Introduction to the Special Issue on "Black Popular Culture"

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This Special Issue on "Black Popular Culture" puts the concepts of blackness and popular culture in dialogue (see Adjaye and Andrews; Boyd; Brown and Kopano; Caponi; Cashmore; Dent; Dyson; Elam and Jackson; Fishwick; Shaw; Verney; White and White).[1] As a social domain of daily life in historical, contemporary, and emergent cultures, popular culture (past, present, future) has four defining characteristics. Popular culture actualizes, engenders, or signifies pleasure and good; is based on the beliefs, values, and norms (real or imagined) of the people who experience it; is expressed in visible, audible, and performative artifacts (icons and personas) and practices (arts and rituals); and groups, organizations, and institutions situate popular culture within gendered, racialized, political, and economic contexts. Black popular culture is a form of popular culture.

By the early eighteenth century, the term "black" differentiated a largely New World phenomenon of African diasporal cultures and peoples from their ethnic-specific ancestors and relatives (Powell 8). Art historian Richard L. Powell argues that "black" is both a racial identity and a social and/or political condition (10) and that "black," even with hyphenated terminologies such as "African-American" and "Afro-Caribbean," "embraces a range of African diasporal experiences across national and linguistic borders" (12). Black popular culture's defining characteristic is the beliefs, values, orality, musicality, and norms (real or imagined) of people of Africana descent. Black popular culture involves all people of Africana descent

[1] Other scholarship examines African Americans and the media (Dates and Barlow; Squires); black popular personas as heroes (Van Deburg); aesthetics and rhythm as concept (Neal; Nelson), and black education and politics (Beard; Iton).

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The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 8, No. 2

internationally. However, nations throughout the world receive United States culture therefore highlighting U. S. black popular culture most often.

Sociologist William Edward Burghardt DuBois was the first to acknowledge a connection between Black popular culture and religion in 1897 in his essay "The Problem of Amusement." In so doing, he marked a recent but significant urban sociological area of concern: the role of amusements (or pleasure) in the daily lives of people. DuBois did not label the phenomenon he was pondering as Black popular culture but, rather, as Black "amusements" (19). Amusement was the term used by scholars and journalists to refer to leisure and recreational pursuits in nineteenth-century America (see Peiss). Popular culture did not enter the lexicon of American scholarship and periodicals until after World War II (see Hinds et al.). Regarding Black popular culture as a scholarly concept, a special "In-Depth" section of the 1971 winter issue of the *Journal of Popular Culture* was the first scholarly publication to include the phrase "black popular culture." Expanded and published as a book later in 1971 edited by historian Dr. Marshall Fishwick of Lincoln University, the special in-depth section was titled *Remus, Rastus, Revolution*.

Just prior to the beginning of the twentieth century, DuBois's concern was the widening gap between young African Americans and religion due to their participation in urban black popular culture. DuBois's observation is still relevant in the twenty-first century. However, three aspects of the study of popular culture was lacking in DuBois's work. One, DuBois neglected to explore the general implications of black American interaction and engagement *with* the popular culture of their day; two, to explore the racial and gendered implications of Black American interaction and engagement *with* the popular culture of their day; and three, to explore the implications of the commentary *within* the popular culture of their day. This Special Issue on "Black Popular Culture" seeks to fill these gaps at this moment at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Artist and cultural critic bell hooks in "Dialectically Down with the Critical Program" asserts that black popular culture continues to be a "vital location for the dissemination of black thought" and that it is a location where "useful critical dialogues can and should emerge" (51). British cultural studies pioneer Stuart Hall in "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" describes black popular culture as a "contradictory space" and as a site of "strategic contestation" (26). Literary scholar Harry B. Shaw in the Introduction of *Perspectives of Black Popular Culture* argues that "Black culture is popular culture partly because it continually looks toward the roots of the common Black experience and draws from those roots for

it creativity" (1). Similarly, Hall states that "black" in the term "black popular culture" signifies the black community (the site or location of the experiences, pleasures, memories, and everyday practices of black people) and the persistence of the black experience (the historical experience of black people in the diaspora), of the black aesthetic (the distinctive cultural repertoires out of which popular representations were made), and of the black counternarratives we have struggled to voice (28).

Responding to the observations of hooks, Hall, and Shaw, this Special Issue records the current "readability" of black popular culture. This collection of papers focuses on U. S. Black popular culture, includes analyses of historical and contemporary artifacts and practices of Black popular culture, and heralds the persistence of the Black experience, the Black aesthetic, and Black counternarratives. These analyses document the discernment of and dialogues about the meanings, contradictions, and contestations of race, gender, and pleasure expressed through the artifacts and practices of Black popular culture and how these meanings, contradictions, and contestations intersect with political and economic contexts. In general, black cultural expression has always been a way of resisting racial and sexual oppression, articulating experiences of resistance and struggle, and articulating oppositional identities. Likewise, all of the papers in this issue deal with representation and agency occurring in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries.

The first three papers examine prominent Black male figures and Black male-dominated organizations in the 1960s: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party in juxtaposition to *The Boondocks* animated television series (Cartoon Network, November 6, 2005-June 23, 2014), the film *Black Panther* (2018, dir. Ryan Coogler), rapper Tupac Shakur (June 16, 1971-September 13, 1996), and the U. S. commemorative postage stamp (1893 to present). Phillip Cunningham in "'A Homegrown Revolutionary': Linking Erik Killmonger to Tupac and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party" connects *Black Panther* antagonist Erik Killmonger to Black nationalist worldviews of Tupac and the Black Panther Party. Cunningham contends that these links between Killmonger, Tupac, and the Panthers allow the film to function as a Panther allegory upon which one can reflect on the Party's potential and shortcomings. Lisa Gill in "The Iconic Malcolm: The 1990s Polarization of the Mediated Images of Malcolm X" argues that two mediated images of Malcolm X—Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X* (1992) and the U. S. Postal Service's Malcolm X Commemorative Stamp (1999)—moved into

iconic status solidifying the images' position within American mainstream society ultimately proving that Malcolm X's political legacy was divorced from the black community. A. J. Rice and Kyle Mays in "*The Boondocks*, Black History, and Black Lives Matter: Or, Why Black Popular Culture Matters for Black Millennials" argue that products of Black popular culture such as the *Boondocks*' episode, "The Return of the King" (a speculative dramatic narrative imagining Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., awakening from a coma post-9/11), can be used to help raise the historical consciousness of Black youth.

Sean Kennedy in "Trap Spaces, Trap Music: Harriet Jacobs, Fetty Wap, and Emancipation as Entrapment" explores the informal political interventions of rap artist Fetty Wap's highly viewed 2014 music video "Trap Queen" and how the excess of the song and video's liberal heteropatriarchal vision invisibilizes the issues of gender entrapment and violence against Black women. Katrina Moore in "The Fallacy of the Nut Pussy: Cross Dressing, Black Comedy and Women" shows how Black women are entrapped in the comedy of black men who enlist cross-dressing in their comedy. Ultimately, Moore argues that these cultural performances express anxieties, fears, and desires of Black men towards Black women. Angela Nurse and Therésa Winge in "Racialized Representations of Black Actresses: Power, Position, and Politics of the Mediated Black Woman" show that Black actresses in Hollywood films are entrapped in their wardrobe selections. Nurse and Winge argue that dress functions as a mechanism to create, challenge, and reinforce racialized understandings of blackness in popular culture and they explore this idea in the films *Girls Trip* (2017, dir. Malcolm D. Lee) and *Black Panther*.

The final group of three papers problematize race as it relates to the Grammy Awards, White R & B singers, and Oprah Winfrey. Jasmine Henry in "#GrammysNotSoWhite: Critical Race Theory and the Grammys' Race Problem" explores the Grammys' historical lack of racial diversity. Henry argues that the Recording Academy deploys powerful yet subversive colorblind ideologies that obscure racial inequalities and the racially-negligent nature of their 2017 policy changes. Carlos Morrison and Jacqueline Trimble in "Appropriation as Appreciation: Afrocentric Testifying in the Discourse of Teena Marie" situate White R & B singer Teena Marie's music lyrics, public statements, and interviews within a Black cultural space to reconfigure appropriation (which is often driven by profit and the desire for street credibility) as appreciation. Joshua Wright in "OWN: Oprah's Chicken Soup for the Soul in an Age of Angst" argues that while OWN

grants Winfrey a platform to promote her views on self-help and healing, religion and spirituality, and women's empowerment, the network places greater emphasis on issues related to the African-American community than found on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (September 8, 1986-May 25, 2011).

Black popular culture is a social domain that critically examines and facilitates an understanding of the intersections of race, gender, and pleasure in the United States and world. The papers in this special issue demonstrate that United States Black popular culture continues to be a contradictory space full of strategic contestations that intersect and coexist with a multitude of triumphs, challenges, problems, issues, and mysteries in the world.

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