

## Afterthought

### Who Leads This Dance: Reflecting on the Influence of African Americans on Popular Culture

by Joseph E. Flynn

Popular culture is a complicated and contested space. The politics of representation are always in play, and across the history of popular culture in the United States there has persisted a strained dance between White Americans and African Americans, wherein African Americans produce cultural artifacts and White Americans create spaces for widespread distribution and consumption. It is essential to recognize this relationship, because for a culture to sustain itself, there must also be a consumption of that culture; otherwise, it will fall into its own idiosyncratic obscurity. But this dance of culture is ultimately a vestige of our racial malaise, and the architects of African American culture have always been aware of their positions in that dynamic—barring those who were swindled out of rightful compensation for their creations.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to talk about a pure African American culture in the sense that how we see ourselves is consistently mediated by the representations we see, and individuals either fight to subvert those representations, blindly accept them, or willfully accept them. Moreover, when White Americans begin to embrace and participate in African American cultural artifacts, how do we make sense of that move? For example, last summer I went to the annual Blues and Jazz Fests in Chicago, a city with a high percentage of African Americans. But as I walked through Grant Park and observed the participants, I realized that there were far more White Americans than African Americans in attendance. This raises the question, “What exactly is the influence of African Americans on popular culture?”

As Stuart Hall points out:

What we are talking about is the struggle over cultural hegemony, which is these days waged as much in popular culture as anywhere else... Cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination (that’s not what the term means); it is never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture...<sup>1</sup>

In today’s popular culture landscape, the influence of African Americans is indisputable. Regardless of the media stream, the presence and voices of African Americans can be seen in myriad and powerful ways. For example, Black comedians and social critics like Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, and Dave Chappelle pushed the envelope of subject matter and stage presence for both stand-up and sketch comedy, and challenged the popular American mind to think differently about race and social relations. But in the case of Dave Chappelle, who rescinded a 50-million-dollar deal to continue his groundbreaking and popular show, *The Chappelle Show*, a significant reason for his retreat was that he no longer felt free to make *his* show. Although Comedy Central, the cable channel home of the show, whose parent company is the corporate media conglomerate Viacom, made a great deal of money off Chappelle’s creation, the show’s success would not have been possible without Comedy Central and Viacom’s promotion and the overwhelmingly White audience’s consumption.

That does not eclipse that we are seeing a larger imprint of African American influence on popular culture. Aaron McGruder, through his award-winning comic strip and cartoon, *The Boondocks*, ingeniously challenges stereotypes of African Americans; he injects an acerbic wit into the comics, and his characters force viewers to continuously challenge how race and the assumptions they make about people affect us all, even though the larger message often gets obscured for the uncritical consumer. Tiger Woods and Venus and Serena Williams have changed the face of professional sports and advertising, and the Williams sisters have begun to make inroads into the fashion industry. African American scholars and public intellectuals like Michael Eric Dyson, Mark Lamont Hill, bell hooks, Julianne Malveaux, and Cornel West have influenced popular culture by directly challenging dominant ideologies, eloquently encouraging consumers to reconsider their assumptions and ideals across social, political, spiritual, and cultural subject matter. And writers from Toni Morrison and Alice Walker to E. Lynn Harris and Zane have engaged readers with new approaches to theme, structure, characterization, and storyline.

In spite of these shifts, when we look at the television listings and coming attractions at the movies, we continue to see a dearth of African American representations. However, it can be argued that that trend is gradually shifting, and as more African Americans begin to occupy roles that gatekeep and greenlight programming and distribution, things will change. This harkens back to Stuart Hall’s notion of the perpetual battle for shifting power relations in the popular cultural landscape. Nowhere is this more evident than in hip-hop.

It is not a coincidence that two of the articles in the issue speak directly to hip-hop and the other two challenge the construction of Black masculinity in media. Beginning in the late 1970s, hip-hop bubbled and boiled into an international movement and phenomenon. Now, over thirty years after DJ Kool Herc began spinning parties in the parks of the Bronx, hip-hop can be seen in all areas of media and popular culture across the globe. The most important advancements hip-hop fomented were the reinvention of the mogul and the art of branding.

Fashion and hip-hop have always stood hand in hand: Run-DMC and their Adidas; LL Cool J and his Kangols; b-boys and their Cazal eyewear. But when Russel Simmons, co-founder of the first hip-hop record label, Def Jam, launched his clothing line, Phat Farm, the entire game changed. Around the same time, Ice Cube, former member of rap pioneers NWA, offered a groundbreaking acting turn in the film *Boyz n the Hood* and forever changed the relationship between Hollywood and hip-hop. These artists did not stop there, and with every venture they expanded the place, shape, and impact of hip-hop. Arguably, none is more prolific than hip-hop mogul Jay-Z.

From a humble beginning in the Marcy Projects of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, Jay-Z has risen to the forefront of American business and popular culture. Over the past fifteen years, he has held interests in record companies, movies, fashion, hotels, clubs, beauty products, the New Jersey Nets, and other interests. Jay-Z's voice is so instrumental to popular culture that when he began mentioning the champagne Cristal in his songs, the beverage's market share spiked; then, when the owner of Cristal made a disparaging statement about hip-hop's association with the champagne, Jay-Z called for a boycott that went viral. Jay-Z possesses incredible influence over what popular culture looks like, what is hot and what is not, what sells and what does not. More importantly, he is carving out a position in which he can create and distribute his own cultural artifacts—hence, realigning the power differential in the culture industries.

Jay-Z is not the only hip-hop artist to diversify interests. Sean (Diddy) Combs, Dr. Dre, 50 Cent, Snoop Dogg, Mos Def, Queen Latifah, Master P, Big Boi and Andre 3000 (a.k.a. Outkast), and many others have also diversified their interests to varying degrees across the popular culture horizon. In fact, this is nothing new. James Brown, Chuck Berry, Barry Gordy, and others also had their beginnings in music but expanded their brands to include radio stations, restaurants, concert venues, film production, real estate, and so on. Expanding ventures is about making money as well as proliferating a message and an image. Coupling the two is the seed of power in the culture industries, and although

there continues to be a problem with the misappropriation and co-optation of African American culture by mainstream media, the infiltration of African American entrepreneurship in the guise of hip-hop moguls directly challenges traditional notions of cultural legitimacy, economics, race, place, voice, and hegemony. Now, we see these artists everywhere, and their ideas, beliefs, values, and stories carry great significance. In one instance, they are the Horatio Algiers whom America loves. At another turn, they are consistent reminders of the power and diversity of African American culture. Ultimately, they push the boundaries of our national and racial consciousness, our global image, and our popular culture.

The articles and lesson plans in this special issue speak to the power and beauty of African Americans' popular culture influence. Unfortunately, our space is limited. Clearly, this topic is broad and substantial and this single issue could not come close to fully excavating the influence of African Americans on popular culture, but the articles and lessons contained herein offer teachers ideas to help their students begin to think more critically about the issues raised. As we keep moving forward and popular culture changes, recognizing the influence of African Americans on popular culture will be elemental in creating cultural practices that are fair, equitable, and empowering, so that as our society continues its dance, we all get to take the lead.

#### (Endnotes)

1. Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," in *Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. Raiford Guins and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz (Sage Publications, 2007), 287.



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