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The Gentrification of "Black" in Black Popular Communication in the New Millennium

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This issue of *Popular Communication* features two particularly interesting pieces of scholarship whose salience should be noted in that the authors work expressly to extend our ideational boundaries regarding racial identity—in these two instances, the categories of Blackness and Whiteness. The authors share a common goal, though one taken with great care: to disrupt plebeian notions of what is thought to be essentialized Black cultural forms (e.g., hip-hop culture) by studying what they consider out-of-the-common practices of Blackness. Adopting the "different contexts" modality, one author locates the Black popular within Whiteness to reveal the elasticity of performative Blackness as well as evidence an accessibility to, and even mastery of, Black cultural participation by those outside of the African American race. The other author locates Blackness within "high culture" Black communicative practices and celebrates the fact that the presumed prole core of the Black popular can be elevated to a higher and, therefore, more worthy cultural plane. More, the author characterizes this ascent of Blackness as being especially noteworthy because it is facilitated by a figure believed to be marginalized within Black popular discourses—a member of the Black bourgeoisie.

Gilbert Rodman, in his article "Race …and Other Four Letter Words: Eminem and the Cultural Politics of Authenticity," argues that American mainstream media does not handle race, specifically racial identity politics and racially defined cultural investments, very well. According to Rodman, when presentations of race are placed front and center in media, cultural critics (possibly even those like myself) focus on debates over whether the presentations of race are good or bad, positive or negative. He asserts that critiques of "the bad" presume that some symbolic "good"

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can be attained. To complicate our thinking on race matters, Rodman focuses on Eminem, with his "reverential cultural borrowing" of Black subjectivity and hip-hop culture, to illustrate how the rap star "poses a significant threat to the … fiction that this *thing* we call *race* is a fixed set of natural, discrete, and nonoverlapping categories." An important theme for Rodman is the notion that delimiting specific cultural forms, such as rap music, as being under the purview or ownership of specific racial groups (e.g., African Americans) is foolhardy, false, and even dangerous. Hence, for Rodman

> there's a lot of value to be learned from a figure [Eminem] who manages to blur the lines between Black and White music, Black and White culture, Black and White performance with ease, with talent, and—perhaps most important—with a large dose of humility about his Whiteness.

Erika Molloseau, the second featured author in this issue, in her article "Grant Hill, Postmodern Blackness and Art," presents as part of her thesis that basketball player Grant Hill, a forward for the Orlando Magic, thwarts oft-circulated popular notions of Black masculinity and athleticism. For Molloseau, Hill is a paragon because of his "multidimensionality" as a Black male athlete: He is art collector and exhibitor; he hails from upper middle-class roots and embraces its value system; he displays genteel behaviors both on and off the basketball court. Molloseau maintains that Hill acts as cultural translator, underscoring contradictions within African American communities. Hill sees the admiration by African American communities and dominant society for athletes and entertainers as a contradiction because many should be paying homage, learning about, and appreciating the work and contributions of Black artists.

Molloseau uses Hill's art museum exhibit "Something All Our Own: The Grant Hill Collection of Art" to demonstrate how art by African Americans can be formalized in "high culture" spaces, not just low or folk culture arenas. Molloseau employs Hill as an iconic figure to challenge what she sees as an obsession among Black popular communication practitioners with "am I Black enough for you" authenticity claims that place "real" Blackness in urban places (not museum spaces), in hard "baller" masculinity (not what Molloseau calls the "gentlemanly"), and in the consumption of disposable products such as car rims, "throw-back" jerseys, and bling (not investments in abstract art). In taking this approach, Molloseau critiques the symbolic "bad"—implicitly implicating hip-hop—and posits that there is, indeed, an attainable "good" through Hill.

To be clear, these works are each, in their own right, crucial contributors to inquiries about racial signifying. For the purpose of full disclosure, I even read and commented on early drafts of the Molloseau article. Read together, however, Rodman's and Molloseau's work provide an opportunity for us to consider the potential trends and agendas in race and popular communication scholarship, partic-

ularly as such scholarship intersects with examinations of Blackness, in the dawning years of the 21st century. My thesis is a straightforward one: Within some scholarship and public discourse there is an assumption that the predominant form of Black popular communication resides in hip-hop culture and the more limited gangsta/thug rap, and it is this kind of Black popular communication that most urgently demands our attention and counter-narratives. In privileging a specific form of Black popular communication in this reductive way, neither the integrationist/procultural miscegenation rhetoric purportedly offered up by Eminem, nor the high culture/antigangsta-ism purportedly embodied by Hill help us to get at the diversities and complexities within the Black popular. U.S. mainstream media may be heaping a narrow margin of praise, as Molloseau observes, upon entertainers and athletes; however, this does not mean that our scholarship and public commentary has to respond singularly to that confining vision and, therefore, become myopic in its own right. Should we continue down this path of allowing the Black popular communication scholarly agenda to be informed largely by responses to gangsta rap, a move which is also foolhardy, false, and even dangerous, the great risk is that not only will wider forms of Black popular communication be gentrified, but also eventually that which remains, that which is already discerned as troublesome and deficient, will ultimately be deemed less than worthy of our attention at all.

MYOPIA IN NEW MILLENNIUM BLACK POPULAR COMMUNICATION

In Spike Lee's (2000) film *Bamboozled*, the principle character Pierre Delacroix (neé Peerless Dothan), an African American, Harvard-educated script writer at a predominantly European American-run television network, finds himself at racial odds with his younger, hipper, European American "Senior Vice President of the Entertainment Division" boss, Thomas Dunwitty. Dunwitty, whose corner office is adorned with blown-up action photos of African American athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan, and Mike Tyson, casts off any claims that Delacroix may have to an authentic Black identity due to Delacroix's failure to prize specific popular forms of Black communication. Delacroix cannot identify an athlete in one photo; therefore, he is not Black enough. Delacroix proposes TV scripts that focus on the Black middle class, and those scripts repeatedly get rejected. Neither he, nor his characters, then, are Black enough. Delacroix does not employ a particular Black vernacular that is often heard in mass-mediated, mainstream Black popular communication—a hip-hop–infused slang liberally peppered with *nigger*. Rather, his affect and language is Euro-riche and, therefore, most certainly not Black enough. For these cultural omissions, Delacroix reaps his boss' scorn, as Dunwitty scolds:

> You know, I grew up around Black people my whole life. I mean if the truth be told, I probably know niggers better than you. And don't go getting offended by my use of the quote-unquote *N* word. I've a Black wife and two biracial kids, so I feel I have a right. … Brother man, I'm Blacker than you. I'm keepin' it real. I'm 'bout it, 'bout it. I got the roll. You're just frontin', trying to be White. (Lee)

Later in the film (Lee, 2000), when Delacroix presents Dunwitty with a show that *is* "Black enough," *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, the writer finally receives praise from his boss: "We gonna hit 'em wid da BOMB DIGGITY on dis' one!" However, even this victory is tempered by a Blackness misstep when Delacroix attempts to pitch a setting for the new show. Delacroix proposes a housing project and is summarily shot down. Dunwitty corrects:

> No, no, no, no, no. That's ya' first bad move. That's the problem with everything today. TV, movies, hip-hop, it all takes place in the 'hood and everybody wants to bust a cap in a motherfucker. … That's not what we're gonna do here. … Check this out. *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show* is going to take place on a plantation. Check this out. Every week, these two Alabama porch monkeys, they're gonna make us laugh, they're gonna make us cry. (Lee)

Lee's (2000) vision of the inner workings of network television in *Bamboozled*, alongside his exposure of the troublesome "real" Blackness yardstick, helps to provide a nuanced exploration into the "new millennium" condition of Black popular communication. The *Bamboozled* text not only calls our attention to what has been incorrectly defined as core components of the Black popular today—celebrity, athletes, the comedic, hip-hop, and slang—but it also identifies severe restrictions placed upon Blackness within these already limited definitional confines. An African American invested in "real" Blackness would have known that a series based in a housing project is now cliché and overwrought. The paradox that Lee was trying to reveal is the perception that an authentic Black person would know that there is not one but *two* (!!) locales for the Black experience in media: the Northern ghetto/project/'hood or the Southern rural/shotgun house/"dirty south." As Massood (2003) conceded, "Ironically, the antidote to the hood's ubiquity is a southern rural idyll" (p. 208)

Lee (2000) also wanted us to know that Blackness suffers when it is witnessed through mass mediated presentations, particularly commercial efforts, which offer up a regular diet of banal, stereotypical fare. As Dunwitty proclaims in the film, no "niggers or crackers alike" have an appetite for images of diverse experiences within Blackness, such as the Black middle and upper classes, African Americans in noncomedic roles, or programming that attends smartly to the complexities of race relations. As a result, what is presented for public consumption by media are, for example, troubling television situation comedies such as the project-living

themed *The PJs* or the slave-com *The Secret Diaries of Desmond Pfeiffer*. When these kinds of media offerings are accompanied by keepin'-it-real gangsta/pimp iconography (e.g., Snoop, 50-cent), Black male cool-pose posturing (Kelley, 1997), and diamond-studded images of African American male athletes (e.g., Allen Iverson, Latrell Sprewell), media has seemingly "done its job" in providing a significant peak into Black culture. It is this treatment of the Black popular that gives rise to the Dunwittys of the world, regardless of race, and which so concerned Lee, as well as me.

And for me, this is exactly the rub: that some of our most important new millennium commentaries, be they fictions such as *Bamboozled* or our scholarship, find themselves taking on "here's a stereotype, there's a stereotype" problematics. That is not to say stereotypes are nonexistent and do not demand our critical attention. What I am saying is that we need the *Bamboozled*s *and* we need explorations into the diversity of Black popular artifacts, performances, and practices that get at the enormous heart of Blackness and which do not lend themselves necessarily to dichotomies between negative stereotypes and positive images. For example, Black popular communication topics such as double-dutch jump roping, Black circuses, Black memorabilia, and gospel plays do not immediately lend themselves to good–bad representational queries. Rather, they remind us that the popular is not just about representations but also about "the people"—their lived experiences, their artifacts, and the knowledges they circulate.

Indeed, contemporary, postidentity scholars see issues of representation as far more complex. For example, Acham (2005), in her book *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power*, dismissed a research agenda that languishes within the positive–negative binary. She questioned why, in scholarship, "televisual blackness [can] be so easily reduced to kitsch or seen as negative representations" (p. 3). Instead, her goal was to "rehistoricize, reconsider, and recuperate arenas of black popular [communication] such as television" (p. 2) by rereading television series that under positive–negative scrutiny would not fare well, shows such as *Julia*, which was criticized for being assimilationist (read, not Black enough), or *Good Times*, which was criticized for making an ill-advised turn toward coonery with its focus on the "J. J." character. Arguing that "to dismiss television as a 'vast wasteland' is to ignore the participation and investment of everyday people in this cultural site, different modes of reading a text, and the presence of resistant culture within this mainstream forum" (p. 23), Acham identified and critiqued revolutionary moments of subversive humor, protests, and public proclamations in TV texts and among performers. These cases demonstrate African Americans' endeavors to resist a dominant hegemony of representational racial inferiority.

Gray (2005), in *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*, expressed the belief that new questions regarding Black popular communication will emerge from postidentity scholars who view representation as one

part of, but certainly not the gateway to, inquiries of race in media. So although I espouse examinations that do not attend to Black popular communication through a restricted view, and although Acham prized uncovering moments of resistance in Black popular communication, Gray advanced yet another agenda, noting that scholars often overlook the cultural producers and circulators—media industry. He believed that we should interrogate the role economic structures, such as media conglomerates, play in shaping and confining Black popular communication's production and circulation. More, Gray pushed beyond political-economy critiques, for in this "post–civil rights period of global corporate consolidation," he believed, we are witness to an era producing a new crop of Black image makers with considerable agency, those that "enjoy access to institutional resources, especially forms of legitimization, prestige, and recognition that such institutions bestow" (p. 13).

Assuming Gray (2005) was correct, such a cultural producers' approach works to establish a more expansive core of Black popular communication issues. This means that Eminem can also be viewed as a *product* whose participation in Black popular communication is as much about (a) African American culture producer Dr. "the new Quincy Jones" Dre (who holds extensive writing and production credits on many of Eminem's compact discs [CDs]); (b) Eminem's Interscope (with Shady/Aftermath Records) record-label chief executive officer Jimmy Iovine; and (c) the influence of *XXL* magazine, which is a principle publicity outlet for Interscope artists, as it is about whether Eminem is a good guy in and for hip-hop.

Gray's (2005) agenda, then, is in accord with Molloseau's who puts an examination of Grant Hill as cultural circulator at the center of Black popular communication inquiry. Where Gray and Molloseau differ, however, may be in Molloseau's belief that Hill should be regarded as not just cultural arbiter but also cultural savior.

A REVERSAL OF FORTUNE:
BLACK AS POSITIVE, WHITE AS NEGATIVE

Rodman concedes that even as Eminem is heralded as a rapper who, to paraphrase Lott (1993), engages in a "love" for Blackness rather than a "theft," the social controversies swirling around the entertainer must be addressed. Eminem, as a thug-life–informed rapper, disseminates the requisite gangsta-rap, hate-mongering rhymes. His lyrics reveal raging misogyny—"Some bitch asked for my autograph/ I called her a whore, spit beer in her face and laughed/ I drop bombs like I was in Vietnam/ All bitches is hos, even my stickin'-ass mom" (Eminem, 2000b)—and virulent homophobia—"My words are like a dagger with a jagged edge/ that'll stab you in the head whether you're a fag or lez/ or the homosex, hermaph or a trans-a-vest/ Pants or dress—hate fags? The answer's yes,"

(Eminem, 2000a). Eminem seems to have taken a page from the Death Row Records manual on blurring stage-persona gangsta behaviors with real-life thuggishness (see Harris, 2005), as the rapper has been connected to brawls and lawsuits, and has even been placed on parole for weapons charges.

Eminem does not and cannot fare well representationally, and certainly not as well as a Grant Hill, because White Eminem not only *chooses* to be linked directly with Blackness (as opposed to a Pat Boone's theft) but also opts to be saddled with its seemingly wicked gangsta-rap performance. However, Eminem is able to emerge more cleanly than some, thereby tempering his badness, when he is placed next to other rappers of his genre, particularly African American men. His fans and music critics are quick to point out that although Eminem may refer to women in disparaging terms, he also frequently reveals a tender vulnerability when talking about his love for his daughter Hailie. This is a far cry from the indelible images of the Wu-Tang Clan's infamous member Old Dirty Bastard, on display for MTV cameras, riding around in a limousine visiting welfare offices with his children, collecting their benefits. Eminem may refer to gay men as *faggots*, but he has also sung a live, nationally televised duet with gay pride champion Elton John. More, unlike virtually every other gangsta rapper, Eminem has been diligent in avoiding the obligatory *nigger* on his commercially released CDs. Finally, Eminem is set apart from other hard-lyric rappers in his take on his lower class, "poor White trash," as Eminem calls it, upbringing where he dropped out of high school in the ninth grade and was "beat up, peed on, be on free lunch and change school every three months" (Kim, 2001, p. 3). His rocky childhood and his well-known troubled personal life are not explored by the rapper for their potential relationship to larger sociopolitical failures. This is an omission unlike that of an Ice Cube, who rhymes, "I didn't have no money so now I have to hunch the back like a slave/ That's what be happenin' but whitey says there's no room for the African." In disrupting or avoiding certain kinds of sociopolitical messages, Eminem becomes a pleasingly complex "gangsta with a heart of gold." One way to "read" Eminem, then, is that in the end, in a context where Black (male) bodies are often first judged on the positive–negative scale in their representations of Blackness, Eminem finds himself and his Whiteness uniquely inhabiting an albeit tempered "bad" space often reserved for Black men.

With gangsta rap and its well-publicized problems typically enveloping Black male bodies, Grant Hill's version of Blackness and masculinity appears far more pedestrian and, in turn, positive. Hill, in his distance from, if not overt rejection of, gangsta rap and thug-culture allegiances can *only* be marked as good for Blackness. Whereas Lee (2000) in *Bamboozled* demanded that we confront the racial suppositions that would put a Dunwitty (or an Eminem) on the winning side of Blackness and a Delacroix (or a Hill) on the losing side of keepin'-it-real authenticity, our Black popular communication scholarship asks much less of us. We are

rarely prompted to scrutinize the assumption that Hill's Blackness should naturally be juxtaposed against those that participate in hip-hop.

Hill is easily viewed as something special for and within Blackness. There are no bad-boy quotes to associate with Hill. Far from intimating a bitches-and-hos view of Black women, Hill has gone so far as to participate in a media blitz to discuss not his basketball career, but his wife's courageous battle over multiple sclerosis. Hill's wife Tamia, a celebrity herself, is a rhythm and blues (R&B) singer (not a rapper). Though Hill appears to have the trappings of celeb-athlete, he is instead cast as a model minority. He enjoins himself with high-culture art and brings that art to what we have been lead to believe is the neediest of Black places, the ghetto (Baltimore) or the rural (Durham, NC). Hence, when, as Molloseau indicates, Hill implores his fellow athletes to "do things that are outside of the box," and to participate in activities "that don't fit in with the stereotypical athlete," we are left neither speculating what the "box" or the "stereotype" are, nor questioning why either one is a problem. With his art history degree from Duke University (supported by his Yale University graduate father and Wellesley College alumna mother), Hill is seen as best positioned to bring a "unique" form of Black cultural enlightenment. By contrast, Allen Iverson, Philadelphia 76er and gangsta rapper, having attended Georgetown University for 2 years, appears to have little to offer Blackness on or off the basketball court. For Hill, it would be the likes of Iverson who must find the "confidence" to display a diametric investment and ultimately provide a more propitious contribution to Blackness. In our discourses, specific features of Blackness are increasingly pushed aside for compositions that are seen as bringing renewal to the Black popular and its participants. Such a gentrification of the purported "low" lower class identification such as the 'hood, and lower popular culture forms such as gangsta rap may place African Americans in the double bind of "damned if you do, damned if you don't." If you *don't* enter into hip-hop culture, then you are open to Huxtable-esque criticisms of facilitating modern racism. If you *do* become party to it, it is difficult to emerge unsullied by critics.

BLACK POPULAR COMMUNICATION: FROM BEEFIN' TO POULTRY

My argument is not necessarily "Why can't we all just get along?" or even that contrasting Black popular communication forms against the other is folly. Rather, my position is one that demands we question why Blackness is being pitted against itself in the manner in which it is. Things have turned uglier than the East Coast–West Coast rap wars that cost hip-hop the lives of two of its most prominent entertainers. Martin Kilson, a professor emeritus of government at Harvard University, is a preeminent, prolific scholar who has much to say on the matter of

hip-hop's hold on Blackness. Descriptors such as *grotesque*, *vacuous*, *honors nothing*, *profane*, *crude*, *nihilistic*, *hedonism*, *slap in the face*, *phony*, *pathetic*, *awful*, and *gone wrong* are wed to hip-hop in his critiques. In his widely circulated *The Black Commentator* think piece, "The Pretense of Hip-Hop Black Leadership," Kilson (2003), who self-identifies as of the civil rights generation, took umbrage with what he called post–civil rights era, hip-hop intellectuals who have become "advocates of anti-human and Negro-minstrel skewed dynamics in contemporary African American entertainment" (p. 5). Scholars such as Todd Boyd, a professor of film and television at the University of Southern California, and Michael Eric Dyson, professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Pennsylvania, have sullied themselves, much the same way Eminem brought taint to his own body, by embracing hip-hop. Worse, according to Kilson, this new generation of hip-hop intellectuals is circulating the belief that those of the civil rights era largely espoused a mainstream assimilationist strategy for African Americans. Kilson cited a 2002 interview with Boyd to reveal much of what is wrong with hip-hop and with scholars who embrace it. Kilson quoted Boyd as saying

> The new-school hip-hop generation exists with a mandate to "keep it real"; this has to do with a hardnosed truth about the world and letting the chips fall where they may. There is now a generation of black people in the United States who find the ways of their parents and grandparents inapplicable to their own lives. (p. 3)

To this, Kilson's response was twofold. First, he took on purveyors of hip-hop politics by proclaiming "the fact of the matter is, there's nothing whatever that's seriously radical or progressive about hip-hop ideas and values," with their "slap in the face of the heroism of our ancestors' struggle to smash American slavery and White racism" (p. 3). Next, he took on the "hip-hop worldview," deeming it "nothing other than an updated face on the old-hat, crude, anti-humanistic values of hedonism and materialism" (p. 4).

Kilson (2003) was clearly disheartened by the 'dissing he believes hip-hop–era babies have dished out upon civil rights–era babies. However, Kilson expressed real fear that conservatives with an anti–civil rights agenda for African Americans will turn the words of some in hip-hop culture against itself—against Blackness—to evidence why Blackness and its quest for comeuppance is undeserving. However, the threat to relevancy of Blackness in the new millennium may not be so easily attributed to these generational, ideological beefs from within Blackness, but to external pressures as well.

When the United States took a turn toward health consciousness in the early 1990s, the fast-food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken, in 1991, buried the *fried* in its brand name, opting for *KFC*. Though fried chicken remained the bedrock product of the fast-food chain, and was not eliminated from its menu, marketers wanted to assuage consumers' guilt over eating the restaurant's poultry by at least not forcing

customers to say *fried* when they announced they were going for a bite to eat. In April 2005, KFC restored all of *fried*'s rights and privileges by announcing that the company had erred and was now going to reembrace its core identity—Kentucky *Fried* Chicken—and would do so by opening 50 stores with the old name forthwith.

This new millennium is to Blackness what the 1990s was to fried foods. On August 11, 2005, the 21-year-old influential periodical *Black Issues in Higher Education* sacrificed its core identity in response to a U.S. climate that rejects racial identity politics, deeming it separatist and playing "the [Black] race card." *Black Issues in Higher Education* renamed itself *Diverse* in a move that sounded a bit like Kentucky Fried Chicken's response to dieting fads of the 1990s. *Diverse* editors explained that the renaming was a "necessary progression that reflects the realities of the world we live in today" (Matthews & Cox, 2005). Today, *Diverse* is explicitly embracing the current trend toward an anything-other-than-specifically-Black identity. As Gilroy (1987) would say, in this new millennium, "there ain't no Black in the union jack." However, the editors of *Diverse*, like the marketers of Kentucky Fried Chicken, may be questioning their decision to change their identity in response to the "realities of the day." Alongside *Diverse*'s online special editor's announcement explaining the periodical's "evolving identity," there is a link to a *Diverse* "iPoll" that asks: "Are you worried that with increasing racial and ethnic diversity in American society, African-Americans will have a more difficult time bringing attention to issues rooted in the unique history of Blacks in the United States?" One month after the name change, an overwhelming 62.5% of respondents indicated "yes," they are worried, 31.25% said "no," and 6.25% said they "don't know."

Many may agree that race matters, but Blackness specifically may not be seen as what matters most. In 21st-century racial discourses, Blackness uniquely falls to "race card" dismissals as evidenced by the recent media rejections of Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton in favor of the perceived "race in moderation" political discourses of Barak Obama and Harold Ford, Jr. For example, on Ford, Jr., Gordinier (2004) wrote that according to

> Bill Schneider, the senior political analyst at CNN, 'They expect to hear Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton. This is not Al Sharpton.' If generations of black activists and elected officials … cast themselves as agents of abrasion, lobbying for a fair shake from a system that seemed bent on marginalizing them and their concerns, Harold Ford, Jr. is part of a new generation that calls the system *home*. (p. 130)

Popular communication, in part, is to blame with its overly reductive narrative of Blackness in America. To let popular communication tell it, all we need to know about Blackness can be learned through *Roots* (slavery), *I'll Fly Away* (civil rights movement), *Good Times* (soul era), and *MTV Cribs* (hip-hop); what else is there to

know? In addition, popular communication has said that if we must know something about racial Others, we can now look to so-called model minority groups (Asian Americans) or those with a population growth challenging that of African Americans. Hence, a divisive rhetoric has emerged pitting people of color against each other in a race for attention and mainstream relevancy. Asian Americans, described in popular media as modern-day Horatio Algers, are pitted against Latino/Hispanics and African Americans, and all three are placed in opposition to each other as seen in the following examples:

> By almost any educational measure, the average black or Latino child continues to lag behind her white or Asian counterpart. (Schrag, 2004, p. 41)

> As of last year African Americans' buying power was disproportionately lower than their numbers in the population … . The growth of Asian-American buying power is even more impressive, having risen 35.2% between 2000 and 2004 to 363.2 billion. … Asians' success may stem in large part from the fact that they have attained higher educational levels. ("Diverse Ethnic Groups," 2005, p. 71)

It is within this climate that Elizabeth Martinez, director of the Institute for MultiRacial Justice, in consultation with Phil Hutchings, past chairperson of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and cofounder of the institute, circulated via e-mail and the Internet "An Open Letter to African Americans from Latinos" begging Black and Brown people to not fall for political baiting that could lead to discord between two previously ideologically unified groups:

> The media has been full of it this year, with such headlines as "Hispanics Now Largest Minority," "America's Ethnic Shift," "Latinos Pass Blacks Unless You Count Black Latinos," and "Hispanics Pass Blacks" … we stand fiercely opposed to anyone making those statistics a reason to forget the unique historical experience of African Americans … . We cannot let whatever meager attention has been given to the needs of Black people up to now be diminished by those new statistics. … Those newly announced statistics emphasize difference and pit Brown against Black like athletes racing against each other in the Oppression Olympics. But other numbers show how much we share the same problems of being denied decent life, education, health care and all human rights. As Latinos/as, we are committed to help build alliances against our common enemies. (Martinez, 2003)

The letter is then supported by more than five dozen signatories that make up a who's who list of scholars and educators, activists, publishers, attorneys, executives, entertainers, and so on, of the Latino/a community.

It is within this climate that proposals of "Black" popular communication courses are met with counterproposals for "Race/Ethnicity" in popular communication (with emphases on Latino/Hispanic and Asian American studies). The

counterproposals come not because we necessarily should integrate ethnic studies courses (a course I've had experience teaching) into our curricula, but because suddenly singularly "Black" initiatives, be they courses or periodicals, are out of vogue. It is also within this climate that Whiteness studies are ebbing, and White privilege endures. Indeed, it seems to be sufficient if Blackness is confined in this new millennium to positive–negative representational debates, hip-hop culture, and that which is generally accessible through mainstream media. It is within this climate, according to the Web of Science citation database covering science, social science, and arts and humanities citation indexes, that Eminem appears in wide-ranging journals such as *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *Popular Music and Society*, *Policy Review*, *Library Journal*, *Sight and Sound*, *Entertainment Design*, and *Index on Censorship*, to name a few, whereas NWA; double-dutch; African American/Black-circuses, -quilt making, and -memorabilia; and gospel plays/theatre do not appear once within the selected 35,513,435 data limits (www.isiknowledge.com).

Headline-grabbing events such as hurricanes Katrina and Rita have returned African Americans to the fore of mainstream attention, yet media's own myopia has left the industry ill-equipped to figure how to frame race. We were left with images of scores of bloated African American bodies floating in floodwater, even as news media adhered to an avoidance of showing European American bodies killed in war (e.g., the soldiers being dragged through the streets of Somalia). We were redirected to believe that African Americans in New Orleans were themselves to blame for widespread erroneous reporting by journalists of unverified stories of rapes, murders, and beatings in evacuation centers. And we were asked by news organizations to see African Americans as criminal looters but to view European Americans as victims understandably finding food and other items for mere survival. It is within this racially charged climate that William Bennett, former education secretary in the Reagan administration, proposed not just gentrification, but annihilation:

> I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could, if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every Black baby in this country and your crime rate would go down. That would be an impossible, ridiculous, and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down. (*Media Matters* Exposes, 2005)

Finally, it is within this climate that when hip-hop does attempt political relevancy, its efforts are dismissed. As Chuck D noted in a September 2005 lecture at Eastern Michigan University, Kanye West's use of the word *Black* during a Hurricane Katrina national telethon somehow became a profanity. Indeed, West has in the past rhymed about various sociopolitical affronts to "niggas"; however, when he took a serious turn to proclaim, "George Bush doesn't care about Black people," it became blasphemy. It seems, even when hip-hop tries, it will always be bad.

THE SOLUTION TO NEW MILLENIUM GENTRIFICATION

Gentrification describes a systematic process of displacement. In urban planning, where the concept of gentrification is most germane, it is a process that moves the (often Black and Brown) lower, working class out of their neighborhoods in favor of the "renewing" presence of the White middle class or those citizens who embrace and can put into practice middle-class values. The spatial and cultural interlopers are hailed as affecting good change upon bad, less developed communities and their indigenous residents. What those who see as color and class-renewal benefits miss is that even economically struggling, politically disempowered communities are still communities, ripe with cultural memories and continuing legacies. Even the most disenfranchised have vibrant, productive lived experiences that should be recognized as culturally rich, not necessarily deficient.

In some new millennium Blackness scholarship, the same assumptions that drive urban gentrification may be rearing their head in our writings. Hip-hop need not be compared to cultural forms outside of Blackness by looking to a figure that promises to bring a renewal of racial harmony, not because Eminem, for example, is not worthy of studying, but because to say that this is *the* reason to study Eminem is to overlook the potential and existence of discourses of racial unity from within Blackness. Similarly, the cultural practices of different classes should be comparatively examined, but to argue that a member of a particular class value system, such as a Grant Hill, can bring renewal to those of another devalues the cultural practices of the "other." Simply put, us-versus-them identity politics has always been a tricky proposition; "us is better than them" is a far worse one.

What makes the gentrification of diverse Black experiences unpleasant is that it belittles Black popular communication participants and Black popular communication scholarship audiences. New millennium popular communication is now marked by what media scholar Catherine Squires called the "shuffle generation" (personal communication, September 23, 2005). She was referring to users of iPod-like technology who are empowered to create their own unique cultural experiences by loading a variety of music, podcasts, voice recordings, and the like, and then "shuffling" them to produce an inimitable cultural engagement that likely bursts the seams of genre confines. This means, if my own shuffle can serve as an example, one can move from Cee-lo to Patsy Kline, Kanye West to The Clash, Femi Kuti to Al Green, Mahalia Jackson to NWA. Hence, there is an obvious solution: to take our cues from our shuffled lives by integrating various popular communication sectors into our work.

Eight years ago, Kelley (1998), during an address to the Black Radical Congress regarding our post–civil rights intellectual agenda, proposed a "Black Radical Agenda" that included prisoners' rights, internationalism, workerist movements, and radical Black feminism. In some ways, Kelley's list hardly seems radical. The post–civil rights crisis differs little from the crises before and during

the civil rights era, as Kelley (1998) pointed out: "Poverty, the right to organize, political power, equal rights, jobs, even support for African and Third World liberation movements" have long been on the agenda, and remain there today. Likewise, the Black popular communication program has long included not only representation concerns but also concerns about who has the right to produce and circulate Blackness as a cultural product and with what outcome; the internationalization of Blackness in a global economy; workers' and creators' access to various cultural production sectors; and diverse identity politics issues that merit continued, deepened exploration such as the presence—or the omission—in popular discourses of Black feminist thought, sexual identities, class practices and ideological positionings, religions, and so on. These concerns remain at the top of the Black popular communication agenda in the new millennium right alongside thug-life masculinities, celeb-athletes, high culture/low culture and appropriation debates, and gangsta rap.

What I am proposing is to return the full range of Blackness to the study of Black popular communication, as well as highlight what communication does best—to activate dialogue, information exchange, and understanding about, within, and across cultural investments. This means more fully developing our knowledge of hip-hop, to include that rappers Eminem, Kanye West, Old Dirty Bastard, and even Allen Iverson are sufficiently different in their relationship to said culture; more, that in the new millennium they are not the sum of Blackness issues. This also means improving our understanding by revealing gaps, silences, and areas that have been understudied. For example, Tom Joyner, through his syndicated radio program *The Tom Joyner Morning Show*, has been cited for being a significant outlet for the circulation of African American culture. It is interesting that Joyner focuses on news, current events, voter registration, fund-raising for the Black community (e.g., millions of dollars for historically Black colleges and millions of dollars for the victims of Hurricane Katrina), comedy, and "old school" R&B, but attends minimally to hip-hop generally and virtually not at all to gangsta rap, except to mock its "new school" thuggishness. For his efforts, Joyner was named Person of the Year by *Savoy* magazine and by the African American organization 100 Black Men. He received the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People President's Award and has been bestowed honorary degrees from Hampton University and Central State University, to name just a few awards. Black talk-radio personalities continue to merit our attention.

Tyler Perry, previously living out of his car, has gone on to write, direct, produce, and star in over a half dozen phenomenally popular "gospel plays" that open to standing-room-only, African American crowds in major cities' largest theatres. To the mainstream press (as culled from Rottentomatoes.com), Perry's venture into moviemaking with 2005's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, bringing his stage themes of Christian charity to problems such as infidelity, strained family relationships, and low self-esteem, was no less than dreadful. A *Houston Chronicle* re-

viewer described the film as "torture" (www.rottentomatoes.com). An Efilmcritic.com reviewer blasted Perry's film as an "all-time grand mistake." Even the famed Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* on February 25, 2005 lambasted the effort: "I've been reviewing movies for a long time, and I can't think of one that more dramatically shoots itself in the foot." By March 2, 2005, Ebert had realized that (White) reviewers had underestimated the appeal of Perry and his message:

> Well, now I know who Tyler Perry is. Last Friday I published a negative one-star review of "Diary of a Mad Black Woman," and since then I have received more e-mails than about any review I have ever written, outnumbering "Fahrenheit 9/11"and "Passion of the Christ" put together. … Many of the messages say versions of the same thing: White critics don't get it. We don't know who Tyler Perry is, we have never heard of the millions of dollars his plays have grossed all over America, in theaters, churches, school halls and on DVD, and —most of all— we don't know that characters like his Madea are based on strong black women the writers are all familiar with. To back up a second: "Diary of a Mad Black Woman," which opened Friday and will win the box office contest this week with an estimated gross over $25 million. (p. 57)

Perry; his second film, *Madea's Family Reunion*; and his ninth play, *Madea Goes to Jail*, all seem to merit our attention.

In the end, I do not mean to sound essentialist or separatist in espousing a reawakening of our interest in Blackness broadly, or in talking about a focus on Blackness in terms of resisting displacement. If the 19th and 20th centuries' treatments of Blackness are any indication, the accomplishments of the reconstruction, civil rights, Black power, post–civil rights, and post–soul eras have not been complete enough to warrant a new millennium approach that can afford a preoccupation with a narrow form of Blackness. Diverse Black popular communication topics lead to diverse questions—not just positive or negative representations concerns—around issues of taste, desire, pleasure, economics, leisure, ideology, politics, resistance, participation, and locations such as the Midwest; East, West, and Gulf coasts; the New England states; the U.S. territories; and so on. As long as Blackness is understood within the realm of the symbolic, as Hall (1996) argued, we need to understand in totality the historical, cultural, and institutional sites within which it is produced and circulated. As we move through this new millennium, I wonder what history will ultimately say about the 21st century's Black popular communication scholarly agenda.

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