

Editorial Introduction: A Cross-Disciplinary Journal Collaboration

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With the illnesses, lockdowns, quarantines, mask wearing, social distancing, testing, contact tracing, and deaths related to the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 has been quite a year so far, to say the least! Adding to the global health pandemic is America's own cultural pandemic reminding its citizens that racism is still very much present in the United States. Attesting to the continuing prevalence of racism is the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Jacob Blake, followed by protests and uprisings focusing on police brutality specifically against African Americans. In particular, following Floyd's death, an offshoot to the protests brought with it the demand for and, in some cases, the removal or relocation of statues, monuments, and memorials dedicated to confederate leaders. Disease. Death. Recession. Unemployment. Racism. Uncertainty, fear, and the daily changing updates of predictions and the progression of the virus surrounds the entire world.

As history records, when America enters a crisis, one of its methods for managing the crisis is to turn to seemingly disparate aspects of life: religion and popular culture. Not surprisingly, in the early stages of the lockdowns and self-quarantines that occurred across the United States at various points in March 2020, newspaper articles and social media bloggers made recommendations about what to do with our time. By far, the majority of those recommendations related to popular culture. Activities such as watching films, reading books, painting, trying out new meal or drink recipes, exercising, meditating, completing puzzles, playing board games, and binge-watching television series on Hulu, Vudu, and Netflix were at the top of these lists.

Even during the coronavirus outbreak, popular culture products created by or related to the concerns of African Americans are present. These Black popular

culture texts reflect 2020, but also the history of Black popular culture in the United States, contemporary campaigns against structural racism, and possibilities for the future. A major change connected to one Black popular cultural-related product is rather significant, while the other is not as groundbreaking. One product, influenced by the protests following Floyd's death, is surprising, and the other was in motion long before Floyd's death.

The less groundbreaking—although no less significant—Black popular cultural product is Spike Lee's twenty-fifth film, *Da 5 Bloods*, digitally released by Netflix on June 12. A war drama, *Da 5 Bloods* is about a group of four Black (male) Vietnam War veterans who return to the country in search of the remains of their fallen squad leader as well as the treasure they buried while serving there. Lee's film relates to the opposition to the Vietnam War in the African American community. Both Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and former presidential candidate Shirley Chisholm opposed the Vietnam War. Muhammad Ali physically demonstrated his opposition to the Vietnam War in 1967 by refusing to step forward for induction. Ali's defiance and King's and Chisholm's arguments against U.S. involvement in the war revolved around issues of racism and the slowing progress of domestic programs focused on helping the nation's most vulnerable populations, including African Americans. Unfortunately, the deadly effects of the coronavirus reminds us in 2020 that vulnerable populations are still vulnerable. Black communities around the United States have suffered disproportionately more, medically and economically, since the pandemic began. Further, enlisting in the military is still one of the strongest pathways of economic stability for economically vulnerable African Americans and other people of color. Lee's film was not planned as a commentary on the 2020 pandemic, but the presence of these sociocultural overlaps demonstrates Black popular culture texts that can speak historically while applying contemporaneously.

The more groundbreaking move related to Black popular culture is the Quaker Oats of North America's announcement on June 17 that the company was going to retire the 130-year old Aunt Jemima brand of pancake mix, syrup, and other breakfast foods. The brand features a Black woman named Aunt Jemima, originally pictured on the label dressed as a plantation servant, hearkening back to the enslavement period in the United States. Recognizable, recurring stereotypes of African American men (including Uncle Tom and Mandingo), women (including Mammy and Jezebel), and children (including pickaninny) crystallized during the nineteenth-century in the minstrel show, novels, plays, advertising, and sheet music

created by White antebellum Southerners. The Quaker Oats Aunt Jemima brand appeared in 1889. Although not as prominent as the other two Black female stereotypes, Aunt Jemima was a less domineering version of Mammy captured on an American food label. The early iterations of the Aunt Jemima brand aligned with several identifiers of the basic Sambo typography: white, round bulging eyes; thick, white, clown-shaped lips; headgear; completely Black skin; and a uniform to denote her occupation as a servant or domestic. The current iconography of the Aunt Jemima brand includes more “normalized” features such as a light brown skin tone, hair permanent, pearl earrings, and makeup.

What this total erasure of Black women from a popular American food brand will mean in relationship to the future portrayals of Black women in popular culture is most likely minimal. However, Quaker Oats’ decision to retire the brand highlights a recurring theme regarding them. A spectrum of portrayals of Black women exist in narrative-based American popular culture forms such as advertising, film, and television. On one extreme, Black women are completely absent and in the other extreme, they are invisibilized, marginalized, overly sexualized, or dehumanized when they are present. Adding insult to injury is how instrumental African American women were in creating Southern cuisine. The omission of this fact in major American food brands, historically and contemporaneously, is beyond ironic.

Like the *Da 5 Bloods* and the Aunt Jemima brand point to, this special issue focused on Black popular culture critically examines the roles of both Black women and Black men in United States popular culture. This special issue is co-sponsored by *Africology: Journal of Pan African Studies* (A:JPAS) and *Popular Culture Studies Journal* (PCSJ). However, this special issue originated with neither the journal editors (Jackson and Reinhard) nor the guest editor (Nelson). The idea for a publication on Black popular culture was initiated by Dr. Itabari Zulu, Founder and Senior Editor of A:JPAS, who passed in June 2019. Despite Dr. Zulu’s transition, A:JPAS has approved this special issue and thus it is being released now. We believe he would be pleased with the publication.

This mutually inclusive co-sponsorship between A:JPAS and the PCSJ is a demonstration of the dialogue between the concepts of blackness and popular culture. A:JPAS highlights Pan African products and contexts while PCSJ highlights American and international popular cultural products and contexts. Philosophically, the journal editors are expressing their support for both visions and missions. It contains a number of powerful articles that range from noting the

impact and legacy of Erik Killmonger, Tupac Shakur, and the Black Panther Party to linking the various manifestations of the Black Lives Matter movement in our current economic and political climate to the continuous relevant legacies of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Also crucial are the enriching articles on Black women in comedy and the film industry as well as the appropriation of African American music. In the end, all the articles make a great and potent contribution to the fields of popular culture studies and Pan African studies. We hope the readers find this issue to be enlightening.