embedded in individual and

collective White consciousness, thus leading to the persistence of systemic racism:

Often, and importantly, the images that White youth consume most voraciously are images of Black violence, Black aggression, and Black misogyny and sexism. These are the very same images that both mainstream conservative politicians and far-right White supremacists invoke to justify regressive social policies or violent reprisals. (Youman, 2003, p. 379)

The racist images do not disappear; Feagin (2006) writes that, “negative stereotypes and images of African Americans and other Americans of color are constantly used, refurbished, played with, amended and passed along millions of White kinship and friendship networks, from one community to the next” (p. 44).

Eating the Other: Performing “Blackness”

While discussing the globalization of Western cultural imperialism and the appropriation of Blackness in Japan, Graburn, Ertl, and Tierney (2008) notes that the acceptance of Black cultural forms “function decoratively to bestow on the user a certain degree of prestige and fashionability, while insuring that the objects of imitation are excluded.” This appropriation benefits non-Black participants by giving them an added “coolness,” “flavor,” or “spice.” Black culture is used as a performative costume, while Black people are systematically and socially punished for their Blackness (Stenberg, 2014). As Black spoken word performer Moise Morancy (2015) remarks in one of his works: “I got my hat to the back, ears pierced, pants saggin’. To you I’m a thug but for Billy it’s ‘just fashion.’” This phenomenon is what Cornel West calls the “Afro-Americanization of White youth,” stating,

The Afro-Americanization of White youth has been more a male than female affair given the prominence of male athletes and cultural weight of male pop artists. This process results in White youth—male and female—imitating and emulating

Black male styles of walking, talking, dressing and gesticulating in relation to others. The irony in our present moment is that just as young Black men are murdered, maimed and imprisoned in record numbers, their styles have become disproportionately influential in shaping popular culture. (West, as cited in Kitwana, 2002)

When Blackness is reduced to racist essentialist notions it can result in Whites accepting the caricatures as truth, and may play a role in the over 3,000 police murders of Black people in past three years alone (Mapping Police Violence, n.d.). The appropriation and spectacular consumption of Black cultural expression leads to racist generalizations and stereotypes of the people being misrepresented (Stenberg, 2014).

So, while a White man dresses in stereotypical Black clothing styles is “just fashion,” that same Black male whom he imitates has to face the consequences of being seen as a “thug.” This is how consumption, commodification, and appropriation become dangerous for the exploited and oppressed community. While many argue that the spectacular consumption and appropriation of Blackness and Black images is “cultural appreciation,” these images do not engage what may be deemed as a Black “reality” and, in fact, celebrate an imagined version of the Black experience (hooks, 1992). “Blackness” has been reduced to a simplistic and condescendingly anti-Black construct, aligned with the interests of a capitalist consumer culture (hooks, 1992; Hill-Collins, 1990; Watts & Orbe, 2002; Yousman, 2003), and shaped not only by capital and market forces, but also by the maintenance of White supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2006). Blackness is capital.

Taking over the Other: Colonizing Blackness

Mass media and images have been, and continue to be, a major part of colonialism. It is necessary to create images that affirm the ideology of domination. Thus, the image of the colonized has remained in the control of the colonizer. It is crucial to recognize that Black people have historically had no power in the way that our bodies are represented and that the constructs

of Blackness have evolved in a centuries long, systematic, and continuous process. Importantly, “from slavery on, White supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination” (hooks, 1992, p. 2). Constructed images of “Blackness” are thus used to propagate and maintain White supremacy (Yousman, 2003).

Images and representation are crucial both to individual and group well-being, self-esteem, and world-view. When the dominating gaze is removed, authentic Black culture can be a point of great transgression and transformation. However, while the dominating, subjugating, and colonizing gaze is present, “Blackness” becomes another object in the perpetuation of domination: “It is conceivable that white youth may become less prejudiced toward individual Blacks because of their appreciation of Black culture, while maintaining a high level of support for the practice and structures of institutional racism, such as unequal education systems, discrimination in housing and employment, repressive policing and criminal sentencing, and so on (Yousman, 2003, p. 387).

Images and representation are a crucial point of political resistance and “unless we transform images of Blackness, of Black people, our ways of looking and our ways of being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation” (hooks, 1992, p. 7). It is of utmost importance that we transform the ways we look at and view Blackness if we hope to heal American culture.

DISCUSSION

How can we view Blackness in a way that does not empower White supremacy? For Black people, or People of Color, creating their own images is not enough. Some People of Color have been indoctrinated to the extent that they can only conceptualize the world through the lens of White supremacy. People that create Black images and Black texts should deeply and critically interrogate the framework from which they are departing, asking what the text communicates about Blackness, whether it challenges anti-Blackness, or how it supports White supremacy. Hooks challenges us to consider that loving Blackness is a political and dangerous

challenge to White supremacist culture (hooks, 1992). It has been suggested that as a Black community we must develop a pedagogy that would allow Black people to engage in their popular culture in a manner that critically reconnects it with its historical, social, and political origins (Haymes, 1997). Detaching Black culture from its foundational contexts prevents it from serving as a functional dialectic to reevaluate the past, and understand the present. This will continue to have consequences for Black cultural identity, as well as for Black resistance.

I neither advocate separating Black culture from outsiders, nor preventing engagement between Black culture and White, but rather call for displacing the colonialist gaze that seeks to reinscribe White supremacy through the spectacular consumption of inauthentic images of Blackness. Consumption of commodified Blackness has not managed to challenge racist institutions on a mass level; therefore, this consumption of Blackness has not benefitted the Black community. The shared cultural space that has been forged through the consumption of Black popular culture could be fertile grounds for transgression beyond the appearances and beyond eating the other:

Thus, although it is possible that White youth involvement in Black popular culture might provide at least some impetus for improved relationships between White and Black youth and, eventually, a challenge to some of the foundational elements of institutional racism, an analysis of this phenomenon as one of commodification and consumption points out that it is equally likely that White desire for, and pleasure from, Black culture might lead to the retrenchment and reinforcement of White supremacy rather than resistance and challenge. A dialectical approach to this issue allows us to understand that these seeming contradictors are actually articulated to one another as part of a greater whole—the continually changing nature of White supremacy in contemporary American culture. (Youman, 2003, p. 388)

We must move *beyond* consumption to action.

CONCLUSION

If the consumption and appropriation of Blackness by non-Blacks truly challenged White supremacy or anti-Blackness, there would logically be no need for movements such as Black Lives Matter. While it is seen as “cool,” “edgy,” transgressive, progressive, and liberal for Whites and non-Black people of color to find enjoyment in Black culture, this enjoyment is not linked to unlearning or interrogating anti-Blackness (hooks, 1992). The images of Blackness that are dominant and popularly consumed are mass-mediated images constructed for consumption and stripped from their original contexts. These images assert White racial superiority and have in consequence not worked to challenge systemic or cultural racism, but instead have historically worked to maintain the status quo. These constructed images work to maintain Blackness as the eternal Other, normalize anti-Blackness, and support institutionalized, systemic, cultural, and individual racism:

By identifying Blacks as others, as eternal outsiders and ultimate strangers, Whites are able to justify the social, political, and economic networks that construct, maintain, and advance White privilege and White power. If Blacks are others, then the insider/outsider structure of American society may be seen as natural and consistent with ideological claims that the U.S. is the home of freedom and equality. If Blacks are others, then they are consigned to outsider status not because of any essential corruption in the structure of our society itself, but because of their natural, eternal, ahistorical status as different. (Yousman, 2003)

The Black community must develop a pedagogy that allows the community to reconnect with our historical, social, and political culture. We must be critical of the images of Blackness that are popularly consumed; it is of utmost importance that we transform the way that Blackness is viewed. Loving Blackness is a political act that can transform the way that we consume Black

images and the way that Blackness, and therefore Black people, are seen. Until then, we will continue to suffer from a collective identity crisis, supported by negative images and representations.

What would America be like if we loved Black people as much as we love Black culture? –Stenberg, 2014

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