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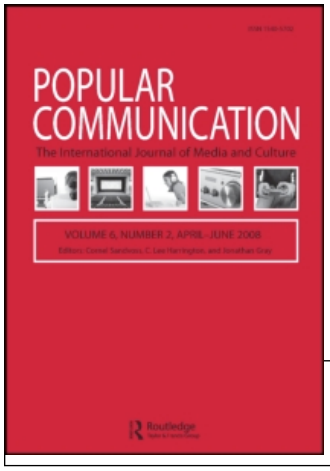

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Elmo Is Black! Black Popular Communication and the Marking and Marketing of Black Identity

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Elmo Is Black! Black Popular Communication and the Marking and Marketing of Black Identity

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In this essay, I seek to thematize and examine the problems that emerge when Black popular communication, such as hip-hop, television programming, blues and jazz, graffiti art, toys, and film, meet national and global market forces. Specifically, I address how Black identity is marked within Black popular communication and how "authenticity" identity politics movements work to maintain Black identity. I also consider what problems emerge, such as cultural appropriations, when forms of Black popular communication are commodified and designed for mass consumption. Finally, I suggest how we can protect Black popular communication from appropriation and consumer culture threats through individual and collective action. I conclude that Black popular communication cannot witness a more democratic treatment of Black identity until we confront market forces that have as its primary goal the exploitation of Black identity for profit.

In January of 2000, I was bombarded by e-mail messages and calls from friends and colleagues, notably all from individuals who identify themselves as members of the African diaspora, excitedly proclaiming an astounding fact—Elmo is Black! More accurately, over the winter break Elmo had suddenly been "outed" as African American in the *New York Times* and my friends, on returning to their campuses, were sharing the news. Some of the messages where satirically sardonic, implicating Elmo in racial "passing," in duping middle-America (read, non-Blacks) for allowing their children to bring a "Black man"/doll into their beds, and in other cunning that afforded Elmo the opportunity to generate huge profits and ultimately, unexpectedly, spring on the world (as, indeed, Elmo is a global commodity) that Black is neither deviant nor deficient, but useful, central, and pos-

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itive. Though these racial claims failed to scrutinize whether the Children's Television Workshop was part of this purported charade and who, exactly, was profiting from the Elmo franchise,[1] this wave of racial interludes around a phylogenetically ambiguous, eunuchized children's idol was the result of the discovery that the voice, character, and movements of Elmo are performed by Kevin Clash, a 39-year-old African American, Baltimore native, and puppeteer.

The implications of this adoption of a puppet into Blackness[2] is an exemplary moment to explore the role contemporary American Black popular communication as a symbolic system plays in marking Black (here, African American) identity. It illustrates developing struggles over the diverse, changing nature of Black identity and the manner in which the "Black" in popular communication gets defined and by whom (i.e., in-group vs. out-group). Additionally, thinking about the popularity of Elmo and the potential impact his "Blackening" has on mass appeal provokes consideration of the commodification of Blackness and the intersections between consumer culture and the making, remaking, and distribution of Blackness in its symbolic forms. The Elmo event also prompts speculation regarding the future social import of Black popular communication as the Black aesthetic is continuously appropriated by mainstream popular communication.

In this essay, I do not seek to provide a historical accounting of the development of Black popular communication (which can include everything from poster art, rap music, and Black situation comedies, to mass-produced toys, books, advertisements, orality, dance, and the like). Rather, I seek to thematize and examine the problems that emerge when Black cultural expression meets national and global market forces. Specifically, I will address the following:

1. The identity debates that emerge, to include who marks Black identity, and how traits of essentialism surface as battles are waged over who defines Black popular communication.

[1]Elmo's performer, Kevin Clash, holds no interest in the puppet or the puppet's character, although he created and developed both. Clash does report that he has been "well taken care of financially" (Steinberg, 1999, p. B2).

[2]Blackness, as a trope, serves as a cultural signifier that acknowledges specific histories, politics, and power relationships within the African diaspora, and generally refers to the meanings and experiences associated with (and assigned to) Black life and culture. Ideally, the term espouses traits of nonessentialism, working to avoid authenticating racial identity; however, a battle continues to reaffirm that Blackness supports a multiplicity of claims, rather than narrowly defining a specific and narrow set of "Black" traits. This is the battle that tends to plague Black popular culture, as some use it as an identity politics vehicle to "keep it real" and thereby celebrate the uniqueness of Black identities (though it opens the cultural to dimensions of separatism). Overall, Blackness demands that we "[make] sense of [it], calling for analyses that theorize about cultural identity, social and political solidarity, and social impacts. Theories of Blackness should acknowledge the oppositional and affirming natures of cultural identities from within and without" (Means Coleman, 2000, p. 5; see also Gray, 1995; Hall, 1989).

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2. The problems that are brought to bare when forms of Black popular communication are commodified and, in some cases (re)designed for mass appeal.
3. The potential for a more democratic space for Black popular communication, away from appropriation and consumer culture threats, through individual or collective human agency.

In his authoritative chapter, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," Stuart Hall (1992) sought to deconstruct this thing we call the "popular"—the "mass-cultural, image-mediated, technological forms" (p. 21), while laying bare the role Black diasporic aesthetics and performatives play within its realm. Hall counseled that as we map the terrain of, specifically American, popular communicative forms[3] and the contributions Black culture make to it, we must be aware of a triumvirate of issues, including

1. American popular communication's own racial and ethnic hierarchies that promote a cultural hegemony in which cultural power and capital oscillate.
2. The role of Black popular communication in providing space for aesthetics linked to Blackness, and in promoting the roots and traditions of discourses that mainstream popular culture may overlook.
3. The idea that as Black popular communication opens its arms to Black cultural expressions and names it "Black,"it runs the risk of homogenizing and essentializing Black experiences.

Hall's (1992) attempt to identify and situate the central debates circulating about Black popular communication and its place in American/African American (as well as technologically globalized) society is an expedient frame for an examination of the hierarchical, spatial, and essentializing circumstances that lead many to Blacken Elmo. It also lends itself to a more general discussion of what popular Black iconography means in today's post-"everything" (modern, industrial, colonial, civil rights movement, etc.) world.[4]

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[3]Popular communicative forms describe popular culture symbol systems that are often mediated by or related to mass media.

[4]Mark Anthony Neal's (2002a) concept of the "post-soul aesthetic" works well to further define the African American post-modern experience. He wrote, "in the post-soul aesthetic I am surmising that there is an aesthetic center within contemporary black popular culture that at various moments considers issues like deindustrialization, desegregation, the corporate annexation of black popular expression, cybernization in the workforce, the globalization of finance and communication, the general commodification of black life and culture, and the proliferation of black 'meta-identities'" (pp. 2–3).

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MAKING SPACE FOR BLACKNESS WITHIN THE POPULAR: RACIAL HIERARCHY AND POWER

It is crucial to understand that the argument here is not that American, mainstream popular communication has no use for Black popular communication, even as it tends to marginalize Blackness and its contributions. The fact remains that Black popular communication is an integral, inseparable part of (American and global) culture. In Brussels, for example, record stores feature "Black music" sections that present the likes of African American rap/hip-hop artists Jay-Z and Outkast. In Jamaica and Ethiopia, Black situation comedies such as *The Cosby Show*, *Family Matters*, and *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* are famously popular. In Japan, the adoption of Black cultural performances such as double-dutch jump roping[5] and hip-hop club dancing has been studied and honed. In return, Japanese anime-style art has been prominently featured in hip-hop magazines like *The Source* and has been wedded with graffiti art. Similarly, hip-hop has crossed the globe and come back again with Black and Chinese cultural influences seen in films such as *Romeo Must Die* starring Chinese actor Jet Li and African American R&B/hip-hop performer Aaliyah. Even Elmo is now a household name in 140 countries.

How contributions from within Blackness or that represent Black culture are named and get talked about within mainstream discourses continue to be problematic. The moniker "Black popular communication" suggests that it represents the communicative (e.g., representations, symbol systems, language) within Blackness. Yet the title belies the question "Who is defining and marking Black popular communication?" hooks (1992) offered that Black popular communication "continues to be a vital location for the dissemination of black thought—shaping and informing our ethics, values, and politics" (p. 51). hooks's definition holds true to the notion that Black popular communication emerges from within Black culture (e.g., "the dissemination of Black thought") while working to create different, unique, and at times oppositional (to the dominant discourse) ideas. However, the "mass, mediated, and technological" that Hall (1992) observed complicates hooks' assumption that Black popular communication comes largely out of Black experiences.

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[5]In 2000, the Japanese team Run-d-Crew traveled to Harlem to compete for and win world championship awards in double-dutch jump-roping, as they jumped to rap and R&B music. Though now largely associated with African American urban youth, Dutch settlers brought double-dutch to New York in the 1600s. After World War II, the jump-rope game, featuring complicated turns, steps, and acrobatics conducted to either rhythmic chants or, typically, Black music, was most often seen played with discarded clothesline in New York City in front of apartment houses. In 1973, New York City police officers developed it as a competitive sport with competitions first held in Harlem. Hip-hop dancing (e.g., breaking, locking, and popping) has proved to be a cultural explosion in Japan thanks to American movie, music, and music video exports. Dubbed Japanese street dance, the moves and dress of African American hip-hop dancers, as seen mostly in music videos, have been adopted and stylized to accommodate Japan's own cultural influences.

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Mass-produced symbols that purport to represent Blackness have, at times, bastardized Black culture. Often, ironically, the very presence of mass-produced Black popular communication results in an erasure or symbolic annihilation of the culture. For example, the history of African American participation in network entertainment television programming shows African Americans often relegated to comedic programming or Black situation comedies (e.g., *Amos 'n' Andy*, *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*). It is the perceived unsaleability (e.g., ratings) of other programming, such as a Black family drama, that is largely attributed to the absence of more diverse Black programming on network television (Means Coleman, 2000). Thus we find Blackness popularized, but in limiting ways, bound by commercial and consumerist constraints that foster definitions that are neither whole, full, nor emergent from within Black culture. As of late, these controversially defined forms have been selected and offered up as uniquely desirable. For example, antique dealers, collectable traders, and online auction sites have chosen available, mass-produced images such as vintage Cream of Wheat print advertisements from periodicals such as *The Saturday Evening Post* as "Black memorabilia" to be held up as unique, prized Black cultural artifacts. By assigning such exchange value to troubling images, it renews its value in the popular and encourages continued production of similar commodities.

Concerns over racial hierarchies, symbolic annihilation, and invisibility within mainstream American popular culture are real ones. The apparent incongruities between African American subjectivities and "othering" symbolic constructions of racial identity are theorized to be the result of what Dates and Barlow (1990) called the "split image." This describes the necessity for marginalized groups to negotiate the subjective, interior self versus that of the imposed, exterior image of the self, an identity often informed by our mediated culture. It is a fissure that is exacerbated, according to the authors, by those at the image-making helm who are outside of investments in Black culture but who work to create symbol systems that define Blackness nonetheless.

From psychoanalytic theory we learn that identification—the process whereby an individual, or subject, takes on "an aspect property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partly, after the model the other provides" (Madan, 1996, p. 30)—in this case, identification with such popular treatments of Blackness, is a pitfall. Be it conscious or unconscious, such "hailing" of the subject, even as the subject resists the constructions, informs how one continues in their "becoming" (Hall, 1996). Fanon (1967) observed the dilemma (calling it a moment of "psychosis") such symbolism can provoke:

> In effect, what happens is this: As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch my hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. … I try then to find value for what is bad—since I have unthinkingly conceded that the black man

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> is the color of evil. In order to terminate this neurotic situation, in which I am compelled to choose an unhealthy, conflictual solution, fed on fantasies, hostile, inhuman in short, I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged around me. (p. 197)

The "Black" in Black popular communication demands that we attend to the symbolic "skin." That is, experiences of being in Black skin, as well as the experience of those who invest in its cultural signifiers. Black popular communication, too, works to create a space (as Fanon [1967] would put it, "rising above the drama") for the popular that emerges from Blackness, sparing it from erasure, dilution, appropriation, and skewing that mainstream popular culture seems, at times, to attach to that which emerges outside of its bounds. In short, naming that which is linked to the Black experience as "Black" serves as an identity politics maneuver where claiming an identity—what it means and how it is produced in the social discourse—particularly an oppressed or marginalized identity, becomes a point of political departure in which the group is mobilized to celebrate the uniqueness and contributory nature of that identity.

However, movements of identity politics must attend to the inherent disparity that such naming may also work to further marginalize the marginalized. Within culture studies, naming increasingly creates division rather than solidarity, as evidenced by those individuals, groups, and their symbols that are associated with mass-, folk-, popular-, high-, or low-culture. Fiske (1987) cautioned that in naming a discourse we run the risk of reinforcing the notion that that which is not named is natural and central and is that which everything else is marked against. In this case, there is popular communication against which Black popular communication is presented as different or dichotomous from. Such naming begs the question "what challenges or marks popular culture?" That is, what is its alternative? Hall (1992), in addressing the "Black" in Black popular culture, raised concerns about its exclusionary, isolating potential. "It sees difference," according to Hall,

> As "their traditions versus ours," not in a positional way, but in a mutually exclusive, autonomous, and self-sufficient one. [Hence] the signifier "black" is torn from its historical, cultural, and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category [that] we valorize. (pp. 29–30)

The essentializing, discriminate nature of such naming practices may be an unintended side effect to a remedy thought to do the exact opposite: hail the historical, cultural, and political within Black popular communication, with the hope of preserving the core "authentic" traditions before appropriations and cross-cultural influences take hold.

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THREATS TO AUTHENTICITY FROM THE MARKETPLACE

The profit-making potential of Black popular communicative artifacts, be they music, (Elmo) dolls, figurines, or even Black expressions as represented through clothing, dance, vernacular, and so on, particularly for those companies and corporations whose interests reside outside of Black identity politics initiatives, proves problematic for those who wish Black popular communication to be a space where Blackness is (re)created or salvaged from mainstream abuses. Instead, Black popular communication's potential as commodity-cum-capital is probably the greatest instigator to appropriation or "crossing-over" assimilationist threats.

Black popular culture has not only been no stranger to these kinds of dominant culture thefts, but there also has been a failure to acknowledge the roots of such cultural icons. Appropriated Black cultural emblems have often been held up as the exemplar of how such thefts translate to a loss of power as "fubu" (for us by us) symbols, often subversive and rebellious to dominant culture, become stylized to ultimately support the dominant status quo.

Black music best illustrates the complexities of appropriation. Indeed, the stories surrounding the threats to Black music are well documented. For example, Leroi Jones in *Blues People* (1963) talked about how big-band jazz became a "peculiarly American expression" by becoming "watered down, slick 'white' commercializations" thanks to Blacks' and non-Blacks' investments in the privileges of the mainstream (p. 176). In particular, Jones lamented the cultural separation and assimilation into dominant, mainstream culture the subversion of big-band jazz brought about for some middle-class Blacks (an example of Fanon's psychosis).

Little Richard, who boasts of being the "architect of rock and roll"[6] has learned to bolster his claim by pointing to a specific moment—the mimicking of the syncopated rhythm of the rail trains that passed by his home when he was a youth—to evidence how it was this unique beat, mixed with Black gospel influences that Roy

[6]Reebee Garofalo (1990), in a 1974 interview with R&B artist Johnny Otis, revealed how the birth of rock and roll was viewed, not from Little Richard's South, but from the West Coast. Otis reported, "In the early forties a hybrid form of music developed on the West coast. What was happening in Chicago was another kind of thing all together. It was all rhythm and blues later, but the Chicago bands, the people that came up from the Delta, came up with harmonicas and guitars—the Muddy Waters and the rest of them. But on the Coast, the people who were there, like myself and Roy Milton, T-Bone Walker, and Joe Liggins and the Honeydrippers, we all had big-band experience. We all thought in terms of big bands, but when it became impossible to maintain a big band and make it work and make a living we all had to break down, and when we broke down, we didn't break down to just a guitar and a rhythm & blues section. We still tried to maintain some of that sound of the jazz bands. We kept maybe a trumpet, a trombone, and saxes—this was a semblance of brass and reeds, and they continued to play the bop and swing riffs. And this superimposed on the country blues and boogie structure to become rhythm & blues. And out of rhythm & blues grew rock and roll" (p. 66).

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Orbison, Elvis Presley, and Jerry Lee Lewis absconded, restylized, and brought to rock and roll. Evidence enough for Little Richard's claim of his crucial contribution to rock and roll may have been Pat Boone's regular "covering" of Little Richard songs (e.g., "Tutti Fruiti" and "Long Tall Sally"), often with the result of Little Richard and Boone's records being released at the same time with the goal of Boone attracting White audiences. Kobena Mercer (1999) saw such aping as cultural violence: "at an emotional level, imitation is not a form of flattery, of reverence or respect. Mimicry is a way in which aggression can be expressed" (p. 2).

Elvis Presley has been cited (as too, have been Eric Clapton, Paul Simon, and Madonna) for being particularly notorious in his imitation of Black music (e.g., Elvis covered Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog" and The Drifter's "Money Honey"). Most confounding, as Eric Lott (1997) detailed, is the rejection of Black Elvis impersonators, even as those who are submerged in Elvis fandom recognize Presley's own Black musical blackface:

> For the black Elvis's scandal also says that the only legitimate crossing over is from white to black—that for a black man to become Elvis is an implicit humiliation or exposure or ironizing of Presley, a telling form of sacrilege. [This] points up an anxiety about the adequacy of Elvis's own impersonation of black cultural practices. (p. 207)

Black Elvises aside, one theory behind such appropriations is the notion that Blackness is infused with identifiable cultural traits in a way that, monolithically, Whiteness does not. In this sense, Whiteness becomes invisible and unscrutinized, but hardly erased. In short, in its normalized position as central, Whiteness is thought to be "all and nothing," hence it turns to "others" for more easily identifiable cultural styles. Recently, bubble-gum boy band N'Sync boasted of securing their "ghetto-pass" with the release of their single "Gone," produced by R&B singer Brian McKnight, which received heavy play on BET. The appropriations and hyper-marketing of groups today may be based on a model that emerged from within Blackness itself—from Berry Gordy and his Motown machine as Neal (2002b) wrote:

> What is significant here is that the corporate annexation of black popular music began precisely at the moment that Motown was witnessing its greatest success marketing and selling black popular music in the form of Michael Jackson and the Jackson Five. It was only natural for corporate entities to attempt to reproduce marketing strategies that helped build a black popular music industry directed largely toward American youth culture. (p. 167)

Interestingly, it is at the moment when the reverse happens—when Black music takes on the music style of, for example, heavy metal and rock (and we should acknowledge the side of the debate that says that metal and punk music are rooted in the Black aesthetic such as Caribbean Ska music), that assigning credit for such

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appropriations becomes eminently important. Roy Orbison, no stranger to Black music appropriations, entered into a high-profile legal battle with the rap group 2 Live Crew over their use of his "Pretty Woman" tracks. In response to occurrences such as the mainstreaming of blues, jazz, and hip-hop culture, a "keepin' it real"—remaining true to one's historical, cultural, and, in the truest sense of the vernacular, racial roots—discourse has emerged that holds up a form of racial authenticity as the yardstick for Blackness and Black popular communication.

"Keepin' it real" is a mantra that comes at a time (post-Black power nationalism/Liberation movement) when the globally commodified condition of Black popular communication is one that runs the risk of dissipation or dilution due to external appropriation/market forces. "Keepin' it real" as an identity politics position relies on an illusory racial prism, co-mingling essentialist, biological racial categories with constructionist cultural claims. It runs the risk of reinforcing the notion that Blacks operate monolithically in American society. It too overlooks the fluidity and diversity within Blackness, as Fusco (1992) observed:

> Not even the social engineering that demands conveniently absolutist, but pseudoscientific, distinctions between black Americans and Caribbean Latinos can completely suppress the history of over a century of cultural and political dialogue between jazz musicians and *soneros*, between Cuban revolutionaries and civil rights leaders, between Young Lords and Black Panthers. Those dialogues resonate in the exchanges between black and Latino rappers who hail from the barrios of New York, Los Angeles, São Paulo, and San Juan, and in the formation of pan-Caribbean syncretism in Brooklyn and the Bronx. (p. 284)

Instead, particular attention is paid to race traitors who "sell out" literally (crossing over to the mainstream for the purposes of power or profit) or ideologically to the dominant culture. In a more idealized sense, such authenticity claims, work to challenge a cultural hegemony (the marketable, mass-mediated definitions of Blackness) that dissolves spaces for Black popular communications that are a part from the dominant, mainstream discourses.

Seeking to measure one's commitment to and entrenchment in Blackness raises obvious questions of who gets to say whom or what is Black enough (e.g., Oprah Winfrey? Tom Joyner? Elmo? Cliff Huxtable?). However, this stance begs another question, that of what exactly is it that marks the "Black" in the popular? How does a Charlie Parker differ from a Sean "P. Diddy" Combs? Manning Marable (1992) may have the answer as he wrote

> Blackness, in purely racial terms, only means belonging to a group of people who have in common a certain skin color and other physical features. In this limited sense, both [Clarence] Thomas and I are 'Black.' But today, this racial identity doesn't tell us anything significant about a person's political beliefs, voting behavior, or cultural values. (p. 295)

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Hence, it is within the ideological that the markings of Blackness seem to reside. P. Diddy's beliefs seem to reside squarely in ostentatious self-promotion and assimilation. P. Diddy has been criticized for hyper-marketing his hip-hop resulting in tremendous popularity with White youth such as the MTV/TRL crowd. He was even disparaged by "keepin' it real" political cartoonist Aaron McGruder for showing off his man-servant, who has such tasks as holding an umbrella over P. Diddy's head to keep the sun off the rap artist while strolling on the beach (see Cornwell & Orbe, 2002). Conversely, Charlie Parker, though not exactly an authenticity purist, as evidenced by his relationship with non-Black women and "uptown" music venues, did little with his art to distance himself from Blackness. Parker, who positioned himself and his music within the jazz underground, found suburbia seeking him for a taste of authentic Black culture, rather than he seeking suburbia.

McLeod (1999) in his article, "Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation" sought to map the range of meanings associated with authenticity. McLeod noted six general "real versus selling out" dimensions. The dichotomies include the following:

- Staying true to yourself versus following mass trends.
- Black versus White.
- Underground versus commercial.
- Hard versus soft (a gender/sex attribute, with "hard" being masculine).
- The street versus the suburbs.
- Old school[7] versus mainstream.

Though "keepin' it real" authenticity can take on a multiplicity of meanings within hip-hop, what seems central is that Blackness is to have overt discursive import. Those who do not invest in such a stance are labeled "sell outs." For example, commercial rapper Will Smith, who has focused his career on mainstream movie making, has been cited by the likes of Spike Lee for selling out in movies like *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, which Lee and other Smith critics (including myself) have colloquially termed, "The Legend of Nigger Vance."

In the end, such claims of authenticity are less about separatism, or "anti-multiculturalism," and more about "recoverable history"—seeking to reclaim and assert lost identities from the past (Woodward, 1997). However, what must be recognized is that, ideally, the valorizing that Black popular communication promotes works to steel Blackness against image-makers (non-Black or Black) who hold what Lipsitz (1998) would call a "possessive investment in Whiteness," that works to set aside or skew Black identity symbols in response to dominant, mainstream expectations.

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[7]Old school pays homage to early break-dancers, rappers, and DJs who didn't see hip-hop as a product or were not wholly concerned with making money.

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THE POTENTIAL FOR HUMAN AGENCY

Increasingly, globalization and corporate or commercial interests in Black popular communication places this cultural discourse in the precarious position of responding defensively to power inequity, stereotypy, and appropriation attacks. Simply, when left up to market dictates, Black popular communication becomes fettered to commodity interests and consumption trends. When subsumed by profit-seeking, and frequently divorced from communal cultural identity practices, though unwieldy, "keepin' it real" authenticity claims rise out of a perceived necessity. It may be argued that market claims and authenticity claims, continue to distract from more racially democratic popular communication moments where the depth, breadth, complexity, and contributions of Blackness are celebrated and noted for their uniqueness. Far less troublesome is when Black popular communication remains communal; however, we must still attend to how to popularize Black discourse, keeping it within Blackness, as well as controlling the discourse when it ventures outside of those experiences.

The cornerstone of a democratic society is the ability for its members to arrive at important decisions through participatory dialogue and negotiation. Extending this notion, the quest for racial democracy describes an open society where the production and circulation of a culture's racial discourse is emergent from those who invest in the identity, who have their say, and through public participation, are heard. Such a democratic moment avails power, to include defining and disseminating power, to those who have long been marginalized. Hence, Black popular communication may be a site where racial democracy likely can be found due to its link to Black cultural traditions, its goal in circulating Black thought, and its "popular" accessibility by the public.

Detangling the stranglehold the market has on Black popular communication, and working toward locating racial democracy within the popular, requires those who are invested in Blackness demand their democratic privileges and work to position themselves to participate in open cultural dialogue. One site where such inclusive dialogues can be had is within new media such as cyberspace (see Means Coleman, in press). Grossman (1995) and Poster (1995) talked about a "cyberdemocracy." Here the Internet can be used to democratize the circulation of cultural discourses by providing decentralized technology that affords its users, contributors, creators, and consumers alike participation in the production and circulation of cultural discourse. To date, the Internet supports a multitude of Web sites catering to African-American popular communication, as well as politics, education, and social issues (e.g., Africana.com, BlackAmericaWeb.com, BlackPlanet.com, EverythingBlack.com). In this regard, the Internet can accommodate the interests of those who wish to remain "underground" and resist market forces; it facilitates those within Blackness to create and circulate Black popular communication, be it for profit, for singularly fubu purposes, or for wider contri-

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butions to mainstream, dominant popular culture (to the extent that the digital divide can be bridged through access to resources such as money, a computer, a modem, phone or cable lines, etc.).

Public action may also be modeled after Napster. Here Black popular communication is created and distributed freely, thereby working to better secure it at the center of popular communication rather than outside its bounds. For example, Web music-sharing networks such as Napster or even more traditional media, such as public-access television, affords those who invest in Blackness the opportunity to circulate Black popular communication forms, targeting audiences with content that they control. On the potentials of sharing, Vaidhyanathan (2001) observed,

> Whole creative movements have established themselves through this process of community building. In the late 1970s … in the Bronx, the hip-hop movement was spreading through a network of fans who would copy and lend tapes of artists like Grandmaster Flash and Kurtis Blow. Free music has always been essential to the discursive communities that fuel the creative process. (p. 180)

Free communication, however, does not preclude one from turning a profit. On the contrary, what the Napster/MP3 model (which is, frankly, akin to radio) has revealed is that fans will continue to buy. Similarly, public access television and the Web have been witness to activism (e.g., popular communication fans have recreated discourses) where a diversity of publics, and their speech, is privileged.

Finally, I have argued in my own research (Means Coleman, in press) that attempting to locate or create more democratic participation in popular communication from within "old" media and its oligopoly, profit-centered, mass-consumption focused structure is an erroneous starting point for human agency. Rather, media-centered grassroots movements should be willing to turn to new or alternate media because, at present, they offer more open participation and are less encumbered by commercial and mass-marketing dictates.

WRAP-UP: BLACK TO THE FUTURE

The future of Black popular communication must be grounded in open, participatory, offensive moments rather than reactionary, defensive strategies that are in response to creations of Black cultural symbols that are outside of the control of Blackness. The Blackening of Elmo, representative of the latter strategy, works symbolically to remind the world of how central and canonical Blackness is and its contributions to popular communication forms. However, like the queering of other children's icons, like Tinky Winky and Bert and Ernie, reclaiming Elmo may result in social backlash that raises questions within dominant discourse about its value, resulting in a rejection of it commercially, thereby rendering it void. It may

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also produce scorn for those who seek to play the identity politics game with that—a red, laughing puppet—which is essentially benign. By Blackening the safe, adorably cuddly Elmo, Blacks have made a purposeful choice in offering up the positive and pure as a counteraction to dominant symbols that tend to diminish Blackness. However, as Neal (2002a) observed, the complexity and richness of Blackness is best displayed when both the positive and negative are tolerated:

> Efforts to create the most "positive" historical read of the black experience and its various icons have often denied a full exploration of the humanity of black folks. … The point here is that such efforts often deny the efforts of black artists and others to tease out radical political and social sensibilities in existing and often problematic (stereotypical) caricatures of black identity. The embrace of the "nigga" by many black youth is but one example of these projects. (p. 9)

Such tolerance requires a faith and confidence in communication structures and in societies to be democratic in the treatment of race, to include an interrogation of racial hierarchies. Until then, Black popular communication will continue to be reduced to essentializing debates over who is Black, often based solely on skin color (e.g., Kevin Clash's black skin) and who within Blackness is real or authentic (is Elmo now more Black than before even as there is no overt investment, from the puppet's performance, in Blackness?). Moreover, although claims of authenticity are unwieldy—hard to pin down and even discriminatory, such as the hard versus soft dichotomy—they do confront market forces that seek to appropriate, or, at worse, exploit Blackness for profit. Elmo creator Kevin Clash's lack of ownership of his puppet's franchise aside, it may be the loss of control—presentation, use, distribution, marketing—that is most devastating to Black popular communication.

Black popular communication is not, by any means, at risk of extinction. As a cultural forum for Blackness, and as a contributor to dominant, mainstream popular communication, Black popular communication will forever remain central to some and important to most. However, the dilemmas the treatment of Black popular communication raises does remind us of the risks we are taking in failing to remedy our racial inequalities and in turning the communal into a commodity. As we continue to mass produce, mass market, and globally disseminate our cultural symbols, it may serve us very well to consider whether there are some benefits to "keepin' it real" versus "sellin' out" our cultures.

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