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How Does Cultural Criticism “Work” in the Age of Antiracist Incorporation?

Felice Blake

There’s a whole cultural phase of revolution that deals with art — it deals with song, it deals with everything about the people that the people produce.¹

— Akinsanya Kambon, Former Sacramento Lieutenant of Culture, Black Panther Party

Of all the reactions I heard to the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election, the most vexing one for me was, “I can’t wait to hear the music that comes out of this!” The widely covered news about the struggle to hire bands for the 2017 US inauguration did seem to indicate that the music was not on the then president-elect’s side. Even still, the conversations about “the music” made my head spin: enthusiasm about the anticipated music; romantic ideas about how the best songs come out of struggle; cultural memories of James Brown shouting that he was “Black

¹ Akinsanya Kambon, interview with the author, Goleta, CA, November 14, 2016. Thanks to Malena Blake Kleiven for her unique insight about K-Pop and BTS and their ARMY. All errors are the fault of the author.
and proud;” and the perception that younger musicians and rap artists are part of the Black Lives Matter generation. These comments, I first thought, buried Black suffering under what often looks like exclusively consumer-cultural appreciation for Black expressivity.

But the association between “good” Black music and “progressive” politics is not simply an overused stereotype. There is, as we know, a historical relationship between Black liberation struggles and Black cultural expression. Black artists and intellectuals have long described the relationship between Black creativity and Black inclusion, whether for better or for worse. Black cultural expression has been a site where people (Black or non-Black, intellectuals or everyday folk) contemplate the diverse meanings of and obstacles to freedom and liberation. Such perspectives are as much about political culture as they are about cultural politics, or the existing conditions for the emergence of various cultural practices and products, as well as their circulation in public discourses about race and representation.

As such, Black cultural criticism and Black expressive culture have also been about engaging the spirit of a moment in relation to what we thought in and about the past, and in terms of what we’re calling for or anticipating in the future. The Movement for Black Lives has certainly impacted public discourse about racism, violence, and policing, but in the era of the 45th US president, are we awaiting the “sorrow songs” of the new millennium?

It is safe to say that we have had the music — and it has been amazing! James Baldwin famously wrote in 1955 that, “It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a pro-

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3 #BlackLivesMatter was created by activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tométi in response to the acquittal of neighborhood watch coordinator George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black American teenager in 2012. See http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/.

tective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story.\(^5\) Historically, such protective sentimentality depended upon narrow definitions of blackness as sexually pathological, cyclically impoverished, hopelessly criminal, and musically masterful. The same presumptions of Black inferiority reinforce the popularity of Black expressive culture, and especially Black popular music, in the (post)-Obama era as well. The election of the US’ first African American president fueled the public representation of the nation’s belief in the commitment to antiracism — a shaky presumption about US democracy and its development since the post-World War II era.\(^6\) However, sentimentalist racial fantasies\(^7\) about blackness encourage mass publics to applaud displays of Black economic mobility, aka “success,” without addressing how Black exclusion makes the American dream possible or serves as a trusty scapegoat for either White American dreams or national nightmares. Dominant representations of blackness celebrate stylized performances of Black thuggery as the “real” voice of the streets because of the overdetermined association between blackness, poverty, and criminality. Protective racial fantasies produce images of “black-on-black” love and its limited “ride-or-die” spirit because we lack a shared grammar about the importance of Black intimacy to Black struggle and liberation. The dialectics between Black poverty and wealth, Black criminality and respectability, and Black sexual pathology and sexual desirability in popular cultural representations incorpo-


rate Black cultural products in order to contain them within the existing racial hierarchy.

This containment through incorporation safeguards the dominant American public from an understanding of the complexity of Black expressivity even as they celebrate the music. As Stuart Hall argues, such appropriations are not merely about capitalizing on cultural representations of blackness, but about creating an image of racial progress by commercializing Black difference. They present a distorted and ultimately deceitful depiction of racial progress and racial strife simultaneously because of presumed Black difference. As other authors in this collection elaborate, antiracist incorporations of Black popular culture sever Black cultural products from the complexity of Black creativity. Antiracist appropriations fetishize Black commodities (or even Black people as commodities), while repressing the epistemologies, cosmologies, and imaginations that generate them. We've had the music, but the attempt to engage it through appropriation and incorporation keeps us from ever hearing it, and thus perpetually thirsting for the next album to drop.

Black popular culture is a contradictory space. Although the “popular” in Black popular culture is meant to anchor such expressions in the experiences of Black communities from which they draw their inspiration and strength, the mainstreaming of Black cultural production as US popular culture is not separate from US ascendancy as a world power and focal point of global cultural production and circulation. The recognition and/or fetishization of Black cultural expression have also resulted in some Black cultural workers’ access to and control over the means of producing mass culture in an era of global media conglomeration and antiracist incorporation. These conjunctures — the dominant position of Black popular culture nationally and its circulation globally, as well as the antiracist

9 Ibid., 26.
appropriations of Black culture and the development of Black creativity — shape the cultural politics through which Black cultural criticism engages popular culture. Thus attention to antiracist incorporations asks how the music speaks in the context of appropriation and how cultural critics approach these evolving, improvisational strategies. Such a critical method can illuminate the framework of oppression and articulate a politics of possibility simultaneously. Rather than seeking “good” representations and receptions of Black culture, this article considers a variety of cultural workers and work, and how they negotiate the contradictions of popular culture and the depiction of blackness. First, I discuss the antiracist incorporation of Black expressive culture. Second, I engage Antonio Gramsci’s term “interregnum” to describe the tensions and paradoxes embedded in the process of incorporation itself. Finally, I provide examples of how Black music continues to inspire important cultural work today and generate new paths for cultural criticism. Attending to the ongoing and irresistible desires to wait for and listen to the music provide an opportunity for considering how antiracist cultural criticism works.

Hard of Hearing: Antiracist Incorporation

As a revolutionary artist my job was basically making sure that the art and the culture was relevant to our struggle. We'd go to parties and the music — if they had music that was reactionary — we had to go “oh, nah you can't play that.” We had to play shit that was mostly Curtis Mayfield stuff!

— Akinsanya Kambon, Former Sacramento Lieutenant of Culture, Black Panther Party

Fifty years after the founding of the Black Panther Party, Akinsanya Kambon (née Mark Teemer) and former Sacramento Lieutenant of Culture and Emory Douglas, Minister of Culture, still emphasize the importance of Black music to the revolu-

11 Kambon, interview with the author.
tionary spirit. In fact, both artists continue to stress the value of Black popular culture as a whole to the development and dissemination of the Panther vision and collectivity. While studying at City College in the Bay Area of California, Douglas was actively involved in the Black Arts Movement. It was due to this capacity that Bobby Seale and Huey Newton sought to work with Douglas; and he joined the Black Panther Party in January 1967, just three months after its inception. Art was always part of the original vision for the Party and figured prominently in the Panther newspaper. The numerous photographs and artworks featured within addressed the issue of illiteracy among impoverished and working class Black people by enabling them to learn and participate through observation. Black art and culture also played invaluable roles in the development of the newspaper and of the Black Panther Party itself. As Douglas describes, “readers” could perceive “how the Party was going from one phase into another by looking at the artwork,” and “in many cases, you could take any one of the 10-Point Platform Program of the Black Panther Party and see that in the art at any given time.” The people were not waiting for the music, but actively engaged in its production and circulation.

The powerful relationship between Black cultural production and Black struggle continues in the subsequent decades of counterrevolution against the organizing, mobilizations, and transformations of the 1960s and 1970s. Neoconservatism, the War on Drugs, the War on Terror, the shrinking welfare state, militarized policing, and mass incarceration in subsequent decades echo the concerns of a previous generation, but do so in an era that celebrates Black popular culture above all others. According to the latest Nielsen ratings, hip hop music has become the most popular music genre in the US — more popular even than rock and roll.  

12 Emory Douglas, interview with the author, Goleta, CA, November 14, 2016.
How Does Cultural Criticism “Work”? vanguard of the popular cultural revolution, producing leaders, innovators, and visionaries that have influenced all other forms of Black cultural production. Although Black music-making is key to understanding Black vernacular culture, Black fiction, fashion, and art, among others, it has also achieved institutional inclusion and representation in the post-Black Power era. Black cultural workers from Nobel-Prize-winning author Toni Morrison (the only US woman to receive the honor), to the late graffiti artist cum neoexpressionist Jean Michel-Basquiat are regularly described with superlatives by critics, scholars, and fans around the world. Basquiat has also set the record for any US artist for the $110.5 million sale of his 1982 painting Untitled, the sixth most expensive painting ever sold at an auction. Art dealer Jeffrey Deitch, described as an expert on the artist, states that Basquiat is “now in the same league as Francis Bacon and Pablo Picasso.”\(^{14}\) Of course, in 2008 the US elected its first non-white president in the history of the country. Regular footage of him playing basketball or quoting rapper Jay-Z while brushing metaphorical dirt from his shoulder buoyed President Barack Obama’s popularity. What is the relationship between political culture and cultural politics in a context that destroys Black lives, communities, and institutions while elevating Black expressivity, even if those expressions critique racial, sexual, and economic injustice?

In his book Cultural Moves, Herman Gray interrogates dominant cultural institutions’ incorporation of Black cultural products, despite those hegemonic spaces’ abiding and deep ambivalence about Black cultural presence.\(^ {15}\) Although such recognition marks a shift in the historic pattern of excluding and/or distorting the representation of blackness, he questions if the recognition and representation by mainstream institutions should still serve as a focus of cultural politics or provide a measure of ra-


\(^{15}\) Gray, Cultural Moves, 15.
cial progress. Ambivalence, obsession, or outright disgust can characterize the dominant public’s response to Black presence in social, educational, and political spaces as well. Consider, for example, the stark contrast between Toni Morrison winning the Nobel Prize for literature and three of her novels appearing on “most challenged book” lists in 2006, 2012, 2013, and 2014, according the American Library Association. Celebrating Toni Morrison’s creative work as proof of US racial progress while censoring her novels, and most often texts by historically aggrieved authors, point to the contradiction of Black popular culture as US popular culture that disrupts traditional ideologies about racial integration and American democracy. There’s also the discrepancy between the popularity of the image of the first Black first family, and the cynical non-apologies from elected officials for circulating representations of the Obamas as primates during his eight years as US president.

What about the distinction between the importance of hip hop music to US popular culture and Michael David Dunn’s murder of Jordan Davis in 2012 for allegedly playing Chicago rapper Lil Reese’s music too loudly in the parking lot of a Florida gas station? Some of us remember the 1992 trial against Ice-T and his rock band Body Count because of their song “Cop Killer” due to the state of emergency following Los Angeles Police Department officers’ beating of Rodney King in March of 1991

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17 Dan Johnson, then-Kentucky-Republican-state-House-candidate, won his seat in the November 2016 election. Calling his posts satire and denying that he is a racist, Johnson refused to apologize for Facebook posts that depicted President Obama and the first lady Michelle Obama as monkeys. Mayor Beverly Whaling of West Virginia resigned her position in 2016 following uproar over her comments on a Facebook post that anticipated Melania Trump as the new first lady because she was “tired of seeing a [sic] Ape in heels,” referring to then-First Lady Michelle Obama. California Republican and elected member of the Orange County Republican Central Committee Marilyn Davenport apologized for her “unwise behavior” in sending a group email that included an image of a family portrait of chimpanzee parents and child with President Obama’s face superimposed on the young chimp to Republican committee members in 2011.
and the acquittal of officers Stacey Koon, Theodore Briseño, and Timothy Wind in 1992. Although he was pressured to retract the critique of state-sponsored violence and to censure the articulation of rage about police violence, most know Ice-T from his various roles as a police officer from television programs like *Law and Order SVU*, *Chicago PD*, *New York Undercover*, or the police detective in the film *New Jack City* (dir. Mario Van Peebles, 1991). In these various examples, incorporation functions to neutralize counterhegemonic critique. The unlivable conditions that racial and gendered injustice produce become not only palatable, but entertaining, through antiracist incorporation.

Even still, Gray points out that “the successful ‘occupation’ of and use of institutional cultural spaces and the political claims that emanate from them complicate rather than simplify the very notion of black cultural politics.”\(^9\) Black cultural production — its incorporation and its popularity — becomes a site for political disputes over representation, meaning, and the valuation of blackness as a cultural expression. It is in this way that even the contradictions of Black popular culture in the present, despite the efforts at sanctioned incorporation and “pure” entertainment, become sites for interrogating the relationship between dominant recognition and daily racial terror and between the development of radical epistemologies and the protections of sentimental engagement. In other words, the very contradictions that emerge through the mainstream recognition of Black popular culture presents critical opportunities to question the very cultural and political terms of order that structure cultural institutions and dominant discourses about race, creativity, and representation in the complicated space of incorporation.


\(^{19}\) Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 14.
The Interregnum and Morbid Projections of Blackness

Antonio Gramsci’s conception of “interregnum” characterizes the dialectical and dialogic spaces Black cultural production occupies. The contradictions that impact the conditions for Black expression and how we analyze it demand attention to antiracist incorporation as a unique modality of racism. He writes:

That aspect of the modern crisis which is bemoaned as a “wave of materialism” is related to what is called the “crisis of authority.” If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer “leading” but only “dominant,” exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.20

Gramsci’s description of the interregnum speaks to the monetized valuation of Black popular culture, a wave of materialism (or “bling,” for example) that presumes individualism and self-interest alone motivate the intellectual and creative will — or that racial politics can be explained simply by how much money a film, album, magazine cover, or scholarly manuscript can fetch if it features the lives, experiences, and perspectives of non-White people. Is life only credit and debt? Gramsci points to how this materialism conceals the crisis of the ruling class, that it’s lost its consensus and rules coercively instead. Sanctioned, and often championed, violence against vulnerable communities functions in tandem with antiracist incorporation and examples of Black exceptionality, especially in entertainment and cultural production. These examples of excellence circulate as proof of

racial progress, further legitimating the violence against those considered non-normative and unassimilable. Perhaps this is the reason why the Movement for Black Lives, one more recent instantiation of the Black liberation movement, is so inspiring to Black cultural creators and critics, for this mobilization has demanded that mass publics pay attention to state violence and coercion as a brutal sign that the old is dying and violently resistant to the new being born. The interregnum thus manifests in morbid symptoms, deferred dreams, and partial wish fulfillment. In this, the longing for the music and the desire for new “sorrow songs” take on new meanings.

In the new millennium, for example, Black cultural incorporation actually demonstrates how a coerced or “respectable” allegiance to definitions of antiracism betray democratic promises. The popularity of Black expressive culture has rarely won elections, as Hillary Clinton learned in 2016 despite rapper Jay Z’s and songstress Beyoncé’s public appearances, performances, and endorsements on behalf of the Democratic presidential candidate. Twenty-two years earlier, Clinton’s husband, President Bill Clinton, signed the 1994 “Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act” that increased the penalties for crime and increased funding for “substantially” higher police presence in US communities and the technology to control them. 21 Jay-Z released his first and highly celebrated album _Reasonable Doubt_ in 1996. 22 With references to the xenophobic film _Scarface_ scattered between the songs, in the track “Dead Presidents” for example, he mocks the misguided pursuit of wealth as protection in a rapidly expanding police state. Having sold over 100 million albums since then, he is now one of the best-selling musicians of all time.

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President Bill Clinton also signed the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (aka the Welfare Reform Act) that ended the guarantee of cash assistance for children in poverty, created a 5-year lifetime limit for receiving support, and required heads of households to find work within two years.\textsuperscript{23} These dramatic new policies depended upon the public’s perception of welfare recipients as poor Black mothers, and they trafficked in representations of Black people as sexually irresponsible, socially abject, and politically expendable. Beyoncé’s rise to fame began with her participation in the group Destiny’s Child with whom she helped develop and commodify an image of contemporary Black female independence: heteronormativity, sexual self-confidence, sanctioned-expressions of vulnerability, and performances of economic autonomy. In 2014, and on the heels of global economic recession, President Obama signed legislation authorizing an over $8 billion cut to food stamp benefits. In 2016, Beyoncé performed during the Pepsi Super Bowl Halftime Show in Silicon Valley, less than an hour away from where the Black Panther Party formed in 1966, flanked by Black female drill-team dancers clad in leather bodysuits, curly afro wigs with black berets on top, and waving Black leached fists in the air. She didn’t sing “Mississippi Goddamn” or “I Hate the Capitalist System,” but “Formation,” a song featuring the voices of New Orleans YouTube personality Messy Mya and “Queen of Bounce” Big Freedia. Beyoncé’s track and music video champion “conspicuous consumption” and sing “bitch” into a term of empowerment, while directing the world’s attention to the Black belt and Black Lives Matter mobilizations. Her halftime show stands in for the movement and activism with all the props of symbolic resistance, including musical mastery. As a solo artist, she is one of the best-selling artists in music history.

Jay-Z and Beyoncé have taken a stake in, and have been staked by, the traditional means of production. Their popularity has increased their wealth, access to production and distribution

channels, and control over the representation of race, gender, and Black popular culture. But this also means that they are also trained in neoliberal lessons in neocapitalism and performance. Expanding the channels for commerce and advertising through new medias and technologies, for example, made Beyoncé’s sixth album *Lemonade* (2016) a success on economic, technological, and racial fronts. *Lemonade* is a visual album (each song accompanied by an extended music video) and a concept album (whereby each track contributes to an overall collective expression) that debuted through cable television (HBO) and international, online commercial outlets like Amazon Music, the iTunes Store, and her husband Jay Z’s multinational streaming service Tidal. Apart from making music products available to a global audience, these various production and distribution channels provide the veneer of individual choice by producing the individual as a unique consumer of the objects and technologies that reflect their projected “lifestyle.” As Jodi Melamed argues, neoliberal versions of multiculturalism abstract race and in place of reference to it specifically use the term “difference” as a way of coding the Beyoncé brand and its consumers for insertion into neoliberalism.\(^24\) Radiating fierce independence and musical mastery, Beyoncé appears as the object and director of the public’s gaze upon her. Her carefully curated image and haunting lyricism bring together the questions “Why can’t you see me?” and “You’re the love of my life” that echo across songs from the album *Lemonade* and its visual representations of the performer. At once, Beyoncé projects mastery and vulnerability, sensuality and sensitivity, rage and reason as a specifically Black performance that is also for sale.

Black popular culture is contradictory, but is it that Beyoncé projects ambiguous representations of blackness onto the public, or that we want her to be *everything we need and want her to be*? Returning to Gramsci’s concept of the interregnum, we recall that morbid symptoms and projections emerge in the dying of an old regime and the struggle for the “new” to be born — for

\(^{24}\) Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 176.
change. In cultural criticism, this refers to the war of maneuver and the struggle for hegemony. Morbid symptoms in popular culture can be perceived in the love of Toni Morrison’s international recognition and the hatred for her novels and in the fetishization of gangsta rap music and the murder of unarmed young Black men. Is Beyoncé embracing the desire for designer handbags or wondering if they will keep her afloat in the proverbial flood recently symbolized as Hurricane Katrina and the context for the video “Formation” from *Lemonade*? What might it say about the desire for things (even Black people as objects, performers, or brands) in the midst of the destruction of Black life? It is like asking Black people, still, to market integration, reject their own pitch, yet profit from their ideas remade into white property. It doesn’t make sense.

And yet it’s still important to remember the significance of why culture mattered then and matters now to Black artists and intellectuals in relation to Black performance and politics. As Stuart Hall asked in 1992, “what sort of moment is this in which to pose the question of black popular culture?” He continues:

> These moments are always conjectural. They have their historical specificity; and although they always exhibit similarities and continuities with the other moments in which we pose a question like this, they are never the same moment. And the combination of what is similar and what is different defines not only the specificity of the moment, but the specificity of the question, and therefore the strategies of cultural politics with which we attempt to intervene in popular culture, and the form and style of cultural theory and criticizing that has to go along with such an intermatch.25

Dominant appropriations of Black cultural expressions persist today in ways similar to that of the past. But the struggle for liberation, and thus its cultural soundtracks and expressions,

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do too. In the next section I consider how contemporary artists work despite antiracist incorporation.

Working from Noun to Verb

You wanna see a dead body?

New York Times music critic Nate Chinen, like many other music journalists, ranked Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” as the best song of 2015. He acknowledges that the “song’s defiantly hopeful refrain became a rallying cry at Black Lives Matter protests, but the verses harbor a more internal struggle — and some of Kendrick Lamar’s most inspired showboating as a rapper.” This perspective retreats from the examination of “Alright” in relation to Black Lives Matter mobilizations in order to pursue a “morbid” fascination with the rapper’s presumed inner turmoil and musical mastery. This “othering” of Lamar in relation to the music critic’s own subjectivity points to the protective sentimentality that James Baldwin describes. Nathaniel Mackey similarly argues that, “other is something people do, more importantly a verb [rather] than an adjective or a noun.” Thinking about othering in artistic media and in our society more broadly allows Mackey to illustrate how movement and mobilization can be shifted from “verb to noun” through “the erasure of black inventiveness by white appropriation.” These critical analyses of racializing and appropriative tendencies also mean that Black

29 Ibid., 77.
cultural workers have long thought about both content and form as part of the racial imposition on creativity as they work to make their art move.

For example, Kendrick Lamar begins his featured section of Pusha T’s song “Nosetalgia” by asking, “Ya wanna see a dead body?” The accompanying music video features the two rap artists strolling down residential streets of Compton, California. The artists reflect on their seemingly long involvement in selling cocaine and Black pain: “20 plus years of selling Johnson & Johnson / I started out as a baby face monster” Pusha T admits to open the song. Lamar, in his articulation, reflects on a childhood with “Troubles on my mind, / I still smell crime / My little brother crying.” The song features an intraracial and intergenerational dialogue to confront the paradoxes of the drug trade and the entertainment industry. On the one hand, opportunities for economic survival and status elevation emerge from both pursuits. Lamar confronts his father, an original drug dealer himself, through his lyrics: “He said ‘son, how come you think you be my connect?’ / Said ‘pops, your ass is washed up with all due respect’ / He said ‘well nigga, then show me how it all makes sense’ / Go figure, motherfucker, every verse is a brick / Your son dope, nigga / Please reap what you sowed nigga.” Lamar links his poetry (“every verse”) to an illicit commodity (“a brick” or a package of cocaine). Through the song and his reflection on his family of origin, Lamar is able to establish himself as superior to his father professionally and creatively: “I was born in ’87, my grand daddy a legend / Now the same shit that y’all smoking is my profession.” Despite Lamar’s youthful bravado, the song also reveals how the fracturing of relations can be an opening for vulnerability and thus form the bases for transformation. A son’s knowledge of a father’s weakness becomes the opportunity to critique the mask of masculinity and grieve the pain behind it. The two rappers’ errant wandering through the neighborhoods of Compton further intensifies the longing and search for “home” the song conveys. The “nose” in “Nosetalgia” links the drug trade to the nostalgia for a home that never was, but will be and now is in the song.
The realist narratives Pusha T and Kendrick Lamar share about their memories of home and their proverbial fathers express the pain over the fracture of intimate relations between Black people and especially in racialized conceptions of gender in the meaning of survival. Lamar’s haunting question, “Ya wanna see a dead body” also challenges the terms through which he or his father could be seen. “Nosetalgia” does not seek to reify social death, but to question the preoccupation with dead Black bodies in the news and in popular cultural representations. Re-animation through redefinition better indicates Lamar’s unique approach to engaging how Black people imagine their own _processual_ relationship to the representation of blackness as we see in his dialogue with Pusha T and their fathers. Lamar is therefore able to bring the complex material and creative experiences that shape Black expression into view and to life.

This attention to movement, to refusing the status of nouns, has become a priority of many contemporary Black artists like Lamar. I’ve been reiterating throughout this essay that Black cultural production accompanies radical movements for liberation. In that way, it also remembers histories of struggle and its pleasures with a difference. For example, we know that the linked Black Power and Black Arts movements meditated on the long history of the Black Left as well as Civil Rights discourses and strategies even as they negotiated their unique circumstances and developed a vision of liberation. The Movement for Black Lives also understands itself in relationship to the long struggle for Black liberation even as it exposes the exploitative, homophobic, and sexist terms upon which Black lives are rendered disposable. The rallying cry “Black lives matter” indicts racist violence while affirming and embracing Black life. In this way, the movement also helps bring into crisis the authority of the ruling class, or what Cedric Robinson calls a “racial regime,” hostile to its exposure.30 Moving from noun to verb, this emphasis on

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traversing collective histories of struggle reveal the “work” of Black radicalism. This, too, is the Black in Black popular culture.

The Movement for Black Lives refracts the creative impulses that hip hop, Black art, fashion, studies, histories, and criticism have uniquely captured global attention. For example, we can’t help but be excited by the worldwide phenomenon that is South Korean popular culture! Broader than the slightly disparaging label of “K-Pop” and its sometimes appropriative engagement with a wide variety of musical and visual genres and styles, Korean popular culture maintains a profound connection to Black music culture. K-Pop’s youth, subcultural vibes and negotiations of intergenerational conflict and trauma find expression through the familiar sounds and fashion associated with R&B and Hip Hop music, but global K-Pop phenomenon also demonstrates a particular understanding of Black culture as “culture.” As Sunaina Maira\(^31\) argues in her analysis of South Asians, South Asian Americans, and cultural appropriation, the terrain of culture is a site for negotiating relations of power in the context of labor migration patterns, global shifts in the political economy, and processes of racialization. Cultural production has to do with the relations of cultural production and the nuances of lived experience.

In the realms of culture and consumption, Black expression, especially Hip Hop music and youth subculture, has offered an alternative means of gaining status in a post-industrial economy through the performance of urban cool associated with Black and Latino youth.\(^32\) Maira describes how South Asian American youth subculture in New York City combined British-born remix music with hip hop sounds to allow “ideologies of cultural nostalgia to be expressed through the rituals of clubbing and dance music.”\(^33\) In other words, their engagement with Black cultural expression depended upon stereotypical associations


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 334.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
between blackness and “cool” in the context of global economic and political transformations.

North and South Korea maintain unique relationships to the US in terms of immigration (Hart-Cellar Immigration Act 1965), militarization (US/Korean entanglement in the post-World War II era), and in US post-Cold War representations of evil (the figure and presumed threat of North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un). The various depictions of North, and by contrast, South Korean culture have turned to US blackness for entry into the discussion of global politics from the vantage point of cultural currency. From *Saturday Night Live*34 skits about the profound relationship between Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un and former professional US National Basketball Association player Dennis Rodman to critiques of K-Pop artists’ appropriation35 of US Black culture to develop a thriving commercial industry, attention to race, culture, and politics accompanies the formation of contemporary Korea.

A large quantity of the most influential contemporary South Korean musicians borrow or appropriate Black music styles and the culture associated with them. In the early 1990s, South Korean artists Seo Taiji and the Boys incorporated gangsta rap and breakdance into songs like “Come Back Home.”36 When the group dissolved, former band member Yang Hyun-Seok started YG Entertainment, one of South Korea’s largest record labels. Seo Taiji and their involvement with hip hop reflects a broader wave of Korean artists using hip hop music and culture directed towards Korean youth.

Kwon Hyuk, better known as Dean, is another South Korean artist who developed his unique sound through his engagement

with R&B and rap. Epik High, another hip-hop group hailing from Seoul, was the first band from the country to ever play Coachella. Heize and CL (née Lee Chae-Rin) are South Korean female rappers who have strong international following. Korean American rapper Jay Park from Seattle, has had a prominent international career in the multiple countries. Consider also the global phenomenon known as the band BTS. This group develops albums, like *Dark & Wild* (2014) and *Wings* (2016), modeled after the “old school” hip hop mixtape — including intros, outros, and skits between songs. Performing most of their songs in Korean, BTS has been catapulted into international fame by their unmatched international fan following and was the most Tweeted-about celebrity of 2017.\(^37\) These, and many other, popular South Korean artists credit collaborations with Black producers, choreographers, and style-makers for the development of their work. Missy Elliot, Kanye West, and will.i.am are just a few of the high-profile collaborations that have helped shape South Korean popular culture in addition to Black choreographers like Jay Black.\(^38\)

The unique role that Black culture and music play for Black people in the struggle for racial justice is significant, but Asian American musical traditions of resistance falsely seem like a relative absence. Laura Pulido uses the term “racial differentiation” to describe how politically, socially, and culturally constructed differences impact how specific groups may experience racism and perceive other groups in the racial order.\(^39\) The perceptions of Black people as the most oppressed and their histories of resistance struggles as the most radical lend subcultural credibility to creative expressions that seek to engage Black aesthetics. Asian artists’ engagement with hip hop and other forms of Black cultural production can certainly reproduce racial stereotypes

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and fetishistic performances, but they can also disrupt the terms of order. The popular band collective EXO, for example, was a South Korean-Chinese boy band who sang in Korean and Mandarin, and eventually in gender-neutral lyrics on the album *Universe* (2017). The band, however, was rocked by internal lawsuits over the differential treatment between Korean and Chinese members. Indie band Hyukoh, formed in 2014, features front man Oh Hyuk, the son of university professors who resided in various parts of China and Korea. The band performs songs in Mandarin, Korean, and English while commenting on these cultural influences and geopolitical spaces in songs like “Bawling.”

In 2014, the Modern Sky Festival, which debuted in China in 2017, held its first event in Central Park in New York City. In 2017, the festival took place in Santa Anita, California, eyeing large Chinese student populations at southern California colleges and universities. The Los Angeles lineup included Hyukoh and the Chinese hip hop group HHH. The global success of South Korean K-Pop group BTS is due largely in part to their extraordinary fan-base, known as ARMY. During the press conference for their new album *Love Yourself: Tear*, leader and main rapper for the group Kim Namjoon (RM) explained why the Korean word *naega* (meaning “I”) was being censored at live US performances and radio play. Having received backlash for his own use of the so-called “n-word,” BTS spokesman and rapper Namjoon’s acknowledgment of the violence associated with the term was significant enough that the group would censor a word so vital to the Korean language and rap performance.

The extraordinary and growing popularity of South Korean popular culture emerges during an era increasingly attentive to US foreign, immigration, and affirmative action policy debates, even as these musicians negotiate the contradictions and ten-

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sions within their own global and local networks. BTS was the first K-Pop group to speak at the United Nations. Speaking to UNICEF’s “Generation Unlimited” the band used the opportunity to discuss their “Love Myself” campaign, which opposes youth violence, and the #SpeakYourself to focus on education and the necessity for each of us to acknowledge and be humbled by the complexity of our individual identities, for better or worse. The many thousands of student protesters who called for the ouster and formal indictment of South Korean President Park Geun-hye and the global focus on North and South Korean politics further indicate how new generations around the world continue to question the status quo. Embracing Black cultural influences and re-imagining gendered performances, K-Pop music and its visual representations bring together sources like anime, rap, and urban stylings to contest state power nationally and internationally. These contestations also occur through frameworks that don’t re-center us, incorporated, antiracist discourses into the analysis of the complex negotiation that takes place within and between aggrieved communities. Consider, for example, the fact that BTS performs mainly in Korean, despite their international fanbase and US recognition. The growing popularity for such contemporary, remixed, and diasporic Asian/African urban sounds remind us not to wait for the music, but to listen differently.

These local and global connections allow us to look critically at the work of Toni Morrison, Kendrick Lamar, Hyukoh, and BTS and the work taking place on our own streets. If our only objects of analysis circulate in the so-called mainstream, then we remain tied to the false promises of integration and inclusion. As we have seen, antiracist incorporation can also be a


How Does Cultural Criticism “Work”?  

modality of oppression that leaves us as dead nouns in the end. Mainstream incorporation often peddles a disembodied version of inclusion that distances expressive work and culture from the communities who motivate and inspire them.

Local actors have also developed ways to occupy cultural institutions and to challenge the othering of Black radical cultural politics. One organization, the Bronx Documentary Center (Bronxdoc.org) has become such a center of local self-activity in New York City. The Bronx Documentary Center (BDC) opened in 2011 as a nonprofit gallery with a mission to grow. Director and founder Michael Kamber is a photojournalist who traveled globally photographing war and conflict. Having resided in the Bronx, he dreamt of creating an educational space in the south Bronx that would offer residents exposure to and education about high-quality documentary work. Although it started as a small afterschool program on photography for junior and high school age students, the BDC has now served thousands of students and provided an artistic and educational space visited mostly by people from the Bronx. As a gallery and an educational center, the BDC hosts twelve to fourteen exhibitions annually as well as multiple events for and in the community. The BDC has the only black-and-white darkroom in New York City not located on a university campus as well as the only photo book library in the city. Many of these volumes come from donations to the center. As a meeting space for community organizations in the Bronx, the BDC has also sponsored the Gentrification Conference annually since 2013. The BDC not only employs Bronx residents, but trains and encourages them to tell their own stories as well.

The BDC hosts regular Friday evening classes and meetups that allow photojournalists the opportunity to speak about their work for an adult audience. These events also give participants the chance to show their own work and to receive constructive feedback from established photographers. From these Friday sessions, participants organized themselves into the Bronx Photo League (BPL), a name chosen in honor of the New York Photo League of the 1930s—50s. Many of these photographers are not
formally trained, but self-taught and committed to the type of local documentation and expression the BDC promotes. In January 2016, sixteen members of the BPL formalized the Jerome Avenue Workers Project (jeromeaveworkers.com) to document and celebrate the workers and trades of people on Jerome Av-

Figure 1. “The Storm Before the Calm.” Simpson Street subway stop, the Bronx, New York. Photo by Rhynna Santos; used with permission.
enue, one of the New York City’s few remaining working-class neighborhoods.

The South Bronx is commonly known as the birthplace of hip hop music and stereotypically perceived as a center of concentrated poverty and crime. Nevertheless, NYC urban planners began plans to rezone Jerome Avenue to clear the way for new housing construction. The proposed new buildings would charge rents according to a $71k median income despite the fact that the median income for current residents is approximately $23k. Similarly, the billboards promoting the “Piano District” that real estate developers put in place sought to create a cultural shift in how people perceive the Bronx. Regardless of the defeat of the suggested name “SoBro,” the efforts to change the South Bronx to the Piano District sought to capitalize on the history of piano-making during the 1800s in the US when the area was a center for piano production. Looking towards Brooklyn, Bronx residents began to organize against the impending threat of gentrification.

The Jerome Avenue Workers Project used documentary photograph and journalism to present the people who live along Jerome Avenue. Kamber decided to use Hasselblad cameras, vintage German film cameras, to unify the project among the photographers and to “photojournalistically” capture timeless portraits of these workers. Learning to use the apparatus required education, training, and cooperation among the photographers. Ultimately, the BPL produced a book and website featuring these extraordinary photos as a way to document this historic avenue and to inform people in the neighborhood about the proposed rezoning. For example, Isabel Khalife, featured in one of Santos’s pieces for the collection, Came to the Bronx 24 years ago from Ponce, Puerto Rico in search of a better economic future. She has worked at the 99 Cents USA store as a cashier for the last two years and financed her two son’s high school and university education through her earnings. Rather than being reduced to another commodity in the store, Khalife and her lived experiences of Jerome Avenue come to life in the photograph and in a new representation of the Bronx. The Jerome Avenue Project
Rhynna Santos, a Puerto Rican Bronx resident and member of the BPL explains how her participation in the project also meant engaging personally with a variety of people from the neighborhood. These experiences have fueled her development as a photographer and the curator of the popular Instagram feed @everydaybronx. Featuring the work of street and documentary photographers, the feed attempts to tell a more complex about everyday life in the Bronx.

Through her engagement with the BDC, Santos has also developed as a photographer with a unique point of view about the
vibrant cultural life of the Bronx. Instead of the dissociation of struggle from representations of struggle, these cultural actors speak to aggrieved communities and not simply of their experiences. They ask, “what is your story” and engage in the work of collectively developing strategies to tell it. They create art collectively and question why they’ve been excluded from learning formally about art or learning how to think of themselves as art. They gain knowledge from community and at the same time keep learning how to see them, how to re-present them, and how to see them again.

In her portrait of Nusaiba Martha Guerrera, Santos captures the unique cultural dialogues, conflicts, and social critiques
that reflect the burrough. A Bronx native, Guerrera stands in her mother’s “botanica,” a store specializing in Santeria religious products. Her parents immigrated to the US from Cuba in the early 1980s. Although she grew up in her mother’s Santeria religion, Nusaiba converted to the Muslim faith in 2011. She used to interpret for Spanish-speaking clients at her mother’s store during religious consultations. After her conversion to Islam, Ms. Guerrera no longer felt comfortable working as an interpreter because Santeria worships more than one god. Her mother’s unwillingness to rely on other interpreters caused a significant financial decline in the family’s botanica. Nusaiba, a former navy sailor, is now pursuing a Master’s degree in education at City College with the goal of becoming a professor of religion. After her conversion she says, “now I feel like I am walking on solid ground.” The community sees itself in the community as the art of the community and a community of artists.

In the article “A Daughter Documents Her Father” Rhynna Santos provides to the world candid black-and-white photographs and a brief entry into the world of her father Ray “El
maestro” Santos. A legendary Puerto Rican musician, composer, conductor, arranger, teacher, father, and Bronx resident, his biography includes study at the prestigious Juilliard School, twenty-eight years of teaching at City College in New York, and “performances with the Big Three – Tito Puente, Machito, and Tito Rodriguez.”44 Santos was a musician whose musical epiphany came through Coleman Hawkins and his expression of “Body and Soul” on tenor sax. But Hawkins’s example of pursu-

ing one’s own path was El maestro’s model for his daughter, and in turn brought her to the Bronx Documentary Center.

If we prepare ourselves to listen, we don’t need to keep waiting for the music. What would the music sound like then?