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A Darker Gaze: Visual Practice and the Augmented Identity of the Black Male

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A DARKER GAZE: VISUAL PRACTICE AND THE AUGMENTED IDENTITY OF THE BLACK MALE

By

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Abstract

*A Darker Gaze* is an interdisciplinary investigation that uses appropriated images to promote a postmodern representation of the American Black male within personal and national identity composites. As a visual practice, this work uses still and time-based media to analyze the idiosyncratic nature of the Black male aesthetic. Language is remixed with technology to generate glitches in the coded structure of images of the Black male, in turn recontextualizing him alongside other visual forms. The process of this layered photographic representation unpacks the racial and ethnic nuances of my identity structure, and creates a public self-reflection and prolonged gaze at a subject that is often overlooked within the collective national identity.
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Terminology

As we witness how the commentaries of this investigation materialize into a set of visual forms, viewer assumptions and knowledge discrepancies will become increasingly welcome. However, to begin with a concise and transparent discussion on the facets of identity, it is important to contextualize several recurring words and concepts prone to ambiguity. For the sake of cogency, it is best to strictly define the following:

The American Mainstream

The American Mainstream is a concept borrowed from Orlando Patterson’s essay *The Social and Cultural Matrix of Black Youth*, providing working definitions of America as a cultural composite. This concept includes the following two definitions: the Hegemonic and Popular Mainstream.

The Hegemonic Mainstream is “the capitalist economy, the political system, the educational system, and the vast set of national organizations that define and meet Americans’ basic and ultimate desires and goals.”1 The Popular Mainstream includes “all cultural and representations that are generally available, usually through the commercialized and commodified mass media, are cognitively accessible and valued by the majority or large plurality of consumers, and require no formal authorization for their production.”2 I use these terms to describe the institutions that have educated me on the social and political leanings of America outside communities of color. The term Mainstream is used to jointly refer to these terms at once, and it should not be conflated with Patterson’s American Mainstream.

Race and Ethnicity

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2 Ibid., 53.
Sandefur, Campbell, and Boek, refer to racial and ethnic identity as being socially constructed through an exchange between selection by the individual and assignment from the outside world. Additionally, Black individuals tend to have less choice in moving in and out of these social constructs, though there is some leniency on ethnicity.3

The increased immigration of individuals of African descent (primarily from Africa and the Caribbean) further complicates the social construction of African American identity. Second-generation black immigrants face an inherent tension: Their parents, in general, hold negative stereotypes of black Americans, and yet these second-generation persons are often identified as American blacks by others because they lack the ethnic markers of their parents (e.g., accent) (Waters, 1994, 1999). As with biracial individuals, this group shows evidence of a variety of racial identities. Among Waters' respondents, some black immigrants adopted a black American identity, others had a strong ethnic identity (e.g., Jamaican, Trinidadian), and still others embraced an immigrant identity. These recent studies suggest that although African American historically has been an extremely rigid racial category, the situation may be slowly changing.4

Following this social constructionist model, as well as to establish a clear system of reference to the artwork being produced, I define my race as Black. Black covers all ethnicities of the African diaspora, and tightly encapsulates the history and social strivings of an entire people. Alongside my Black race are my Jamaican-American and African-American ethnicities. I primarily see myself as Jamaican-American due to my lifelong immersion within the culture, and also identify as African-American because I was born in the United States, have assimilated some African-American cultural practices, and the general public is more likely to term me as such upon first impression.

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4 Ibid.,32.
The Postmodern Identity Composite

As a young adult, my perception of reality has begun to rapidly evolve in response to a near daily flood of information and interactions that characterize the university environment. Each new encounter, no matter how inconsequential, presents itself as an opportunity to gain new knowledge that either augments or contradicts my personal world view. Over the past two years, much of my Studio Art and Humanities coursework has centered around striking up social commentary—particularly that of race and ethnicity—that has birthed a multilayered state of cognitive dissonance on what it means to be a minority in America.

As the product of a Jamaican-American upbringing that emphasized an education amongst a Mainstream society, adolescence rendered my conceptual map of the ideological landscape of America to be mostly post-racial. I made little effort to explore neither my race, nor ethnicity beyond the clichéd teachings of the Civil Rights era in history classes. Despite being Black, my family’s immigrant status largely excluded them from American history, leaving them estranged from the prototypical racioethnic narrative. Racial prejudices against them were compounded with being designated as foreign or low-income, shaping a slightly different reality of oppression from the African-American. Older family members were largely prejudiced and misinformed of African-American culture, and I was discouraged from speaking in the African-American Vernacular or participating in other ghetto behaviors from an early age. If I rebelled, I was corrected in Jamaican Patois to speak proper. Overlooking the irony of using one slave-based informal English language to debase another, such familial prejudices towards other low-income groups led me to a limited and superficial understanding of the dynamic between race, ethnicity, and the individual.
This juvenile model of race does little good for me, now a Black man, attending a predominantly White institution, in the South, amidst a national crisis of systemic racism and police brutality. I have entered my twenties inundated with images of young Black men gunned down by law enforcement, forcing me to discard post-racial conceptions and reevaluate my sense of self. This macroscopic issue occurs alongside a phase in my life in which my environment is mostly White or affluent, without the balance of my family and the cultural affirmation they provide. These external conditions have essentially bled into my interactions with others, and for the first time I have begun to recognize the pressing, yet subtle reality of a twenty-first century racial dynamic.

Most prejudice I encounter seems to be veiled through subtle linguistic expressions Derald Wing Sue et al. refers to as microinvalidations. These are “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.”5 Being told how well-spoken I am, how my behavior practically deems me White, how cute I am for a Black guy; they have all made subliminal devaluations of an indelible part of my reality, and damage my own reflections on the Black male. To consider me acceptable for simply existing beyond stereotypes crafted on Blackness, or to commend me for closely paralleling conventions of Whiteness, is not only humiliating, but also a great measure of how others regard me—or those like me—at first glance.

This act of watching oneself not just through self-awareness, but also “through the eyes of others,” is termed by W.E.B. DuBois as double consciousness.6 This multilayered surveillance forces an evaluation of the self through standards, rules, and ideals set by people unlike you.

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Double consciousness forces the African-American to reconcile being “both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spat upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.” DuBois implies that there is little a person of color can do to achieve a singular notion of selfhood, rendering identity as a perplexing and fractured representation of our own humanity.

DuBois creates a foundation for identity to be understood as a contradiction. Part of my emerging need to define who I am within my surrounding environment, has been because my anxiety over contradictions between my behavior, and the assumptions others have of me. Stuart Hall presents the idea of a postmodern identity in *Modernity and its Futures*:

This produces the post-modern subject, conceptualized as having no fixed, essential, or permanent identity. Identity becomes a "moveable feast": formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us (Hall, 1987). It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent "self." Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or "narrative of the self" about ourselves (see Hall, 1990). The fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy, Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with—at least temporarily.

Under this postmodern definition, the individual exists as a structure of separate and transient parts that evolve throughout a lifetime. Essentially, context evokes a sense of identity: if I know myself to be male, that particular knowledge only becomes imperative when I am confronted with conversations or environments impacting masculinity. Furthermore, these fragments of identity have little continuity—the external representations of manhood that impact

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my concept of masculinity have not been the same throughout my existence, and will continue to change. So can be said for Blackness, foreignness, and every other designating factor to my life. What is useful about this model is that by eliminating a singular narrative of the individual, it becomes difficult to neglect or hardly recognize smaller facets of identity. When identity inhabits separate entities, formulating respective systems of reality, it facilitates the process of creating a profound and structured analysis of relationships with the surrounding world.

Utilizing the specificity of double consciousness in conjunction with a postmodern identity, creates a system for examining the specific and contradicting parts of my Jamaican-American ethnicity, African-American ethnicity, and Black race. This model fosters a need to understand how each aspect of identity crafts its own reality, as well as how that fabricated reality is understood from the outsider’s perspective. By examining these realities simultaneously, I am able to generate a process for controlling self-representation and understanding: I am able to grasp the representation of the Black male for myself, in turn controlling how each relevant part of me perceives that representation.

Beyond the individual, there is also the configuration of the Black male within the national identity. Hall makes reference to a nation being “a symbolic community,” and goes on to explain important components within the national identity, including the narrative of the nation.  

...it is told and retold in national histories, literatures, the media, and popular culture. These provide a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols, and rituals which stand for, or represent, the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation. As members of such an “imagined community” we see ourselves in our mind’s eye sharing in this narrative. It lends significance and importance to our humdrum existence, connecting our everyday lives with a national destiny that pre-existed us and will outlive us.

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9 Hall. Modernity: an introduction to modern societies, 612.
10 Ibid., 613.
Using popular and news media as a reflection of national narrative, the representation of the Black male in this context is limited and excludes nuance. This means Black men are being retold an inaccurate story of themselves, and are excluded in some capacity from their “imagined community.” A Darker Gaze emerges as a practice in coercing a complete image of the Black male back into the national narrative, as well as create a representation of the Black male that suits the postmodern system of individual identity.
Establishing a Visual Context

The Power of Appropriated Media

The visual aspect of this work is grounded in a new media conception of appropriated images. By taking established images created by others, and recontextualizing them in a twenty-first century perspective, the role of the artist transforms from image maker, to interrogator. Control is asserted over the previously owned, and the work begins to question perceptions and intentions of the original owner, as well as their authority before and after the work is created. Furthermore, an appropriated practice works as a depiction of my process of consuming and synthesizing an image, and the new conclusions that may be drawn from this act.

Carrie Mae Weems accomplishes a strong appropriation-based work in From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, 1995–1996. In this work, she uses thirty-three historical images that document the evolution of African-Americans from slavery into the mid-twentieth century, each expressing fragments of a written narrative. With the addition of text and a red hue cast over the black and white prints, these photos assert a voice that drowns out the power of the photographer, and the intended audience of the original images.

The Intet of the Practice

The main objective of this work is to fabricate an environment that creates a visual map of my postmodern, double-conscious identity. Just as I am fragmented into a set of distinct and overlapping parts, so too is the exhibition space. Each work is based on photographer John H. White’s images of the Black male from the mid-twentieth century series DOCUMERICA. Pieces of text from James Baldwin essays are inserted into a text-based source code of White’s photos to create a glitched image. By fracturing the photograph of the Black male, it renders the identity
fragment as an ambiguous phase of a greater image, and lends room for it to be greater informed by surrounding visual context. In its final form, the work is composed as a video installation that juxtaposes time-based cultural artifacts of the Black male against the still glitched images I have created.

Through emphasis on the context of the image, the viewer must question what particular aspect of my individual racioethnic identity they are engaging with, as well as how this correlates with the greater national narrative on identity. The viewer must questions their inherent understanding of the Black male, and how easily their perception changes with each fragment.

By contemplating various methods of representing my own reality, I generate a self portrait with no direct reference to my image. I craft a dialogue between artificial identity fragments, and gain control over the sensory data that builds the perceptions of my actual identity composite. This creates a practice in which I am able to exercise control over images of myself at individual and macroscopic levels. The glitch becomes a visual representation and celebration of disruption within the individual, and the surrounding images structure an analysis on the history and reality of the Black male.
Process Images

[Images of children in uniform holding sticks]
Conclusions and Future Intentions

With the notion of identity being understood in such a faceted manner, there leaves room for a multitude of investigations into the nature of the individual as reflection or summation of an external environment. As a work striving for clarity and a more rational sense of the self, much of the dialogues and images have largely centered around personal assumptions and perspectives. Moving forward, the work can become critical and engaging if the same source images are provided to another artist of color to create an original composition. A shared practice would also question the fate of an image that is appropriated by a community, and delve into methods of differentiating the same images a multiple number of times. Ultimately, I see the discussion of race, ethnicity, and gender shifting away from discussions on my identity, and more towards cultural, historical, and political events. By adopting such a practice, the process of making gains a greater capacity to shift worldviews, and facilitate artforms and the general public in becoming more critically aware.
Bibliography


