THE BLACK CULTURE INDUSTRY

ELLIS CASHMORE

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The Black Culture Industry

This insightful study of the relationship between black culture, wealth, and race relations…allows the reader to understand better, and more clearly, the nature and evolution of race relations in the United States, and how culture and art can be utilized by wealthy and powerful interests to manage race

James Jennings, Director of the William Monroe Trotter Institute at the University of Massachusetts, author of *The Politics of Black Empowerment*

Ellis Cashmore's book offers an evocative and engaging look inside black cultural industries

Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Institute of Social Studies, Holland, author of *White on Black*

Can there be such a thing as an authentic black culture, when the industry that produces it is controlled by white-owned corporations? Cashmore's account of how black culture has been converted into a commodity throws into question the very idea of an authentic black culture. It shows how blacks have been permitted success within the entertainment industry only on the condition that they conform to whites' stereotypical images, and how black entrepreneurs, when they reach the top of corporate entertainment ladder, have tended to act very much as whites have done in similar circumstances.

Developing a history of black culture from the post-emancipation period to the present—from negro spirituals to rap—Cashmore argues that inflating the value of a commodified "black culture" may actually work against the interests of racial justice, and that its most significant—and pernicious—effect may be in signalling the end of racism while keeping the racial hierarchy essentially intact.

Ellis Cashmore is the author of…*and there was television* and *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations*. He has held academic positions at the Universities of Washington, Tampa, Massachusetts, Hong Kong and Aston, England, and is currently Professor of Sociology at Staffordshire University, England.

Routledge books by Ellis Cashmore

…and there was television

Making sense of sports

Dictionary of race and ethnic relations

Black sportsmen

Out of order? Policing black people (with Eugene McLaughlin)

The Black Culture Industry

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Contents

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Do you know why the white man hates you? Because every time he sees your face he sees a mirror of his crime and his guilty conscience can't bear it.

Malcolm X

You value things you can master. Whatever white men have permitted us to do we have mastered

Bernard Vanderstell, in *Drylongso* by John Langston Gwaltney

Chapter one
Crack in the Wall

THIRTY YEARS AGO, whites were taught to fear difference. The sight of a black man in a suit was enough to cause alarm in some areas. One of the purposes of segregation was to prevent the potential contamination that might be caused by contact with "others." The others in question were not only different in appearance, language and lifestyle: they were inferior. Neither the moral nor the constitutional imperative behind the separate-but-equal idea had any force at all.

Today, whites embrace the differences that once disturbed them: appreciation and enjoyment have replaced uneasiness. The images whites held of blacks have changed in harmony with changes in aesthetic tastes. What was once disparaged and mocked is now regarded as part of legitimate culture. Any residual menace still lurking in African American practices and pursuits has been domesticated, leaving a black culture capable of being adapted, refined, mass-produced and marketed. Whites not only appreciate black culture: they buy it. Having appropriated music, visual arts and the literature traditionally associated with African Americans, they have put it on the market. Black culture is now open for business. A great many blacks have become rich on the back of it. An even greater number of whites have prospered. This book is about the industry that makes all this possible.

In the course of the book, we will see how black culture has been converted into a commodity, usually in the interests of white-owned corporations; how blacks have been permitted to excel in entertainment only on the condition that they conform to whites' images of blacks; and how blacks themselves, when they rise to the top of the corporate entertainment ladder, have tended to act precisely as whites have in similar circumstances.

One of the myths I hope to expose is that of an unbroken continuum that stretches back from rap music through soul, gospel and negro spirituals to the African-derived slave traditions. This is a melodramatic construction of black culture and one which does no justice to its intricacies or indeed hiatuses. Although impressive as a rallying cry for unity, a "call to consciousness," as the film director Mario van Peebles once put it, the concept of a distinct black cultural tradition is questionable. Cultures, whether African or European in origin, have merged and melded over time and space.

"The history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowings," writes Edward Said, in his book *Culture and Imperialism*. "Cultures are not impermeable." Western science, for example, borrowed from Arabs, who had, in turn, borrowed from India and Greece.

Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* shows how Egyptian and Semitic influences bore on Greek civilizations, though these influences were either obscured or left unacknowledged. Said concludes: "Culture is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures" (1993:261–62. Year of publication followed by page numbers quoted will be given in parenthesis throughout the text).

There are rather more appropriations than common experiences and interdependences in the cultures I will look at. My examination will reveal the considerable extent to which whites have intervened in black culture, shaping it, changing it, packaging it, producing it, merchandising it, distributing it, franchising it and turning into any shape that will turn a profit.

"Making black expressiveness a commodity," is how Houston Baker describes the process I am writing about. "Afro-America's exchange power has always been coextensive with its stock of expressive resources," he observes in his *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1987:196). Blacks have entered into negotiations with whites, bargaining with their most valuable resource—culture. There are understandable historical reasons for this, many written of by David Levering Lewis in his study of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. After World War I, blacks were denied membership to labor unions, kept out of decent jobs, prevented from participating in the the political process and, generally, marginalized. But, states Lewis: "No exclusionary rules had been laid down regarding a place in the arts. Here was a small crack in the wall of racism, a fissure that was worth trying to widen" (1981:48). This book, in part, chronicles the attempts to widen that fissure.

In the process of chronicling, I will suggest that inflating the significance of black culture may work against tangible enhancements to the lives of African Americans. The most significant value of black culture may be in providing whites with proof of the end of racism while keeping the racial hierarchy essentially intact. If this is the case, the argument might run like this:

Years ago, the United States was torn by what some called "An American Dilemma," that is, the land of the free was free for only whites, and blacks were profoundly unfree. In 1963, two years before his death, Malcolm X observed: "The white man has a guilt complex and the white people today are so afraid since they know what they have done to the black people in this country" (1971:115).

The guilt was hardly lessened by the establishment of civil rights because, for years after, nearly four times as many African American families lived below the poverty line as white families, black youths under the age of 20 were four times as likely to die by murder than whites of the same age group, black infants died at twice the rate of white infants, the net worth of a typical black household was about a tenth of that of a typical white household, a black youth's chances of going to prison were better than he or she had of going to a university and, in many states, five to ten times as many blacks as whites between 18 and 30 were imprisoned. The catalog could continue. But blacks were capable of *some* things and whites became mature enough to accept them. Indisputable evidence of this came principally in entertainment and sports, where blacks literally earned fortunes—and the respect of whites. The hatred and racism that pockmarked

America has now abated: whites not only recognize that there is a legitimate black culture: they applaud it. And keep this as evidence of the dilemma's resolution.

Discrimination is deplored, its effects regretted. Aspects of the black experience can be integrated into the mainstream and, with the advent of the mass media, consumed without even going near black people. Hit a remote control button and summon the sounds and images of the ghetto. This is culture as the antidote to racism, a way of removing the complexities of history and society from the mind by introducing a painless cure: legitimize black culture, its literature, its religions, its athleticism and, perhaps above all, its music. If this is so, it is time for black culture to be examined with the same kind of cyncism that Theodor Adorno brought to American culture in general. Adorno's most potent argument was that the culture ushered in during late modernity was—and is—manufactured by elites to serve their own interests, often commercially as well as politically motivated ones.

The resemblance between the ways culture and other artefacts of industrial society are produced and distributed was sufficient for Adorno to coin the term *The Culture Industry*. I want to entertain the possibility that black culture is commodified and, at the same time, urge caution about welcoming it as a new basis of power for black people. To do so, I focus on black music, which is virtually synonymous with black culture. In his introduction to *Black Talk* (originally published in 1971) Ben Sidran wrote: "Music is not only a reflection of the values of black culture, but to some extent, the basis upon which it is built" (1995:xxi).

My account of its history and development will accentuate the intrusion of sometimes subtle and conflicting forces in the formation of what we have come to regard as black culture. It will also display the role of entrepreneurs, both black and white, in promoting a culture from which they have sought to profit. And it will open out the meaning of the 1992 track, "Famous and Dandy (like Amos 'n' Andy)" in which the band The Disposable Heroes of HipHoprisy self-reflect that black people can be rented to "perform any feat" (from *Hypocrisy is the Greatest Luxury,* 4th&B'Way™, Island Records).

In an effort to spare him the indignity of wearing handcuffs in front of the world's media and the west Los Angeles paparazzi, the accused was made to wear a concealed electronic belt—reportedly designed to stun him with an electric shock should he try to flee. He arrived in a motorcade of presidential proportions, jurors arriving in a sheriff's department bus usually used for carrying prisoners, shielded from the media by tinted glass and a mobile cordon of 240 police officers. It was February 1995: they were on a field trip, a ritual common to Californian murder trials, the purpose of which is to enable jurors to visualize scenes talked about during trials. The scene in this case was the Brentwood home where Nicole Simpson and her friend Ronald Goodman were found dead. Johnnie Cochrane Jr objected when jurors were denied access to a trophy room. He argued that it was unfair to exclude areas that reflected well on his client. The trial judge agreed, but insisted that a life-sized statue of the accused in football uniform be covered. It was a sheet, though it might just as well have been a sacramental pall that was draped over the icon.

Cochran, LA's leading African American lawyer, led the defense of O.J. Simpson, the ex-football star, sports journalist and movie actor, who was accused of the murder of his former wife and her friend. At times during the trial, Cochran's rhetoric was that of a nonconformist preacher. Robert Shapiro, a white attorney, was Cochran's righthand man.

Both attorneys became internationally-known figures in a matter of weeks; yet, they were bit part players in one of the greatest real life dramas.

The Simpson case was America's defining cultural experience of the decade: it claimed the front page of every newspaper in the USA, Britain and probably everywhere else in the world. The television companies gave it gavel-to-gavel coverage and were rewarded with record-breaking viewer ratings. Even the soaps were eased aside to make room for a story that was every bit as involving as *Days of Our Lives* and had an additional dimension—that of race.

While both sets of attorneys publicly announced their intention not to exploit the race issue, one of the defense's strategies was to shake the credibility of Detective Mark Fuhrman, one of the first police officers to arrive at the scene, at first by hinting at his racism. He had, it was alleged, made racist remarks to a psychiatrist. Soon, the entire focus of the case shifted to the detective's racial slurs and it was he rather than the defendant who began to dominate the front pages. The acquittal was widely seen as an expression of outrage at the racism in the Los Angeles Police Department that had been brutally exposed in the Rodney King tapes three years before. The Simpson case unearthed the possibility—however unlikely—that a racist plan had been designed by the LAPD to frame Simpson, an obviously successful millionaire African American.

Without his kind of money, Simpson might have become just another inmate in a prison system already overpopulated by black males: about 32.2 percent of young black American men are in prison, on parole or on probation; in many states, five to ten times as many black men under the age of 30 are in prison as whites. But, Simpson had sufficient funds to hire a top defense team; his legal fees are thought to have been in the region of $10 million.

Time magazine, in its first issue following Simpson's arrest, featured his police mugshot on the front cover. No surprises here: the photograph almost became omnipresent, with virtually every daily and weekly publication making use of the same powerful image. Unshaven black celebrity stares out blankly through hooded eyes, his arrest sheet number BK401397006179 strapped across his chest and "Los Angeles Police: Jail Division" framing the shot. But *Time* added its own Stygian touches. Apart from its headline AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY, it artificially darkened Simpson's face and surrounded it in murky shadow to produce an image that resonated menace.

"No racial implication was intended," the magazine's editor assured 800,000 computer bulletin board readers. The doctored photo was just "a work of art." Not so, answered an assembly of black interest groups led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The cover presented a stereotype that pandered to white racism. Here was the surly black brute, dark, sinister and dangerous, a throwback to the stereotype of years past, when lynching or emasculation were the prescribed methods of taming bestial black males. Even a superficial "reading" of the image revealed a crudely coded message: "Here's OJ, black as sin; no longer someone who entertains whites, whether on the sports field or the screen, but a coveter of a white woman."

Some accused the magazine of a scabrous attempt to crank up circulation figures by appealing to the latent racism of white America. This was the criticism of rival magazine, *Newsweek,* which published the same photograph, but without the additional brushwork. *Time's* editor, James Gaines, would not apologize for the tampering and actually tried to

reverse the tide, by prompting the query: is it not racist to say that being blacker equates to being more sinister?

At the same time as the Simpson hearings, another image of blackness was being relayed around the world via satellite and optic fibers; that of Michael Jackson, who married Lisa-Marie Presley, Scientology devotee and daughter of Elvis. At first, an incredulous media laughed at the very idea. Incomprehensible: the oddest, most famous, yet reclusive rock star in the world getting hitched to the unimaginably wealthy progeny of a once equally famous and equally reclusive white rock star who died dissipated by booze and drugs.

The timing of the wedding was unusual. Jackson, deeply troubled by a dependency on sleeping pills and forced to cancel a world concert tour, was suspected of having molested a 14-year-old LA boy, whom he paid an undisclosed sum, rumored to be over $25 million. Like Simpson, he found that, while money may not whiten, it does buy the kinds of privileges not available to the vast majority of African Americans.

Jackson, of course, was a child prodigy, a singer in the Jackson 5, then the Jacksons, before going solo and breaking records with his bestselling albums and concerts. His popularity was universal and fascination with him grew as he metamorphosed from an African American child, then youth, to a chalky-skinned individual, his face resculpted many times over until its appearance owed more to a surgeon's scalpel than the gene pool. Jackson befriended a chimpanzee, he bought the skeleton of the famed Elephant Man, he slept in an oxygen tent. The public's devotion to him never wavered, despite his idiosyncrasies.

Perhaps his cds and videos carried him; perhaps his flawed and vulnerable private self endeared him to fans. Perhaps even his changing pigmentation—a product of either a skin condition or cosmetic surgery, depending on whose version you favored—won him fans. Whatever the source of his attraction, Jackson was a cultural icon in the strongest sense of the term, a figure who both embodied and formed a constituent part of late twentieth century culture. A black male, born to an African American family, but whose physical form defied any clear ethnic categorization.

Images of blackness are power; the power to frame and affect. The images of Simpson and Jackson presented in the mid-1990s were not just images of black people: they were whites' images, representations created and recreated anew over a period of several hundred years. If Simpson was the brute nigger, Jackson was the black child of countless pictures and posters that circulated in Europe and North America from the seventeenth century and which depicted a white couple scrubbing a black child with soap in a futile attempt to rid him of his blackness. "To labor in vain" was the saying that accompanied the illustration. Jackson's efforts to transmogrify himself were as futile as those of the white couple of yore.

The conventional and always rhetorical question asked is: who are the producers and consumers of these and other images? And the answer is assumed to be obvious. What purposes do they serve? is a related question and here the answer, though not as clear-cut, is still apparent and involves the concept of cultural colonialism. The principal European powers of the past four centuries have divested themselves of the political and economic control they once had over their colonies and the USA has legally granted civil rights to all its citizens, but something else remains as an obstacle to equality of opportunity and

treatment. Something far less tangible than the institutional barriers that isolated blacks and retarded their progress in every social sphere.

Jan Pieterse, in his authoritative book, *White on Black,* uses the term "pathos of inequality" to describe the quality of contemporary western culture that excites the thought and emotion of racial hierarchy. In virtually every discourse involving blacks and whites, it is this quality "rather than race or racism in a narrow, shallow sense, which permeates the images of white on black" (1992:51). The title of Pieterse's work carries the import of his thesis: the historical relationship he is referring to is an imbalanced one, weighted in favor of white colonizers and ex-colonizers who sought to impose images of blacks that they, rather than blacks, had created.

Public representation in a way reflects other interests and images of blacks that elicit a pathos of inequality and serve to stir ideas, not always openly negative ones, but ones which somehow conjure up a sense of hierarchy. The hierarchy in question is pretty much the same one that has endured for 400 years: whites remaining aloft, with subordinate groups of other colors scrambling beneath them. A respectful acknowledgment of blacks' musical gifts, their athletic talent, their lithe, untutored sense of rhythm might seem like a half-compliment. But, it unlocks the same vault of ideas that contains well-worn stereotypes, like the dumb nigger, the selfless domestic worker, or mammy, and the lusty, promiscuous black Venus. All of these contribute the general image of African-originated and -descended groups—whether in the USA, Britain or continental Europe—as *others,* groups that are actually in mainstream culture, yet at the same time not integral parts of it.

None of this is original and the past decade has seen the emergence of a near-consensus regarding the power of imagery. To have cultural power is to have power, period. This includes the ability to define not only images that circulate in culture, but also the content of religious ideas, of art, of electronic media of communication, of popular ideas; all of which influence perceptions and behavior. It follows that having access to the means of changing all of these places one in an advantageous position at a number of levels. One of the consequences of being able to reshape images and ideas, specifically of black people, is the potential to change the racial hierarchy and, so, the pathos of inequality that underpins it. This is why so much store is placed on those African Americans who have assumed some measure of cultural power: people who have control over how representations of blacks are formed and disseminated carry a heavy burden, whether they like it or not.

It used to be that black people who had money and a certain amount of prestige were either sports stars or showbusiness performers. They made comparatively good money and enjoyed a status of sorts, though an apophthegm captures the conditional nature of the status: the only difference between a black shoeshine boy and a black Olympic champion is that the one is a nigger and the other is a fast nigger. The cultural impact of sports and showbiz stars was limited, in the sense that they added new, complementary dimensions to existing stereotypes, rather than undermining them. True, Sugar Ray Robinson was an exceptional fighter, who possessed an almost inhuman mastery of all elements of boxing and was able to prolong his distinguished career well into his thirties. True, Nat King Cole had unrivalled pitch and vocal qualities. But, for all their glory and esteem, they never mounted anything resembling a challenge to existing ideas about blacks. They expanded on older images. Many other champions and entertainers followed

them, without affecting the quality of "otherness" that characterized blacks in the eyes of whites.

The problem was crystallized in the career of Muhammad Ali. A boxer of extraordinary technical brilliance, he self-consciously attempted to transcend sports, seizing the opportunities offered to the occupant of sport's most prestigious position, heavyweight champion of the world, to make *ex cathedra* pronouncements on issues that ranged from morality to the military. Even at a distance of some twenty years after his heyday it is still hard to know what to make of the man. Was he a charismatic leader, wise and strong, earnest in his provocative but well-motivated endeavors to shake the US's and possibly the world's black population into realizing its own potential? Or was he just another power-crazed fighter who was naïve enough to think above his station and whose career ended as abjectly as a run-of-the-mill club fighter? Or simply a fallibly human mixture of both?

At the time of Ali's ascent in the 1960s and 1970s, other blacks were also fighting: not in a literal sense this time—they were fighting to get into industries that were historically controlled by whites. The faces of the sports stars and the entertainers who made up what was then an African American elite may have been black; but the promoters, the managers, the executives and the audiences were white. Then at last came an emergent group of black entrepreneurs who could at least approach the kind of positions that carried the power to change images and ideas. Not just performers who stood on stage or ran the length of a football field for the amusement of whites (and audiences would have been predominantly white, of course); but people who were trying to wrest control of industries that dispensed cultural products, like music and sport, and who ultimately should have been able to destabilize the racial hierarchy.

The concept of the racial hierarchy deserves a little explanation. I use it in the same way as Louis Kushnick in the 1980s and, more recently James Jennings. Kushnick's mission was to explain how racism has retarded the progress of both the black and white working class in the USA and Britain in the postwar years (Kushnick, 1981). Jennings describes Kushnick's interpretation of racism as a bribe, whites enjoying psychological privileges and material benefits in exchange for not questioning a set of social arrangements that exploited them slightly less than it did blacks and other ethnic minorities.

Imagine a fir tree with a few small but powerful branches perched near the apex and the majority down towards the base where the shoots fan out; ethnic minorities stand about the trunk of the tree waiting for a chance to shin up. The idea, according to Kushnick, is that whites get to keep their places at the lower levels as long as they keep blacks off the branches completely. This may not even be a conscious process: whites necessarily have privileges; they cannot avoid them. Working class whites "are most afraid of seeing the distance between themselves and the blacks disappear," argues Michel Wierviorka in his *The Arena of Racism*. It is this sharing of relative privilege that "allows whites from different social backgrounds, who, in other circumstances, would be opposed to, or would keep apart from, one another, to come together" (1995:19, 20).

"Even a cursory examination of academe, entertainment and sports, housing, the military, management of cultural institutions, the corporate sector, or government in the United States reveals that generally blacks serve under, report to, or are held accountable by whites in power," writes Jennings in his *Blacks, Latinos and Asians in Urban America*

(1994:149). "And even in most of the institutions managed by blacks—whether historically black colleges, local social welfare programs, public schools, and other institutions—final authority rests with whites."

The cultural implications of this racial hierarchy are many. The value attached to products coming out of cultural institutions managed—and, we might add to Jennings' point, owned—by whites is correspondingly valued. The products of those few cultural institutions not managed or owned by whites are devalued. At least, that has been the case until recent years, when a warrantable black culture, owned, managed and, in the most general way, controlled by African Americans has developed. This meant that its products were not films, music and other media that used primarily or even exclusively black crews and black actors. As Ada Gay Griffin writes, "They are productions in which the artistic vision is controlled by a person of African descent." Its significance is multifaceted, but, as Griffin notes, "Ultimately, it is about power over the image" (1992:231).

What exactly is black culture? It is a term we hear a lot about today. We know it is a product and expression of African American and Afro-Caribbean creativity, embodying values, ambitions and orientations unique to black people, whether in the States, Britain or elsewhere in the diaspora. Conventionally, culture is contrasted to nature: we are not born with it, but into it. We acquire it through language and transmit it to future generations, through instruction. In its widest sense, culture is everything we learn from others and pass on to still others. It does not involve instinct, natural propensities or biological dispositions. So, when we talk of black culture, we are not referring to any of the qualities purportedly deriving from black people as a "race" (and I place the word in inverted commas to emphasize my rejection of it as anything other than a mistaken belief). Yet, there is something distinct about black culture and, if it is not anything to do with spurious biology, it must come from experience.

In his classic anticolonial treatise, *Black Skin, White Masks,* Frantz Fanon wrote, "What is often called the black soul is a white man's artefact" (1986:16). Fanon was making a psychoanalytic point and his purpose in making it was quite different to mine in this book. But, it is a powerful point nevertheless and one I want to retain.

We often hear of the black experience, that is a set of social and historical conditions that all peoples whose ancestors originated in Africa have lived through in one way or another and which unifies them. Struggle: this was the basis of the experience. Racism, in whatever form, whether manifest or covert, imposes limits with which black peoples have to contend. Exile, enslavement and discrimination were all integral parts of the experience and all resonate through the lives of black people, even today.

Out of struggle comes unity of purpose and identity, a sense of resolve and cohesion. This was a popular argument in favor of the black experience and quite logically flowed into arguments about the character of black culture. Amid the different forms of discourse lay something of the essence of blackness, a nucleus created out of struggle. All cultural expressions have at their center this essence of blackness.

It is, as Paul Gilroy acknowledges, "a potent idea" that is "frequently wheeled in when it is necessary to appreciate the things that (potentially) connect black people to one another rather than think seriously about the divisions in the imagined community of the race" (1993:24). Gilroy's work concerns what he calls *The Black Atlantic,* a "webbed network" comprising elements of African, American, Caribbean and British culture, but

without a core essence. Criticizing what he calls "a brute pan-Africanism," Gilroy challenges purified conceptions of black culture as the contemporary expression of a centuries-long tradition.

In one heady passage, Gilroy describes versions of rap music, often accepted as a strong expression of contemporary black culture, as "a culture of compensation that self-consciously salves the misery of the disempowered and subordinated" (1993:85). And, in another, he broadens this point to include other cultural forms, like song, that "are developed both as a means of transcendence and as a type of compensation for very specific experiences of unfreedom" (1993:123). In his view, blacks have been denied access to some cultural forms, like literacy; the forms to which they have been granted access, like sport and music, have performed compensatory functions.

In this sense, black soul could well be an artefact of whites: a music forged in the smelter of oppression and exploitation, soul is often seen as the special preserve of blacks, but not always as a compensation for the "experiences of unfreedom," as Gilroy would argue. To this I would add that the very term "black soul" to describe a fusion music that owes much to blues and gospel is a creation of whites; most probably a racist creation too. The depth and intensity of emotion that are associated with black soul are not typically available to whites. Yet they come naturally to blacks. So goes the argument. The inference is clear. (We will cover soul music in Chapter five.)

The same might be said for all black culture: it serves to soothe and heal the weals of racism and, as soon as it begins to take on a recognizable shape as a cultural form, the appellation "black" is slapped on it by whites, who are always willing to market it as a commodity. Once this happens, it is said to embody all manner of exotic qualities that are in the province of black people. Whites can only copy and imitate—like Al Jolson did in the 1920s and Vanilla Ice did in the late 1980s. And like any number of white rap bands did in the mid-1990s.

In his book *The Signifying Monkey* Henry L.Gates examines the African American literary tradition as a "fragmented unity" comprising self-conscious speakers of English who defined their status as "one of profound difference vis-à-vis the rest of society" (1988:47). Yet, Gates' analysis of the "subtle and perhaps the most profound trace of an extended engagement between two separate and distinct yet profoundly—even inextricably—related orders of meaning" makes no mention of how commercial imperatives intervened in the "engagement." In stressing the role of cultural producers in developing strategies of resistance, Gates shows how black people share creative credit in disrupting racial hierarchies and "inscribing" black culture.

Compatible with this is Houston Baker's work, especially his *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* in which he argues: "Afro-American expressive culture appears in its complex continuity and genuine cultural authenticity when it is analyzed according to the model that I have proposed" (1987:100). My account brings into question both continuity and authenticity. In her *Cannibal Culture,* Deborah Root proposes that we treat the phrase "cultural authenticity" with some cynicism: it is often "a definition imposed from the outside" and so functions in the interests of those who profit from selling commodified versions of culture (1996:70). We will see how black culture has been subject to such definition and commodification; and how whites profit most from these.

The process of creating commodities out of culture involves strenuous attempts to contain, control and manipulate notions of fidelity: the people who either discover or

manufacture authenticity—and this is not as ironical as it sounds—have needed to calibrate their marketing with changing social conditions. We will see how different types of commodification have been suited to different stages in history. Berry Gordy's prescience in spotting social changes, for example, served him well in moving from an owner of a black music label to a prime mover of the black culture industry—Chapters six and seven deal with the transition. With other culture industry chiefs, Gordy shared an ability to shape, present and sell black culture as something genuine.

On the surface, it appears offensive to argue that black culture is, in some way, not an original product, but a construction: it devalues the creativity, denies the fertility of imagination that lay behind many of the expressions that we now popularly regard as black. Still, it should be stressed that there is nothing natural, less still inevitable, about blackness; any more than there is anything natural about whiteness.

As early as page 17 of *The Shaping of Black America,* Lerone Bennett stresses that "the first white colonists [in America] had no concept of themselves as *white* men. The legal documents identified whites as Englishmen and Christians" (1993:17). The term "white" did not even enter popular usage until the latter part of the seventeenth century. Its associations with guilt, superiority and cultural arrogance came later. Much the same point is made but in far greater detail by Theodore Allen in his book *The Invention of the White Race,* which examines the transformation of English, Irish, Scottish and other European settlers to a single all-inclusive status—whites.

Allen's historical analysis pays particular attention to the experiences of migrant Irish, once victimized and disparaged as degenerate and not amenable to civilizing influences, yet later transformed into defenders of an exploitative order. The Irish were certainly regarded by English colonizers as an inferior racial group (colonization of Ireland took place during the sixteenth century), but were physically indistinct from the English. There were other groups that would today be recognized as white that were readily associated with savagery. But it became expedient to co-opt them into a new inclusive category as a way of shoring up support for the white-controlled slave order.

Correspondingly, neither the word or the status black was in the vocabulary or the culture of the day: the fundamental division of the slave era, at least the early phases, was not between whites and black, but masters and servants. Being black and being held in contempt because of that fact is a relatively recent phenomenon. One of the many interesting features of Bennett's narrative is the emphasis he gives to the common conditions shared by "Negroes or Negers," as they were called, and white indentured servants. "The tasks expected of both were the same and, in the fields, at least, no discrimination seems to have been made in favor of the latter," observes Bennett (1993:18).

My intention here is not to delve into history: simply to point out that, if the statuses black and white are created and not naturally-endowed, then presumably, the cultures attached to them are similarly built. Bennett alludes to the same metaphor of construction when he writes of "the bridges of self-determination that black people built for themselves" (1993:310). How these bridges were built, the conditions under which they were assembled and the support they provided, especially in the postwar years, are described in coming chapters.

I do not accept that there is anything natural or given about the gifts, qualities and characteristics that are customarily attributed by both blacks and whites to black culture.

Blackness is as artificial as whiteness; they are both arbitrary indicators of status that appear only in recent history and have been passed through successive generations with such consistency that they appear for all intents and purposes (at first, whites' purposes) to be part of the natural order. Even this cursory glance at history suggests that the categories black and white were inventions. The consciousness of color that infuses so many artefacts, like art, music and film, with significance is a product of peculiar historical circumstances. That so much of culture still has prefixes of color is a kind of testimony to the fact that those circumstances have not changed as dramatically as many smugly think.

Chapter two
Once Pain and Hunger Have Been Removed

THE HISTORIAN JOSEPH BOSKIN writes of the "incongruity of play and circumstance" that propelled whites toward a conception of blacks that explained the apparent contradiction between the horrendous conditions in which slaves lived and their pleasant, comical mien. "It was a conception that attempted to encompass all the facets of blacks' playfulness: their cheerful and lighthearted manner, penchant for frivolity, rhythmical movements, unusual mannerisms, even their patter of language," Boskin observes of the white mentality in the mid-nineteenth century. "It was an image whose elements were viewed as a blessing and a curse, one that whites were convinced would serve them well in dealing with blacks in any environment or circumstance" (1986:54). For whites, blacks were the embodiment of humor, "mirthful by nature." In this chapter, we will see how the image affected the shape and substance of early black culture.

Reheating overcooked dishes rarely produces a satisfactory meal. Doing likewise with scientific debates has different results. Take the case of Herrnstein and Murray's book *The Bell Curve* (1994). The debate it joined was started in the 1960s by Arthur Jensen, who soared to international infamy after publishing the results of his research in a respectable scientific journal, the *Harvard Educational Review*. The title of the article was "How much can we boost IQ and scholastic achievement?" Jensen's project had been to unravel the riddle of nature versus nurture. Are we born with intelligence, or do we acquire it as we grow up? he asked, though in rather more erudite terms. Specifically, he wanted to test the intelligence of three groups of children: white, black and Latino. Jensen found that blacks consistently scored 15 points below whites. Nothing shocking in this: indeed, it would have been a major surprise had African American children fared any better, given the history of slavery and the denial of civil rights they and their forebears would have endured; the impact of this and other factors on intellectual development is plain enough.

Jensen, though, did not accept that social, cultural or environmental forces, the nurture side of the equation, were the cardinal causes of the persistently low scores of black children. He concluded that genes bore 80 percent of the responsibility for intelligence. Nature, in his experiments, won hands down. Even if, as Jensen stressed, the motives behind the research were all about the spirit of scientific inquiry, the conclusions could not have been designed better for the truth-seeking racist (if that is not an oxymoron). Caucasians are more intelligent than other groups that have been called races and the

reason they are lies in the realm of biology. We can do nothing about it: blacks are naturally inferior.

Nobel prize winner William Shockley threw his scalpel into the arena when he proposed that blacks be sterilized to prevent them from passing on their inferior genes. Unlike Jensen, Shockley did not insist that his motives were pure. Few would have believed him anyway.

The notorious article bearing Jensen's findings drew fire from all quarters and, only years later, after several other studies yielding different results, did the debate die down. Few noticed the embers glowing. Years later, in 1994, Richard Herrnstein, who had once suggested members of the working class carried different genes to their middle class counterparts, and Charles Murray, author of the "black underclass" thesis, published their own study. Entitled *The Bell Curve* to convey the parabola formed when plotting the distribution of intelligence in a population, the book strengthened Jensen's suggested link between IQ and race.

Many studies, said the authors, demonstrated about a 15-point difference in the mean scores of black and white Americans. There is also more equivocal evidence that Asians score significantly higher than whites. Herrnstein died while the book was in production, though Murray survived the trauma and robustly defended its argument. Nature may be unfair in its distribution of talent genes, but its does not determine our destinies. *"Differences in IQ don't much matter,"* emphasized Murray. "We put it in italics; if we could we would put it in neon lights."

The riposte was as sharp and resonant as that which followed Jensen. No one was seriously entertaining Murray's meek apology about IQ differences not mattering, nor his insistence that the results told us only about group differences, not individual ones. In the sample studied, there were many blacks who outscored whites. Glib as it sounded, Murray asserted his commitment to individualism: being born to a group that is collectively inferior does not mean the individual should accept his or her own inferiority. They should travel as far as their natural talent will take them along the road to success; this was the gist of Murray's message.

When Jensen's article was published, the United States was in the throes of a series of changes that were to transfigure America's social and political landscape. The civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King had literally marched its way into public prominence figuratively holding a mirror to white America. This dear, untutored land that created tragedy by either its own ignorance or its own malevolence had turned a nation sundered by slavery into one serrated by class and ethnic divisions. Tormented by the lack of progress that followed the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision to dissolve the legal boundaries that segregated whites and blacks in educational institutions, the States had to negotiate the commission of full civil rights to an African American population openly dissatisfied and prepared, in some instances, to take violently to the streets.

Predictably, the white backlash to desegregation brought an unwelcome reminder that, for many, the traditional institution of slavery was still the favored social arrangement and the segregated society that succeeded it was a move in the wrong direction. The case for desegregating schools had to be fought at local level in many state courtrooms in the south, defenders of the old system resisting the federal injunction to create mixed schooling. One can easily imagine how the Jensen report rained down like manna to this

rearguard. It all but mocked the federal government's vision of an integrated society in which black, white and Latino children shared classrooms while their parents peacefully blended into society, producing ethnic diversity, or pluralism.

The melting pot beloved of the 1960s was in fact full of wormwood-laced stew, the main ingredients simmering without ever mixing. Federal laws could change the rules, but they could not change hearts and minds, at least not in the short (and, as it turned out, not in the medium) term. Jensen's report fortified both heart and mind: it supplied scientific credibility to what was previously only an appeal to tradition and a claim about propriety. You can make blacks and whites learn together, work together, even live together; but you cannot create equality, the research confirmed. And the reason for this is hardly anything to do with historical or social circumstances: it is mainly (80 percent) due to nature. In a way, a perverse way perhaps, this cemented what many whites, especially in southern states that had vehemently opposed the Brown decision, had known all along: that blacks were at the foot of the racial hierarchy for no reason more mysterious than nature. They, the white population, were not responsible for the impoverished conditions of blacks, their lack of formal education, their miserable existence at the fringes of society. Blame mother nature.

The quarter-century that elapsed between the Jensen report and the publication of *The Bell Curve* had seen momentous changes both in the objective condition of black people and in the cultural products they created. How about the black image in the white mind? I take this phrase from the title of George Frederickson's authoritative history, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The debate on Afro-American character and destiny, 1817–1914,* first published in 1971. In his introduction to the second edition of the volume, Frederickson defines his subject matter as "the problem of how ideas become instruments of group advantage or domination" (1987:ix).

This involves not just "what whites thought about blacks," but how black thinkers and writers' contributed to the discourse and imagery. In a sense, my project in this book is similar to Frederickson's, except I am interested in the more recent period in which black musicians emphatically contributed to the discourse and imagery. As they did so, an entire industry largely—though not entirely—owned by whites developed and prospered around them. This is what I refer to as the black culture industry and its full significance in the purgation of white guilt will unfold in chapters to come.

I also have additional objectives because, with Pieterse, I agree that there has been and still is a type of reasoning at work which "transforms a negative stereotype into a positive one" (1992:12). A stigma can become a badge of honor, while remaining a derivative of a stereotype based on simplification, generalization and, at very best, part-truth. We will see evidence of this when we consider African American artists who have been reconstituted as postmodern icons.

Before moving to the specific task, I want to dwell on the epochal period 1787–1837, which overlaps with the era studied by Frederickson, moving then from 1914 to World War II and then to the publication of Jensen's *Harvard Educational Review* article in 1969.1 use the term "epochal period" to describe the phase beginning in 1787 because this marked the beginning of the years of making and shaping of what might warrantably be called black America replete with its own distinct culture. During this period, black people assumed the roles of political and cultural leaders and made tentative moves toward the creation of inchoate institutions that could reflect the unique circumstances

and problems of black people. The church was pivotal in this process. Yet it developed as a response to the specific conditions of black people and those conditions were dictated by whites possessed of the view that blacks were inferior to themselves. Racism, in other words, was the decisive force in the formation of the black church and by implication of black culture. It is impossible to see black culture without considering the ideas and institutions that permitted its growth.

Late in the eighteenth century and early in the nineteenth, representations of blacks as "others" (I will drop the inverted commas from this point) was strikingly different. Contrary to the popular wisdom that blacks were despised and loathed as subhuman, there was a rough consensus in North America about the desirability of creating a unique and homogeneous republic in which black people would play an integral role. The problem was: blacks were manifestly different and inferior beings, so how could they be changed in such a way as to make them acceptable to whites?

Many times, I have tried to understand the enduring near-global popularity of Michael Jackson. A performer practically since he was old enough to grip a microphone, the youngest member of the Jackson 5 (later, the Jacksons) has almost wilfully defied every convention for achieving innocent-messianic status, getting involved in child molestation allegations, developing obsessional personal habits, refusing to give interviews and, oddest of all, undergoing extensive cosmetic surgery that has almost removed all physical traces of his African Americanism. His albums are unerringly bestsellers, though, for this listener at least, not extravagantly brilliant; his videos are ingenious, but owe more to directors and technical staff than to him; and his performances are works of art that draw admiration rather than awe. Yet, Jackson remains arguably the most significant male icon of the late twentieth century.

My own explanation involves reaching back way before 1969, when the Jackson 5 released their first number one, "I want you back" (number two in Britain). To the sixteenth century, in fact, when illustrations depicting a black child immersed in a tub of soap suds being scrubbed by two zealous whites circulated in Europe. Trying to remove the child's color was, of course, "labor in vain" as the phrase went: it was hard but futile work. Just like trying to civilize, educate, upgrade or assimilate Africans. Their blackness was a visible reminder that they were simply not amenable to the kinds of changes or, more aptly, metamorphoses required to bring them into civilized culture,

The motif came from Jeremiah 13:23: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" The answer was, of course, no; and the efforts of the two whites were in vain. Scrub though they might, the child would remain black. Four hundred years ago, they did not have the benefit of cosmetic surgery, otherwise the answer might have been different. Without imputing motives to Jackson, his efforts *appear* to be similar to the scrubbers: to "change his skin."

Might it not at least be feasible to suggest that this exercise has an appeal to many whites, who can admire Jackson, crave his wealth, privilege and status, yet still content themselves with having something he wants, but can never have—whiteness? Perhaps it is Jackson's inability not his considerable ability that provides the source of his extraordinary popularity. His is a largely white following that has grown accustomed to his quirks and oddities. Quirks and oddities, we might add, that could have killed the career of many a performer, especially a black performer. Jackson is different: there is an elaborate mystery about him. He remains the best known, possibly most celebrated and