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ARTICLES*

- 5 Robin R. Means Coleman
All Around the World Same Song: Blackness, Racism, and Popular Culture in China
- 22 Mark Deuze
The Media Logic of Media Work
- 41 John Hatcher
The Routine at The Daily Routine: Exploring the Influence of the Individual in an Age of Media Transformation
- 60 Amani Ismail, Mervat Youssef and Dan Berkowitz
Taking It to the Streets: U.S. Newspaper Discourses on Iraq War Protests
- 81 Leo W. Jeffres, Kimberly Neuendorf, Cheryl Campanella Bracken and David J. Atkin
Untangling Spirals of Silence in a Presidential Election
- 116 Ruben P. Konig, Hans C. Rebers, and Henk Westerik
Television Omnivores? Snob and Slob Taste for Television Programs in the Netherlands in 2000

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ALL AROUND THE WORLD SAME SONG: BLACKNESS, RACISM, AND POPULAR CULTURE IN CHINA

ROBIN R. MEANS COLEMAN

This autoethnographic account of the author's trip across mainland China explores the role popular culture plays in informing racial understandings and intercultural exchanges between two families, one African American and one White American, as well as between Chinese encountered along the journey. Specifically, this autoethnography works to expose moments when popular culture—music, music videos, dance, style, travel brochures, advertisements, film, and broadcast media — prompts cultural misunderstandings and fuels racial stereotypes. This study seeks to complicate extant scholarship on racial representations by considering how such popular culture forms translate in transnational contexts. It is argued here that the global circulation of raced discourses (re)produce complex, hierarchical notions of power and cultural worth.

Keywords: autoethnography, blackness, China, whiteness

“There is no racism in China because there are no Black people.” —A Chengdu University Student quoted in the *Shanghai Star*, April 17, 2003

Mainland China, February 2007

My husband, RC, and I enter a crowded food and sundries market on the rural outskirts of Xi'an. We are entranced by what to us, as urban-dwelling African Americans, is the unfamiliar spectacle of the place—from an elderly man with a small, razor-sharp knife

Robin R. Means Coleman is associate professor of communication studies and director of the Center for AfroAmerican & African Studies (CAAS) at the University of Michigan (rrmc@umich.edu). She thanks Andre Cavalcante, Emily Chivers, Aimee Cox, Helen Ho, and the anonymous reviewers for their very thoughtful feedback on this manuscript.

quickly and methodically cutting the throats of live chickens to sell them under his blood-splattered, blue plastic tarp, to a female adolescent hawking herbal remedies infused with ground “dragon bones.” However, on this day, it is neither the conditions under which chickens are slaughtered, nor the purported remnants of flying dragons that are on exhibition; today, as it has been for much of our stay in China, it is we who are on display. Our entrance into the market is greeted with shouting, pointing, and staring. “What are they saying?” I ask our guide Ting. She hesitates, self-censoring her response. Ting opts to plead ignorance, even as several dozen people begin to press in around us very clearly yelling *something*, something that is not in my Chinese-English dictionary or part of my limited Mandarin vocabulary.

A few dozen women walk behind me, and then reach around to my face to run their fingers quickly across my cheek or to give a quick pull of the tips of my long dreadloc’d hair. After this first, daring wave of curious women examine my Black body, more, and more, and more women rush up, reaching out in the hopes of doing the same—touching and pulling. Absolutely no one touches RC. For whatever reason RC is spared (gender discrimination perhaps?) from this moment of objectification, I feel as though he is the lucky one. Ready to bolt from this claustrophobic place, RC and I look for a way out of the market’s labyrinth. Finally, Ting shoos the women off, putting a stop to the drama. She explains to us that the women are not sure our skin is really our skin. Ting has given up on feigning incomprehension, and she now seems willing to talk about what we are experiencing. But I am unclear as to what she is trying to convey, so I tread carefully: “Do they think I’m dirty?” To this, Ting responds emphatically, “No, no! They think it is like a powder, for girls’ faces. They are seeing...checking the color underneath.” I am still confused about what, exactly, Ting is telling me they are checking for. “Where do they see people with powdered makeup covering their skin?” I ask. And now I have confused Ting with my question. She seeks her own clarification, “Where?” So I try to rephrase, working to bridge our language gap: “Would they have seen someone around here with make-up on her face, but that make-up is covering...covering up what?” Ting’s face moves from confusion to a smile evidencing understanding. She explains, “Yes, covering a different color skin. But not *here* [gesturing around the market]. But, all around, on TV.”

All around, indeed. With Ting barring any other opportunities for such close encounters by the curious, RC and I are able to take in our own unfettered look about the market. Directly before us, there is fodder for cultural misunderstanding in the form of Black Man (formerly, “Darkie”) toothpaste being sold in a stall. The brand name of Hong Kong’s Hazel & Hawley Chemical Company’s “Darkie” toothpaste was only changed after the company was acquired by Colgate in 1985. The Darkie brand’s Al Jolson-inspired logo, a grinning caricature in blackface and wearing a top hat, was as offensive as its name. After buying the company, Colgate [slightly] altered the logo and changed the product’s name to “Darlie,” but only after U.S. civil rights groups protested. However, the Cantonese name - Haak Yahn

Nga Gou or “Black Man Toothpaste” remains for Asian marketing (Kolpakov, V., 2006).¹ [See Figure 1].

In other cities such as Shanghai and Chongqing, RC and I spot posters adorning the storefronts of hip music and video stores, hailing the arrival of The Bubble Sisters’ third CD, “Vol. 3-Dramatic Episode” which was released in China on February 9, 2007. The Korean quartet’s stage act, writes the *Korea Herald*,



Figure 1

includes painting themselves black, donning afros, sticking their lips out in caricature and dancing in pajamas [...] The girls jump around, pulling faces and wearing grotesquely distorted “rubber-lips” makeup that harks back to the White Minstrel comedy acts dominant in 1830’s America, bringing up unsavory issues like slavery, exploitation, racism - issues the West has spent a century trying to bury. To make matters worse, the girls sing about being ugly and not satisfying their true love, creating an unfortunate juxtaposition (Hodges, M., 2003). [See Figure 2].

Ting and I are now close to fully understanding each other, “So, you see people with make-up on to change their skin color on TV? Do you mean on CCTV?” “Yes,” Ting explains, “our people put on make-up to look like you. On singing contests for prizes.”

As RC and I make our way across mainland China—Shanghai, Wuhan, Yishang, along the Yangtze River, Wushan, Fengdu, Chongqing, Xi’an, and Beijing, questions emerge for me about cross-cultural, racial understandings. What meanings do the Chinese bring to, and take away from, their encounters with African Americans? What are the sources of cultural (mis)understanding between the Chinese and African Americans? What role does the transnationalization of popular culture forms such as television, advertising, music and music videos, Internet-circulated discourse, and film play in these understandings? Is cross-cultural (mis)understanding between the Chinese and African Americans markedly different from White Americans’ understanding of African Americans? And, in what ways do African Americans (mis)understand Chinese and White Americans? Here, I draw upon instances of close cross-cultural encounters to highlight the role popular culture plays in interpersonal interactions in China between RC and I, as African Americans, and a family of White Americans, and between some Chinese we meet. To be sure, none of us represent ideal types. Nonetheless, our interactions work as examples to assist in an interrogation of our responses to each other. Unlike recent scholarship that has focused on concerns of the appropriation of (Black) Western culture by some central



Figure 2

Asians (e.g., de Kloet, 2005; Wang, 2007: 35-68), this article explores the meanings assigned to Black, White, American, Chinese, and Asian cultures, in the context of central Asia, by attending to the circulation of popular culture. The goal here is to reveal how popular culture informs how we take, as Crang (1997: 360) posits, “part in the world” rather than popular culture simply “reflecting it.”

I choose to pursue these queries through the methodological lens of autoethnography. Autoethnography, write Ellis and Bochner (2000: 745), is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self [...]” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 746). In autoethnography, with the researcher as subject, it is the researcher’s activities that are under investigation. That researcher as subject “ask[s] their readers to feel the truth of their stories and to become coparticipants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 746). Thus, autoethnography describes a writing practice that is emotional, self-conscious, and first person. In autoethnographies, the personal-cultural-social is brought to bear for reflexive interrogation. It “confronts dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflective response, representational spaces that have marginalized those of us at the borders” (Tierney, 1998: 66).

To begin to answer my questions, I keep a field log of my and RC’s experiences and interactions with some of China’s citizens, as well as with the other foreign travelers, we meet up with during our travels. The field log includes detailed observational and analytical notes, as well as photographs, and other documents. These data reveal a complex array of racial decodings that relate to cross-cultural (mis)understanding which work to either facilitate and/or impede race relations. For example, data evidence themes of ethnocentrism, in which the Chinese are viewed as excessively raced. There are themes of racial symbolic annihilation, in which African Americans represent a cultural lack with their usefulness residing only in their potential to entertain. And, there are themes of what I would call an “embodied Other” where the raced body is seen as an object that houses stereotypes and myths.

ETHNOCENTRISM FROM IOWA TO CHINA

During the tourist “low season” — December through March when the weather ranges across China from cool to brutally frigid—the country’s approximately 22 million annual international visitors² diminishes to a trickle. Massive chartered buses are replaced with Toyota minivans or mid-sized Buick sedans to transport the few foreign tourists to China’s many cultural highlights. Challenges arise, however, if a low season trip (such as ours)

coincides with the Chinese New Year/Spring Festival, a two-week celebration that sees China's major urban areas emptied of its populace as millions of migrant workers return home, often to remote farming villages several days by train away from the cities. With these two February events conspiring, the low season and the arrival of the New Year (the year of the pig), an ostensibly unusual turn of events for logistical expediency by our excursion coordinators put RC and I in the company of the Benson family for parts of our trip. The three Bensons—Brian, Delores, and Paul—hail from Iowa, are White, and all are in their late 60s. Somehow, the Beijing landmark tours RC and I pre-arranged through our travel agency become their itinerary too. As best we can tell, their travel agent worked with a Chinese tour brokerage firm—one that our agency used as well. Their agent likely said, “Don’t worry, we’ll see that you have a good time,” while failing to ask the Bensons about their tastes or for their input into the design of their own travel plan. This is but one of many things that make the Bensons very unhappy in China.

Introducing the Bensons³

Brian and Delores are husband and wife, with four adult children at home in Iowa. The Benson family represents several generations of grain and cattle farmers. Today, the Benson clan primarily produce corn to be converted into ethanol fuel. According to 2000 U.S. census data, Iowa farmers earn an average income of \$41,000. The Benson family farm is not the largest in their area – those would be owned by corporations – but Brian confides that they continue to “do all right. Not the best. But not nearly as bad as some.” He should know their competition well, as their specific community is a small farming village with a population of approximately 230 people representing around 60 families, with some of those 60 interrelated through marriage. According to Delores, their town was 100% White; however, that distinction changed recently with the arrival of a pair of Latino men who are employed as cooks in a local restaurant. On seeing their numbers reduced to 99.13% White with less than 1%, approximately .87%, reporting as non-Black Hispanic,⁴ Delores divulges to us over dinner one evening, “They are starting to move in; even where we live” and that “It has become a big issue.”

Brian and Delores confide to RC and I that they would not even be in China were it not for Brian’s brother Paul, who has financed the entire trip for the trio—“Who’s gonna turn down a free trip!” Brian chuckles. Paul is the self-described “cosmopolitan” of the family. He attended a regional university in Iowa where he completed training as a dentist. Over the years, Paul has accumulated thousands of frequent flyer miles, which, as a widower and not wanting to travel alone, he uses to treat himself and his brother and sister-in-law to trips. Paul crowed about the three days he spent in Macau, or “the Orient” as he called it, three years ago. Paul chose a return visit to China on his travel agent’s recommendation since she

had convinced him he had “not really seen China” during his earlier 72 hour trip to a Macau casino.

Indeed, by comparison, Paul does seem more “cosmopolitan” than Brian and Delores. Paul is embarrassed when his brother and sister-in-law unabashedly proclaim their profound dislike of museums while, too, complaining loudly about how are forced to suffer through lectures by docents. Likewise, this Benson family conversation at a museum gift shop leaves Paul noticeably mortified:

Brian calling out to Delores and Paul: *“Hey, you guys should buy from that little oriental gal over here. You can ‘Jew’ her down.”*

Delores: *“That little oriental gal there?”* [To Paul]: *“I picked up four of those Terra Cotta soldiers for the kids, I didn’t think to ‘Jew’ them.”*

Paul [shooting a furtive glance in my and RC’s direction]: *“Shhhh! You’re talking a little loud.”*

All three Bensons insist on being presented with the English names of our various tour guides. Jia, our Tiananmen Square and Forbidden City lecturer, bristles at this demand — to provide an English name, because his Chinese name is easy to pronounce. Barely containing his contempt for the Bensons, who refuse to even say his name, Jia growls at all of us, “Some disregard Mao today, but he was a great man who fought the Western imperialists!” Jia then seethes to our group, “Just call me Mark!” And the Benson’s do. RC and I are especially hurt that Jia has lumped us in with the Benson’s bad behaviors. When they act out or insult, in our judgment, they soil us too. As a result, at times, we as a tour group appear comically ridiculous as each of us refuses to yield on our ideological entrenchments:

Robin: *“Jia, what is that over there?”*

Paul: *“I’m sorry Mark, we didn’t hear you back here. What did you say that was?”*

While this incident could have easily allowed RC and I to position ourselves as self-righteously enlightened, it worked to do the opposite. We came away feeling burdened. We took it upon ourselves to act as an intermediary between the Bensons and Jia, perhaps with the goal of evidencing to them both the “goodness” of African Americans. In Jia’s presence, we felt the double-consciousness of being both Black, but also of being potentially viewed as the “ugly American.” As such, we took the approach of trying to earn his favor, and to recast Blackness as positive, by behaving as a sensitive cultural brokers.

By contrast, what the Bensons are making plain through their rhetoric and behavior is not only an ethnocentrism—evaluating Chinese cultures as deficient in comparison to their own, and based upon a very limited experiential base—but they are also making obvious their judgment of the Chinese by reacting to what Prashad (2001: 127)⁵ calls a myth of an

“excess of culture.” Discussing their experiences in Iowa, the Bensons present a form of American Whiteness that views Latinos as fraudulent citizens who are lacking because they seemingly have little to contribute to the Benson’s tight-knit community. The Latino men are seen as “takers”—moving in and taking over, thereby consuming without offering anything useful in return. By contrast, where Latinos represent lack to the Bensons, the Chinese represent excess. They are too “little” and too markedly “oriental,” and their language too difficult. Later the Bensons would deem Asian food too “different” to even try to consume, and the Chinese customs too peculiar. For example, Brian refuses to eat when he is supplied with chopsticks; instead he turns boisterous, demanding from restaurant food servers a “U.S. of A., fork”. That the Bensons are on the Chinese’s turf is irrelevant, making their reaction to Chinese culture little different than Whites’ first encounters with Asians in 18th century America. According to Prashad, Whites during this time had a view of themselves as virtuous, but “when the first Asians arrived in the Americas, the White patriarchs found their presence foul [...] they came to be seen as fundamentally alien [and] as oozing cultural sloth mainly through their language, food, and hair” (Prashad, 2001: 127). This view of Asianness means that it can never shed its “Other”. In the Bensons’ view, the Chinese have to find ways to adapt their culture to Western ideals, such as adopting Westernized names and cutlery; but the Chinese, even in China, should not expect accommodations in the reverse.

BET: Black Entertainment Tourists

In 2005, CBC News reported how then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s race was ridiculed by some of China’s educated elite on the Chinese website Sine.com. Some wrote that Rice was, “a black devil,” “a black pig,” “a black whore” and “a black female dog.” While others offered: “You’re not even as good as a black devil, a real waste of a life,” “her brain is blacker than her skin,” “the ugliest woman in the world,” and “she looks like an orangutan, and talks rubbish; send us a beautiful woman next time” (Chao, S.Y., 2005).

In spite of these select racist opinions, I hold out hope for signs of personal syncretism between us and some Chinese. Literature and popular imagery embed in my imagination a connection with the Chinese built around political solidarity. I recite to myself a line from W.E.B. DuBois’ poem “I Sing China: ‘Hail, dark brethren of mine’” (Mullen B. & Watson C., 2005: vii). I allow myself to adopt a naïve, uncomplicated view of a Black and Yellow diaspora formed out of our variously Othered existences; as DuBois described, “we are all—we the Despised and Oppressed—the “niggers” of England and America” (Prashad, V., 2000: 173). Likewise, I recall Richard Wright, who at the 1955 Bandung Conference noted calls for an Asian-African/Yellow-Black alliance with guarded optimism, but did not dispute our common opponent:

Who had thought of organizing such a meeting? And what had these nations in common? Nothing, it seemed to me, but what their past relationship to the Western world had made them feel. This meeting of the rejected was in itself a kind of judgment upon the Western world! (Wright, R., 1995: 12).

Indeed, I suspend my disbelief about racial disharmony in ways I would never do so at home in the States. Discriminatory moments in China get a “pass” from me in large part because the presence of the Bensons serve as a distraction. Theirs is what RC and I call undifferentiated, “one size fits all” bigotry. In short, I come to conclude that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. I engage China with the belief that it can offer me whatever it is I believe I am lacking on the racial solidarity front at home. There is some legitimate reason to believe that China can provide such solidarity. Vice Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China, Wang Guangya’s remarks at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism leaves me optimistic about our same-mindedness:

Colonialism, foreign invasion, slave trade and Apartheid are all typical manifestations of racism, which inflicted untold sufferings on the countries and people across Asia, Africa and Latin America. In Asia, innocent people were trampled underfoot by colonialists and foreign invaders. From the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and from South East Asia to Middle East, none of the cradles of ancient human civilization was spared by the wreckage and destruction. In Africa, the colonialists treaded on every inch of the land under their iron heels, and slave trade was the darkest page written in human history with the blood and tears of countless African sons and daughters. [...] Our forefathers left an old maxim with us, “all men are brothers within the Four Seas.” Though we hail from different parts of the world and vary in race and color, we have similar genomes, and our ideal in pursuit of equality, happiness and peace is the same. (Guangya, W., 2001)

Though we are all “*brothers* within the Four Seas,” in China RC is regarded as a “*brotha*” as defined by and seen in media. RC came to understand that popular culture had, in the *a priori*, tainted for some in China understandings of Black masculinity and its worth.

Blackness According to “Barbershop”

We are just 72 hours from New Year’s Eve in China: it is *the* national holiday. RC and I are excited that we will soon be in Beijing celebrating with over 10 million people. For now, however, we are in Xi’an with Qin (no Bensons on this leg of the trip), a local guide who has spent much of the day leading RC and I on tours of neighborhoods. Qin chats RC up about men’s fashions, about RC’s lack of “bling-bling,” and about the national excitement around the coming Olympics in Beijing. We all get along so splendidly that, though his duties as a hired guide for the day are complete, Qin invites us to dinner at his favorite neighborhood restaurant. Watching Qin and RC hang out and laugh together is the

embodiment of the equality, happiness, and peace Vice Foreign Minister Guangya talked about, and which I had hoped we would experience.

The restaurant Qin has taken us to is really a massive banquet room, and it even has a large stage for people to climb up on for impromptu karaoke performances and dancing. The place is packed with city workers being treated to a holiday feast by their companies' bosses. The employees, lubricated by truly enormous quantities of Chongqing beer, engage in lots of singing, joking, and loud talk. Our meal finished, Qin, RC, and I wind our way past tables crowded with festive diners and move toward the elevator. Unfortunately, the elevator does not come fast enough—not before an inebriated celebrant grabs a digital camera and leaps from his table. The man rushes over to RC and gleefully snaps the flash directly in his face. Then the reveler goes much too far. First in Chinese, then slowly, crudely translating into English, he punctuates each word with hysterical laughter and looks back at his tablemates to see if they are watching—they are. The man attempts to hand RC a coin while telling him, "Get my coat." If there is any doubt that we are mistaken about any part of the man's cruelty, Qin's gasps of horror and his leap into the finally available elevator in an effort to flee the whole scene reveal otherwise. In a controlled, yet scolding voice, RC says directly to the drunk, "You should be ashamed of yourself." It is a purely lucky but brilliant choice of words. Qin tells us later that "losing of face" is one of the worst situations a Chinese person might find oneself in. Because RC has kept steady composure, RC "wins" by being the most respectable. Indeed, in being subjected to RC's measured admonishment the man is instantly sobered and immediately embarrassed. He apologizes profusely, interestingly, not to RC, but to Qin. Later, RC and I would ponder this man's ability to speak directly to RC when RC was seen as the Black buffoon stereotype. When RC presented himself as real, human, and humane, and therefore outside of media's imagistic constraints, the man could no longer communicate with RC.

Those who have gathered at the elevator for a closer look at the action now join us for the ride down. They pepper RC with questions, or rely on Qin to interpret, "Where are you from? Do you speak Chinese? Are you a sports star? A rapper?" RC is often presumed to be an athlete or a rapper, even as his age, weight, and style of dress do not prove to be a signifier for either line of work. Perhaps in some of the Chinese's minds, Black male wealth stereotypically comes from two principle sources of what I call the "Black entertainment economy"⁶—sports or music. Though neither the Bensons' presence, nor that of other White tourists such as those we run into from Australia, raise an eyebrow, we as Black Americans seem to be judged as out of place. It is often assumed that we are in China for some other specific job-related purpose, such as to promote a concert tour or in connection with a sports-marketing event. While walking us back to our hotel, Qin makes sense of our reception in China.

Qin: "So, RC, you are not a rapper, huh? Are you a policeman or something?"

RC: "A policeman? Wow, no. What makes you ask that?"

Qin: *"It's how you handled that man. You were very firm, very calm."*

RC: *"Qin, we've got to know. Everywhere, we've been kinda the center of attention. People taking our pictures...We are kinda getting more attention than most foreigners. Is there an understanding of Black...?"*

Qin [suddenly interrupting]: *"Like Barbershop!"*

RC: *"What???"*

Qin: *"Black. Like Ice Cube. Like 'Barbershop.'" [Plainly] Um hmm. But you were different with that man in the restaurant. He didn't expect you to be like that."*

Robin: *"Wait! You mean to tell me that what he knows about Black folks is from movies like 'Barbershop!?"*

Qin: [Rather matter of fact] *"It's very popular here."*

Robin: *"Oh Lord!" [I proceed to rant] "That man in the restaurant ... when RC didn't act like a servant or grin then people didn't know what to make of him!"*

Qin: *"Um, well, yeah."*

Robin: *"Look. You don't want us foreigners learning about China only through the movies do you?"*

And then Qin offers a measure of confirmation for Park, et. al's (2006: 160) assertion that the naturalization of racial differences through comedic stereotyping discourages critical engagement with racial discourse. Qin puts forth, "Yeah, but Blacks *are* very good with, you know, funny comedy."

Touring Yellow and Black Bodies

RC and I do not want to engage China as tourists in China; rather, we want to be good travelers. The difference is crucial. Vardalos (2003: 2) writes,

The motivations of the tourist are commonly assumed to be self-gratification, hedonism, and escape, while the motivations of the traveler are presented as spiritual rejuvenation, education, and concern about the world and its inhabitants. The tourist's character is viewed as cautious, oblivious to inauthenticity, and unmindful of others, but the traveler's character is presented as adventurous, intelligent, independent, and conscientious.

RC and I are what McKercher, Wong, and Lau (2006: 650) would call the "Tour-taker." A tour-taker, they write, "buys multiple sightseeing, cultural or special interest tours during the visit. [They] describe themselves as being curious about the local culture and interested in developing a deeper understanding [...] purchasing a tour provides them with an opportunity to gain a more authentic, back of the house understanding." Toward this end of "tour-taker," we arrange for a series of tours, sometimes several excursions per city, per day. The Bensons, by Vardalos' definition, are tourists.

The Bensons take photos of that which speaks to their oft-proclaimed theme of “look how poor they are.” Paul snaps a photo of what the Chinese call “bom bom” men — rural farmers that come into the cities to make extra money by toting heavy packages, balanced on a rod of bamboo. On one occasion, Delores kneels down close to the ground to capture a close-up photo of a severely handicapped, blind woman lying in the street. Delores chooses not to leave a coin behind in the woman’s donation cup.

In my view, the Bensons were promised a particular story about China largely through media—tour brochures, textbooks, movies, and fiction literature, and they worked to capture that story through their camera lens. John Urry, in his seminal book *The Tourist Gaze* (2002: 129), explains:

What is sought for in a holiday is a set of photography images, which have already been seen in tour company brochures or on TV programmes. While the tourist is away, this then moves on to a tracking down and capturing of those images for oneself. And it ends up with travellers demonstrating that they really have been there by showing their version of the images that they had seen before they set off.

Our own picture taking focuses on objects—the Great Wall; the Terra Cotta soldiers; mountains, rivers, and boats; a school for the arts in Beijing where actress Gong Li trained; a music school in Shanghai for children learning stringed instruments; towering statues of Buddha all across China; and signs marking the last 75 meters the Yangtze River has to rise before it will completely flood out millions of people to make way for a hydroelectric power station and dam. The photos that I take are to support my pedagogy in my “China Theme Year” course I will teach when I return home. In part, I hope the images I bring back will dispel myths about China as a land of mystical kung-fu fighters and sacrificing geishas. One main “theme” of mine is the globalization of consumerism and commercialism. Neon advertisements for Kentucky Fried Chicken, TDK, Wynn, Casio, Nikon, and Nestle intrigue me. I capture a snapshot of a provocative department store window display for “Tony Wear,” which juxtaposes Chinese men in “before” poses with White men in “after” poses under the tag line, “New life style for you.” RC and I fail to notice that we have taken very few photos of actual people until friends looking at our photos upon our return home point out this fact.

With this being the low season, tourist attractions are not being overrun by foreigners. Rather, many Chinese are using the holiday to visit national landmarks with their families. At different landmark sites, groups of Chinese gather around our guides, smiling approvingly when they are able to detect that a fellow countryperson is displaying an impressive command of the English Language. One of our guides reports the he finds this phenomenon humorous since many of his admirers do not speak English themselves, and have no real idea what is being said. After pride is shown toward the guides, RC and I brace ourselves for what we know is coming next as it happens in location after location:

hundreds, if not thousands, of personal cameras turn away from China's most precious artifacts to capture our image. RC, weary from enduring near constant attention, laments, "I wonder how much of their vacation stories are going to be devoted to us and not to these places?"

By the time we join up with the Bensons, these incidents of being gazed upon are routine for us. But, as it turns out the Bensons have some of the very same questions about Blackness that the Chinese have posed.

They, too, wonder what our proximity to the "Black entertainment economy" is, and are similarly poised to snap our photos, but only if we are people of some popular entertainment importance or notoriety. "No, I don't rap, if that is what you are asking," I respond, when questioned if I am "a rapper performer, or some sort." "But you listen to it," asks Paul accusingly. The Bensons' cameras are lowered. Delores asks what I have done to my hair. I don't suffer Black hair questions well. I choose to ignore her. Undeterred, Delores next questions my age, remarking how my smooth skin in contrast to the grey in my hair belies any guess. By now I have grown annoyed with Delores. And still, I resist the temptation to mischievously provide her with a new stereotype for this one: "Black don't crack." When, under heavy questioning, I finally reveal that I am a professor (of media studies), Paul shows surprise and begins to ponder the information for a moment when, "flash," he stuns me by snapping my photo. In his digital camera I appear after pictures of a Terra Cotta soldier and of a Starbucks in the Forbidden City. I'll never know which he finds more amazing.

I, too, wonder what stories will accompany the images of our Black bodies taken by the Bensons and the Chinese. This concern of embodiment is what Crang (1997) describes as looking upon objects (e.g., bodies) as cultural products without knowing or controlling how that looking will be taken up and used. I also fret over what stories will be attached to the images of the Yellow bodies taken by the Bensons. As far as I can tell, no one—neither us nor the Chinese—have shown much of an interest in capturing the Benson's White bodies.

It may be argued that global media has turned seemingly "exotic" bodies into the familiar; therefore, today, the "body tourist" can be more purposeful in the images that they seek. Such body tourists are not seeking out photo opportunities that have been "set up." For example, during a trip RC and I once took to Jamaica, we saw a lavishly costumed elderly man invite tourists to take his photo for \$10. Rather, body tourists are now purposefully striving to capture candid moments of purported authenticity with little recognition of how their photos may work to supplement (problematic) media representations. As Buzinde et. al (2006: 708) advance, the images we consume before embarking on a new experience often offer an interpretation of the culture that reaffirms stereotypes, and ultimately embeds "myths and expectations that affect how certain groups of people, whether locals or tourists, are perceived." As such, when the raced body becomes the voyage the tourist embarks on, the body becomes the spectacle upon which a particular ideology is inscribed.

CONCLUSION

Autoethnography works to situate encounters and events into contexts of deeper meaning and understanding. It is an endeavor that is “located between the interiority of autobiography and the exteriority of cultural analysis,” and can, at times seem “heroic” to some while “ludicrous” to others (Tedlock, 2000: 455). Indeed, revealing the presumptions and prejudices the three groups displayed during this trip may to some be laudable, and to others nonsensical. Autoethnography boasts a goal of focusing its readers’ attention upon the ethnographic encounter while demanding that readers consider “the complex personal and political dimensions involved in crossing cultural boundaries” (Tedlock, 2000: 466), as well as writing and reporting about such boundaries. As such, regardless of reception, it is my hope that this autoethnography works to encourage debate regarding how researchers can counter criticisms that race has been studied “somewhat blithely” and devoid of experiential and social context (Morris, 2007: 409). Additionally, readers of this study should be aware that detailed analyses of individual cultural specificity remains elusive in research (Hughes and Heuman, 2006: 34). This work also encourages readers to engage with (and in) comparative cultural research that extends beyond binaries such as African American and White American encounters. Certainly, cultural crossings do not happen in a vacuum, rather, as evidenced here and as asserted by Kim, racialization trajectories of groups are “profoundly interrelated” and “mutually constitutive of one another” (1999: 106).

If this autoethnography is any indication, our world seems woefully ill equipped to make sense of the complexities of relationships that come with increasing global, cross-cultural interaction. The Bensons viewed themselves as superior to the Chinese and to African Americans (and, for that matter, Hispanics and Jews). Theirs was a sense of power based on myths of white skin privilege. They are not “raced;” the rest of us are. Though they were visiting the “middle kingdom,” it was the “U.S. of A.” and the English language, which were thought to be central and dominant. Hence, as Dyer (1988: 44) concludes, “white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular,” that is, except better. By engaging China only in ways that work to reaffirm their superiority, the Bensons returned to Iowa without the kinds of alternate visions of their own and others’ culture that come with travel. In leaving China resolute in their dissatisfaction with “Orientals,” the Bensons seem guilty of textbook Edward Said’ist orientalism: “[...] The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony [...] There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness” (1979: 2, 5, 7).

More pointedly, the relationships and degrees of hegemony RC and I are trying to sort through is more complex than Occident vs. Orient. Rather, it is that of a “racial triangle”—Black, White, and Asian—which, too, displays a varied hierarchy of power and privilege. In our unique experience in China, one that should not be construed as universal,

RC and I discovered that we as African Americans possessed no “cultural currency” (Alexander, 2003: 106). Even if we could lay claim to membership in the Black entertainment economy (actually, as a Black woman it was viewed as unlikely I was the entertainer, rather I simply was accompanying RC who was thought to be either a rapper/athlete), such an identity still worked to mark Blackness—its forms of cultural practice, knowledge, history, vernaculars, and modes of social interaction—is at best intriguing, but it does not necessarily increase Blackness’ hierarchical value. The work of scholars such as Bow (2007) complicates this notion of hierarchy by reminding me of the role (skin) colorism plays and how it informs identity investments. While I took to China fantasies of DuBois/Wright/ Guangya-inspired political hybridity, I failed to consider, as Bow would have me to, that some Asians do not construct themselves as “partly colored,” rather they see value in being “almost White” (Bow, 2007: 3). Certainly, there were hints of this phenomenon to be seen in the Tony Wear window display, as well as in advertisements featuring models and products presenting a White European standard of beauty.

Finally, in sorting through the trajectories of race in this Black, Chinese, and White encounter, this autoethnography works to prompt others to interrogate and critique my own flaws. First, I problematically conflated U.S. Chinese history in America as non-White and Other (e.g., the Chinese in Mississippi during Reconstruction) with how mainland Chinese view themselves in China as well as on the global stage. Seeking relationships of solidarity need not be predicated on a group’s identifying as marginalized or experiencing marginalization. The coalition seen between activist groups such as the Black Panther Party, the Red Guard, and the Brown Berets in the 1970s U.S. is as much about location as it is about their own *internally* constructed racial situatedness. Second, on an emotional level, RC and I (perhaps as this study too prominently reveals) often felt that we were Black objects, placed in a position of being acted upon. We were studied, gazed upon, and pigeonholed. But as visitors to China, outsiders really, we felt powerless to flex our muscles too much. This research should encourage readers to theorize strategies for (re)claiming agency for all parties involved in cross-cultural encounters.

As for my mounting concern regarding what popular culture may be communicating about American Blackness, sociologist Herman Gray (2005: 187) is troubled by the preoccupation, by the “investment, overinvestment really, on the part of African American cultural producers, media activists, and scholars in representation as *the* productive site of cultural politics.” Gray is talking directly to me, as I am one of those scholars with “preoccupations with positive and negative representations” (Gray, 2005: 187). Gray argues, in part, that such a preoccupation is excessively local and one should not get entirely caught up with worrying about judging gazes. Touche’ Gray. However, evolving and shifting configurations of diaspora, nation-state, identity, and power, not to the exclusion of a globalization of Westernness, Whiteness, and Western White ideologies, are all changing

as cultural imagery goes global. My charge here is a simple one: there needs to be continued exploration, at a micro level, into the diasporic racial triangle of Asian, Black, and White. It would be productive for such an exploration to focus on how these groups view and relate to one another, as well as how these relationships are predicated on a knowing informed, in part by, popular culture. As communication and transportation technologies make the world more intimate, the translocalization of global racisms (embedding local racisms into global communications) and cultural misunderstandings becomes increasingly problematic.

In 1999, at the MIT “Media in Transition: An International Conference,” Ingrid Volkmer offered that,

[...] growing density and complexity of communication are the sign of a growing “world community.” To understand the new global sphere, its autonomy, independency and its “mediation” will support the transition into a world community in the 21st century.

Indeed, understanding the complexity is what we need. However, understanding isn’t easy. The difficulty of carrying out such cross-cultural communication is revealed through our trip. We felt superior to the Bensons given our perception of their bigotry. The Bensons felt superior to us and to the Chinese based on what they believed was each of our subordinate racial status. The Chinese felt superior to us and seemingly indifferent to White tourists. And along the way RC and I encountered much north (Beijing) versus south (Shanghai) posturing, with southerners saying they were more stylish than northerners, and northerners saying the southerners were not too bright. What — a — mess!

As an urban-dwelling Black woman, scholar and “tour-taker,” my unique experiential, philosophical, and educational positions influenced my readings of the Bensons and the Chinese with whom I interacted. Somehow, I thought these identities would help me to sort out impressive solutions to race relations dilemmas. In fact, there is no happy ending. When we returned home from our trip, all hell had broken loose in the U.S., and my email inbox was full of messages from friends and colleagues with the subject line “have you heard about this?” or “Blacks and Chinese.” While RC and I were away, Kenneth Eng, a (now fired) reporter for *Asian Weekly News* had penned a column entitled, “Why I Hate Blacks.” All around the world same song.

ENDNOTES

1. Note: Kolpakov is a local (Michigan) medical researcher-practitioner.
2. Based on China National Tourist 2006 data from www.cnto.org/chinastats.asp, accessed 21 March 2007.
3. “The Bensons” are a pseudonym. In addition to changing this family’s name, all important identifying facts have been altered to ensure anonymity.

4. This data has been drawn from the 2000 U.S. Census. However, the exact location in which they reside has been altered, and the exact population numbers have been rounded, in an effort to protect the anonymity of the “Bensons.”

5. On this point of “excess of culture,” Prashad cites and draws on the work of historian Robert Lee. See: Lee, R. (1999). *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

6. The concept “entertainment economy” comes from Michael Wolf’s (2003) book, *The Entertainment Economy: How Mega-Media Forces are Transforming our Lives*, published by Three Rivers Press. Wolf describes such an economy as one preoccupied with a battle for celebrity and attention, and as one in which popular entertainment forms are the fastest-growing segments in the economy. According to Wolf, U.S. produced entertainment forms (e.g., mass media, concerts, sporting events) and strategies used to commodify these forms is being replicated throughout the world. I extended Wolf’s concept to Blackness to reveal how entertainment and marketing merge and become culturally defining since Black economic and social success is often displayed through entertainment forms. For example, Shaquille O’Neal success is defined through his participation in entertainment—he is an athlete, a film, reality television, and television commercial star, and a rapper. Relatedly, the Black entertainment economy works to explain how Blacks get their disposable income. While in China, no one questioned how the Bensons’ could afford such a costly trip. However, many people wondered where RC and I got the funds for such travel. Award-winning journalist Cora Daniels in her book, *Ghetto Nation* (2007: 7), published by Doubleday writes of similar travel experiences born out of presumption that her husband (note the exclusion of Black women) is part of the Black entertainment economy: “When my husband and I travel abroad, whether it be to South America, Europe, or the Caribbean, at some point during the trip he will be asked, nicely, respectfully, and will no ill intent, if he is a rapper. How else would a young Black man have cash to spend? [...] Even in Morocco they called my husband Puff Daddy and wanted to buy his “hip-hop” sunglasses right off his face” [...].

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