Hypervisible Blackness. Invisible Narratives:

Redefining Black Masculinity in the Social Media Era

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to explore the role of transmedia in the construction of Black masculinity as well as the production of mediated narratives by Black men sustaining their own identities. Specifically, in examining our current transmediated culture, I explore the hashtag as a place of convergence - where social media users, TV watchers, gamers, etc meet to interact and engage with mediated content specifically related to digital instantiations of Black masculinity.

Borrowing from the new model of media production, I use "transmedia" to engage what Goran Bolin (2007) calls "textual production that travels over technologies" (243). The transmedia text involves intricate multi-platform narrative webs that, according to Henry Jenkins (2006), capitalize on the affordances of digital media convergence. The transmedia text, thus, requires cultural synergy of a multitude of mediated formats. The visual of this mapping creates an intricate nexus of analyzing what Black masculinity means for Black men across platforms.

Engaging Black masculinity across these mediated platforms reveals a significant moment of critiquing narratives, creating content, and controlling narratives. The aftermath of Mike Brown's death revealed the power of this innovative engagement that the once excluded could now actively engage, participate, and produce on their own terms. In the context of #BlackLivesMatter, the combination of the textual and the visual ignited not only a movement, but a proclamation of reclaiming narratives and identities - from #BlackLivesMatter to *Black-ish* to "The Breakfast Club". It is important to examine the everydayness of mediated counterpublics to examine Black oral culture in digital spaces (Steele 2016).

#IFTHEYGUNNEDMEDOWN: 'TWEETING WHILE BLACK' AS SELF-DEFINITION

While #BlackLivesMatter generates a significant amount of attention around digital and physical activism, there are other hashtags that subsequently spawned from this form of mobilization. For instance, #iftheygunnedmedown began trending in response to mediated imagery negatively skewing the representations of Black men in particular. Recalling mediated imagery disseminated by news outlets, Brown was immediately referred to as a *thug* throwing up gang signs because of the photography NBC News and others decided to use (Korn 2015):

The hashtag, #iftheygunnedmedown, along with accompanying photographs, challenged how media outlets often choose to characterize Black men in particular, based on the photographs selected to represent them (Jackson 2016). This same narrative parallels the discourse surrounding Trayvon Martin, the Florida teen shot by neighborhood security guard, George Zimmerman in February 2012, when he was portrayed as a dangerous teen. Preview the images below to gain a sense of the use of this hashtag as well as the power therein:

"#IfTheyGunnedMeDown they'd say i was a thug"

"#IfTheyGunnedMeDown what picture would they use"

The juxtaposition of the imagery provides an immediate contrast and critique of media outlets deciding which image will fit within their narrative of deserving and worthy - which as the Black community knows, the Black body is rarely afforded (Korn 2015). This inequitable media landscape sustains a narrative of perpetual criminality for Black men in service of White supremacy.

DIGITIZING THE PLANTATION: DISRUPTING THE STEREOTYPES OF BLACK MASCULINITY

Stereotypical and other-izing depictions of Blackness stand out prominently against a popular culture backdrop dominated by the (su)primacy and supremacy of Whiteness and the secondary nature of Black existence and representation. Black masculinity in particular has been subjected to the sharp stereotypical framing of these fantastical tropes of Blackness, rooted in the rigid separation of the plantation era and aestheticized in new ways with each revolving loop of mediated representation (Mirzoeff 2011). The continued demarcation of Black masculinity as inferior to, and less than is a specific tool of White supremacy systematically enforced to preserve the distinction between ruler and ruled (Wright 2010). This imagery, historically, has been subsidized and sensationalized by television and print journalism and was bolstered by the Nixon-Reagan-Bush years propelling mass incarceration via the War on Drugs (Ibid 348). It is necessary to be theoretically equipped to decipher these mediated attempts that encourages the viewing public to believe that only a few exceptional Black men are capable of 'succeeding', while the rest should be contained (literally and figuratively) because they are innately incapable (Wright 2010). Portrayed as violent natured, unembraceable Black males are featured in media in ways that seem to threaten the body politic, including the visible and often invisible bureaucratic and corporate arenas of cultural manipulation of White public spaces (Page 1997).

Historically, there may have been a push by Black masculinity to distance oneself from the negative portrayals of Blackness. Recalling the Cosby era of the Black middle class family TV, scholars suggested such portrayals were "Black enough not to offend and middle class enough to comfort" (Gray 1995, 55). Todd Boyd (1997) critiques this approach in suggesting that Blackness does not always have to exist in response to white racism. But there is currently a

desire among many social media users to center critiques of Whiteness and racism. Currently, the trend is to embrace uncomfortable images of Blackness and Luke Cage live tweets reveal this:

A bulletproof black man in a hoodie? Luke Cage is an American police nightmare.

This self-explanatory tweet and similar memes that followed represent the shift to embrace so-called negative associations of Blackness. By focusing on Twitter as a Black counterpublic, we begin to see that these constructed logics of Black masculinity may have once been framed to serve a particular purpose of demarcating Black men to physical and digital margins, but now they are fully embraced and Black digital users make mediated connections to physical realities. With this example, the connection between Luke Cage and Trayvon Martin and the subsequent #HoodiesUp movement are made apparent. This 'signifyin', as Andre Brock (2012) articulates, reflects mediated Black cultural discourse that conveys meaning and connects relationships.

BALLOTS, BULLETS, TWEETS, AND MEMES

Social media has been a significant source for users to articulate their identities. As Herman Gray (1995) rightfully notes, commercial representations of Blackness have been "socially and culturally rooted someplace" (55). I contend that place is White supremacy. By critiquing this imagery and challenging depictions, Black men's use of social media in particular

defies the often simplistic and reductionist trends inherent in mediated narratives. Contemporary examples of televised Blackness (i.e. *Luke Cage, Black-ish, Empire*) have been met positively not with criticism of the imagery but rather embracing the images and content therein.

The continued barrage of stereotypical imagery, both positive and negative, of Blackness has led many social media users to create their own counter visualities, narratives empowering themselves and claiming their autonomy through the definition of their own identities (Mazurek and Gray, 2017). Such marginalized groups in the gaming community who have their identities constantly defined within complexes of visuality beyond their control often consciously challenge the stereotypes tied to the visual attributes of their bodies (Gray, 2012). As the *Luke Cage* tweet shows, social media is an important component for countervisual resistance that not only allow Black men to reframe racialized narratives of Blackness they encounter, but also allow them to do it in such a way that is readily accessible and easily replicable due to the proliferation of social media.

The current era of Black hypervisibility could simply be viewed within the narrative of consuming Black death. This limited vision of Black reality would render Blackness only intelligible under conditions imposed by White supremacy. Social media has given visibility to #BlackExcellence, #BlackJoy, #BlackHumor, among other holistic instantiations of Black cultural practices in digital form: #thanksgivingwithblackfamilies, #DuragHistoryWeek, #RootsSyllabus, #BlackOnCampus, and many others. Black digital practices in this transmediated era of engagement has disrupted traditional narratives of Blackness. No longer are commercial entities able to deny Blackness, and they are beginning to offer complex modalities of representation. Examining a movement like #OscarsSoWhite has challenged White

hegemonic creation and appropriation of Black figures and imagery. Whiteness' supposed

neutral visibility illuminated its limits and the possibilities of mediated Blackness, and the

affordances of transmedia demonstrates the discourse of the possibilities of visible Blackness.

REFERENCES

Bolin, Göran. "Media technologies, transmedia storytelling and commodification." Ambivalence towards convergence: digitalization and media change (2007): 237-248.

Boyd, Todd. *Am I black enough for you?: Popular culture from the 'hood and beyond*. Indiana University Press, 1997.

Gray, Herman. Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for" Blackness". University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

Gray, Kishonna L. "Deviant bodies, stigmatized identities, and racist acts: Examining the experiences of African-American gamers in Xbox Live." *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*18, no. 4 (2012): 261-276.

Jackson, Roni. "If They Gunned Me Down and Criming While White: An Examination of Twitter Campaigns Through the Lens of Citizens' Media." *Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 3 (2016): 313-319.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. NYU Press, 2006.

Korn, Jenny Ungbha "Towards Social Justice, Against Media Bias: Creating Tumblr Content With Purpose Through #IfTheyGunnedMeDown." Paper presented at the sixteenth international conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, Phoenix, AZ, October 2015.

Mazurek, Jordan E., and Kishonna L. Gray. "Visualizing blackness–racializing gaming." *Routledge International Handbook of Visual Criminology* (2017): 362-375.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "The right to look." *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 473-496.

Steele, Catherine Knight. "The Digital Barbershop: Blogs and Online Oral Culture Within the African American Community." *Social Media+ Society* 2, no. 4 (2016): 2056305116683205.

Wright, Joshua K. *Stagolees, Superflies, & gangsta rappers: Black masculinity, bad men, and the struggle for power*. Howard University, 2010.