Racism and Popular Culture

DANIELLE DIRKS AND JENNIFER C. MUELLER[1]

Exemplifying the ill will, oppression, and domination of blacks by whites, the merchants of popular culture have used these icons to shackle our psyches as deftly as enslavers once used real chains to shackle our bodies.

(Turner, 1994, xv)

To pretend (as we all do from time to time) that film or television, for example, is a neutral vessel, or contentless, mindless, or unpersuasive, is sheer denial. It is, for better and frequently for worse, one of the major forces in the shaping of our national vision, a chief architect of the modern American sense of identity.

(Williams, 1996, 194).

In 2002, the board game Ghettopoly was released, promising "playas" the amusement of "buying stolen properties, pimpin' hoes, building crack houses and projects, paying protection fees, and getting car jacked" (Ghettopoly, 2002). Invoking stereotypical images that implicitly implicate the cultural deficiency of African Americans, the game pieces included a pimp, a hoe, a machine gun, a 40-ounce malt liquor beverage, a marijuana leaf, a basketball, and a piece of crack rock. The game garnered significant positive attention, advertised as a great way to entertain and introduce "homies," coworkers, and children to "ghetto life." Yet, this game must be grasped beyond simple considerations of entertainment or play. Ghettopoly must be added to the wide array of popular culture productions that exist as contemporary reflections of the continual distortion and misappropriation of so-called blackness by dominant groups in the United States. In this paper, we seek to illustrate the many ways in which racist popular culture images persist today, and how their continued existence reflects a white thirst for blackness that seems unquenchable. We adopt the view that marks popular culture as pedagogical and, against the backdrop of this assumption, consider what the racial lessons are that we learn from popular culture.

The concept of race in American social life is a concept under constant contestation, giving it no single fixed meaning in defining racial boundaries, hierarchies, and images

DANIELLE DIRKS • University of Texas at Austin
JENNIFER C. MUELLER • Texas A&M University

(Guerrero, 1993). Despite this fluidity, both historically and today, ideas about race have dictated notions about white superiority as much as they have about black inferiority. Although ideas about race are in their rawest forms fictions of our collective imagination, they have real and meaningful consequences—economic, psychological, and otherwise. Popular culture has had a centuries-old history of communicating racist representations of blackness in Western societies, giving it the power to distort, shape, and create reality, often blurring the lines between reality and fiction (Baudrillard, 1981, 1989; Pieterse, 1992). We argue that these productions do not exist without consequences—they permeate every aspect of our daily lives.

Popular culture has served as part of the ideological and material apparatus of social life for as long as it has existed. Most cultural theorists today disavow the polarities of popular culture as merely pure and innocent entertainment or as an uncontested instrument for executing top-down domination, adopting instead, as Kellner (1995) does, the model of media cultural texts as complex artifacts that embody social and political discourses. The power of popular culture lies in its ability to distort, shape, and produce reality, dictating the ways in which we think, feel, and operate in the social world (Kellner). And while popular culture certainly exists in many ways as a contested terrain in the sense that Kellner asserts, it has been frequently used hegemonically, as an effective pedagogical tool of dominant classes in Western culture, supporting the lessons that keep structural inequalities safely in place (hooks, 1996).

As theorists like Kellner (1995) and Guerrero (1993) have asserted, this is the promise and predicament of popular culture. Contemporary media culture certainly provides a form for the reproduction of power relations based in racism (and classism and sexism), yet its very fluidity and contestation provide some space and resource for struggle and resistance. This is the sole reason why challenging racist representations—in their various recycled and newer transformations—is crucial if we are truly, vigorously devoted to making social change a reality.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the United States, popular culture has assisted in the maintenance of a white supremacist racial hierarchy since its American inception. We provide a brief history of American popular culture's racist past to show that there is nothing creative about present-day images, ideas, or material goods manufactured by today's merchants of culture. Antiblack images are central to our historical analysis because, as Guerrero (1993) has contended, "Blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated order and racial hierarchy of American society" (p. 2). This is certainly not to deny a long history of exploitation and domination for other groups in the United States, particularly among popular culture ideas and images; yet we see antiblack ideology and iconography as structurally embedded in every aspect of American social life—historically and today. In many respects, this ideology contains the racial "yardstick" by which other groups have been and continue to be measured, and elevated or devalued. We hope to show that contemporary popular cultural ideas and images are recycled products and remnants of dominant ideologies past—ideologies that exploited, distorted, and oppressed people of color historically and continue to do so today. As popular culture is constantly reinventing itself under the guise of innovation, a historical understanding of these ideas and images is crucial to deconstructing their continued existence today as simply reformations of such deeply rooted ideologies, rather than truly novel inventions.

Contemptible Collectibles

Although the sale of actual African Americans ended in 1865 with the official demise of the state-supported U.S. slavery system, the consumption of blackness through popular culture ideas, images, and material goods marked an easy, if figurative, transition in the postbellum South. From black-faced caricatures found on postcards, children's toys, and household items to 19th-century minstrelsy, these examples provide only a smattering of the racist icono graphy and ideology found throughout Western culture. As such, images of coons, pickaninnies, mammies, bucks, and Uncle Toms were born, to live out lives distorting the image of black Americans for centuries to come.

In the United States, popular racist stereotypes of the Jim Crow era easily became the faces of mass-produced lawn ornaments, kitchen items, postcards, and children's toys such as noisemakers, dolls, and costumes. Many of the material goods depicting black personas from this time, such as the mammy or pickaninny, have been mistakenly called "Black Americana," suggesting that these items come from the creative endeavors of black Americans themselves. However, this description is as incorrect as it is insulting, leading one author to more accurately describe them as "contemptible collectibles" (Turner, 1994). Perversely, these items have become immensely popular among collectors, with some originals of the era fetching several thousands of dollars apiece.

Manufacturers of everything from coffee, hair products, and detergents plastered the insidious iconography on virtually every type of household product available. Particularly prevalent was the image of the "coon," who, in addition to being depicted as unreliable, lazy, stupid, and child-like, was known for his "quaking," superstitious nature, making him an ideal target. Similar characterizations included the wide-eyed pickaninny and the image of the mammy (Skal, 2002). Mammy—the rotund, smiling, benevolent, uniformed black woman—is by far the most popularly disseminated contemptible collectible of all. Today she continues to happily oversee our pancakes and waffles as Aunt Jemima. For all of her popularity, no other image has been so historically identified as a fiction of white imagination than she. Social historians have pointed out that the existence of any "real" mammies in the antebellum South would have been very few and far between; her being overweight would be equally implausible given the severe rationing of food for slaves (Clinton, 1982; Turner, 1994). Yet the image of this obsequious and docile black woman has survived only to become immortalized through the mass production (and reproduction) of thousands of household and kitchen items made for "sufficiently demented homemakers" (Turner, 42).

Postcards depicting black Americans in various states of childishness and need have provided some of the most interesting snapshots of white thinking and imagination of the time. As if it were an aesthetic rule, adults and children were regularly depicted in print media coupled with watermelons. Even more disturbing is the vast collection of alligator-themed postcards and "artwork" depicting small black children and infants being chased or ready to be devoured by the toothy creatures. Apparently both alligators and their white American counterparts have an insatiable appetite for distorted images of society's most vulnerable members. Consumption here, in the Freudian and an all-too-literal sense, cannot be under- stated among this genre of "memorabilia."

Racist artifacts of the time were not limited to the enjoyment of adults, however, as children's toys represent some of the more pernicious forms of transmission of racist thought and belief. Dress-up items for children allowed them to "play at being a 'Negro'," including wigs, masks, and a "Negro make-up outfit," described in a 1912 Sears display as "the funniest and most laughable outfit ever sold" (Wilkinson, 1974, 105). Indeed, blackface

Halloween masks and costumes are among the numerous racist artifacts created and marketed during the 19th-century Jim Crow era, and popularly collected as Americana memorabilia today (Pilgrim, 2001).

The Only True American Drama

Many 19th-century Americans proudly boasted of minstrelsy as the first distinct form of American entertainment, laying claim to it as "our only original American Institution" (Pilgrim, 2000; Toll, 1974, v). In many respects, it might be considered the earliest form of American popular culture. Despite the romantic sound of such historicized ideas, to most people such entertainment was more simply referred to as "nigger minstrelsy" or "coon shows." The typical minstrel show was put on by a troupe of white men in burnt cork black-face makeup, performing song, dance, and comedy claiming to be authentically "Negro." Such minstrels created extreme caricatures through heavy mocking dialect, bulging eyes, and gaping lips, easily reinforcing and popularizing beliefs that blacks were inherently lazy, dim-witted, subhuman, inferior, and unworthy of integration, to their almost exclusively white audiences (Feagin, 2000; Pilgrim, 2000; Toll, 1974). Minstrel shows swept the nation in the 1840s, even performing for the "Especial Amusement of the President of the United States" (including Abraham Lincoln and John Tyler's inauguration), making them one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the country for over half a century (Roediger, 1991; Toll, 1974).

Toward the later half of the 19th century, black Americans began replacing white minstrels in order to make a living on the stage, blackening their own faces and engaging in similarly exaggerated performances. This tragic and ironic twist greatly enhanced the credibility of minstrel images of black Americans, as white audiences perceived black minstrels as "genuine Negroes" displaying what were simply "natural impulses" (Toll, 1974, 202). Clearly, the degrading and dehumanizing minstrel portrayals set up ideas that were as much about whiteness as blackness, highlighting white virtue against the clear contrast of the inferior black (Feagin, 2000). As Toll explains, characterizations of blacks as indolent, improvident, immature, and unintelligent were "the very antithesis of what white men liked to believe about themselves," and as such served not only as "ego-boasting scapegoats for whites" but also as confirmation that blacks could not play a constructive role in society and should remain segregated (p. 71).

Historical Images Today

In 1987, independent filmmaker Marlon Riggs completed *Ethnic Notions*, an award-winning documentary on contemptible collectible objects and other minstrelsy media with the premise that: "Contained in these cultural images is the history of our national conscience: a conscience striving to reconcile the paradox of racism in a nation founded on human equality—a conscience coping with this profound contradiction through caricature" (*Ethnic Notions*, 1987). It begs an answer to the questions, why did such images exist in the first place? Who made them and why they have enjoyed such immense popularity both historically and continuing into contemporary society? And, what does their continued popularity say about racial relations in the United States today?

During early American history, popular culture reflected and supported an ideology that sought to romanticize conditions of slavery—particularly when its eradication came into focus. As people worked to dismantle the U.S. slavery system, the rise of dehumanizing images such as the contented Sambo and coon served to whitewash the depravity of planta-tion life and ease white consciences. These caricatures mirrored the prevailing belief that slaves were not human, therefore not deserving of full and free citizenship. Over time researchers have assigned additional functions to the continually expanding dehumanizing characterizations, suggesting, for instance, that they assuaged white male economic insecu-rity or created solidarity for the KKK by asserting the image of black male rapist (Gayle, 1976; Guerrero, 1993).

In probing the historical rationales underlying the creation and maintenance of such racist iconography, it is highly significant to consider the continued popularity of their original forms during an age where blacks are no longer slaves or non-citizens. These images continue to be manufactured, and the reproduction and sale of contemptible collectibles are in full swing. Our own eBay search using the terms "nigger" and "mammy" in the early weeks of 2006 found thousands of items—original and reproduction—of jolly nigger banks, mammy salt and pepper shakers, and postcards with watermelons and pickaninnies in every shape and style imaginable. Apparently, as Turner (1994) writes, "We still live in a world eager to develop new reasons and rationales for commodifying African Americans—past and present" (p. 30).

Indeed, other authors have turned to identifying what they consider contemporary examples of recycled racial themes. For instance, Grindstaff (2004) points to day-time talk shows, and Lhamon (1998), hip hop, as examples of modern-day minstrelsy. Similarly, Bogle (2000 [1973]) in tracing black representations in movies from 1903's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through the end of the 20th century, notes the regular resurfacing of the old racial stereotypes among contemporary characters, even in the face of seeming progress.

PRESENT-DAY REALITIES

Despite the advances made during the Civil Rights movement, we live in a post–Civil Rights era where social progress has been co-opted to help deny the existence of racism today. We view contemporary forms of racist popular culture as dangerous not only for the same reasons they were in the past, but also because we live in a slippery, self-congratulatory era where we can easily look back at popular images of the past with such disdain, that it temporarily blinds most from its subtle, yet equally egregious, forms today. Delgado and Stephancic (1992) suggest that "We acquiesce in today's version with little realization that it is wrong, that a later generation will 'How could they?' about us. . . . [Racism] of our own time strikes us, if at all, as unexceptionable, trivial, or well within literary license" (p. 1278).

Yet racism in popular culture has not gone uncontested, and in recent years well-organized and successful protests have risen up in various forms against corporations, athletic organizations, and other purveyors of racialized popular media. However, for as many successful protests, decades-long battles continue today to end the dehumanizing portrayals of marginalized groups in the United States. We begin by focusing on some recent successes gained in fighting against distorted and dangerous images as exemplary of the context of contestation that has and can exist in contemporary media culture. As others have asked, if future generations are to look back on the images and iconography current today, what will they have to say? And what we will say about our own roles in rallying against them?

Contested Images

Corporate entities, in their push for profits, have misappropriated images of the racialized Other for as long as they have existed. Yet these images have not gone uncontested, and social organizing around these movements has been swift and well-organized, despite severe corporate foot dragging in recent decades. One example comes from Frito-Lay's 1967 introduction of the Frito Bandito—a greasy, pudgy character who would steal Anglos' Frito corn chips at gunpoint (Noriega, 2000). The company launched several commercials depicting the corporate mascot singing: "Ayiee, yie-yie-yieeee/I am dee Frito Bandito/I love Frito's Corn Chips/I love dem I do/I love Frito's Corn Chips/I take dem from you."

Chicano groups such as the National Mexican-American Anti-Defamation Committee and Involvement of Mexican-Americans in Gainful Endeavors organized and appealed to Frito-Lay on moral grounds to remove the negative image and replace it with a more positive one. In response, Frito-Lay "sanitized" the *bandito*, deciding to remove his gun and his gold tooth, making him less grimacing—an utter disregard for the moral pleas that the image was damaging to Mexican Americans. It was only after the threat of a class action anti-defamation lawsuit on behalf of the 6.1 million Mexican Americans in the United States at the time that Frito-Lay dropped the corporate mascot, after four years of immense profiteering (Carrillo, 2003; Noriega, 2000).

More recently in 2003 retail giant Abercrombie and Fitch launched a line of t-shirts featuring screen printed images of slant-eyed, smiling caricatures donning rice hats. Shirts with slogans such as "Wong Brothers Laundry Service: Two Wongs Make It White" led to swift online activism and organizing among Asian American and student groups across the United States. In response to the massive protests—both online letter and petition campaigns and on-site protesting across American shopping malls—Abercrombie and Fitch finally agreed to pull the shirts from stores. However, this reluctant action was taken with a weak non-apology by the company spokes- person: "We personally thought Asians would love this T-shirt. We are truly and deeply sorry we've offended people. . . .We never single out any one group to poke fun at. We poke fun at everybody, from women to flight attendants to baggage handlers, to football coaches, to Irish Americans to snow skiers. There's really no group we haven't teased" (Strasburg, 2002). An explanation such as this reveals an utter disregard for persons of Asian descent by attempting to level the racial playing field, effectively dismissing the exploited and often tragic existence of Asian Americans in the United States. By providing a list of groups also allegedly targeted (openly revealing sexist and classist notions), it suggests that any group who takes offense simply cannot take a joke, deflecting any wrongdoing away from the company itself. Yet this attempt at racial innocence became even more thinly veiled in 2005, when the company was ordered to pay $40 million in a class action settlement for the company's widespread racial, ethnic, and gender hiring discrimination (Lieff, Cabraser, Heimann, & Bernstein, 2005).

Some of the most widely contested and long-standing controversies over dehumanizing and degrading images are those surrounding athletic team mascots. American Indians have been widely targeted with the naming of teams, such as the Washington Redskins, Cleveland Indians, and Atlanta Braves. Images of so-called Indianness are inaccurate and inappropriate cultural fictions of the white imagination that are disturbing on several levels. First, these images continue today despite decades-long fights over their use. Second, like blackface, they perpetuate a perverse means by which whites can "play Indian" during halftime spectacles (Deloria, 1998). Third, these images relegate Native Americans to the "mascot slot," denying them a meaningful sociopolitical identity in American public life (Strong, 2005; Trouillot, 1991). Overall, the continued existence of these racist representations—despite other images that have been resisted

and retired—indicate that white America is so deeply invested in these cultural inventions, that they are unconcerned if the images bear any resemblance to reality as long as they can still "participate" in the mythologized dances, rituals, and movements they have come to love so dearly. Whites' resistance reflects an unjust sense of entitlement to "owning" these images, as well as their devotion to profit from the continued use of these racist representations.

Social movements against Native American mascot images remain some of the most visible and arguably most successful examples of American Indian activism and sociocultural resurgence, and over 1,000 mascot images have been retired as a result (King & Springwood, 2001). Much of this protest has invoked comparison among other marginalized groups, stating that groups such as the "Pittsburgh Negroes, the Kansas City Jews, and the San Diego Caucasians" would cause outrage, asking why these logos continue to exist for Native Americans (Strong, 2005, 81). Using this logic, a University of Northern Colorado intramural basketball team called themselves "The Fighting Whities," in protest of a local high school team, The Fighting Reds. In one year, they raised over $100,000 for scholarships for American Indians, selling clothing items with their name and mascot, a 1950s-style caricature of a middle-aged white man in a suit, bearing the phrase "Every thang's gonna be all white!" (Rosenberg, 2002).

Despite these successes, there is clear evidence that the critical evaluation and challenge of racist representations is more often the exception than the rule—both in real life as well as on screen. In the next section, we trace the twisted fate depicted in Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* (2000) and the tumultuous, real-life events leading to the demise of black comedian Dave Chappelle's wildly successful Comedy Central sketch show. We offer this examination because their deep connection provides an excellent example of the boundaries of reality colliding and blurring with fiction.

Satire Appropriated: "Bamboozled" and "Chappelle's Show"

Released in 2000, Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* satirically restages minstrelsy to show that contemporary white America has no interest in seeing black Americans portrayed on television as anything more than buffoons.[2] Lee's film challenges modern racial ideology that encourages the belief that we have progressed far beyond the days of black-faced minstrel shows. The film is posthumously narrated by the main character, Pierre Delacroix, an African American television network executive "buppie" recklessly determined to get fired from his job at a major network where they are looking to improve a ratings slump by creating something "dope, sexy, and funny." Seeking to be laid off, he pitches what he thinks is an outrageously offensive and racist pilot, *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, to his white boss, Thomas Dunwitty. To his surprise, Dunwitty jumps on the idea, quickly turning the pilot into a show about "two real coons" who are "keepin' it real."

Dunwitty, who boasts being blacker than Delacroix because he has an African American wife and two biracial children, sets *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show* in a watermelon (or "nigger apple") patch with a house band, The Alabama Porch Monkeys. The show, like its historical minstrel predecessors, chronicles the dull-witted and unlucky antics of tap-dancing Mantan and his sidekick, Sleep 'n Eat. The live-audience sitcom garners a wildly successful following across America, and by the end of the film, audience members of all races don blackface, exclaiming they are "real niggers." Quickly the satire is lost—if it ever

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[2] For two longer reviews of *Bamboozled*, see Barlowe (2003) and Epp (2003).

existed—and Delacroix is loved by all for his "creative genius" and the fact that "the show can't be racist because he's black." Finally unshackled to laugh freely at some of the most degrading images of black Americans of all time, America becomes obsessed with *Mantan*, delighting in and restaging a nostalgic era where, "a man could be a man, a woman could be a woman, and a nigger knew his place."

Interestingly, before *Bamboozled* had been released, *The New York Times* blocked its ad of a watermelon-eating pickaninny, perhaps over concern that the satire would be lost on its readers. Blending real life with fiction, the allure of *Bamboozled* is its seamless juxtaposition of historical reality with a fictional sociopolitical future fantasy. Weaving images of *Ethnic Notions* (1987) throughout, *Bamboozled* reminds its viewers that these racist icons from the not-so-distant past can, and have been, resurrected with relative ease. Ironically, if not surprisingly, *Bamboozled's* art-imitating-life approach was brought to fruition with the tremendous success of African American comedian Dave Chappelle's Comedy Central Network program, *Chappelle's Show*.

With sketches like "The Racial Draft," "The Niggar Family," and "The Life of Clayton Bigsby" (a blind white supremacist unaware that he is a black man), *Chappelle's Show* tackled American racial issues head-on with satire and humor—enjoying two wildly successful seasons of episodes dealing with race, sex, and celebrity. Having signed a $50-million contract with Comedy Central, fans were shocked when the third season was delayed indefinitely in early 2005 amidst rumors that Chappelle had become drug addicted and mentally unstable. During this time of delay and uncertainty, it became clear how much white America had come to "love"—and need—*Chappelle's Show*. To be sure, *Chappelle's Show* enjoyed a multiracial audience, and white fans were not the only ones bemoaning its absence. Chappelle's smart satire provided black Americans an outlet for expressing common racial frustration. White audiences had an arguably different attraction to the material, however, as the program not only provided white America with the license to play out their black alter egos while exclaiming, "I'm Rick James, bitch!" but also finally created a space where white Americans could safely—and openly—laugh at some of their most inner thoughts on race and racism.[3]

Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising to learn that these were the precise reasons Chappelle had come to question his role in bringing sharp-witted satire into millions of white American homes only to have the message destroyed upon delivery. In a revealing interview done to dismiss rumors of his disappearance, Chappelle described one of his last tapings, where he played the role of a black-faced pixie trying to get other black pixies to act in stereotypical ways. Discussing his reaction to one spectator, a white man laughing too loudly, Chappelle revealed, "When he laughed, it made me uncomfortable. As a matter of fact, that was the last thing I shot . . . because my head almost exploded" (Farley, 2005).

Comedy Central and Chappelle's long-time, white writing partner, Neal Brennan, failed to understand the underlying reasons for concern over how the show was being received. Brennan said, "We'd write it. He'd love it, say, 'I can't wait to do it'. We'd shoot it, and then at some point he'd start saying, 'This sketch is racist, and I don't want this on the air'.

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[3] This quote is taken from the sketch, *Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories*, "In the first (and easily the most popular sketch in the show so far—one that catapulted Chappelle to the level of phenomenon within days after airing), Charlie Murphy (Eddie Murphy's real-life brother) recounts supposed altercations between himself and the late funk musician Rick James, which took place during the height of his popularity in the early 1980s. Chappelle intersperses Murphy's retelling of his story with reenacted excerpts in which Chappelle plays the young Rick James and Murphy plays his younger self" (Wikipedia, 2005).

And I was like, 'You like this sketch. What do you mean?' There was this confusing contradictory thing: he was calling his own writing racist." Similar to the fate of *Bamboozled's* Delacroix, white America renders black artists incapable of determining the artistic or problematic merits of their own work. White America takes on a paternalistic role in deciding what is racist and not and are least likely to make these types of judgments fairly and without their own best interests—psychological or economic—at heart. The fictional Delacroix and the real Dave Chappelle both clearly came to understand the difficult lesson pinpointed by critical film analyst, Armond White (1995): "A Black filmmaker can take nothing for granted" (p. 62).

To be sure, this lesson extends to people of color in most if not all genres of popular media production. And ultimately, as Chappelle himself noted, in the multinational media outlet, those not willing to tow the line are replaceable when it is the message, and perhaps more importantly, the dollar hanging in the balance. Reflecting on the end of the second season, the actor portended his own fate, "I was replaceable. I'm still replaceable now. That's what's so crazy about show business" (Chaney, 2005). In *Bamboozled*, when Mantan and Sleep n' Eat finally decide to walk away from the degrading show, their characters are quickly replaced by another desperate actor waiting in the wings, Honey Cut. Comedy Central, too, has attempted to fill the gap left by Chappelle with a new show, *Mind of Mencia*. This program features Latino comic Carlos Mencia, who shares his own brand of racial humor with the Comedy Central audience. As the show's Web page promises, consumers can "enter Carlos Mencia's mind and immerse themselves in his unique, unflinching take on the world." While *Mind of Mencia* attempts to work within the racial satire formula that made Chappelle famous, its execution is much less analytical and nuanced, relying on blatant stereotypes to make fun of everyone from Mexican immigrants to the disabled. And, indeed, this show appeals to the fans of *Chappelle* who missed the point of his smart satire.

Beyond *Mencia*, at the time of this writing, Comedy Central had promised its viewers a third season of *Chappelle's Show*—with or without Chappelle (who traditionally introduced each show to a live audience following a monologue), highlighting yet again the economic interests at stake. Literally scrapping together pieces from unused filming from the previous two seasons, the network is giving the show a life of its own to feed the Chappelle-hungry white audiences. Here, we see the fates of *Mantan* and *Chappelle's Show* end the same: the show taking on a life of its own, supported only by a white thirst for the laughter and the expense at which it tolls black Americans in real life, even in the absence of its creators. With or without Chappelle, it appears as if he will be just fine, reflecting, "I want to make sure I'm *dancing and not shuffling*. . . .Your soul is priceless" (Farley, 2005).

Addressing Race in Film

Analysts like Bogle (2000 [1973]), Kellner (1995), Vera and Gordon (2003), White (1995), and others have each taken on the important task of critically addressing the varied ways in which race is portrayed, often problematically, in the popular media of film. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to recite their important contributions here, we wish to consider two very recent examples of race in film that present arguably new formats for conveying recycled ideas. For many years following the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s, a politically correct discourse pushed frank talk about race into the corners of popular culture. This was precisely what made the classic *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*? (1967) such a seemingly groundbreaking work for its time. In many respects, and as *Chappelle's Show*

demonstrated for TV media, it appears that we have moved into a new post–Civil Rights era where it has become fashionable to talk about race, as a more "genuine" proof that we are a progressive society. In this way, 2005's feature film *Crash* is for movies what *Chappelle's Show* is for television.

The oscar award-winning motion picture drama *Crash* (2005) was hailed by critics and audiences alike for its seemingly forthright treatment of race in America. It marked itself unafraid to take on the explicit bigotry of whites, from the heinous abuses of a racist white cop to the purse-clutching prejudices of a wealthy white woman. Perhaps more importantly, however, was *Crash's* seeming equal-opportunity-racism message—not only were the white characters regular espousers of racist dialogue, but the many characters of color were as well. Nearly all characters in this movie, including African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans, participated in interpersonal interactions that are traditionally labeled racist. The net effect is a leveling of the racial playing field. White moviegoers certainly made uncomfortable by the white characters' forthrightness with their prejudices can be comforted in the notion that racism is not a white problem, but rather a human problem. We all must fight against our tendencies to stereotype—whites are no longer the lonely oppressors, but rather engaged in a common struggle against the detached evil of racism.

While *Crash* undoubtedly addresses race in a more candid way than is traditionally done in Hollywood, it is precisely its claim of being progressive that marks it dangerous. What appears to be an enlightened take is in many respects a new form of whitewashing. Liberal whites, in particular, will feel validated by their brave willingness to face the uncomfortable. In another 2005 film, we see the same ideas offered through humor. The remake of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), offers a racial role reversal in *Guess Who*. Similar to its predecessor, *Guess Who* portrays a middle-class black family unwilling to accept their daughter's white boyfriend.

Laughter is the vehicle that makes this film—and its messages about race—appear innocuous at best, hardly as controversial as its predecessor. Yet, with the portrayal of a black father unwittingly prejudiced against a white boyfriend, it levels the racial playing field—teaching us that black people are just as racist and prejudiced as white people, a problematic message that resonates well among those who believe that "reverse discrimination" and "reverse racism" are alive and well. Here, historical issues regarding racism are shallowly presented and go unchallenged (Vera & Gordon, 2005). Films like *Crash* and *Guess Who* that focus on interpersonal interactions, and present equal-opportunity-racism themes, effectively dismiss the long, structured, systemic legacy of white supremacy in the United States. These new forms of erasure make certain histories—and people—invisible, and this is particularly problematic for the future of racial relations not only in the United States, but globally as well.

Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something . . .

Under critical historical examination, images of "blackness" found in popular culture today have shifted very little from their historical counterparts. Yet, as Patricia Hill Collins (2004) explains, "In modern America, where community institutions of all sorts have eroded, popular culture has increased in importance as a source of information and ideas" (p. 121). This is particularly problematic for black American youth, as popular culture has come to authoritatively fill the void where other institutions that could "help them navigate the challenges of social inequality" are beginning to disappear (p. 121).

Although whites have appropriated black popular culture throughout history, in recent decades it has reached new heights of global commodification—circulating problematic ideas about race, class, gender, and sexuality domestically and globally. Black women's roles in popular culture have been limited to mammies, matriarchs, jezebels, or welfare queens, yet we have seen these images being repackaged for contemporary consumption and global exportation (Collins, 2001). Contemporary hip hop portrays black women—lyrically and visually—as golddiggers and sexualized bitches who like to "get a freak on," an updated form of the jezebel (Collins, 2004).

Sexualized images of black men have also been repackaged for contemporary popular consumption as well, being touted as a way of life for many black American young men. bell hooks (2004) writes that, "Gangsta culture is the essence of patriarchal masculinity. Popular culture tells young black males that only the predator will survive" (p. 27). Today's *criminal-blackman* is not much different from the historical stereotype of bucks who are "always big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh" (Bogle, 2000 [1973], 13; Russell, 2001). Currently, sexualized images of black femininity and black masculinity have become highly marketable yet remain historically rooted in an intersectional racialized sexism. "These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of every-day life" (Collins, 2001, 69). Such lessons are not only learned all too well domestically, but globally as well, with their continued popularity and exportation.

THE FUTURE OF RACISM
AND POPULAR CULTURE

Pieterse (1992) tells us, "The racism that [has] developed is not an American or European one, but a Western one" (p. 9). With the global exportation of Western popular culture, it is no surprise that racist Western iconography and ideology have enjoyed immense popularity as well. The Hollywood film industry is a prime example of this problematic globalization of images, with U.S. studios controlling three-quarters of the distribution market outside the United States (Movie Revenues, 2006). When Disney's Uncle Remus tale, *Song of the South* (1946), was highly contested for its "this is how the niggers sing" jubilant portrayal of planta-tion life, its distribution was blocked in the United States after serious protest (Bernstein, 1996; Neupert, 2001; Schaffer, 1996; Vera & Gordon, 2003). However, the film was quickly made available for global distribution, making it the highest-grossing film in 1946 with $56.4 million in worldwide sales (World Wide Box Office, 2006).

Not to let the fantastic lore of Uncle Remus' tales be forgotten, in 1992 Walt Disney World resurrected Critter Country to create the animated roller coaster ride Splash Mountain (Schaffer, 1996). Children and adults 40 inches and taller from all over the world can "hop a hollowed-out log to follow Brer Rabbit's mischievous escapades as he tries to flee the clutches of Brer Fox and Brer Bear until you plunge five stories off Chick-a-pin Hill! 'It's the truth. It's actual. Everything is satisfactual. It's a zip a dee doo dah day!' " (Walt Disney World, 2006). Like other stories manufactured under the Disneyfication project, *Song of the South* and Splash Mountain serve to disguise the horrors of American slavery from visitors to Disney World and Disneyland in the United States, but also from visitors to Tokyo Disneyland and, in 2006, Hong Kong Disneyland (Walt Disney World, 2006; Wasko, 2001). While the antebellum American South may be far off the radars of visitors to such spectacles,. *Song of*

the South and Splash Mountain represent the height of Baudrillard's (1992) sense of white-washed and sanitized American simulacra, to be sure.

Global recycling of contested antiblack images and ideas has been found in numerous other examples. In 2003, the Bubble Sisters, an all-female quartet in Korea, made headlines when they used a "blackface gimmick" to gain popularity among pop music fans. Performing in black-face makeup, afros, grotesquely caricatured rubber lips, and dancing in pajamas, the group received airtime from several sources, including MTV Korea, leading to swift protests against the Bubble Sisters and their producers (Hodges, 2003). In response, Bubble Sister Seo Seung-hee explained the group "loved music by black people," and "we happened to have black makeup. With the makeup we felt good, natural, free and energized. In taking the real album cover photos, we finally decided to go for it" (KOCCA, 2003). Similar to other contemporary examples of people who have reported "accidentally" donning blackface, black-face appears to just spontaneously happen to people.[4] After severe backlash, their manager reported, "To the 1 percent of people who were offended by this, we're really sorry . . . we won't be performing with black faces" (Hodges, 2003).

In Japan, *Chikibura Sambo* (or "Little Black Sambo" in English), a children's book with a long history of controversy over its racial caricatures and stereotypes, was re-released in 2005, 17 years after Japanese booksellers agreed to pull it from shelves following a U.S.-led campaign against its racist imagery and language. Its contemporary re-release sold over 100,000 copies, making it a national bestseller in Japan. The book publisher's president, Tomio Inoue, announced that, "Times have changed since the book was removed. Black people are more prominent in politics and entertainment, so I don't think this book can be blamed for supporting racial stereotypes. We certainly had no intention of insulting black people" (McCurry, 2005). Like other corporate apologies, this one invokes a colorblind racial story of progress to try to minimize their actions in the name of profits. And this apology does not appear to address whether this racial progress has occurred in the United States or Japan (a country with an even smaller population of black persons), and still delineates black people's roles to entertainers, a stereotypical post invoked to cite progress among the entire population of black people.

With new technologies and the continued globalization of American popular culture, we can only imagine that these images will find their ways into more and more spaces—problematically defining blackness across the globe. As one study found with interviews of rural Taiwanese who had never traveled to the United States, they "knew" about race and black Americans in the United States from watching U.S. movies (Hsia, 1994). Like other immigrants who come to the United States, their exposure to U.S. movies undoubtedly shaped their stereotypical views and acceptance of racist ideas about black Americans. As popular culture's global audience grows, so do the lessons it provides about race and racism in the United States today. Without a critical resistance against these images, we can have no hope for racial equality in the United States or globally.

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[4] There have been numerous incidents of blackface parties at colleges across the United States (Mueller, Dirks, and Picca, forthcoming). One Swarthmore student stated, "I figured (obviously jokingly), that if I painted my face black, I would thus gain some super powers that would enable me to dance," explaining that dressing in blackface was a "spur of the moment thing." A Swarthmore history professor responded, "You don't inadvertently put on blackface, you inadvertently bang your shoulder on the way out the door' " (Nelson, 2002).

CONCLUSION

On any typical day, one could feasibly rise and dress in their Abercrombie and Fitch "Wok n Bowl" t-shirt, eat breakfast with Aunt Jemima. Get ready for lunch with, "Yo quiero Taco Bell!" Have dinner with Uncle Ben, before retiring to the television to watch the Indians, Redskins, or Braves (and don't forgot to throw down your "tomahawk chop" in and important moment of collective consciousness); After a leisurely game of "Ghettopoly" before heading to bed, you finally watch the late night news to get a daily dose of Arab and Muslim terrorists and criminalblackmen *bedtime stories.*

As Noriega (2001) has argued, race in popular culture is in many ways a paradox—its representation has become regular in our media culture, while the profound ways it affects the real-life chances of individuals and groups remain hidden. And indeed, as Noriega notes, while popular media cannot be implicated as the "cause" of racism, neither does it offer a value-free medium for the exchange of ideas and information. The problem with the stranglehold popular culture has over dictating the way that the populace "knows" people of color is that for people who have very little real, interpersonal experience with individuals from these groups, they can believe in an assentialist vision composed of every stereotype and myth promoted. In today's world of mass information, it is easy to see how the very ubiquity of such images makes keeping pace with them nearly impossible. As addressed above, this is the promise and predicament of popular culture. The deep need for a critical cultural studies is clear, one that seeks to understand the tools available, how they have been used in support of the dominant ideology, and how they might challenge such ideologies and offer counter-cultural solutions.

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