

BOUND

Blogging Gender, Race and Culture

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM



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Acknowledgements

I collected these essays for the nearly 10,000 people who follow me on twitter, which research suggests only 1500 or so are actual people. When I checked about three months ago about 2000 people subscribed to my blog. I suspect more of the subscribers than tweeters are real people, not that I want to privilege the corporeal. Between the two platforms, I have had many requests for my most-read essays to be collected in one place. I find it hard to believe people want the cow considering the blog (www.tressiemc.com) that is proverbial free milk, but I am honored anyone reads me at all. Thank you to the teachers who have taught me, the readers who have read me, the writers who continue to shame me, and Jade. Here are nine of my most-read blog posts, bound.

Upfront

I wrote my first book when I was nine-years-old. It was a collection of poems and what I generously called “musings”. I had read the word somewhere and liked it. In the basement of Forest Park Elementary school I watched my musings become an honest-to-God book. I was in the basement for one of two reasons. I was either being rewarded for good classroom behavior or being enticed out of bad classroom behavior. I cannot remember which or even if they were really distinct activities. School has this odd thing where talking at one time is bad and at another good. It confused me. Anyway, that’s how I ended up in the basement. Only a few of the details about making my first book are crystal clear in my memory. The hip, young teachers’ aides had on a hot pink collared shirt my mother would call “sharp”. The old, un-hip aide laughed when I smelled the papers fresh from the copier. And, in the middle of the room was a machine that coiled a plastic binding through my musings, making it a book. I thought it was magic.

I lost the hubris of nine-year-olds who think their musings deserves a spine and a cover. I revere books. I would never take lightly making one. Blogging is a good middle ground. Sure, there’s still some hubris. Who am I to think someone, somewhere wants to read what are still pretty much musings? Still, I took to the platform early on and the habit stuck. A professor encouraged me to think of blogging formally. She pushed me to learn about copyright and creative commons and conventions. She also inspired me to buy my own domain. I will always owe her for that. When I had little else – an apartment or a bed my first year back in college or gas money or book money – I had a domain of my own. As my graduate school career somehow also became a writing career I kept the space, even as I experimented with what it should look like and sound like and stand for.

Somehow, readers have found me. It’s the book-binding machine all over again. I am amazed. Some readers are Professional Smart People. Many, many others are smart people too smart to become Professional Smart People. More than a few of both have asked me to publish my essays in a more traditional format. They wanted pages. Some called for a “reader” and yet others just said they’d like to share a copy with a friend. In all our talk about the end of books it seems I am not the only one who is amazed by the transformative process of binding up paper pages. I am

glad even if I think doing this takes more hubris than a not-nine-year-old should ever venture.

But venturing I am. I suppose I have a few reasons. I could try to make them sound rational. I am trained in that kind of thing. But the truth is, I had laughed off enough requests for a book when one day it seemed less funny. I suddenly wanted to do it. And, ultimately, I weigh risks and rewards and then do what I want to do. It's how I ended up in that damn basement to begin with.

I think I want to do it because I feel like I owe it to someone. If you have suffered through the evolution of my public writing then I think you deserve cleaner prose, citations, and follow-up on the background noise I allude to from time-to-time when a post reads as if I am picking up a conversation already happening. And, too, I have had time to consider the risks of doing this when I am still very much not a real person. Trapped between graduate student and academic, blogger and writer, muses and thinker, the risks are moving targets. It is hard to get a good fix on them at any one point in time. I took a look at the variability of all the risks, both known and unknown, and determined that it is all a crapshoot. No matter what I choose, I will alienate people. Silence has never been my strong suit. Again, *that's how I ended up in the damn basement.*

I am going to pretend that I have matured beyond musings and call this a collection of essays. I wrote them without any idea of a theme for my life's work or myself as, God help me, a brand. Until mid-2013 the blog I bought with a prepaid credit card six years earlier averaged something like 150 readers a week. A series of events created spikes of a few thousand, and then tens of thousands and now, on occasion, I semi-regularly see 2-300,000 visitors a week. I only discovered that with this project because I have never cared to monitor my blog's traffic. That should be a clue about how I approach its subject matter. I write to my bizarre collection of interests: academia, education, labor markets, country music, new media, race, gender, feminism, and more country music. I do not write to readers. I respect them too much to imagine them on the other end. I write to the thing.

I have over 300 essays spanning three years on this version of my own domain (www.tressiemc.com). I had to decide how to put a few of them together. I started where I often start: students. I field a lot of requests from teachers and professors who use my online content as a class resource. If they say they've taught it and the students would like to have a paper copy they can haul around, then I've included it. I have added context where hyperlinks operated in blog posts. Additionally, I have tried to add context that can be taken-for-granted when blog posts are being written in real time but that may be lost in translation when an ephemeral pop culture moment has passed. If all else fails, I have included the date that the original post was published. Might I introduce you to the google machine?

I ended up with nine essays. The tenth essay is a vanity project. Sue me.

I'm not promising you magic like I found in that basement but I will tell you this: this book will damn sure be bound.

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I. MOOCs, Profit, and Prestige Cartels

(This is a reformatted transcript of a talk that was given at UC-Irvine on May 12, 2013)

Thank you to Catherine Liu and the Humanities Collective here at UC Irvine for having me.

Thank you to Aaron Bady for not blowing a hole in the time-space continuum when he decided to exist outside my twitter feed.

When she invited me, Catherine said, “please no charts and such!” and I think she expected resistance. What she did not know is that I grew up reciting Paul Laurence Dunbar poetry to entertain my mother’s guests, that I was an English major in undergrad and once fancied myself a slam poet. I came late to charts and such and I’m always happy to get back to my storytelling roots.

And that’s what I’d like to do today.

I'd like to talk to you about the story of for-profit colleges and then I'd like to offer a counter-narrative, as it were, the story I would tell about profit and higher education "markets".

So let's start with what for-profits are broadly. Everyone likes to tell me the joke about how "aren't all colleges for profit; he he" Trust me I've heard that one. Yes, we all increasingly participate in profit seeking activities but the difference lies in what one can do with that profit: it's the difference between profit-taking versus reinvestment. I would argue that profit-taking restructures the fundamental relationship between the higher education organization and how it conceives of education and how it affords education to its students.

We are told by the for-profit sector, increasingly politicians and probably saddest of all for me, education researchers, that the for-profit model of education "delivery" will disrupt, innovate, cage-bust and unbundle higher education. A note here about language: I don't have to tell you how powerful it is. Indeed, if stories are a fundamental characteristic of human consciousness and development – our ability to imagine a subjunctive future separates us from the apes as surely as do opposable thumbs – then language is the means by which we construct our humanity, our stories. When the story of profit and higher education tells us it will disrupt, innovate, cage-bust, unbundle it is using the language of markets. It is telling a story of education as a tool of markets, a serf that exists at the largesse of market morality and financialization. When we use that language to resist our commodification we are limited in the possible outcomes. We are, [as Graeber has noted](#)^[1], restricted to talking to the king – here the almighty market – in the king's language. Or, to borrow from Audre Lorde, I might ask if the master's tools ever have a chance of disrupting the master's house of profit and markets.

How did higher education become a market? That's a story that is integral to the narrative being sold about the calcified higher education system that is so in need of disrupting and innovation. I put this before you because [in CA recent legislation would have you take for granted that "something" needs to be done about public higher ed and that the only real debate left is about what should be done](#)^[2]. I have argued that the extent to which higher education needs "something" to be done depends greatly on one's larger perspective of history, economics, labor, and comparative education. [It's almost heretical but I do not think that "failure", as we define it currently -- on-time graduation and no interruptions in one's course taking -- understands the uniqueness of the U.S. higher education system](#)^[3]. The flexibility of our sprawling, decentralized system actually allows "non-traditional" students frequent points of entry into higher education, making it possible for them to earn a credential, even if they do not earn it in six, ten or even twenty years. This fluidity is a rare benefit afforded the working poor in our culture and to harden the system in the name of linear progression seems to me to be the exact wrong thing to do. But that is neither here nor there today. Today, I'd like to counter the dominant narrative about for-profit higher education similarly to how I have done in other articles and [how the faculty at San Jose State](#) recently countered by asking: if for-profit education models are the answer, what precisely is the question?

The dominant narrative, rooted in market morality – all in the pursuit of profit is right and proper – would tell us

that the question is how can education better serve the needs of the labor market. That's how you get to SB520 which is a market solution to a problem no one can prove exists as they say it exists!

Now, here's where I'd like to pull out and tell you a different story.

I did eventually become a sociologist and as a sociologist I believe in the social as a unit of analysis. I believe in groups and patterns. Economics talks about groups but they are always imagining them as a mere collection of individuals, these roving bands of rational actors. These rational actors will make decisions within the unquestionable framework of the limits and needs of the market and those decisions will act back on systems like education. When they do not, education is broken.

Aaron talked about profit and enclosure in his talk on MOOCs and it is here that I think our talks are in conversation with one another. I have followed the trajectory of MOOCs and have marveled at how they have so obviously learned from the uneven success of for-profit colleges that, even as their financial dominance has expanded, has not been able to wrest the mantle of legitimacy from traditional colleges. I convened a conference last year at Duke. I invited many from the for-profit sector. I was honored that several took me up on the invitation. I expected contentious debates but I was shocked to learn which debates were contentious. It was not accreditation woes or legislative challenges that fired up the for-profit leaders in the room. Instead, it was a fairly innocuous mention about credits from for-profit colleges not transferring universally into traditional college programs.

The room erupted!

One executive tossed out the term "prestige cartel" to describe the unilateral dominion of traditional colleges over the articulation process. It is a fair charge: how can traditional colleges simultaneously convict the for-profit sector for not providing institutional mobility to their students while they largely control the acceptability of credit hours earned at for-profit colleges? So, you see, I saw SB 520 here in California and laughed at its ingenuity. Rather than fight with institutions for legitimacy, MOOC owners attempted to end run them through legislative sanction. "We're not [the University of] Phoenix," insists 2tor CEO Chip Paucek, dissing the massive for-profit online education player. "Online education has been dominated by the for-profits, but nothing is even close to this in terms of quality. We're doing this at the highest possible level."

It's really quite brilliant, if not endemic to the ideological shift that MOOCs and profit-seekers in higher education would have us make: that the authority for certifying knowledge rests not in institutions -- particularly not with public institutions -- but with individuals. The first step in creating a higher education "market" of a "public good", is to shift the understanding of education from being a social good to an individual good. Markets need individuals. Markets need rational actors. MOOCs have learned.

If you're like me and you believe that a collection of individuals is more than just rational actors making constant cost benefit analyses then you can start to imagine a different story. In my interviews with for-profit students I try to understand the social and institutional processes that they experience as individual lives; how are they

embedded in these larger constructs. They often look like me and that isn't lost on either them or me. We sit across from each other at a table but miles away in social distance and frequently the interview is derailed as they question me about how I got here and not there; and what's the secret. They know there is one and they are right: it's being born lucky but who am I to tell them that luck is all we've been able to come with as a solution to poverty and human dignity? Time and time again my respondents tell me a story of economic insecurity, fear, and instability. They have worked for years, many younger students have seen their parents and siblings work. It was not always "good" work as we would likely imagine it but it had dignity and more importantly it existed. Just as the for-profit sector was going through its recent phase of mergers, acquisitions and corporatization that fueled the expansion we're now in engaging our social structure was also rapidly changing. [Kalleberg writes about the dissolution of good jobs](#)^[4] – livable wages and decent working conditions. We know that there are fewer and fewer such good jobs. Internal job markets have collapsed as industry turned people into human capital and "maximized their competitiveness" by hollowing out upward mobility in the labor force and reducing any corporate responsibility to workers. People experience that competition for ever scarcer resource as insecurity. And humans are not designed to live forever suspended in uncertain conditions, ever shifting underneath their feet as the dominant ideology of success and worthiness requires stable middle class respectability as a marker of decency.

So people are casting about for the means to protect themselves against that insecurity. They are looking for a way to not only afford decent housing but to buy the house in the neighborhood that feeds into the good k-12 schools that will give their own kids a better chance at a life not marred by the insecurity that keeps them up nights. They are looking for a way to be respected at work, to be respected in their communities, to locate their position in the larger social structure and to find it congruent with their ideal selves. They are looking for dignity and rest. That we have constructed the only means for achieving those things as credential hoarding can be understood as "market demand" but I would call it mass insecurity. Again, language, tools, kings and masters.

If we accept my story of profit and higher education market we get to different kinds of questions that lead to different kinds of policies. Rather than disrupting higher education because it does not serve the needs of the market we can ask the market why it does not serve the interests of human beings. Why, as corporations increasingly use their moral authority and political will to limit their tax exposure and their contribution to social institutions like k-12 schools, why is public education being refashioned to provide them the "human capital" they require to continue their abdication of the greater social good?

That's a different question than the ones being asked right now and that's because it's a different kind of story. It's a story that makes sense of not only why for-profits have expanded and why they are increasing their lobbying of political bodies but also why for-profit students are disproportionately black, Hispanic, female and first generation. Although only one in 20 students who attend degree-granting institutions attend for-profits, 1 in 10 black students, 1 in 14 Latino students, and 1 in 14 first generation college students is enrolled at a for-profit college. The shared economic and social insecurity of minorities, women, and mothers would make their overrepresentation in for-profits make sense, yes? I mean who has more pain to respond to than poor mothers and black and brown people? And organized to respond to that social pain is an integral part of the for-profit enrollment process and

organizational distinctiveness.

Now, that's the ideological stuff, right? Let's be practical and real. We aren't about to upend the authority of the markets over our political system or our educational structure. I may concede that. But we can come out of our ivory towers to engage these issues. Because we have not done that well...at all. For 30 years we've been content to let for-profits serve people who aren't "our kinds of students" but let me tell you something about the walls we'd build around poverty and pain? They are always porous. You can't wall off social and economic insecurity and treat it as tangential to your core function. All that shit – that pain, that instability, that insecurity, that voicelessness – it always expands, always.

We can do what we do here. We can talk about it. UC does this better than we do where I'm from. But we can't just talk to each other. We have to talk to other institutions, disciplines, people who aren't "our kind of people".

I think we have to accept that traditional colleges like ours have benefited from inequality. That's biting us in the ass now because it's being used to say we're elitist as if we weren't designed to do precisely what we're doing. I mean c'mon. So let's accept that part of our own story and say yeah we've got other stories too. We've got stories of civil unrest, courageous impolitic research that shift data that justifies different kinds of stories differently. We can still do that.

We can invite the world to see us talking about this. We can invite nutcases like me in from outside to rant about this. We can pressure our institutions to be more political. Where are we in some of these debates? My god. White papers are one necessary way to go but we can and should do more. Where are our organizations? Do we need another conference as much as we need to fight back against the successful crusade of one nutcase senator who would defund almost all social science research: the kind that provides the data that says hey, our schools are unequal, our workplaces are gendered, we do have income inequality. Do you think we get that kind of research from the University of Phoenix or Western Governor's University? No and they know that.

We can't rewrite the dominant narrative but that doesn't mean that the dominant narrative can't be rewritten, just not by us alone. We have to engage this as central to the weaknesses of traditional higher education but those weaknesses aren't the ones profiteers would tell us they are.

We aren't lacking in innovation or even really in access. We're lacking in storytelling. And that's something we can do something about.

II. Graduate School, Race, and the "Don't Go" Genre (April 5, 2013)

When I decided to return to graduate school I was about as devoid of prestige as one can be. I was old, from a no-name undergraduate university (worse, maybe, an HBCU!), I lacked social capital, my undergraduate performance was fine but not stellar, and I did not know the difference between sociology and anthropology.

Fortunately, I grew up with a library card and a mother who made it seem like the passport to everything I would ever need to know in life. My motto is if they've written a book about it, I can likely figure it out. So, that's where I started. I went to the library and the bookstore (remember those??) and I spent months poring over everything written about academia and graduate school. Along the way I saw lots of stories like this one from [Slate today](#)^[5]. The writer says graduate school will ruin your life as surely as it ruined hers. It's on the far right extreme of the "don't go!" advice market but it is indicative of what that advice entails. It's some combination of an assessment of the academic labor market, the odds of tenure track appointment, the high cost of graduate school, and the emotional toil.

That advice is not wrong.

It is, however, a bit disingenuous about the implied comparison always being made. Namely, that one can do better. But, what if one can't do better? Like me, five years ago?

This is the case for many black students and I will try to unpack the Pandora's box of structural and social processes that make it different. I do this not to judge what is, again, not wrong advice. Instead, I do it so that we can think more fully about how complicated any blanket advice is and how we should always interrogate our position in our advice and, most importantly, how that might be different than the position of the people on the receiving end of our (usually well-meaning) advice.

It's Hard Out Here For A Pimp

As the saying goes, [when white America catches a cold, black America already has the flu.](#)^[6] The labor market has always been inhospitable to black labor. That has changed some, through a combination of social policy and well, social policy. But, [as Sharon Collins points out in her carefully crafted empirical analysis of black class mobility](#)^[7], the changes that wrought the growth of the black middle class were fragile ([indeed we've already witnessed the end](#)) and primarily driven by public sector hiring. There are lots of reasons for that. One that is important to remember here is that the public sector is most sensitive to political mandates. The private sector is significantly less so. As a result, black people have been over-represented in bureaucracies because bureaucracies are most sensitive to affirmative action policies.

That's not changed overly much. That's why [Obama's reduction of the public sector as the private sector picked up hiring over the past three years has been devastating for black workers.](#) We work in the public sector because equal opportunity hiring laws counteract biases in hiring that [make a white felon more likely to be hired than a black applicant with no criminal history.](#) We stay in bureaucracies because those same equal opportunity laws require that promotion criteria be explicit, published and uniformly applied regardless of sex, race, gender, etc. which counteracts the documented bias that transmutable, opaque "discretion" produces.

Credentialism is often rewarded in bureaucracies because it is a simple, relatively unambiguous designation of

"qualified" that conforms to bureaucratic desires to remove discretion from decision-making. Ergo, credentialism -- literally here just meaning the process of formalizing knowledge or qualifications by attaching it to some kind of certificate or degree -- can be disproportionately important to black folks who are disproportionately hired by, employed in, and promoted according to the standards of bureaucracies, which reward having a credential.

That makes graduate school a lot less stupid of a decision.

I see this in my interviews with for-profit students, many of whom are black. They are not crazy when they intuit that they "need some letters behind [their] name". They are actually pretty accurately assessing the economic and social landscape in which they are embedded.

Plainly put, black folks need credentials because without them [our "ghetto" names get our resumes trashed](#), our [clean criminal records lose out to whites with felony convictions](#), and [discretion](#) works against our type of social capital (and weak ties and closure of information) to amount to a social reality that looks and feels a lot like statistical discrimination.

A graduate degree can also signal that you are not "that kind of black person". It can say that not only, ideally, do you have some special skills but that [you won't go all Sapphire in a department meeting](#) or steal someone's hubcaps out of the company parking lot, or whatever the en vogue, deeply seated fear is that motivates implicit discrimination in hiring decisions these days. We are not crazy when we think we need more education for the privilege of being underemployed.

We do.

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[But Academia Is Different](#)

Well, it sure is different, but the difference is likely not as acute or meaningful for some of us as it is for others.

Academia may not be a traditional bureaucracy but we forget that public colleges are embedded in state governments, making them more like the public sector is some ways than the private sector. That is particularly true when you account for the fact that many black PhDs end up working in Historically Black Colleges and Universities, many of which are part of state college systems. It is not totally beyond the realm of possibility then that black students should engage with some sectors of higher education similarly to how we have engaged the Post Office. That is to say, credentialism is rewarded and, thus, we should pursue it. The nature of the rewards, however, seems to be what trips up a lot of this advice. And that is rooted in some fundamental, unexamined privilege.

It is difficult to be embedded in higher education today, particularly if you study it, and not be acutely aware that academic labor is changing and likely not for the better. [Adjunct labor conditions are pretty deplorable](#): low pay, long hours, little prestige, no mobility, etc. When we are in that we can forget that our crappy jobs can be someone

else's upward mobility.

I suspect part of our not understanding this is ideological. To recognize that crappy is relative is to undermine our own fragile, tenuous class-consciousness. It's an old problem. Unions had similar issues as they tried to bring black, brown and white labors together through their shared position in the class structure. The problems arise when your shared position isn't exactly *shared*. Focusing so narrowly on class to the exclusion of structural racial projects can put you in this quagmire. Black poverty is not the same as white poverty. That's not the fault of white poor people but is a function of a complicated mix of social constructs, organizational processes, politics, history and probably magic. It's complicated. It is also inconvenient, particularly when you really want and need people to focus on deplorable class conditions. So we like to sometimes ignore it. We do so to our peril.

When we obscure those meaningful differences we end up counseling black students considering graduate school that it is a waste of time and money. We do that because our class-consciousness says this whole pyramid hierarchy is a scheme and those at the bottom are losing. The thing with losing is there's always some construct of what constitutes "winning". The dominant construct of winning is rooted in privilege and biases.

Winning is different for different folks. I think of [Boudon's](#) ^[8] work which I grossly oversimplify when I call it a cross-sectional, longitudinal, empirical analysis that concludes that we're always from where we're from. Apologies to the philosopher Rakim but sometimes [it ain't where you're at](#) but is indeed all about where you're from. Part of Boudon's argument for me is about social distance being as important to understanding mobility as status occupational/income/prestige outcomes. Basically, if I get a master's degree that increases my labor value to \$45,000* it can sound like crap to a person who went to graduate school, got a PhD and earns \$50,000. However, if my parents didn't have their GEDs and I grew up helping my mom clean banks after hours for her janitorial freelance business -- one of her three jobs -- I have actually traveled quite a bit of social distance. That can make the value of my graduate degree different than the value of yours.

Don't Go! Unless...

Maybe too many people are going to graduate school but not too many of all people are going to graduate school. I am suspicious of declarations of an institution being dead the minute I show up to it in my party dress. But, I'm not a starry eyed loon when it comes to the fissures of distress in the academic labor market. They are there. They are real and we should engage them. But on the road to the revolution let us not forget that folks still got to live.

Let us not engage the change that needs to happen in academic labor by telling people who could stand to benefit the most from credentials that we have socially constructed, through racism and classism and sexism, as more necessary for some than others that graduate school is a net negative. Because it is not. Instead, let us consider a calculation of social distance, aspiration, returns on investment, prestige and cost. Let us give students a patchwork quilt of tools to determine that graduate school math for themselves rather than a blanket default condemnation that is rooted in our own social position, experiences, and privileges.

Surely, an entry-level administrative job or low-status teaching job is not the life of the mind with summers off and adoring undergraduate groupies. But it can represent a legitimate career option for someone who is not choosing among hopeful tenure jobs at the Ivies but instead is hoping for a call back when her name is Lakeisha or a job offer when she doesn't have a family member who is an alumnus, or for whom there is no implicit "better" career option out there just waiting for him to show up.

I don't argue that we should not be concerned about differential returns to credentials but our concern and advocacy should not obscure or denigrate what is, at the individual level, a legitimate, rational choice that many black students face.

And I am talking to myself here. I check myself constantly on leanings towards some prestigious option that might exist for me but not for others (and it may not even exist for me). I talk to my interview subjects or I go home for the holidays and I make sure I remember that as we are studying and advocating for structural change, real people have to navigate those structures every day as a matter of survival. If they should overcome the hurdles of an inauspicious low-status start in life (like I did) and discover that academic labor is even a thing that exists, let's not advise them to do something better when all empirical evidence suggests that for black, qualified workers there often isn't a "better".

If you can't consider that in blanket advice to "don't go!" please send your students to someone else, somewhere else.

III. A Nasty Piece of Cornbread: Chait, Coates, and the Audacity of Hopelessness (March 30, 2014)

I once set out to write a book of southern aphorisms. It was going to be a serious treatment of (mostly) black (uniquely) southern "mother wit" as philosophy. Then, grad school and so on and so on.

If I were to undertake a project today I would start with a favorite handed down to me from my Aunt Jean. She is fond of saying that someone is a "nasty piece of cornbread."

Cornbread, if made properly, is delicious. Even when it is made poorly it is hard to argue with the beautiful form and function of ground meal, fat, dairy and heat alchemy that sustains, fuels, and serves up sustenance, as well as culture and community. Cornbread is, in hip-hop parlance, that good-good.

When someone is being a nasty piece of cornbread they are combining the ingredients and process of a remarkable foodstuff in ways that poisons its inherent goodness. They are being nice-nasty. They are serving you cornbread that turns to shit in your mouth.

I read Chait's latest response to Ta-Nehisi Coates on shades of gray among liberal and conservative treatments of race and the cultural of poverty. I probably shouldn't have. I had checked out of the public debate on this after the

first round, and even then after barely skimming. I saw all the keywords for a battle about white guilt and structural racism that, frankly, is the story of my entire work life. I'd rather spend my few non-work hours watching *The Golden Girls*.

But sociologist and tweep, Dave Parcell put them all in [one convenient package](#) and I clicked. I am weak.

But not as weak as Chait's argument.

Look, Coates doesn't need anyone [capping](#) for him. He is formidable even when I disagree with him. Further, the gendered tone of the entire debate has too many javelins flying for me to expect a sister in a wonder woman outfit to be as welcome as, well, wonder woman rarely is when the real superheroes are about real superhero bizness.

I did want to point out a few things for my own intellectual satisfaction.

Love it or hate it, Coates lays out an empirical and theoretical argument. In response, Chait begins, continues and ends with a condescending dismissal of Coates, the person.

Wrapped in a nice-nasty package of platitudes about the former (ie younger, better, more idealistic) Coates, Chait bemoans the angry, cynical darkie Coates has become. I am not playing for dramatic effect here. I offer you:

What struck me, instead, is that Coates turns the question of Obama's role as head of state into a profoundly pessimistic take on the character and future of that state...I have never previously detected this level of pessimism in Coates's thinking before.

Chait remembers a kinder, more empathetic Coates and he is not this fella writing about white liberal paternalism.

Except, he is.

This is a turn so common in the long history of black intellectuals and white publics as to be mundane. Black anger about white violence, white racism, and the veneer of white civility is acceptable to white liberals only when it is in service to their role as caretaker. It is a role that requires the illusion of hope. Without a hopeful angry ward, Mr. Drummond is just some weird dude keeping his black adopted sons in a gilded cage. Hope is what transforms the relationship into a cause, a movement, a penance.

Of course, requiring hope is not functionally different from requiring drug tests for public welfare (when you are one of the publics, no less) or requiring women wear long johns to be justifiably victimized by a rapist or being told to bide your time as the majority catches up to the idea of your humanity.

Hope only feels less intrusive, less violent and less damning than these arbitrary thresholds when you swallow the cornbread without chewing. Once ground in molars of empirics or human rights or morality or obligations of the

State, the funkiness of the bread spews forth. It's like cornbread but nasty. And black intellectuals have been remarkably consistent in finding what Coates finds: that nasty cornbread is no cornbread at all.

I said on Twitter that I cannot recall a single black intellectual that was not condemned by white liberals for their paucity of hope. DuBois was crazy for embracing communism when empirically it would be crazy to have embraced his America where Ida B Wells was documenting the regularity of black lynchings. Crazy, he was, for not having hope in the face of those empirics!

Paul Robeson was consistently the smartest person in any room he inhabited. When his nation recalled his citizenship he made a powerful case for the benefits of socialism. He may be remembered today as a black history month milestone in the sanitized march of America's progress, but at the time his sanity was questioned. What could be wrong with that brilliant, ostracized, stifled black genius that a little hope wouldn't cure?

And do not even get me started on the women who are not only crazy for questioning the white man's hope but who are crazy by function of their biological penchant for hysterics. The relatively privileged Mary Church Terrell had an education few blacks of any gender had at the time. But she had to fight first her father's dismay at her wasting her lady breeding to pursue formal education. She went on to do just that, making friends with powerful white women in the suffrage movement only to have them warn her to not make her speeches too "harsh". Harsh isn't hopeful.

And hope is integral to the greater project of white paternalism and black intellectual products. To be recognized, rewarded, disseminated, or sustainable black intellectualism must perpetuate the fervent epistemology of American progress. This epistemological frame is so rigid, so deeply rooted in the psyche of the majority culture that it turns good thinkers into circular logic jerks. It must be defended at all costs to reason or argument even when reasonable arguments are offered up in compliance with the rules set forth by the epistemology!

I think I could go on and on about the arsenal of hope wielded against black thinkers, writers, and artists and people in the public domain. Chait's final analysis is that Coates ignores evidence of progress in his myopic rejection of hope. Chait offers no theoretical link between evidence of progress as incompatible with Coates' larger argument about the structural similarities of liberal and conservative arguments about blacks, culture and poverty. The mere suggestion that Coates has lost his moral center — his dark hope — is offered as sufficient evidence that the larger argument isn't worthy of engaging. That is a fight to be had by hopeful black people, as determined by the solicitors of hopelessness.

It's a proper [sonning](#), complete with sports metaphors that reduce it all to (as someone on twitter pointedly said) a game of "whose...um, intellect is bigger".

The whole thing is one big nasty piece of cornbread.

IV. Did White Feminists Ignore Attacks on Quvenzhané Wallis? That's An Empirical Question (February 28, 2013)

Children are sacred. They are off-limits for behaviors and treatment that are perfectly acceptable for adults. Although this cultural norm is violated frequently enough to make us question how seriously we take the rights of children, it is fairly uncontested that at least in theory our society considers children deserving of special laws, care, and treatment.

So, when The Onion published its now infamous tweet in which it called the Oscar nominated phenom nine-year-old Quvenzhané Willis a c*nt, it raised a few hackles. This has been documented, discussed, and debated. Kirsten West Savali wrote one [of the most articulate essays on this issue](#). It is really a beautifully written essay. In it, West Savali starts from a provocative position that mirrors a conclusion many have drawn: white feminists weren't nearly as outraged by a gendered slur being lobbed at a black child as they would have been [had Quvenzhané been white](#).

Racism in feminist circles is nothing new. Angela Davis documented the history of racism in the evolution of woman's suffrage. When Kimberlé Crenshaw coined intersectionality it was a refutation of the ethos that all the blacks are men and all the women are white. This dominant construction of humanity as either raced *or* gendered effectively erases the lived, structural, and political experiences of black women. As one who watched the debacle unfold live the night of the Oscar's coverage, I'm inclined to believe West Savali's reading of the events. But, many are not.

Did white feminists ignore, downplay -- or, worst -- defend the public degradation of a black little girl?

That struck me as an empirical question. To explore it I did a little content analysis.

I focused on media platforms for several reasons. One, I study organizations. Two, media - both new and traditional - powered the response. The attack was issued via a tweet on a weekend night. As a result the most immediate responses were on social media and online sites, which are generally characterized as a means of responding quickly to current events. Three, there is an observable history of congruence between published blog posts and essays on mainstream white feminist media outlets and current events deemed "feminist". For example, when Rush Limbaugh called Sandra Fluke a slut on February 29, 2012 it was covered by Ms. Magazine on its blog on [March 1, 2012](#). Certainly, feminist organizations then know how to marshal organizational resources like blogs in response to current events. Therefore, it did not seem untoward for me to examine response of the same organizations that responded to Fluke in an analysis of the response to Quvenzhané.

I conducted searches for "feminist magazines" and "feminist blogs" and compiled an initial list of 39 online and print publications recognized as feminist. Then, I surveyed [feminist blog carnivals](#) produced over the past year. From those I removed entries of sites that had isolated blog posts about feminism but were not part of a blog or

Feministe's coverage is just a comment war in an open-thread about the Oscars. There is no editorial analysis. Jezebel has been a Quvenzhané booster in the past. It posted adorable .gifs of the little Oscar nominee pumping her arms in celebration as the camera panned to her in the audience. [There is an essay about the disrespect of clueless media professionals who somehow insist that Quvenzhané](#) is unpronounceable and not worthy of practice or phonetic cue cards. That post ran AFTER the Onion episode, by the way. There is no analysis of The Onion tweet or Seth McFarlane's dig about Quvenzhané almost being too old for George Clooney save an odd (comedic?) response from two Swedish writers. They are described in the byline as unemployed roommates in an industrial Swedish town. The article is entitled: [How To Make Fun of a Nine-Year-Old Without Offending The World.](#)

HuffPo has a whole section dedicated to "Women", albeit not to feminism. This could explain why there was no coverage of the event on HuffPo Women. There is an essay from [AJ Verdelle](#) that directly addresses racism and gender in the vulnerability of Quvenzhané to such an attack and to the virulence of the backlash. It ran on the Black Voices branded section of the website. It should be noted that there is also a post that [defended satire against misplaced outrage.](#) A black woman wrote the former and a non-black man wrote the latter.

In the final analysis, the white out on Quvenzhané and The Onion is gradational. Some feminist outlets covered the issue, if only tangentially. The notable exceptions are the biggest brands and the most corporate outlets. What appears to be closest to the truth of what happened, and what feminists of color are arguing, is that white feminists ignored how race made Quvenzhané vulnerable to attack and that race muted the intensity of the response from white feminists.

My intent at the start of this project was to compare the feminist media response to a comparable case. The example of Sandra Fluke has come up more than once. If the issue was about the vulnerability of black women to sexist attacks, I could offer more than a few examples starting with [the Rutger's basketball team.](#) That I could not come up with a single comparable example of a white girl being called a gendered slur by a media organization, in service of humor or not, reinforces the saliency of race.

This analysis underscores the importance of non-mainstream voices, online and off, to push narratives we care about. The Feminist Wire responded swiftly via [Facebook](#), Twitter, and on the [main website.](#) The coverage included analysis of race and gender. We were unequivocal in our support and stand-by our full-throated defense of Quvenzhané. So was [The Crunk Feminist Collective](#), also managed by black women voices. We need these spaces to exist.

The [Women's Media Center](#), an organization dedicated to women's voices and representation in media culture, presented a case of mainstream organizational support for Quvenzhané. They also point to a weakness of my analysis. Because the event was sparked by a tweet and was driven largely by twitter responses, much of the coverage may have escaped standard blog and print coverage. I watched the WMC twitter feed blaze a trail across its diverse followers in support of Quvenzhané. They did not shy away from talking about race, racism, sexism, or power. That response is not captured on the website where a search reveals no coverage of Quvenzhané or The

Onion. However, this does lead to the question: why did twitter outrage not translate into less ephemeral responses on blogs and online media as it has happened for other "feminist" issues in the past? It is a larger issue about the role of social media in social movements which, by definition, must at some point organize not just tweets and likes but people and action.

Despite these limitations, I think there is something to the feeling many black feminists/womanists have about the non-response from white feminists to what happened to Quvenzhané. And it is not in the question of if white feminist media ignored what happened but if they responded to what happened with the intensity and intersectional focus it seemed to demand. [The wishy-washy response from feminists like Amanda Marcotte](#) belied the severity of the act.



For many black feminists, the extremity of the attack, satirical or not, demanded an equally extreme organizational response. If a movement was ever going to be unequivocal and resolute about anything I would like to think it would be about calling a child a c*nt. The response for me was visceral. The minute I saw The Onion tweet I was nauseated. [I was not kidding when I said I was shaking.](#)

I felt that for a host of reasons, I'm sure. She's brown like my adorable younger cousin Genesis. God knows she has my god-daughter's impish personality and preternatural confidence. I used to wear my hair like she had hers the night of the Oscars.

She looks like people I care about. If she doesn't look like people you care about, I have to wonder where your give-a-damn cuts off.

Being disgusted by sexualized attacks against a defenseless child is a function of a social construction, and likely a hypocritical one at that. Even though our society idealizes children we abuse them individually and structurally every day. Still, there remains a cultural norm that children are off-limits. When that norm is violated and it does not elicit a social response equal to the severity of the violation, it communicates that there are invisible limits to who is included in the greater social contract.

In this instance, being black *and* being a girl put Quvenzhané just beyond the limits of inclusion. That is the kind of thing those of us who fight for an intersectional feminism consider a fundamentally feminist issue. That others who identify as feminists felt differently or, worst, appeared to feel nothing at all lays bare the tensions in big tent

feminism. That happens. But maybe it shouldn't happen when the subject in question is a little girl with a puppy purse.

V. Using Social Media to Rage Against The Machine

(This is a reformatted transcript of a talk given at UNC in July 2013)

I noticed a trend with yesterday's panel that I think is quite useful considering the theme of the conference. Very quickly, I'll interrogate the researcher here by putting forward a note on how I came to social media. First, personal inclination: I've had some engagement in online spaces since Livejournal, about ten years ago. I've always journaled and participated in public writing spaces. My first "letter to the editor" was sent via the U.S. Postal Service and published in my hometown paper when I was 13-years-old. It was about the Rodney King verdict, which just hopelessly dated me. But professionally I found myself in a position where I had this research topic that happened to have an active public life. I study for-profit colleges, particularly how they function as vehicles for inequality. Well, I'm a first year graduate student with no adviser, a literature review comprised of two books and five articles, most about a decade old and almost all the work on for-profits was happening in policy and in real time. I began using twitter to curate my information flow – to follow the development of my topic and eventually ended up developing community with a small cadre of scholars working in the same area.

Then, being who I am, I have larger interests in academia, inequality, and organizations. I consider myself an organizational theorist, by the way. So, when an article about black studies in the Chronicle of Higher Education drifted across my twitter feed in April of 2012, I took notice. How I took notice, what motivated me to engage the content, how I responded to that content, and what happened next are all part of how we end up with today's talk.

So, the lay of the land for this talk is loosely as follows. First, in the interest of time I will give a cursory overview of the sequence of events of what I call "David v. Goliath: The Case of the Chronicle of Higher Education, Schaefer Riley and Black Studies". As an actor in the event I have some data on how it unfolded that I've not talked about publicly before today but I thought this is the right audience and the right space to do so. Second, I'll argue – as I argued then – that the vitriolic personal attack on black graduate students in black studies at Northwestern was fundamentally a consequence of organizational conditions: of the media, of academic status cultures. Third, I'll argue that my response, organized and executed on twitter, my blog, and online petitions, is an example of how similar organizational characteristics (or, logics in my parlance) can disrupt dominant narratives. There is some debate about whether this constitutes a social movement, in the strict sense, and I'll touch briefly on that. Finally, I'll argue for a critical engagement of organizational practices as a means for understanding contemporary iterations of marginalization, exclusion, and hegemonic authority.


Why focus on organizations to talk about things like justice, equality, and such as I will discuss through this case analysis of the Chronicle of Higher Education moment? Please indulge me a brief demonstration. If you are the victim of the crime and you want to pursue justice, what do you do? I mean the concrete actions? Well, you can file a case with the police? You can hire a lawyer. You can ultimately petition a court to hear your claim. You wait and

you pray. Another one: how does one negotiate for citizenship? Is anyone familiar with doing this? You request some forms. You complete them according to the specifications of a bureaucracy. You submit them to an office. You wait and you pray.

To pursue justice, to pursue citizenship individuals do not waltz up to a place called justice or citizenship. Instead they go through this pretty mundane bureaucratic practice. That is to say this: critical human projects in our society are negotiated through organizational practices. To understand how those organizations work and do not work is to better understand fundamental issues like justice, nation, state, etc.

All right, so, what is this case of David and Goliath? On April 21, 2012, a blogger, Naomi Schaeffer Riley published a post entitled, "The Most Persuasive Case for Eliminating Black Studies? Just Read the Dissertations."

As I've said, I saw a link to the story, with the title, come across my timeline on twitter. I ignored it the first two or three times but by the fifth or sixth time someone retweeted it, that frequency of sharing signaled to me that this was a link with some resonance with my tweeps. Thus, who you follow becomes a way of filtering massive amounts of content for better, easier consumption and the frequency of a story among twitter people you've curated for their relevancy to your group or interests, signals to most twitter users that a story or event has a high likelihood of being important to one's own interests. That was the case for me and my engagement with this link.

I won't delve much into the politics of the Schaefer Riley's argument. Honestly, it's nothing new. It isn't even a well-reasoned or constructed argument: Black studies is intellectually vacuous, not a real academic discipline and should be dissolved. There were two things, however, about Schaefer Riley's argument that I found unique to this genre of black subject as intellectually inferior genre. First, the attack on black studies was made by a rather shrill, mocking, hateful attack on the dissertation titles of black doctoral students in Northwestern's inaugural graduating class from their new PhD program. She calls their titles "a collection of left-wing victimization claptrap." At one point she derides a study about black midwives as ridiculous because who cares how people give birth. Another dissertation about race and the housing crisis is chided for the audacious claim that race influences housing policy in the U.S. Second, Schaefer Riley's post was on the Chronicle's main page, beneath it's masthead which looks like this: . I'll return to why I think that matters.

Ok, so, I am a black doc student. I think the attack on unpublished dissertations in the primary academic news publication is an abuse of power against a relatively powerless group. That's one of my things. I don't like bullies, individuals or institutional. I also think that Schaefer Riley's argument is poorly written and poorly argued. That just makes a response too easy to resist. And finally, I think the Chronicle of Higher Education has legitimized Schaefer Riley's personal screed by promoting it beneath its masthead. It has legitimized a fringe opinion. That was the focus of my critique. Pretty early on I decided to appeal not to some general morality but specifically to the ethics of the status culture from which the Chronicle of Higher Education derives its legitimacy: academia. Schaefer-Riley's critique was not an academic criticism and Chronicle of Higher Education bills itself as the paper of academia. I think this actually mattered most to the saliency of the public nature of the social media diffused

campaign that ensued.

There's a full story out there but the gist of what happens next goes as follows. I went to Wal-Mart and I was still hopping mad. On the return trip home I pull over and write a blog post refuting Schaefer Riley's argument and calling on the Chronicle to exercise editorial ethics by removing it and censuring Schaefer Riley. It's Atlanta so a 10-mile ride took me about an hour. By the time I got home, a link to my blog post had been retweeted over 300 times and my sleepy blog which averaged, prior to that, maybe 100 readers a week had been read by almost 10,000 unique visitors in three countries.

Which brings me to the first theoretical point about twitter. Its fundamental strength is its ability to separate the wheat from the chafe, or put another way, to cull the signal from the noise. This is an invaluable benefit, particularly to social movements. However, I'll argue that mobilizing a message is not the same as mobilizing people. It can be a necessary condition but not a sufficient one for social movements as we generally define them in academic terms.

Ok, so, Chronicle of Higher Education responds after about two days of silence. It gets a little ugly. A black editor was obviously authorized to come have a "sister-to-sister" talk with me. She begins by engaging me and eventually moves on to the critiques of hundreds of others on twitter. However, she particularly engages me because at this point I'd started a petition asking for Schaefer-Riley be relieved of her duties and the signatures were registering pretty quickly. Amy Lynn Alexander's first entreaty to me was "good critiques, comment on the post!"

That was, my *critique* was fine. From the Chronicle of Higher Education's perspective the violation was that I made my critiques on my blog and not on theirs. Here's where we return to the salience of organizations. There is no shortage of debate about the decline of traditional media. I won't get into that here. What is agreed upon by almost all is that new media has exposed the fault lines of traditional media. In so doing, it has fundamentally challenged its profit model. That model has traditionally been built on advertising dollars and subscription fees. Blogs, social media, the hallmark of these new media tools is that the content is generally free. They are also increasingly how people engage information. Again, that's a big, general concept that is being negotiated by individuals through a particular kind of organizational arrangement.

Social media has introduced a new kind of organizational arrangement to how we consume information. And information, for many organizations is about dollars, how they make them.

The Chronicle of Higher Education is no different. When's the last time any of you bought the paper copy of the Chronicle of Higher Education? It's a niche paper in an institutional field undergoing massive changes, which are undermining the profit model on which it was built. When Chronicle of Higher Education set up the blog space for which Schaefer Riley was eventually hired to write, it was an attempt by a media organization to co-opt the reach of a social media platform – a blog – while preserving its traditional profit model. One way to do that is to get people to "click" on your website. To do that, you have to drive eyeballs to your site in an information landscape where content and websites proliferate like rabbits reproduce.

So what do you do if you're the organization?

You hire someone like Schaefer Riley.

Schaefer Riley was already a conservative talking head with a book accusing academia of banishing god from the quad. In a follow up interview (after her untimely termination from Chronicle of Higher Education, I might add), she says that Chronicle of Higher Education knew who she was when they hired her.

On this, and perhaps only this, I agree with Schaefer Riley.

The Chronicle of Higher Education knew exactly what and who she was when they hired her and that's why they hired her. Here, I'd like to call your attention to the first line of SR's post. It's a line that has bothered me for some time. She begins, "You'll have to forgive the lateness but I just got around to reading The Chronicle's recent piece on the young guns of black studies." What was she late for? It implies that there was an expectation that she would reply to the earlier profile on the black studies grad students. It also implies a pretty nefarious plan on the part of Chronicle of Higher Education editors to exploit an innocuous profile of black studies and black doctoral students for the purpose of providing Schaefer Riley a platform to do what they'd hired her to do. I suspect that when the grad students were asked to participate in the profile they could not expect that it was also an implicit invitation to be attacked.

If your organizational logic is being disrupted and attention becomes a new kind of currency you can, understandably, think that hiring an ideological blow hard with no moral compunctions about trading in what I call "conflict currency" is a good idea. That conflict currency – the debate guaranteed to incite emotion AND action (again, clicks are currency) – is inherently a racialized, classed, gendered proposition is a function of a greater American culture. The race stuff hits because race is still America's great fault line.

Chronicle of Higher Education did not intend to harm the reputation and careers of junior black scholar (for the rest of their careers this story will show up when their names are googled). It intended to generate profit for its organization. That the two coincide is a lesson for why organizational level analysis matters. Organizational practices make intent relatively meaningless. At best, it better captures the complex social reality of agency, structure and shifting social roles. If citizenship paperwork is printed in English-only that is likely not because some white man somewhere hates immigrants. It's a bureaucratic decision, however, that can have the same net effect: minimizing access to marginalized groups. Racist intent, or this perversion of race as an individual failing as Omi and Winant and Bonilla Silva would argue, obscures the reality of our bureaucratic iron cage wherein organizational processes can formally rationalize inequality, obscuring their saliency via ostensibly neutral bureaucratic acts without all the messiness of intending to be racist or sexist etc.

Now a word about the potential and limits of social media in social action. I could leverage my own social real

estate to critique Chronicle of Higher Education. That's a valuable tool for disrupting the diffusion of information. By writing on my blog, my twitter, I denied Chronicle of Higher Education what it wanted: outrage from which it could directly benefit. I didn't have to rail in their comments section. Or, in the old school version where you write a letter to the editor of the paper that published the thing that pissed you off. Social media changes the rules on gatekeeping. That's important. Also, again, it can connect people across geographies, both spatial and cultural. By the time this all died down, that post had been read in 27 countries by over 80,000 people. I still get emails from senior scholars and aspiring graduate students alike, so social media can even cross the academic prestige hierarchy.

I actually do not attribute the eventual dismissal of Schaefer Riley from The Chronicle to the eloquence of my appeal. Trust me. I'm a junior scholar with little of the prestige that facilitates action in the academy. I attribute it instead to the particular synergy of the appeal with the status culture from which The Chronicle derives its institutional legitimacy. It bills itself as a paper of higher education. Fortunately for my appeal, higher education has a clearly articulated formal ethic of what constitutes fair debate and discourse. It was the challenge to The Chronicle's rightful claim to this status culture's mores that ultimately propelled their response. I would caution that this is rarely the case with traditional mass media. However, it does suggest that social movements and action should/would benefit from careful analysis of the status cultures and legitimacy of the institutions they challenge.

So social media was a powerful tool in this instance. However, I would caution us to remember that while social media is largely public it is *not* the public commons. It feels like it, by design. It's freewheeling and mostly uncensored *by design* to attract users. But twitter, tumblr, blogger, wordpress and the like are not publicly but privately owned. These are corporate products. Never, ever, ever underestimate the ultimate allegiance of corporate persons: it's always to the greater market morality. While corporate Twitter may help Bahranians find work-arounds to state blockages of their dissent Internet companies have complied with governments, allegedly facilitating the surveillance of private citizens without just cause or warrant. They have also been known to collect and sell private data without consent or to change the ownership terms of the content you produce on their platforms with little notification or fanfare. It may be free today but that is not a promise that it stays free or that the price of that free will never not be renegotiated to preserve the corporate ownership of social media.

VI. Getting it Wrong on Leslie Jones (May 6, 2014)

I want badly to get this right. That, of course, means that there is no way humanly possible for me to get this right.

I want to get this right for the usual reasons. I want Twitchy and professional feminists and black nationalists and the identity police and FOX news ambassadors to stay out of my comment section. I also want to get this right because I spent a fair amount of time this [week](#) explaining to mostly non-black academic labor organizers why they

are nowhere near adept or oppressed enough to use slavery metaphors.

Then, too, this is the week that Miley Cyrus [called me old](#) (also, see essay VIII) for publicly ruminating on her adoption of a specific kind of black female affect in a capitalist beauty structure where chicks like me stay losing, even when we're paid to dance like we're winning.

Miley's is actually some of the *niciest* criticism of my analysis. Sisters have flat out got in my ass in comments, emails, and Q&As at public lectures about that essay. They are angry that I am not lifting up black beauty. I am guilty of not modeling self-esteem for young black girls. Some of the younger black women feel not unlike Miley. They think I'm too old to understand how they share culture with their white girlfriends who are down.

The white women do a different kind of haranguing. They need, desperately, for me to accept that I am beautiful... just *in my own way*. I think they want to make me tea and tell me how they like my hair "like that" and compare me to every halfway normatively attractive black women they can think of. Brothers smell low self-esteem blood in the water of a thick thighed girl and I get thinly veiled offers to help me feel better about myself. I am almost positive that involves meeting their penis. White men are mostly above it all because they get to be on such issues of gender and mate competition. And that is how you write from the near-left corner of the matrix of intersecting oppressions, kiddos.

That's why I do not want to have a single thought on Leslie Jones.

A cultural moment could not be more ill-timed or perfectly contrived to fuck up my inbox for ages to come.

Leslie Jones is a black woman. She is a comic. She is a comedy writer at Saturday Night Live. She [commented](#) on Lupita Nyong'o being named People Magazine's "Most Beautiful Person" this year. With short natural hair and a dark complexion, Nyong'o is an anomaly on such declarative lists of normative beauty. You need to understand that. You also need to understand that Jones has the job at SNL, in part, because of a pretty public backlash this year about the dearth of black women in the show's history. Her joke starts by proposing a counter-standard of beauty ("usefulness") that assumes the audience knows that there is a normative beauty standard and that she clearly is not winning by its measure. That is an argument about beauty as a structure and a commodity and you need to assume everyone agrees on those points for the set-up to work. Then she transitions into tropes about the value of big, tall, black female bodies like hers as valuable during slavery. By a different beauty measure, i.e. utility, Jones is saying she can hold her own against white beauty norms and the equally unattainable black exceptions that are made about once every popular culture generation (Lena Horne, Diana Ross, Diahann Carol, Pam Grier, Beyonce, Lupita, etc.). The punchline is that with her big-bodied utility to white slave-owners she would have been guaranteed to have a man back in the olden days.

It is painful as shit to watch.

Just, painful.

Many have taken issue with Jones making light of the horrific sexualized violence of slavery...you know, like how I took labor movements to task for minimizing the horrific reality of slavery to further the cause of underpaid college adjuncts.

You see, I do not want to write this because there is no way I can get it right. I have to assume or explain too much of the set-up to even try. And, experience says that more than any other charged topic on which I have written, this one about gender, race, beauty and power is the single most contentious.

Someone should have told Jones. Because she tried to do no less in a 90 second comedy sketch, for a white audience, within a history of a show whose creative overlord proclaimed it is not and never would be an “urban” comedy show. We see how that turned out: painful.

There are times when the task to which we aspire is simply beyond our abilities. Here, I am specifically talking about myself. I fear there is no way around it and yet here I am anyway. It is one of many reasons that Vivian tells me that I’m the smartest little dummy she’s ever reared (note: I’m also the only one she’s reared but she doesn’t like it when I appeal to proceduralism).

When Vivian was rearing me I ran away regularly. I ran away all the time. Like, easily once a week. I wrote long, torrid letters and taped them to bathroom mirrors and cabinet doors where she could find them. I ran away because she did not understand why I tried to paint an impressionistic crayola masterpiece of purple rain on my bedroom wall in homage to Prince. I ran away because I did not have the vocabulary or emotional capacity to explain why I simply could not, yet again, be the only short, squat, round, dark body in the dance classes she scrimped to pay for me to have because she had never had them. I ran away because I was born with a deeply ingrained sense that no one should ever be the boss of me. I ran away because it was Tuesday and I wanted it to be Friday. All kinds of reasons.

I never ran far. It seems that I have a serious Achilles heel for a revolutionary. I really, really, really like central heat and air conditioning. I spent the hottest summer of a human life with my elders in Eastern North Carolina. My great-grandmother believed in closing all the windows at night to keep Jesus in and the white man out. I almost expired. Every night I laid butt naked under two pounds of quilts in August promising myself that I would never be that hot again. Controlling the temperature of my environment seems to me as close to being a god as I will ever come and being on the run puts you at the mercy of hot Carolina summers.

But the desire to run away never really left me. When I got to be a bit older — say, in my 20s but before I became Miley Cyrus old — I clearly remember thinking that I wanted to find a place in the world where I could be a black woman. I had a bit more learning and experience by this time. “Running away” had become “finding”. It sounds much classier. But the motivation was the same. I remember sitting in a cafe at a corporate bookstore, slowly putting them out of business as I paid for coffee and read the books for free.

I was reading Randall Kennedy and Elaine Brown and *Town & Country* and I wanted to “find” a place in the world where I could be all those things — Kennedy’s fierce identity warrior, Brown’s bad ass leader, and *Town & Country*’s perpetual comfort. And I thought, “surely there’s a place in this world where I can be those things, all at the same time.” I had not yet realized the sheer magnitude and scope of colonialism that had exported a racial hierarchy, gendered capitalism, and anti-black beauty structure to every single corner of the world.

I couldn’t be that kind of black woman anywhere in the world.

There is a reason that one can buy chemical skin lighteners and hair straighteners in almost every economy in the global north and south. There is nowhere to run, no place to find, and all I could do was write letters to the world about it and tape it to the door of my website.

I watched Leslie Jones’ skit and I had to stop the video five times to finish it. Her follow-up tweets to the criticism made it worse. I felt her desire to run. Surely, she seems to be saying, there’s a world where someone like her can be what she is while simultaneously being desirable (I think she missed the section on colonialism in the bookstore, too). Because there is no geography where that is true, Jones instead collapses time and ends at slavery. For the record, that’s the same way we end up valorizing the good old days of segregation when poor and affluent blacks shared the same neighborhoods. The truth is, looking for the good ol’ black days in U.S. history is a fool’s errand. There aren’t any.

Instead of a letter to a cabinet door, Jones posted her torrid Dear John letter to colonialism on the public wall of popular culture on a very white show in a culture where: there is no structure; there is no tolerance for examining beauty as a object of institutional demoralization; and there isn’t a [feminist ethic of valuing the desire to be desirable](#).

I think that if there was anyplace where Jones went really wrong it is in misunderstanding her [social location](#) in all of this. Someone pointed out that Jones is not merely an actor at SNL, but a writer. The implication is that she had power over what she chose to play for a joke. Choosing to play any aspect of slavery was an abuse of power. The sociologist in me would like to point out that in no institution is a black woman’s power equal to that of her non-black, male peers.

Tanner Colby [wrote](#) an enlightening essay on race and SNL earlier this year as the show clamored to find a black woman to cast. Colby has also written a book on the subject (that I’ve only skimmed; grad school; sorry). I saved the essay because I thought it was one of those great moments when previously under-appreciated scholarship meets critical cultural moment. I love it when that happens.

In the essay, Colby classifies the few black SNL cast members as belonging to either the disgruntleds/wash-outs or the successes. The difference between the two groups? In Colby’s analysis of the successes he says, “they come, mostly, from fully integrated, majority-white backgrounds.” He names Keenan Thompson, Maya Rudolph and Tim

Meadows as successes. I think of the sole woman in the group, Maya Rudolph. I love Maya. She is criminally under-appreciated and under-utilized in Hollywood.

She is also as close to white normative ideals of beauty as a black woman can probably be.

Nothing about her social location makes it likely that she has had to consider a place to run where someone who looks like her could be considered desirable. Or, if she has (because surely that may be common to all women in a patriarchal society) that she would have to travel to the darkest recesses of black history in the United States to unearth an alternative norm of utility that might give her a chance up to bat.

But these are the things we simply are not supposed to say. Beauty is how we feel. In capitalism, beauty is something we can buy. In the post-Oprah “Live Your Best Life” utopia, beauty is something we can affect. Which is all true if we think of beauty the way many white people think of race and racism — that it is a choice, a range of activities, a domain restricted to symbolic interactionism and situational discrimination.

But, if beauty is ascriptive, like race, then there is a different kind of conversation to be had. There is a conversation that says I can call myself beautiful (or, cannablasian) but that in no way changes how systems, structures, institutions, and culture define me against my will.

Jones’ pain, so apparent to me as I paused and un-paused that video, is having that conversation. Jones is likely having it in the wrong place. It can be argued that she is even having the conversation without all the requisite tools or precision using them. I think of Richard Pryor’s adroitness when he slices the thin layer of fat from bone by excising his self from structure in one of SNL’s [best sketches ever](#). In it, Pryor is an increasingly combative participant in a word association game being conducted by Chevy Chase, in character as a job interviewer. As the words become increasingly more loaded with socio-historical context (like “colored”), Pryor funnels generations of racial discourse through his body language, cadence and delivery. It is brilliant. Maybe Jones isn’t Pryor. Neither is she the powerful organizational actor that Tina Fey could be as a writer for the show. When you’re hired under social protest and, in part, for your identity as much as for anything else your power is greatly constrained. And being that kind of hire is compounded by being the last hired and easily first fired (common to black workers across labor contexts). Add to that situation the white bro peer culture that Garret Morris describes as essential to success at SNL when he says that, *“the social life is just as important as your talent. Particularly with writers, they have to hear you talk and get to know you.”*

Jones seemed to be doing that thing comics do: mining personal pain to bleed for our amusement. Being who she is, in the system she is in, there is no way that cannot end at slavery. Doing it for the white gaze is unavoidable considering the context of her employment and the popular culture structure that’s signing her checks. It’s brutal to express the desire to be desirable when even the generational black beauty exception manages to still be different from you and there’s next to no feminist ethos to guide you or respect to be earned for risking it. And it takes superior skill to use slavery, even when it is a part of your inherited legacy, to move forward a critical comedic commentary. It maybe even requires a type of privileged irreverence that black men have in ways black women do

not.

I probably got this wrong. But at least I am getting it wrong on a domain of my own and not on Lorne's dime. It's a small freedom in a world where there aren't many.

Slavery isn't a joke. That's what I told the adjunct folks this week. I maintain that is true. But I don't think Jones was playing it as a joke. Her pain, so inextricably bound in the way enslavement shaped her social distance from desirability and beauty in the here and now, couldn't let her make it a joke even if she intended to.

That's the thing about social locations and constraints and structure. It's always making absolutes relative.

And, as I found out long ago, there is nowhere in the world where some of us can run to get away from that.

VII. When You Forget to Whistle Vivaldi (September 18, 2013)

Last week Johnathan Ferrell had a horrible car crash. He broke out the back window to escape and walked, injured, to the nearest home hoping for help. Ferrell may have been too hurt, too in shock to remember to whistle Vivaldi. [Ferrell is dead.](#)

Social psychologist Claude Steele revolutionized our understanding of the daily context and cognitive effects of stereotypes and bias. The title of his book alludes to a story his friend, NY Times writer, [Brent Staples once shared](#). An African American man, Staples, recounts how his physical presence terrified whites as he moved about Chicago as a free citizen and graduate student. To counter the negative effects of white fear he took to whistling a classical music piece by Italian composer Vivaldi. It was a signal to the victimless victims of his blackness that he was safe. Dangerous black men do not listen to classical music, or so the hope goes. The incongruence between Staples' musical choices and the stereotype of him as a predator were meant to disrupt the implicit, unexamined racist assumptions of him. It seems trite perhaps, an attempt to make whites feel at ease unless we recall the potential consequences of white dis-ease for black lives.

I do not know many black people who do not have a similar coping mechanism. I have been known to wear university branded clothing when I am shopping for real estate. A friend straightens her hair when she is job seeking. Another friend, a Hispanic male, told me that he shaves all his facial hair when entertaining white clients to signal that he is respectable. While stereotype threat can occur to any member of any group, it occurs most frequently and with more dangerous consequences for groups for whom there are more and stronger negative beliefs.

Of course, the oft-quoted idiom that respectability politics will not save you is true. Just as wearing long johns is not a preventative measure against rape for women, affecting middle class white behaviors is not a protective measure but a talisman. In exerting any measure of control over signaling that we are not dangerous or violent or criminal

we are mostly assuaging the cognitive stress that constant management of social situations causes.

That stress has real consequences. Steele inspired an entire body of research on those effects. When the object of a stereotype is aware of the negative perception of her, that awareness constrains all manner of ability and performance. From testing scores of women who know the others in the room believe women cannot do math to missing a sports play when one is reminded that Asians don't have hops, the effects of stereotype threat are real.

Perhaps more interesting to me is what Steele described as the constant background processing that stereotyped people engage. It's like running too many programs in the background of your computer as you try to play a YouTube video. Just as the extra processing, invisible to the naked eye, impacts the video experience the cognitive version compromises the functioning of our most sophisticated machines: human bodies.

I mentioned just today to a colleague that for all we social scientists like to talk about structural privilege it might be this social-psychological privilege that is the most valuable. Imagine the productivity of your laptop when all background programs are closed. Now imagine your life when those background processes are rarely, if ever, activated because of the social position your genetic characteristics afford you.

Of course, privilege is sometimes structural. But the murder of Johnathan Ferrell reminds us that activation of stereotype threat in daily interactions can be aided and abetted by organizational processes like the characterization of a police call to 911 and structural legitimacy like the authority of the police to shoot first and ask questions later. I am choosing to ignore how that process was set in motion. Perhaps better feminist scholars than myself can explore the historical, cultural gendered fear that legitimizes the unconscious bias of black men as sexual and criminal predators. I find I do not have the stomach for it today.

I just read an article that quotes Ferrell's family at length. His family's attorney did not just want us to know that Ferrell was a friend and son but that:

"He's engaged to be married, he has a dog and a cat, he was driving a Toyota Camry, he survived an accident, had 3.7 GPA, a chemistry major. This is not someone who posed a threat to the officers or anyone else, this is an everyday American."

A 3.7 GPA.

They want us to know that their murdered friend, son, brother and cousin had a 3.7 GPA.

Ferrell may have been too injured, too shocked to whistle Vivaldi to all he encountered the night he was shot. It may not have helped if he had through slammed doors, over police sirens, and gunfire. But even in death his family cannot help but signal to us all that he was a student and, by extension, a human being whose death should matter.

Sometimes, after the violence, all that is left of us are our loved ones who whistle Vivaldi in tribute; a talisman and hope that justice will hear what executors did not.

VIII. When Your (Brown) Body is a (White) Wonderland (August 27, 2013)

This may meander.

Miley Cyrus made news this week with a carnival-like stage performance at the MTV Video Music Awards that included life-size teddy bears, flesh-colored underwear, and plenty of quivering brown buttocks. Almost immediately after the performance many black women challenged Cyrus' appropriation of black dance ("twerking"). Many white feminists defended Cyrus' right to be a sexual woman without being slut-shamed. Yet many others wondered why Cyrus' sad attempt at twerking was news when the U.S. is planning military action in Syria.

I immediately thought of a summer I spent at UNC Chapel Hill. My partner at the time fancied himself a revolutionary born too late for all the good protests. At a Franklin Street pub one night we were the only black couple at a happy hour. It is one of those college places where concoctions of the bar's finest bottom shelf liquor is served in huge fishbowls for pennies on the alcohol proof dollar. I saw a few white couples imbibing and beginning some version of bodily grooving to the DJ. I told my partner that one of them would be offering me free liquor and trying to feel my breasts within the hour.

He balked, thinking I was joking.

I then explained to him my long, storied, documented history of being accosted by drunk white men and women in atmospheres just like these. Women asking to feel my breasts in the ladies' restroom. Men asking me for a threesome as his drunk girlfriend or wife looks on smiling. Frat boys offering me cash to "motorboat" my cleavage. Country boys in cowboy hats attempting to impress his buddies by grinding on my ass to an Outkast music set. It's almost legend among my friends who have witnessed it countless times.

My partner could not believe it until not 30 minutes later, with half the fishbowl gone, the white woman bumps and grinds up to our table and laughing tells me that her boyfriend would love to see us dance. "C'mon girl! I know you can daaaaannnce," she said. To sweeten the pot they bought our table our own fishbowl.

My partner was stunned. That summer we visited lots of similar happy hours. By the third time this scene played out my partner had taken to standing guard while I danced, stonily staring down every white couple that looked my way. We were kicked out of a few bars when he challenged some white guy to a fight about it. I hate such scenes but I gave my partner a break. He was a man and not used to this. He didn't have the vocabulary borne of black breasts that sprouted before bodies have cleared statutory rape guidelines. He didn't know the words so he did all he knew how to do to tell me he was sorry this was my experience in life: he tried to kick every white guy's ass in Chapel Hill.

I am not beautiful. I phenotypically exist in a space where I am not usually offensive looking enough to have it be an issue for my mobility but neither am I a threat to anyone's beauty market. There is no reason for me to assume this pattern of behavior is a compliment.



What I saw in Cyrus' performance was not just a clueless, culturally-insensitive attempt to assert her sexuality or a simple act of cultural appropriation at the expense of black bodies. Instead I saw what kinds of black bodies were on that stage with Cyrus.

Cyrus' dancers look more like me than they do Rihanna or Beyonce or Halle Berry. The difference is instructive.

Fat non-normative black female bodies are kith and kin with historical caricatures of black women as work sites, production units, subjects of victimless sexual crimes, and embodied deviance. As I said in [my analysis of hip-hop and country music](#) cross-overs, playing the desirability of black female bodies as a "wink-wink" joke is a way of lifting up our deviant sexuality without lifting up black women as equally desirable to white women. Cyrus did not just have black women gyrating behind her. She had particularly rotund black women. She gleefully slaps the ass of one dancer like she intends to eat it on a cracker. She is playing a type of black female body as a joke to challenge her audience's perceptions of herself while leaving their perceptions of black women's bodies firmly intact. It's a dance between performing sexual freedom and maintaining a hierarchy of female bodies from which white women benefit materially.

The performance works as spectacle precisely because the background dancers embody a specific kind of black female body. That spectacle unfolds against a long history of how capitalism is a gendered enterprise and subsequently how gendered beauty norms are resisted and embraced to protect the dominant beauty ideal of a certain type of white female beauty.

Being desirable is a commodity. Capital and capitalism are gendered systems. The very form that money takes -- paper and not goods -- is rooted in a historical enterprise of controlling the development of an economic sphere where women might amass wealth.

As wealth is a means of power in a capitalistic society, controlling this means of acceptable monies was a way of controlling the accumulation, distribution and ownership of capital.

For black women, that form of money was embodied by the very nature of how we came to be in America.

Our bodies were literally production units. As living cost centers we not only produced labor as in work but we produced actual labor through labor, i.e. we birthed more cost centers. The legendary "one drop" rule of determining blackness was legally codified not just out of ideological purity of white supremacy but to control the inheritance of property. The sexual predilections of our nation's great men threatened to transfer the wealth of white male rapists to the children born of their crimes through black female bodies.

Today much has changed and much has not. The strict legal restriction of inheritable black deviance has been disrupted but there still exists a racialized, material value of sexual relationships. The family unit is considered the basic unit for society not just because some god decreed it but also because the inheritance of accumulated privilege maintains our social order.

Thus, whom we marry at the individual level may be about love but at the group level it is also about wealth and power and privilege.

Black feminists have critiqued the material advantage that accrues to white women as a function of their elevated status as the normative cultural beauty ideal. As far as privileges go it is certainly a complicated one but that does not negate its utility. Being suitably marriageable privileges white women's relation to white male wealth and power.

The cultural dominance of a few acceptable brown female beauty ideals is a threat to that privilege. Cyrus acts out her faux bisexual performance for the white male gaze against a backdrop of dark, fat black female bodies and not slightly more normative cafe au lait slim bodies because the juxtaposition of her sexuality with theirs is meant to highlight Cyrus, not challenge her supremacy. Consider it the racialized pop culture version of a bride insisting that all of her bridesmaids be hideously clothed as to enhance the bride's supremacy on her wedding day.

Only, rather than an ugly dress, fat black female bodies are wedded to their flesh. We cannot take it off when we desire the spotlight for ourselves or when we'd rather not be in the spotlight at all.

This political economy of specific types of black female bodies as a white amusement park was ignored by many, mostly because to critique it we have to critique ourselves.

When I moved to Atlanta I was made aware of a peculiar pastime of the city's white frat boy elite. They apparently enjoy getting drunk and visiting one of the city's many legendary black strip clubs rather than the white strip clubs. The fun part of this ritual seems to be rooted in the peculiarity of black female bodies, their athleticism and how hard they are willing to work for less money as opposed to the more normative white strippers who expect higher wages in exchange for just looking pretty naked. There are similar racialized patterns [in porn actresses' pay](#) and, I suspect, all manner of sex workers. The black strip clubs are a bargain good time because the value of black sexuality is discounted relative to the acceptability of black women as legitimate partners.

There is no risk of falling in love with a stripper when you're a white guy at the black strip club. Just as country music artists strip "badonkadonk" from black beauty ideals to make it palatable for to their white audiences, these

frat boys visit the black body wonderland as an oddity to protect the supremacy of white women as the embodiment of more and better capital.

My mentor likes to joke that interracial marriage is only a solution to racial wealth gaps if all white men suddenly were to marry up with poor black women. It's funny because it is so ridiculous to even imagine. Sex is one thing. Marrying confers status and wealth. Slaveholders knew that. Our law reflects their knowing this. The de rigueur delineation of this difference may have faded but cultural ideology remains.

Cyrus' choice of the kind of black bodies to foreground her white female sexuality was remarkable for how consistent it is with these historical patterns. We could consider that a coincidence just as we could consider my innumerable experiences with white men and women after a few drinks an anomaly. But, I believe there is something common to the bodies that are made invisible that Cyrus might be the most visible to our cultural denigration of bodies like mine as inferior, non-threatening spaces where white women can play at being "dirty" without risking her sexual appeal.

I am no real threat to white women's desirability. Thus, white women have no problem cheering their husbands and boyfriends as they touch me on the dance floor. I am never seriously a contender for acceptable partner and mate for the white men who ask if their buddy can put his face in my cleavage. I am the thrill of a roller coaster with safety bars: all adrenaline but never any risk of falling to the ground.

I am not surprised that so many overlooked this particular performance of brown bodies as white amusement parks in Cyrus' performance. The whole point is that those round black female bodies are hyper-visible en masse but individually invisible to white men who were, I suspect, Cyrus' intended audience.

No, it's not Syria but it is still worth commenting upon when in the pop culture circus the white woman is the ringleader and the women who look like you are the dancing elephants.

IX. The Logic of Stupid Poor People

We hates us some poor people. First, they insist on being poor when it is so easy to not be poor. They do things like buy expensive designer belts and \$2500 luxury handbags.



To be fair, this isn't about Eroll Louis. His is a belief held by many people, including [lots of black people](#), poor people, [formerly poor people](#), etc. It is, I suspect, an honest expression of incredulity. If you are poor, why do you spend money on useless status symbols like handbags and belts and clothes and shoes and televisions and cars?

One thing I've learned is that one person's illogical belief is another person's survival skill. And nothing is more logical than trying to survive.

My family is a classic black American migration family. We have rural Southern roots, moved north and almost all have returned. I grew up watching my great-grandmother, and later my grandmother and mother, use our minimal resources to help other people make ends meet. We were those good poors, the kind who live mostly within our means. We had a little luck when a male relative got extra military pay when they came home a paraplegic or used the VA to buy a Jim Walter [house](#) (pdf). If you were really blessed when a relative died with a paid up insurance policy you might be gifted a lump sum to buy the land that Jim Walters used as collateral to secure your home lease. That's how generational wealth happens where I'm from: lose a leg, a part of your spine, die right and maybe you can lease-to-own a modular home.

We had a little of that kind of rural black wealth so we were often in a position to help folks less fortunate. But perhaps the greatest resource we had was a bit more education. We were big readers and we encouraged the girl children, especially, to go to some kind of college. Consequently, my grandmother and mother had a particular set of social resources that helped us navigate mostly white bureaucracies to our benefit. We could, as my grandfather would say, talk like white folks. We loaned that privilege out to folks a lot.

I remember my mother taking a next-door neighbor down to the social service agency. The elderly woman had been denied benefits to care for the granddaughter she was raising. The woman had been denied in the [genteel bureaucratic way](#) -- lots of waiting, forms, and deadlines -- she could not quite navigate. I watched my mother put on her best Diana Ross "[Mahogany](#)" outfit: a camel colored cape with matching slacks and knee-high boots. I was miffed, as only an only child could be, about sharing my mother's time with the neighbor girl. I must have said something about why we had to do this. Vivian fixed me with a stare as she was slipping on her pearl earrings and told me that people who can do, must do. It took half a day but something about my mother's performance of respectable black person -- her Queen's English, her Mahogany outfit, her straight bob and pearl earrings -- got done what the elderly lady next door had not been able to get done in over a year. I learned, watching my mother, that there was a price we had to pay to signal to gatekeepers that we were worthy of engaging. It meant dressing well and speaking well. It might not work. It likely [wouldn't](#) work but on the off chance that it would, you had to try. It was unfair but, as Vivian also always said, "life isn't fair little girl."

I internalized that lesson and I think it has worked out for me, if unevenly. A woman at Belk's once refused to show me the Dooney and Burke purse I was interested in buying. Vivian once made a salesgirl cry after she ignored us in an empty store. I have walked away from many of hotly desired purchases, like the impractical off-white winter coat I desperately wanted, after some bigot at the counter insulted my mother and me. But, I have half a PhD and I support myself aping the white male privileged life of the mind. It's a mixed bag. Of course, the trick is you can

never know the counterfactual of your life. There is no evidence of access denied. Who knows what I was not granted for not enacting the right status behaviors or symbols at the right time for an agreeable authority? Respectability rewards are a crap-shoot but we do what we can within the limits of the constraints imposed by a complex set of structural and social interactions designed to limit access to status, wealth, and power.

I do not know how much my mother spent on her camel colored cape or knee-high boots but I know that whatever she paid it returned in hard-to-measure dividends. How do you put a price on the double-take of a clerk at the welfare office who decides you might not be like those other trifling women in the waiting room and provides an extra bit of information about completing a form that you would not have known to ask about? What is the retail value of a school principal who defers a bit more to your child because your mother's presentation of self signals that she might unleash the bureaucratic savvy of middle class parents to advocate for her child? I don't know the price of these critical engagements with organizations and gatekeepers relative to our poverty when I was growing up. But, I am living proof of its investment yield.

Why do poor people make stupid, illogical decisions to buy status symbols? For the same reason all but only the most wealthy buy status symbols, I suppose. We want to belong. And, not just for the psychic rewards, but belonging to one group at the right time can mean the difference between unemployment and employment, a good job as opposed to a bad job, housing or a shelter, and so on. Someone mentioned on twitter that poor people could be presentable with affordable options from Kmart. But the issue is not about being presentable. Presentable is the bare minimum of social civility. It means being clean, not smelling, wearing shirts and shoes for service and the like. Presentable as a sufficient condition for gainful, dignified work or successful social interactions is a privilege. It's the aging white hippie who can cut the ponytail of his youthful rebellion and walk into senior management while aging black panthers can never completely outrun the effects of stigmatization against which they were courting a revolution. Presentable is relative and, like life, it ain't fair.

In contrast, "acceptable" is about gaining access to a limited set of rewards granted upon group membership. I cannot know exactly how often my presentation of acceptable has helped me but I have enough feedback to know it is not inconsequential. One manager at the apartment complex where I worked while in college told me, repeatedly, that she knew I was "Okay" because my little Nissan was clean. That I had worn a Jones of New York suit to the interview really sealed the deal. She could call the suit by name because she asked me about the label in the interview. Another hiring manager at my first professional job looked me up and down in the waiting room, cataloging my outfit, and later told me that she had decided I was too classy to be on the call center floor. I was hired as a trainer instead. The difference meant no shift work, greater prestige, better pay and a baseline salary for all my future employment.

I have about a half dozen other stories like this. What is remarkable is not that this happened. There is empirical evidence that women and people of color are judged by appearances differently and more harshly than are white men. What is remarkable is that these gatekeepers *told me the story*. They wanted me to know how I had properly signaled that I was not a typical black or a typical woman, two identities that in combination are almost always

conflated with being poor.

I sat in on an interview for a new administrative assistant once. My regional vice president was doing the hiring. A long line of mostly black and brown women applied because we were a cosmetology school. Trade schools at the margins of skilled labor in a gendered field are necessarily classed and raced. I found one candidate particularly charming. She was trying to get out of a salon because 10 hours on her feet cutting hair would average out to an hourly rate below minimum wage. A desk job with 40 set hours and medical benefits represented mobility for her. When she left my VP turned to me and said, "did you see that tank top she had on under her blouse?! OMG, you wear a silk *shell*, not a tank top!" Both of the women were black.

The VP had constructed her job as senior management. She drove a brand new BMW because she "should treat herself" and liked to tell us that ours was an image business. A girl wearing a cotton tank top as a shell was incompatible with BMW-driving VPs in the image business. Gatekeeping is a complex job of managing boundaries that do not just define others but that also define our selves. Status symbols -- silk shells, designer shoes, luxury handbags -- become keys to unlock these gates. If I need a job that will save my lower back and move my baby from Medicaid to an HMO, how much should I spend signaling to people like my former VP that I will not compromise her status by opening the door to me? That candidate maybe could not afford a proper shell. I will never know. But I do know that had she gone hungry for two days to pay for it or missed wages for a trip to the store to buy it, she may have been rewarded a job that could have lifted her above minimum wage. Shells aren't designer handbags, perhaps. But a cosmetology school in a strip mall isn't a job at Bank of America, either.

At the heart of these incredulous statements about the poor decisions poor people make is a belief that we would never be like them. We would know better. We would know to save our money, eschew status symbols, cut coupons, practice puritanical sacrifice to amass a million dollars. There is a regular news story of a lunch lady who, unbeknownst to all who knew her, died rich and leaves it all to a cat or a charity or some such. Books about the modest lives of the rich like to tell us [how](#) they drive Buicks instead of BMWs.

What we forget, if we ever know, is that what we know now about status and wealth creation and sacrifice are predicated on who we are, i.e. not poor. If you change the conditions of your not-poor status, you change everything you know as a result of being a not-poor. You have no idea what you would do if you were poor until you are poor. And not intermittently poor or formerly not-poor, but born poor, expected to be poor and treated by bureaucracies, gatekeepers and well-meaning respectability authorities as inherently poor. Then, and only then, will you understand the relative value of a ridiculous status symbol to someone who intuits that they cannot afford to not have it.

X. Reading Hick-Hip (April 2, 2014)

Could there be two musical genres more diametrically opposed to one another than hip-hop and country music?

Born amid Reagan's urban apocalyptic landscape in exotic places like Brooklyn and the Bronx ^[9] hip-hop music is a decidedly black urban cultural product. Unlike jazz, rock, and be-bop before it, hip-hop maximized a unique moment in a disrupted corporate music industry to afford black artists control of the iconography of the latest iteration of race music. Country music may have once been the poor white man's attempt at singing the gospel and the blues but it evolved as the symbolic culture of non-elite, working class rural whiteness. It's attendant values proudly defy middle class cultural conformity and racialized urban imagery. Country fans unironically embrace faith, family and country in a cynical pop culture world. Hip-hop fans may embrace the free market ethos of "money over bitches" but mainstream hip-hop is largely resistant to sentimental ruminations on hearth and home. How then do we understand the emergence of what the Wall Street Journal called "hick hop", ^[10] country music with hip-hop verses, hip-hop language, hip-hop posturing and even occasionally actual hip-hop artists rapping in country songs?

We're not just talking about an underground, marginal sub-genre. In the past year a number one hit song by Florida Georgia Line has been remixed with rapper Nelly. Not only is the remix lacking all irony, it is not the most embarrassing remix done this month, let alone this year. It is in rotation on both country and pop radio. Jason Aldean remixed his hit "Dirt Road Anthem", written by self-proclaimed country rapper Colt Ford and remixed with southern rapper Ludacris. Earlier attempts at merging the two genres include Trace Adkins' "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk" and Dierks Bentley borrowing the hip-hop slang for crazy in "5-1-5-0" (itself borrowed from police codes). These songs are not the farce that was black country rapper, Cowboy Troy. Instead, each represents a fairly seamless movement of hip-hop culture, language, and stylings into a musical form that defines itself in large part by how *not* black it is. How is it possible that country fans embrace Nelly and Ludacris popping up in hit country songs *and* fist pump to Eric Church's melodramatic admonishment of the lost country white boy who thinks he is "too bad for a little square town" with his "hip-hop hat" and "pants on the ground"? To be astonished by the hip-hop country crossover is to not understand the history of "race" music or the contemporary reality of poverty among rural whites. Not entirely unlike hip-hop, "Hick hop" is the cultural reflection of poor rural whites' resistance to the erasure of their material reality from cultural discourse.

Rising inequality and structural changes in the labor market that replaced good paying skilled jobs with low-wage service work ^[11] have hit poor whites hard ^[12]. At the same time, wealth has concentrated in urban centers while suburban sprawl has eaten away the landscape of rural America ^[13]. Literally, the "country" of which country music sings is diminishing rapidly. The U.S South is country music's spatial and symbolic ground zero. The shifting demographic and economic realities reshaping poverty and mobility throughout the nation are particularly acute in the South ^[14]. This explains, in part, the fault lines of acceptable hip-hop crossovers into country's musical backyard. Rendered largely invisible by ideological fetishizes for pathologizing black urban poverty, country music remains a symbolic space for poor white culture to be centered. The adaption of black hip-hop culture speaks to the greater youth culture of popular music but also to the constraints of poor rural whites to contest their cultural representations even in country, the "purest" of all American white cultural products.

Cultural Miscegenation and The Invisible Poor

To understand why hip-hop is the means for this cultural crossover and, say, not punk or metal, one must first understand that the neat marketing demographics that define corporate radio silos are not natural^[15]. Culture is a messy thing that defies rigid boundaries and even outright ownership. There is a long history of inter-racial cultural making in every single genre of music, including that which would brand itself the most authentically American music genre: country music. In *Segregating Sound* (2012), Karl Hagstrom Miller argues that the categories that we have inherited to think and talk about southern music bear little relation to the ways that southerners long played and heard music. I would add that these categories also ignore how southerners actually lived^[16]. Jim Crow was always better at policing public spaces and bureaucracies than it was at severing the intimate lives of southern blacks and whites^[17]. That is reflected in the sonic “race mixing” that produced the genres we now take for granted as distinct and naturally occurring.

That sonic refutation of distinct racialized spheres of social life can be heard in Lesley “Esley” Riddle’s significant contribution to the famous Carter family clan. It can also be heard in the island rhythms of Jimmy Buffett or spied in the black artists singing back up for a range of country stars. I point this out to refute the notion that country music is “white music”. It is not, of course. It’s an expression of ethnic, racial, and cultural miscegenation that marks all culture. But country music has been leveraged as a tool of whiteness, particularly as a tool in the delineation of the cultural boundaries of rural, southern, working class whiteness.

Sociologically, we understand that rural southern whites have experienced a lot of economic and social change over the past 50 years. Writer [Chauncey DeVega \(a pseudonym\) argues](#) that the “new white poor” is comprised of the formerly white working class and they bear little resemblance to the toothless, uneducated “redneck” caricature used to erase this reality. Census data show that while racial disparities among the impoverished persist, they have narrowed since the 1970s. That is not because of greater mobility for minority groups but the expansion of white poverty. Today, 76 percent of whites will experience poverty by the time they reach 60 years of age. This is most acute for what some demographers call the “invisible poor”: poor whites in suburban and rural rings throughout the country (especially the South and Rust Belt)^[18]. More than 60 percent of the poor in outer-urban rings that span the Appalachia and the industrial Rust Belt through the Midwest are white. The poor rural and suburban whites that make up the core country music audience are more likely to be born poor, live poor, and die poor regardless of educational achievement today than they were 50 years ago^[19]. Rather than working hard all day in a union job^[20] and coming home to an ice-cold beer -- a ritual memorialized in thousands of country tunes -- today’s white poor are more likely to be working shift work at Wal-Mart or the Piggly Wiggly, if they are working at all. That is a qualitative change in the day-to-day reality of non-elite whites and they recognize that: just 46 percent of whites polled in a nationally representative survey think they “will have a good chance of improving

their economic position based on the way things are in the United States”^[21]. That’s the lowest it has been in decades.

That pessimism is a fairly accurate interpretation of the decline of upward social mobility for whites. Ideological fetishes that reward a hyper-focus on poverty as a black urban peculiarity often obscure that decline. That’s true of both the political right and left. The reality of poor whites might be absent from our news, our dominant narratives about poverty, and even from our academic research but it is being played out in the country music soundtrack of their lives.

Our culture’s hyper-focus on poverty as a black underclass phenomenon obscures how hip-hop and country are embarking upon similar paths cultural adaptation. If country music is the tool of a particular type of whiteness, then hip-hop can be understood as a tool for the delineation of a particular type of blackness. At its roots, hip-hop was the musical grandchild of the blacks that made the great migration so great. Isabel Wilkerson’s “Warmth of Other Suns” details how American music is the direct beneficiary of black migrants who, in their economic and social ambassadorships, were also cultural ambassadors. The men and women who traveled north and west to Chicago, New York, and California from Georgia, Mississippi and the Carolinas carried with them the music, rhythms, instrumentation and genius of black art even as they toiled in the bowels of the industrial revolution for meager pay.

Cultural tools, here music and musical styles, are a way for individuals and groups to define themselves, particularly in relation to how they would be defined by powerful hegemonic structures and sociological forces. Poor black people made the blues because social ills like segregation, black codes, and institutional violence gave them some blues to sing. Later, when the grandchildren and great grandchildren of those cultural ambassadors were living the disappointment of the northern dreams of their freedom-seeking foreparents, they started beating on tables and speeding up melodies to reflect the urgency of their social condition. They made hip-hop when political, social, and economic forces created the material reality that made it necessary to create hip-hop.

Because the peculiarity of whiteness demands it never be racialized in the ways that blacks are always racialized, it is easy to forget that white people are living among social, economic and political processes similar to those that gave rise to hip-hop. Rising inequality in the U.S. is absolutely racialized but it is, by its nature, a class construct from which whites are not exempt. The amorphous “middle class” has declined from 28.2 percent of the population in 1967 to 23.7 percent today. This decline has pushed ever more whites beyond the boundaries of middle class respectability. The bifurcation of our social structure reinforces the ideology that rich white elites have little in common with their poor white brethren. Policing the boundaries between “white trash” culture and high culture becomes a way of solidifying the superiority of elite whites. The economic contrasts are being drawn ever more sharply and so, too, are the cultural contrasts. In popular culture, reality television either valorizes the white economic (if socially trashy) elite in the housewives of Orange County or demoralizing the lives of Myrtle Beach trailer parks. Cultural critics and scholars alike have noted what writer Eric Deggans calls the proliferation of “hickspolitation” television and the demise of working class settings like Archie Bunker’s urban enclave on 1970s

“All In The Family”. There is no middle in the popular culture depiction of whiteness because increasingly there is no achievable middle in the white economic class structure.

When Black Culture is Popular Culture

The fragility of upward mobility for poor whites influences their contemporary engagement with black cultural goods. Historically, when white folks wanted to enjoy black music without the danger of actually listening to black musicians, they simply put the black music in whiteface. The organizational logics – the prevailing organizational structure for an industry of field – made this particularly lucrative in the 20th century [\[22\]](#). Early on, that organizational logic favored large, paternalistic music companies. Operating in a sort of Wild West before copyright had deigned to catch up with new modes of producing and distributing cultural products, these music and entertainment companies were more Rockefeller robber baron than Rock-a-fella distribution deals. There was no negotiating with talent. Talent was hired, shaped, and packaged by music companies that had an unholy ownership over the artist, the music, and the product that was sold and played on radio.

These organizational logics do not materialize from thin air. They are produced by that cultural stew in which we’re always being slowly roasted at temperatures just low enough to escape your awareness most of the time but hot enough to make you notice when change is afoot. And, while culture is lived by us all it is made for the young. Therein lies a special tension for hip-hop and country audiences.

When race music was capturing the hearts, and perhaps more importantly the bodies and libidos, of white youth in the 20th century, organizational logics responded to the dictates of a segregation by shaping black music into “rock and roll”. Elvis’ gyrations may have been dangerous but thanks to anti-miscegenation laws, Ike Turner’s would have literally been criminal and unnatural. The music that defines the culture of young people is intuitively understood by a society as an intergenerational hegemonic tool. It shapes how young people will acculturate into or, as sometimes happens, resist acculturation into existing hegemonic roles and structures.

Making race music over into whiteface was an organizational logic with a profit motive, but it did not operate independently of the social structure of hegemonic culture. [\[23\]](#) In fact, the two worked in tandem to exert control over the acceptable trajectories of white youth and the social dominance of whiteness over blackness. This dominance is reinforced by the malleable, phenotypic construct of whiteness, which is very much at the mercy of miscegenation. The legal definition of blackness as anyone with “one drop” of black blood makes whiteness biologically fragile. Controlling white youth culture becomes a way to control the making of white babies by criminalizing black sexuality and especially criminalizing the intermingling of black and white sexual selves.

If you have ever seen a young white woman “drop it like it’s hot” when Jay-Z is played at a nightclub, you may see how hip-hop could be a problem.

Throughout most of U.S. history an interlocking set of political, legal, social, and corporate norms empowered by white hegemonic racism colluded to strip black musicians of the means to own their art. In his book, “Race, Rock, and Elvis”, author Michael T. Bertrand argues that Elvis did not “steal” black music as much as he borrowed heavily from all forms of music. It remains that black music, as opposed to white roots music, was singularly translated to divorce the music from its black creators. Hip-hop, however, has steadfastly resisted being made over into white face. Sure, there has been Third Bass, the Beastie Boys and the white hip-hop savior, Eminem. However, unlike Elvis Presley (here a stand-in for the many, many white artists who borrowed black music to profit from its mass commodification for white youth), these acts were legitimized and produced by black artists. That means the audience could not access hip-hop without also getting a black face, a black pelvis, and all other aspects of blackness.

The power to affect that kind of legitimizing is a product of the times in which hip-hop was born. By the late 20th century, the entertainment market was fragmenting. Radio was the primary point of distribution for music. Corporate entertainment companies, which are almost comically bad at predicting or shaping emergent technologies, did not see much room for growth in the music market. This produced a laissez faire attitude to building new markets and controlling the markets they already owned, pretty much lock, stock, and barrel. In the language of the culture, record companies got caught slipping.

Because major labels were not much interested, when new technologies emerged that rearranged the relationship between music maker and music distributor, they hadn’t yet bothered to co-opt them. These boxes – the synthesizers, the drum machines, the turn tables – seem quaint and low-fi now but at the time they represented no less than a revolution of the control over distribution of cultural product. You could make the music in your bedroom, duplicate it on tape decks, and distribute it at house parties and swap meets.

These black kids were making black culture, but they also were owning its trajectory in ways not possible for their foreparents. This is due in large part to the disruption of music models mentioned above but it is also a function of the competitive nature of hip-hop. Historically, a hip-hop MC’s dominance had to be earned publicly in “ciphers” or battles among rappers, dancers, and deejays. A record company could not brand you the best. Only your peers – other black kids – could make you the best. This guerilla legitimization was a bottom-up process. By the time record labels caught on to the noise coming out of Brooklyn (or the Bronx, depending on your orientation) they were still thinking of it as just race music 2.0 (or, maybe 3.0). It would be years later before they understood what those badass black kids were really making: youth culture.

By then a crop of brash young black entrepreneurs owned much of their product, and as a result, much of their culture and some of its capital. Russell Simmons, Puff Daddy, Jay Z, Dame Dash and others were then in a position to sell its youth culture to the major music labels. That ownership meant a type of legitimacy of the culture as black and of blacks as the gatekeepers of the culture. This precluded a total whitewashing of hip-hop. For sure, major music labels eventually co-opted most independent black hip-hop makers [\[24\]](#), but they never got a chance to buy it

wholesale, cut out the black middleman, repackage it and sell it as authentically white. In 1950 a white business executive like Jimmy Iovine would have stolen some beats from Dr. Dre and lyrics from Jay Z and used them to make an Eminem. [In 1994, Iovine had to bring a white kid to Dr. Dre who, in turn, made him Eminem.](#)

When MTV, Fab Five Freddy, Kid Rock, mp3 sales, billboard rankings and corporate radio made it official – this hip-hop culture was THE youth culture – it had to do so using black iconography. That was the only legitimate iconography. Industry could not strip the blackness from the cultural product being sold without devaluing the product. The culture being shipped out from the powerful east and west coast conglomerates to Middle America and rural America was then decidedly, irrefutably black. To be cool, to participate in the dominate youth culture as every American generation has sought to do for generations, white youth had to engage it through black language, black dress, and black sound. To be young, in many ways you had to affect blackness.

If those black kids were born listening to their parent's soul records, rural poor white youth were born listening to the country music that, though influenced by blacks, was always careful to make that influence invisible by the time the music entered the intimate spaces of homes and ears. But this was not their parents' time. These white youth do not wait for their youth culture to be distributed to them by the corporate radio stations or their parents' television choices. They can now listen to music in headphones. Their parents need never even hear it. And, they don't wait for the music to come to them. They can go out and get it. The Internet, peer-to-peer sharing cultures, and hyper-segmented cable television markets made youth culture a separate sphere in ways it had not been before. Here, white kids can partake in the youth culture without much parental or corporate control of how they access it or internalize it. With hip-hop lyrics, language and guest verses, they are using the language and the posture of youth culture and grafting it onto the cultural tools of their particular space and place.

Before this descends into post-racial melting pot utopianism, let us be clear that when white kids do this transposing they are divorcing hip-hop from blackness to make it more palatable, not entirely unlike white corporate radio did to rock and roll seventy years ago. That they are only able to do it within narrow purviews speaks changes in structural authority over ever-declining white spaces, not to the declining significance of race.

Despite the narrowing of the purview, how white country audiences define authenticity^[25] determines which hip-hop-country pairings work. Hip-hop and country music construct authenticity similarly. That similarity provides a mechanism for white audiences to exert influence over black cultural adoption in white rural country music sonic landscapes. Nelly's verse on the Florida-Georgia Line remix is notable for its presence but also for its seamlessness. Nelly's hip-hop career was always anchored by his authentic claims to mid-western southern-ness. From St. Louis, Nelly was not from one of hip-hop's east coast dynasties. He could not draw on references to New York projects or use Harlem street slang to signal his legitimacy. Instead, Nelly did what southern rappers like Outkast and Scarface have done: he redefined authenticity symbols from his specific cultural geography^[26]. This included a southern cadence, introducing regional slang, and regular shout-outs to St. Louis cultural symbols. Nelly's hip-hop authenticity draws on his country authenticity. That Nelly's version of country is materially different from Florida

Georgia Line's ^[27] seems to matter less than that it exists. The same could be said for Atlanta rapper Ludacris' verse on Jason Aldean's remix of "Country Road Anthem". Nelly and Ludacris work while LL Cool J's verse on Brad Paisley's "Accidental Racist" does not and not just because LL Cool J appears to be issuing a blanket forgiveness of racism on behalf of all black people. It falls flat, in part, because LL attempts to drag country iconography to the symbolic urban jungle of his native Queens, NY from which he derives his hip-hop legitimacy. In contrast, Nelly and Luda linguistically slip into the rural white imaginary as familiars. The hoods from which they derive their authentic cred are suburban country. They are likely closer in actual and social distance to the poor suburban and rural hoods of white country fans than elite whites. The crossover is made possible by the same U.S. spatial segregation that allowed Eminem access to black Detroit from 8 Mile or introduced Elvis to Arthur Crudup. Nelly and Luda's visit to country music is paved by the historical spatial and cultural co-existence of non-elite whites and blacks. That's authentic history, authentically shared if not authentically owned by white country audiences. How country artists toe the line of authenticity while yielding to the popularity of hip-hop iconography exposes the limits of that power over the only musical genre that centers white poverty.

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Honky Tonks, White Donks, and The Country Imaginary

Country music has been at odds with pop music for decades. However, when the dominant popular music is hip-hop music, the authority of country masses to contest what is authentically country gets extra complicated, real fast. Because the country audience is one of the most loyal it can also be the most rabid. The sanctions issued for violating the complex code of authenticity and values that define country music can be some of the most artistically and economically severe meted out by anyone not named McCarthy.

For examples of the price of pop success and country sanctions see Dolly Pardon in the 1970s or The Dixie Chicks and Faith Hill in the 2000s (and, note the penalty appears highest and most often for women). The Dixie Chicks case is especially illuminating. While they were exiled not for crossing over but for violating country's political ethos, the swiftness of the country audience response is noteworthy. The pervasive belief is that big, bad, corporate country radio stations orchestrated the near immediate elimination of The Chicks from country music and popular culture. But Princeton researcher Gabriel Rossman's study of the Chicks controversy shows that the pressure to put The Chicks out to permanent pasture was exerted by the country masses i.e. poor rural whites. Top-down imposition of culture from elites has its limits. While the poor white rural country music audience may lack the material power to define themselves in the dominant ideology, they can and do shape what constitutes authentic country music. This constrained authority exposes how class defines the authority of whiteness differently. It also frames how poor whites have contested the ways in which hip-hop has been allowed to infiltrate country music.

To draw on popular culture memes is to necessarily draw on black culture and because of the unique black legitimacy of hip-hop, to draw on that black culture country music has to engage blackness directly. Yet, this pursuit of popular relevance risks violating deeply engrained racial beliefs of country's loyal, brutally responsive white poor rural fanbase. That is particularly dangerous as many of those poor whites feel that they are being

marginalized by economic elites, losing their social identity in an increasingly diverse America that doesn't necessarily default American to white, and competing with ever more ethnic groups for a dwindling pool of good jobs and beneficial citizenship arrangements that have long been a social salve for their economic pain. Yet, to not engage this black culture that is now youth culture, artists risk irrelevance as the youth contingent of their core white poor rural fanbase listens to and adopts much of the hip-hop/youth culture. The top-selling examples of "hick-hop", or this cultural fusion, exemplify the difficulty of that dance while their approaches to navigating the tensions of cultural legitimacy speak to the fault lines running through race, class, gender, and culture.

There's the wink-wink good times approach. This is epitomized in Trace Adkin's "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk". The term badonkadonk is a black euphemism for a woman's ass. But it does not refer to just any ass. In the black cultural imagination there has long existed a beauty ideal that has simultaneously internalized white beauty norms ^[28] and resisted them through the valorization of "uniquely black" phenotypical traits. As complicated as the notion may be, a rotund ass is one of those ideals ^[29]. Even as white norms have been internalized as a preference for light skin and straight or curly hair (as opposed to dark and nappy hair), a black woman's supposed "natural" dominance ^[30] in the genetic market of rotund asses has resisted white adoption ^[31]. When Sir Mix a Lot wrote the official ode to rotund behinds in 1991, there was a reason that a stereotypically white valley girl voice, named Becky, opens the song with disgust for a "big ol' butt". As fat has become a class marker among whites, it has necessarily become a racialized class marker. A "big" anything has been conflated with "fat" in a way to make poor bodies non-normative ^[32]. Black bodies become trapped by this, oddly irrespective of class, forming one of many other well-documented essentialized hegemonic distinctions that makes black inherently non-normative ^[33] in ways that money cannot buy you out of. If you doubt me, ask Oprah. For all her money, she's still fat with a big ol' black booty, and it has caused her no small amount of existential crisis or marginalization ^[34]. It has been rumored that Joan Rivers once told Oprah "she must lose the weight!" ^[35] Oprah is one of the wealthiest women in the world. She could buy Rivers a thousand times over. However, being fat opened Oprah up to a classed critique from someone many times her economic junior. This is how great the conflation of fat and inferior black bodies. A billion dollars can't buy you out of it.

Some feminists and black womanists have long understood that beauty is not just about being aesthetically pleasing. Beauty is a means of granting a certain type of legitimacy ^[36] with attending access to material resources through, for example, marrying "well" ^[37]. When Adkins draws on the lexicon of black beauty ideals with badonkadonk, he must do so without lifting up black women as beauty ideals. It is a tricky maneuver. To pull it off, he couches the entire endeavor in humor. The woman Adkins is singing about has it "going on like Donkey Kong" and works her "money maker" to the chagrin of all the women present. The "poor ole boys" can't help but stare. Adkins is telling us that if a white boy -- a southern country white boy -- can't help but stare, then the woman in question must be white no matter the blackness of the language used to describe her. No self-respecting good ole

boy would be caught dead looking at a black booty, certainly not while in the presence of white women. Lest you don't get it then, Adkins qualifies "badonkadonk" with "honky tonk". A honky tonk is a quintessential country music setting. It refers to the small social gathering spaces that dot many white rural communities. Honky-tonks exist in contrast to the country clubs of the white elite. Honky-tonks play country and western and maybe for a pretty girl, as Montgomery Gentry tell us in "Hell Yeah", they might play a little Bruce Springsteen. But, Colt Ford warns in "Hip-hop in a Honky Tonk" that a proprietor would be smart to keep the hip-hop off the jukebox because "rednecks" don't come to a honky tonk to hear no hip-hop.

The etymology of "badonkadonk" is inseparable from a black female beauty ideal. All such cultural ideals are a way of defining sexualized interest and attention. What we make sexually desirable in our culture also risks affording its power to its possessors. Women with a badonkadonk in a hip-hop song yield a certain power over men, albeit always constrained by dangerous heteronormative, misogynistic authority to define acceptable female sexuality. Still, black feminism is clear that any power can feel like a tool for liberation when all of your identities exist at the axis of multiple oppressions. A country musician could no more allow a symbol of black female power into a country song through an earnest appreciation of a badonkadonk than could a honky tonk in Colt Ford's world play Snoop Dogg. There's cultural appropriation and then there's *cultural appropriation*. To blunt the blackness of the slang, Adkins must divorce the badonkadonk from black women. He does this by situating it within the honky tonk, where it is clear in country music that no blackness should be allowed to transverse. The humor is a signal that Adkins will be back in another tune with an appropriate ode to a blue-eyed girl he is allowed to sexualize earnestly sans humor. Employing the honky tonk as qualifier doesn't just place this hip-hop euphemism into a country music imagination, it situates it within a proper discourse of acceptable cultural exchange and sexual norms. Black lexicon and rhythms are acceptable within narrowly defined constructs that signal to listeners that white norms, including beauty, are still privileged.

Songs like Jason Aldean's "Dirt Road Anthem" take a different approach than Adkins. But for the guitar riffs and the slowed down delivery, this is a hip-hop song through and through. It is brash, male and it big ups Aldean's hometown. It has liquor, partying, and women and it's riding the beat not entirely unlike LL Cool J's 1980s hi-hop love song, "I Need Love". There is no melody. Aldean does a country spoken word performance for most of the track. As in classic hip-hop odes to place like Jay Z's "Empire State", Aldean draws on imagery and narratives of the down home country towns that he loves. Unlike, however, Jay Z's ode to New York City, Aldean's isn't a love song to a specific town. This is an allusion to a material reality: there really isn't a "country" anymore ^[38]. Family farms have given way to industrial farm giants like Monsanto. Watering holes have been enclosed by zoning laws and planned communities. Spray painting the water tower can constitute a violation of the Patriot Act. You need expensive automotive computers to fix up pick-up trucks. People may be rural in that they do not live in cities but they are increasingly suburban, not country. As white poverty as increased so has the spatial concentration of poverty been impacted by the decline of rural America. Suburban poverty has grown faster than anywhere else in the country over the last decade, at a rate of 64% since 2000. A 2013 report from the Brookings Institute says that "job losses triggered by the Great Recession in industries like construction, manufacturing, and retail hit hardest in suburban communities and contributed to rising suburban unemployment and poverty." That might explain why

one rarely hears a country artist sing an ode to an actual rural town anymore. Instead, they harken back to the town of their childhood, which today is as likely to have a strip mall and a couple McDonalds as it is a drag strip and a Main Street. Or, like Aldean, they romanticize a fictionalized Anytown, USA.

In this town of Aldean's the boys live to fight, learn to love their women, and get in trouble on Friday nights. These are all old country music tropes. Only here, Aldean waxes poetic using the linguistic styling of hip-hop. There are the sixteen bars (ok, 18ish or so), a musical bridge, and even space for a little call and response should the song be played live. And it has been played live. In fact, Aldean says the song started out as a tune strictly played at his live shows. He had no intention of making it a record. However, his band noticed the extreme positive response from the audience every time they played it. Through the magic of cell phone videos and social networking, the song had become a record on its own as fans ripped, remixed, and reworked it as a single sans distribution. It could be argued that Aldean tripped into a hip-hop cipher and played catch up by releasing the song on his album.

Aldean's "Dirt Road Anthem" is unique for its earnest deployment of hip-hop elements. It is not using it as comical capital for "cool points", like Adkins or the tragicomedy that was Cowboy Troy. "Dirt Road Anthem" is also notable for who wrote it: Colt Ford. The same artist who wrote for himself the redneck anti-hip-hop manifesto, "Hip-hop in a Honky Tonk", also wrote Aldean's quintessential country hip-hop song. Born in 1970, Colt Ford is two years younger than LL Cool J and would have been nine years old when Sugar Hill Gang's "Rappers Delight" brought rap to the mainstream and a teenager when Run-DMC saved Aerosmith's career with their remake of "Walk This Way" in 1986. Ford likely understands the tensions between hip-hop and country and represents so perfectly it's dueling duality in the music he produces because he, like his audience, embodies it.

"We're Losing Our Country"

In many ways poor white people are right when they talk of losing their country. However, they are not losing it to blacks or immigrants. Neither are they really "losing", as that implies poor rural whites once owned this nation's promise in the material sense. The cultural divide between the white elite and redneck white poor has existed in some form for generations. However, the hope of escaping one's redneck past is becoming less likely while even the comfort of an actual country to ease that sense of loss is being gobbled up by suburbanization, the collapse of middle class work, and rising income inequality. Poor whites are not losing their country but their "country": the symbolic hope of the utility of their whiteness to improve their material lives by rendering them visible and autonomous. And, they're losing it to the white plutocracy.

Sadly, rich white folks don't have a banging soundtrack. Black folks do. And [when people like uber rich, uber white Gwyneth Paltrow is on national television dropping hot NWA bars from memory](#), it is easy to see how poor white people can conflate the encroachment of black culture into their symbolic spaces with the dominance of the white economic elite over their material spaces. They live a million social miles from both.

The success of hick-hop is grounded in mutually constituted authenticity of two genres that both value their respective authority to define that authenticity. While they cannot control the boundaries of popular culture,

country fans can still erect limited boundaries of acceptable cultural remixing. The contestation of boundaries of that cultural remixing signal an awareness among poor whites of the structural limitations of whiteness as necessary *and* sufficient for social mobility. Most Black Americans have been socialized to develop an awareness of the external constraints of blackness, eloquently described in WEB DuBois' theory of double-consciousness. The historical privileging of whiteness as a master identity has left poor whites with few such tools to navigate what that means in our new economic reality. Branding poverty with a black urban face simultaneously makes black poverty ubiquitous while erasing black lives but it erases poor whites almost entirely.

Historically, participation in popular culture promised a type of upward social mobility into higher status whiteness. It created a shared culture in which poor whites could assemble cultural tools like language and dress to transverse mobility bridges out of backwoods USA and into middle class white USA. That bridge now seems only to lead to blackness and god knows no one should ever want to end up there. The youth culture is developing a shared language but the language is being shared, and in many ways controlled, by blackness (if ultimately for the economic benefit of corporate media). That this might actually represent similar cultural bridges to mobility really only antagonizes the diminishing utility of one's whiteness, or at least the perceived diminishing utility. Sociology suggests its still pretty good to be white in America but it is quite true that it's not uniformly good to be white in America.

It is understandable how the benefits of whiteness can be hard to see for poor whites on which country music depends. It certainly must not feel true in their daily lives as they experience joblessness, poor health outcomes, shrinking social safety nets, and the near erasure of the poor and working class from television, movies, and pop culture save but a trailer park minstrelsy or two. It could be that the shifting economic realities of poor whites are exposing an emerging group identity crisis. Living with that at your 9-to-5, or in your search for a 9-to-5, may be one thing. Dealing with it in the spaces where you should be able to exert some control – your personal spaces, your homes, over your children, in your honky tonks, and at your tailgate parties – could present a particular kind of crisis. Their invisibility in national discussions of poverty may be a kind of privilege (one black Americans surely do not enjoy) but it is not without its perils. The erasure of the structural demise of social mobility for poor whites leaves them with few uncontested spaces, symbolic or material, to work through that group identity crisis. That it is hip-hop that provides them tools, albeit in limited and constrained ways, to explore that crisis is a function of hip-hop's domination of popular youth culture, spatial segregation of the haves from the rural have-nots, and shifting corporate logics. All of this structural change is reflected, as such things usually are, in the beautiful ugly culture people make as they try to construct their ideal selves under less than ideal conditions.

Recommended Resources:

Explore sonic landscape of underground hick hop bands on NPR: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1794557>

Colt Ford is the crossover king of hick hop. See his official video for “Country Thang” for an auteur’s performance of quintessential hick hop culture and iconography: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEYzcEM2zSU>

Transverse the historical, racialized evolution of “honky tonk” from Bill Doggett’s version

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bq4NhcFurgU>

to Trace Adkins’ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNVguvNE7qc>

The opening vignette of a peer-to-peer conversation between Florida Georgina Line and Nelly are particularly fascinating in their video of the hit remix: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmZ9xRO7M9M>

[1] Graeber, David. "Debt: The first five thousand years." *Melville House* (2011).

[2] At the time, the California legislature was debating Bill SB 520, that would require all state colleges to unilaterally accept all transfer credits from online groups, many of which were for-profit education companies. <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/03/18/essay-significance-last-weeks-proposal-higher-ed-outsourcing-california>

[3] See “Things I’m Not Supposed to Say: Make it Cheaper to Fail” in this volume.

[4] Kalleberg, Arne L. *Good jobs, bad jobs: The rise of polarized and precarious employment systems in the United States, 1970s-2000s*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2011.

[5] Rebecca Shuman’s “Thesis Hatment” was the Slate post heard ‘round the (academic) world. http://www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2013/04/there_are_no_academic_jobs_and_getting_a_ph_d_will_make_you_into_a_horrible.html

[6] It’s a common enough idiom in black rhetorical tradition meaning if things are bad for America, they are worse for African Americans. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/30/business/30detroit.html?pagewanted=all&r=2&>

[7] Sharon Collins empirically destroys arguments against affirmative action as ineffective or that the government cannot exert influence over private sector hiring or discrimination. Collins, Sharon M. *Black corporate executives: The making and breaking of a black middle class*. Temple University Press, 1997.

[8] Raymond Boudon would likely hate my characterization of his path-breaking work in measuring income and status mobility if he got the hip-hop reference at all. Boudon, Raymond. "Education, opportunity, and social inequality: Changing prospects in western society." (1974).

[9] Chang, Jeff. *Can't stop won't stop: A history of the hip-hop generation*. Macmillan, 2007.

[10] Hannah Karp, “The Unlikely Rise of Hick-Hop,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 3, 2013, D1.

[11] Baron, James N. "Arne L. Kalleberg: Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000s." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2013): 149-151.

- [12] Abramsky, Sasha. "THE OTHER AMERICA 2012." *NATION* 294, no. 20 (2012):11-2.
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- [17] This is no way minimizes the extreme, violent oppression of black Americans under Jim Crow. See Daily et al in footnote 6 for a discussion of how the careful, brutal maintenance of Jim Crow laws reflect the challenges of their daily enforcement over time.
- [18] Ryan Cooper. "Galloping Economic Insecurity" *Washington Monthly*. July 28, 2013.
- [19] See: Sandoval, Daniel A., Mark R. Rank, and Thomas A. Hirschl. "The increasing risk of poverty across the American life course." *Demography* 46, no. 4 (2009): 717-737 and Mouw, Ted, and Arne L. Kalleberg. "Occupations and the Structure of Wage Inequality in the United States, 1980s to 2000s." *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 3 (2010): 402-431.
- [20] Chris Kromm, "Unions, the South and Justice at Smithfield" in Facing South. June 6, 2006.
- [21] Tompson, Trevor and Jennifer Benz. "The Public Mood: White Malaise But Optimism Among Blacks, Hispanics" *NORC The Center for Public Affairs Research*. 2013.
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- [24] Negus, Keith. "The music business and rap: Between the street and the executive suite." *Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (1999): 488-508.
- [25] Peterson, Richard A. *Creating country music: Fabricating authenticity*. University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- [26] For more on the discursive practice of establishing authenticity in hip-hop see: McLeod, Kembrew. "Authenticity within hip-hop and other cultures threatened with assimilation." *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 4 (1999): 134-150.
- [27] Florida Georgia Line's very name is a practice in the same kind of explicit legitimacy claims to the U.S. South, country music's symbolic capital
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- [34] Vogue's Anna Winters insisted Oprah lose weight before allowing her to grace the cover: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1184436/Anna-Wintour-ordered-Oprah-Winfrey-lose-20lb-appearing-Vogue-cover.html>
- [35] See: "Joan Rivers Tells Oprah Winfrey to Lose Weight" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAtdjZa2eA>
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