ABSTRACT

STRUGGLING TO FIND BLACK COUNTERNARRATIVES: MULTICULTURALISM, BLACK ENTERTAINMENT TELEVISION & THE PROMISE OF ‘STAR POWER’

by Terrence O’Neal Harewood

Skeptical about the radical potential of multicultural education given its cooptation by mainstream educational discourses, this dissertation explores the possible existence of counternarratives of Blackness within commercialized popular culture. In light of the fact that Blacks watch television at astronomical rates unparalleled to other U.S demographic groups, I interrogate Black Entertainment Television (BET), the nation’s first African American owned and operated multimedia conglomerate, in order to illuminate possible counter-hegemonic narratives of Blackness. I argue that in order for multicultural education to engender any substantial educational and social transformation, the discourse must be rearticulated, from a postcolonial and cultural studies perspective, as the study of youth identity formation which centers pedagogy around discursive practices that influence the construction of youth subjectivities. From a postcolonial and cultural studies perspective, multicultural education is about understanding, reaffirming, and “troubling” identities. It is also about understanding how identities are discursively produced, represented, and performed in society. As such, the mass media and sites such as BET must be subjected to intense critique as an integral dynamic of multiculturalism. My project makes the case for a syncretic pedagogy which employs critical media literacy as the curriculum framework and problematizes the essentialist and binary logics that have come to characterize multicultural education in the United States.
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DEDICATION

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My wife, Lori Harewood

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to engender Black counternarratives through education.
CHAPTER ONE:

Multicultural Education:
Exploring New Grounds, Creating New Possibilities

Is there still radical potential for multicultural education? Or should Black intellectuals and other critical scholars look to new discourses to find counternarratives of Blackness? Could commercialized popular culture be a space where such counternarratives emerge? The purpose of this dissertation project is twofold. The primary purpose is to understand how the Black visual media, and in particular Black Entertainment Television (BET)\(^1\), are responding to or are rearticulating colonial constructions of Blackness. As such, a major aspect of this project will involve a case study of BET—the nation’s first African American-owned and operated Multimedia Corporation—in order to interrogate how Blackness is being constructed in the visual media once Blacks gain control over their own representation and also to propose an educational response to reading and deconstructing media imagery. The second and inter-related purpose is to rearticulate multicultural education as the study of student identity formation in order to ground it within postcolonial theory and cultural studies frameworks. From this perspective, pedagogy and curriculum will be centered on critical media literacy, with a view toward helping Blacks and other students become critical readers of television and other mass mediated and cultural texts which will help them to identify colonial tropes as well as ideological codes that may influence their construction of reality. I argue that a major goal of multicultural education must be to engage students in a “critical” reading of mass mediated texts and to provide opportunities for them to

\(^1\) Black Entertainment Television will be referred to as BET.
produce and create their own counternarratives. This chapter charts the critical course of this project. In section one I provide the rationale for this study. Section two discusses the methodology that I will be using in this project and in section three I outline the major aspects of each chapter, identify and define several important terms and concepts which will be crucial to understanding the goals of this dissertation project, as well as offer a few caveats.

From a post-colonial and cultural studies perspective, multicultural education is about understanding, reaffirming, and “troubling” identities. It is also about understanding how identities are discursively produced, represented, and performed in society. A number of education scholars in the United States and elsewhere have already begun reconceptualizing multicultural education around cultural studies (Cameron McCarthy, 1998; Henry Giroux & Peter McLaren, 1994; Dennis Carlson, 1998). In perhaps one of the most comprehensive critiques of multicultural education in the United States to date, Ram Mahalingam and Cameron McCarthy (2000) argue that the discourse is in dire need of a fundamental paradigmatic overhaul. They draw upon popular criticisms that project an overall climate of apprehension and ambivalence over multiculturalism to bolster their argument for an elaborate “reconceptualization” of the field. I employ their critique here to support my position that mainstream approaches to multicultural education with their focus on essentialism and the reification of difference are anachronistic and have been relatively unsuccessful in bringing about any major transformational shifts in social policy and practices. My research emerges as a direct response to these criticisms by Mahalingam and McCarthy and a multiplicity of others who are similarly concerned that multicultural education has been relatively ineffective in
engendering any major changes in the nation's public schools, and ultimately within contemporary society.

The rationale for this project stems in part from alarming statistics which illustrate that television, more than schooling, may be the primary source where Blacks gain ideas about themselves and the “other,” as well as where notions of Blackness are being constructed and appropriated by a significant number of youth. According to a recent A.C. Nielsen\(^2\) report on African American television consumption (1999-2000), Blacks of all age groups watch significantly more television during the three key television periods—daytime, primetime and late night—than any other demographic group in the United States (See Figure One, Chapter Four). The report also suggests that Blacks are much more likely to watch television programs which show Black actors, characters or performers. Given the pervasiveness of racialism within the historic and contemporary visual media, there is legitimate cause for concern that the television representations of Blackness may be having a serious impact on the self-esteem and attitudes of African American youth (Camille Cosby, 1994). Of the numerous hours Blacks spend consuming television daily, BET no doubt commands a significant portion of their attention. The network reaches 90% of African Americans and more than 68 million total households across North America (Johnathon Chait, 2001). Furthermore, BET’s slogan makes overt claims that the network represents “Black Star Power.” Is BET empowering to Blacks and providing them with a “star power” which builds positive self-esteem and promote positive attitudes? Or does its program merely empower Black “Stars?” In other words, what kind of “star power” does BET offer its viewers? According to a survey by Felicia

G. Jones (1990), an estimated one-third of African Americans reported watching BET programming on a regular basis. The emergence of BET as a primary source of content by and about Blacks is significant for several reasons. Among them, Black leaders and scholars have long complained that mainstream television offers limited and often problematic constructions of Blackness. As such, they have chastised the media for projecting primarily negative images of Blackness and reinforcing problematic stereotypes. These stereotypical representations of Blackness came to light in a study by Cosby (1994) who identified an extensive list including:

- Dangerous and beast-like African-Americans
- Dirty and repulsive African-American poor people
- African-Americans engaging in gross behavior, like spitting and fighting
- African-Americans disrespecting other African-Americans, such as men striking women, cursing, etc.
- Animalistic, sub-human African-American men
- African-American men who are buffoonish clowns
- African-American women are nosy, gossipy, hens
- African-Americans as welfare recipients who are dependent on welfare cheese
- African-American men being sexual studs
- Immoral, dirty, and incompetent African-American adults
- Undisciplined African-American children who strike African-American adults
- A hopeless African-American community which believes that unless you are white, you won’t make it in society. (p. 130-131)

Many of these stereotypes and myths about Blackness all have their discursive roots in colonialism but still play an extremely important role in the Eurocentric, racist constructions of Blackness within mainstream media. It is the pervasiveness of these images that has fueled the burning desire for Blacks to have greater control over their own representation. As far back as 1942, the NAACP has been challenging Hollywood and the entertainment industry to produce more substantive content that portrays

3 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
Blackness in a “positive” light and to include more Blacks in the production and control over images that target Black audiences. Yet as recent as the fall of 2001 television season, the NAACP was forced to threaten the three major networks, ABC, NBC and CBS, with a national boycott by its members, claiming that the anticipated line up of new prime time television shows included too few Black characters. As the nation’s first African American owned and operated television network and primary television source which distributes narratives of Blackness, there has been much optimism that BET would challenge and or subvert these problematic constructions of Blackness. In this project I interrogate this presumption and address several critical questions including the following: Does BET challenge the dominant and hegemonic constructions of Blackness that have been prevalent within the mainstream media? Is BET a space where Black counternarratives are being produced? Does the network really promote “Black Star Power” that is emancipatory to Blacks?"

This study explores the way Blackness is being constructed within the Black visual media in order to say something about how multicultural education may become more empowering as the study of student identity formation. I also want to illustrate what might constitute a “counter-hegemonic” narrative of Blackness and to demonstrate what may constitute a critical reading of texts. By counter-hegemonic I mean a set of narratives, representations and performances of identity that challenge and or subvert dominant representational practices and that are consistent with a democratic cultural

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politics. Because the struggle in this project is to identify counternarratives of Blackness which speak against colonial representations within contemporary culture, postcolonial theory and cultural studies frameworks will be crucial to articulating multicultural education as the study of identity construction. In particular, I am very interested in exploring postcolonial theories of cultural hybridity and syncretism which may have usefulness for reconceptualizing multicultural education. In fact, the notion of a syncretic pedagogy that brings together arguments from various sides of the multicultural spectrum will be explored as a possible way to engender the radical democratic potential of multicultural education.

In terms of hybridity, post-colonial discourse suggests that hybridity represents a counter-hegemonic identity. Hybridity celebrates fluid, non-fixed identities and is often used to explain the subversive border crossing by a multiplicity of transnational or postcolonial people. For instance, McCarthy (1998) argues that formerly colonized people, and in particular those of Caribbean origins, often affirm a postcolonial hybrid identity through their writings. In illuminating the fluidity of this hybrid identity, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1996) similarly note that postcolonial literature illustrates this postcolonial hybrid subject as oscillating to and fro across a number of traditions, subverting the Eurocentric canons, and in the process creating a new, multifaceted and ever-changing identity. Shohat and Stam write, “Occupying contradictory social and discursive spaces, then, hybridity is an unending, unfinalizable process which preceded colonialism and will continue after it. Hybridity is dynamic, mobile, less an achieved synthesis or prescribed formula than an unstable constellation of discourses” (p. 41). By writing themselves into being through this literature, Shohat and Stam suggest that
postcolonial subjects constantly define and redefine themselves in alternate ways, affirming themselves as more than just the "other," and representing themselves in terms different from the alterity and negativity of "whiteness." This fluid hybrid subject, according to this perspective, is somehow able to subvert dominant representational practices by moving back and forth and occupying the uncomfortable, tension-filled space between oppositional worlds. In keeping with my conception that multicultural education should resist all notions of a stable identity, I argue that the postcolonial hybridized identity may be one way of recognizing counter-hegemonic identities in production and subvert colonial, hegemonic constructions of Blackness. At issue here is whether representational practices by African Americans on BET have been counter-hegemonic in the sense that they illustrate identities similar to the postcolonial hybrid subject, and whether a new hybrid subject is emerging in the process.

I attempt to confront these issues through an interrogation of BET, the primary space where “African American culture” is celebrated on television. Traditionally, television audiences in the United States and around the world have had to rely solely on representations of Blackness offered up by white producers and networks. This practice can be traced back to the antebellum minstrel shows where Blackface images performed by white actors, often depicted African Americans in racist, stereotypical ways ranging from indolent, shiftless buffoons, to violent criminals (Valerie Smith, 1997). Within the last few decades, however, there have been systematic attempts among African Americans to produce their own visual texts and insert their own narratives. Hence, Black audiences have seen the emergence of a few Black directors including Spike Lee, Robert Townsend and John Singleton, among others. BET is a primary source of such
texts produced and directed by African Americans. Founded in 1979, it is the nation’s first African American owned and operated network, and its programs are geared toward those who are interested in “African American culture.” Its daily diet of programs include rap, hip hop and R&B music videos, comedy shows, and on a much smaller scale, news and public affairs programming, as well as religious programs. The fact that the nation’s only television network dedicated to Blackness focuses almost exclusively on entertainment and highlights the “entertainment” aspect of Black culture in its title has raised significant concerns by many within African American communities. Nonetheless, by virtue of its label, management, and claims to Blackness, many African Americans have adopted BET as their own, “authentic” television network.

BET is arguably the most significant popular cultural site in which “African Americanness” or “Blackness” is produced, represented, distributed and contested. While traditional educators have often downplayed the importance of popular culture, and sites such as BET—often equating them with “low culture” or treating them as insignificant and unworthy of any serious intellectual inquiry—popular culture has always been a crucial space for marginalized people. As McCarthy (1998) argues, studying popular culture affords critical educationists a unique opportunity to “appreciate that oppressed people throw up their own forms of resistance as they encounter structures of domination in their daily lives” (p. 42). However, in light of the emergence of cultural industries and an increasing attention given to globalization of popular culture, many have expressed concern that the commodification of “Black popular culture” ultimately undermines its political value. This sentiment is summed up in the comments of Todd Boyd (1997) who notes there was “a time when culture and politics that deviated from
the mainstream were viewed as threatening. When there was a political theme that ran through popular culture, it was bounded by the real-life threat of a strong political presence” (p. 4). Boyd’s concern is that with the commodification of “Black popular culture,” an emphasis on mass production of Black images and representations have ultimately eroded the radical potential of popular culture and depoliticized its messages. In this project I am interested in exploring these various positions in order to interrogate the role of popular culture in engendering the democratic potential of multicultural education as the study of student identity formation.

I am particularly interested in Blackness, in part because I recognize its problematic construction in the United States. As a racial trope, Blackness continues to be taken for granted as a “natural,” “God-given” category of difference. In order to “denaturalize” this construction and treatment of Blackness, I will interrogate essentialist representations within popular culture vis-à-vis BET. A major reason for focusing on BET is because I believe it provides important ideological and curricular texts from which youth identities are intersubjectively produced. Stuart Hall (1996) argues that “amongst other kinds of ideological labour, the media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the ‘problem of race’ is understood to be” (p. 161). For the past twenty years BET has been performing such ideological work and has poised itself as the chief representative of Blackness. By saturating the television market with images of Blackness, BET prides itself as the “dominant medium used by advertisers to target the black consumer marketplace” (Alice Taitt and Ron Barber, 1996, p. 187). In order to earn this reputation, BET lures its audiences by packaging a variety of cultural products and by making overt claims that the
network represents “authentic” African American culture or, in their words, “Black Star Power.” As BET continues to market these performances as authentic Blackness, millions of youth flock to their television sets daily to gaze at the cultural programming and to consume these representations. What meanings do the BET content inscribe about race and race relations in America? How does BET content “represent” Blackness? Does BET’s content challenge the essentialism and colonial tropes which naturalize Blackness as the “other?”

A critical issue here is whether these representations on BET can be classified as counternarratives, and whether commercialized popular culture can be relied upon to challenge the hegemonic constructions of race. There are some who believe that BET is Afrocentric and liberatory (Taitt & Barber, 1996). One of the arguments advanced by various post-colonial scholars states that in order to challenge dominant or hegemonic representations of the colonial and neo-colonial “other,” formerly colonized people such as Third World people, women, African Americans and other racial or cultural “minorities,” must gain control of their own representation. This moment of self-production is seen as a counter-hegemonic moment for these “marginalized others” to see themselves in ways other than through the “master’s” eyes. Because Black Entertainment Television (BET) has been Black-owned, some have hoped that it might provide a space for counternarratives that challenge the dominant representations of Blackness. However, this hope must be tempered by the realization that BET is big business, and now owned by a multinational corporation—Viacom—engaged in the commodification of racialized signifiers of difference. BET still continues to be managed and operated by Blacks. My interest in BET, therefore, stems from a concern about the
meanings that the network gives to notions of race and, in particular, Blackness in the
United States given its contradictory role as the nation’s only “Black” network, and as a
big business whose raison d’être is to make a profit. Historically, Black media and in
particular newspapers, radio, and documentary film have been expected to focus their
energies on challenging hegemonic constructions of Blackness. The tension with BET
emerges as a result of a tacit commitment the network gives to continuing this tradition
while at the same time earning the necessary profit to sustain itself. This begs the
question: can commercialism and counternarratives occupy the same space at the same
time?

I assert that because of the continual entrenchment of the categories of
“Blackness” and “whiteness” in America, it may be difficult for Blacks to define
themselves on television other than in opposition to whites. I also argue that since the
goal of BET and other television representations of “Blackness” is to “sell” these images
to the public, the possibility of these representations challenging dominant discourses
might be momentarily constrained. I interrogate BET in order to better understand how
Blackness is defined as a category of difference and to interrogate whether
counternarratives of Blackness are being circulated on the network. Is Blackness
represented as an oppositional category and in terms of negativity and alterity of
whiteness? Is BET a space where hybrid identities are affirmed and represented? Does
BET essentialize and fix Blackness as a stable category? What are the implications for
employing commercialized, popular cultural texts as part of the multicultural education
curriculum?
While I am skeptical about the subversive potential of commercialized popular cultural sites, I argue that BET warrants a critical engagement since it serves such important ideological functions in the production and distribution of racial narratives. My argument is that in spite of the commonly held belief that the Blackness visual on BET is limiting from the standpoint that it perpetuates stereotypical, homophobic, misogynous and limiting representations of Blackness (Yemi Toure, 2000)\(^5\), BET provides an interesting insight into the complex dynamics that are involved in the representation and construction of racial identity in the United States.

If nothing else, a critical engagement with BET allows educators to recognize that notions of Blackness are informed by a multiplicity of factors including gender, sexuality, class, geography and religion. In addition, the performative nature of Blackness (Martín Favor, 2000) visible on BET could help to undermine all efforts to essentialize Blackness, a tendency that has become commonplace within mainstream multicultural education discourses (Mahalingham & McCarthy, 2000). In reference to the argument by critical pedagogues concerning multicultural education and popular culture, I argue that a, “pedagogy of the popular” (Henry Giroux, 1993) must be engaged in order to make multicultural education a more transformative discourse that empowers students. Furthermore, since youth—Black and white—rely so heavily upon social texts like those found on BET to make sense of reality and to construct their identities, educators must engage these texts, open them up for critique, and validate them as part of the schooling experience. Cultural workers must, therefore, take up the challenge of interrogating and

engaging popular cultural meanings that are inscribed in texts such as those found on BET.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION**

Moreover, an engagement with BET and popular culture may also have significant ramifications for the debate over multicultural education in the United States. It is the position of this project that an engagement with popular culture may be one way of engendering a “syncretic pedagogy” which speaks to destabilizing the many binary oppositions such as the high/low or high/popular cultural binary or the general us/them ideology that has become emblematic of the multicultural education discourse. My major argument here is that one of the primary reasons why multicultural education has not engendered any significant transformation of the US educational and social landscapes may also be due to the simplistic binary oppositions that have emerged between scholars from multiple sides of the multicultural spectrum. Some critics have characterized this dispute as a “cultural war” and a multiplicity of binary oppositions have been unleashed to mark off and distinguish positions emerging from neo-conservative right-wing educators and more left-wing radical, liberal, progressive or Afrocentric scholars.

Among these multicultural dualisms, education is often simplistically defined in terms of: liberation versus domestication; critical versus false consciousness; united versus polarization; transformative versus socially reproductive; hegemonic versus counter-hegemonic; distorted versus the truth; high versus popular culture; common culture versus pluralism; essentialism versus anti-essentialism; traditional versus progressive or critical pedagogy; theory versus practice and more recently, modern versus
postmodern education. While arguments emerging from these oppositions have been fundamental for identifying significant problems with multicultural education, the major concern in this project is that this either/or thinking has simplistically defined what the multicultural education project is all about. This is not to suggest that these binaries are not useful. My major concern is that an overemphasis of these binaries has led to a form of intellectual dogmatism that encourages multicultural educators to talk past each other instead of dialoging with each other. I argue that taken by itself, no single one of these groups has a monopoly on the truth. To denaturalize these binaries I suggest that more contemporary theoretical perspectives must be encouraged with a view to limiting the intellectual divide which does nothing but undermine the transformational potential of multicultural education. At this historical moment when poststructural theories have destabilized all notions of a pure or authentic identity, I believe the postcolonial notion of syncretism may serve an important role in helping to "re-think" multicultural education and overcome some of the binary thinking that continues to characterize discussions of identity. Syncretism implies a creative crossing of borders that separate identity categories. This is different from the traditional American "melting pot" mythology of a blending of identities into one homogenous, unified identity (a blending which certainly never occurred in reality). It also implies something different from the Hegelian and Marxian notion of a dialectical opposition that leads toward the reunification of all opposition and difference. If a dialectic of identity still operates, it does not lead toward a neat synthesis of oppositions or an end of history in which identity disappears along with difference. Syncretism implies a creative play of difference that is not resolved or resolvable into a unified identity or sense of self, that leaves the subject open and non-
determined, adaptive and shape shifting. The syncretic self may recognize borders of identity and difference as having some strategic value, but part of their value is to be found in crossing back and forth across borders, bringing different cultural traditions and identities in ways that enhance human freedom and power. According to Vassilis Lambropoulos (2001), syncretism includes everything from,

The cultural mixture of diverse beliefs and practices within a specific socio-historical frame; to the congruity of dissent within such a frame, despite differences of opinion; to the non-organic solidarity of heterodoxy which constitutes a collective worldview; to the forging together of disparate, often incompatible elements from different systems; and to the intermingling and blending. (p. 224)

Such a complex mixture is already taking place within popular culture and may be useful for moving beyond the artificial ideological binaries and separatist dichotomies that currently restrain the democratic potential of multicultural education. It may also be this insistence on purity that continues to entrench the racial categories of Blackness and whiteness in the United States. That is to say that the colonial myth of Blackness and whiteness as “pure” ethnic categories of difference is still alive and well in the U.S. In this regard, BET may be responsible for either reifying or intercepting taken-for-granted notions of ethnic absolutism and essentialism which must be subjected to an intense postcolonial critique. In this project, I appropriate Lambropoulos’ definition of syncretism in my argument for a syncretic pedagogy which calls for a mixture between

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ideas emerging from Western Traditionalists, Afrocentrists, Multiculturalists, critical pedagogues, Feminists and other critical theorists and educational stakeholders. I suggest that one place to start may be through a common interest in destabilizing the taken-for-granted meanings that underpin television and popular culture. This idea of a syncretic pedagogy will be explored further in chapter eight.

Another critical goal of this project seeks to move multicultural education beyond the limited approaches to identity, schooling, and difference employed by mainstream discourses. In spite of its popular usage, few can deny that the term "multicultural education" has failed to live up to its transformational expectations in mainstream curriculum discourses. After more than three decades of discursive status, multicultural education still remains as somewhat of a "buzz word" or a "fad," and a contentious one at that. This attitude stems, in part, from what many claim as a lack of fulfillment of the fundamental goals of multiculturalism. The discourse on multicultural education owes its roots to the civil rights era. More specifically, it gained discursive prominence sometime between the late 1960s and early 1970s (Sonia Nieto, 1996, p. xv). An early problem for multiculturalism centered on the question, “should multicultural education be all things to all peoples?” This issue produced widespread debate within many academic circles. For instance, Gay (1977) argues that if multiculturalism becomes too elastic to include the many issues associated with class, gays, gender, etc., it runs the risks of “shortchanging” its initial goal of promoting equity and justice for ethnic minorities. Others have sought to broaden the definition of "multiculturalism" in order to create space in the curriculum for multiple cultural groups. While initially multiculturalism applied strictly to race and ethnicity, today multiculturalism recognizes the intersectionality of identities and,
therefore, has been expanded to include gender, sexuality, religion, exceptionalities, and other markers of difference. However, in spite of its general interest in difference, mainstream multicultural education for the most part has failed to address in any substantive way contemporary issues of identity that reflect the complexities of living in a pluralistic society constituted and reconstituted by mass migration, displacement, globalization and electronic mediation.

The debates over multicultural education in the United States is construed mainly in terms of a struggle over whose culture is legitimated within public schools and in society in general. There are some who argue that Protestant Anglo-American culture should permeate the public school curriculum. Arthur Schlesinger (1991), E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (1987), William Bennett (1988) and Diane Ravitch (1992) are among those who make the case for the supremacy of the Eurocentric discourse and are often classified as Western traditionalists. Writing in 1991, Schlesinger argued, "the white Anglo-American culture was for two centuries – and in critical respects still is – the dominant influence on American culture and society" (p. 8). As such, Schlesinger and a multiplicity of other scholars often advocate the use of curricular texts, which focus primarily on the European influence on the American culture. While these critics provide contemporary arguments for a Eurocentric curriculum in schools, it must be noted that the focus on a Eurocentric discourse for public schools did not originate with them within the last few decades. In a sense, one may argue that from their inception, U.S. public schools were founded to legitimate the culture of the dominant group, namely Anglo Saxons. Those who were not a part of that dominant group were expected to become “acculturated” or “civilized” and take on the values of the dominant culture. Consequently, there were systemic attempts
to stratify society in a manner that served the interests of members of the dominant culture. As Joel Spring (1997) described, "Some citizens believed in the racial superiority of whites that resulted in the segregation of African Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans" (p. 12). Henceforth, this particular group of scholars have addressed identity only in a way to suggest the superiority of Eurocentrism, but not in a sense that speaks directly to the everyday realities of living in a complex, multifaceted, mediated society where youth are increasingly relying upon electronic and popular images to construct their subjectivities.

The multicultural education discourse emerged during the civil rights era to challenge this conception of white supremacy and the overwhelming devaluation of cultural difference. Demoralized by the marginal treatment and widespread oppression both in schools and within society, in general, minority groups begun to seek affirmation and recognition of their culture. Subsequently, civil rights activists challenged many of these “othering” public school practices by using strategies ranging from efforts to desegregate public schools, to widespread struggles for cultural recognition being called for by a multiplicity of minority groups. Spring writes:

The great civil rights movement opened the door to demands that the public school reflect minority cultures. African Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and Puerto Ricans demanded that their unique cultures be recognized and be given a place in the school curriculum. These demands gave impetus to the movement for multicultural education in the 1980s and 1990s. (p. 13)
From its discursive inception, multiculturalism has struggled for legitimacy in mainstream curriculum. Mahalingam and McCarthy (2000) cite three typical responses to multiculturalism in America.

First, when the reform is not seen as a fleeting practice, then the political economy of engaging multiculturalism is manifested in naturalizing the European roots of American identity (Ravitch, 1990 Hirsch, 1987). Second, multicultural rhetoric is deployed to obfuscate the political economic consequences of globalization. Third, the social production of multiculturalism is elaborated in a pedagogy that is rooted in essentialized representations of various minority cultures. (p. 3)

Furthermore, in the cases where multicultural education gained acceptance in the curriculum, it often received marginal treatment as an add-on to the dominant Eurocentric curriculum. It can be stated that despite widespread efforts to pluralize the curriculum, the goals of multicultural education were never fully realized. Reflecting the plurality that is constitutive of the discourse, multicultural education has always been justifiably underpinned by a lack of a singular, unified approach. In the next section of this paper, I will illuminate some of the more popular approaches as outlined in an influential taxonomy by Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (1987). I outline the major assumptions of these approaches and argue that most of them have been inadequate for addressing the needs of living within a contemporary society.

In what remains today as one of the most comprehensive examinations of research conducted on multicultural education in an American context, Sleeter and Grant elucidated five typical approaches to multiculturalism. Their taxonomy on multicultural education classified these approaches as: (1) Teaching the culturally different, (2) the
human relations approach, (3) single group studies, (4) the multicultural education approach and (5) education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist. I am particularly interested in the “teaching the culturally different,” “multicultural education,” and “education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist approaches.”

According to Sleeter and Grant, the purpose of the "teaching the culturally different approach" is to assimilate students of color into the mainstream by offering "transitional bridges." Hirsch might be considered as a contemporary of this approach. He believes that the primary reason for academic underachieving is a lack of "cultural literacy" among youth. For Hirsch, being culturally literate means acquiring certain knowledge of selected works and historical information which he deems as necessary for informed participation in the political and cultural life of the United States (Colin Lankshear & Peter McLaren, 1993). Hirsch believes that by learning this prescribed content, “culturally different” students can gain "transition" into the mainstream economic and political spheres. Henceforth, to Hirsch developing “cultural literacy” empowers marginalized students socially, economically, and politically.

Hirsch's position has often been castigated by critics for oversimplifying the role of cultural politics, its apolitical, elitist, racist and transcendental notions of a common culture, its neutral treatment of education, and its failure to accurately depict the formidable struggle that undergirds American cultural identity formation (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Furthermore, as Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux (1988) point out, cultural difference is not perceived as educationally valid under Hirsch's conception of a common culture. They argue that Hirsch's concept of cultural literacy engenders a politics of exclusion by systematically ostracizing the experiences of the "other,"
rendering them as invalid material for the official educational exercise. From the standpoint of this project, this approach to multicultural education suffers from its failure to address the lived realities of students especially with regards to the popular knowledges they imbibe from mass media through electronic mediation.

Moreover, in their survey of literature using this approach, Sleeter and Grant also found significant drawbacks. One of the major issues for them was insufficient discussion of the social relationships between marginalized students and their “majority” counterparts. Literature advocating this position failed to address issues surrounding the asymmetrical power relations that grounded student experiences on a daily basis. A second problem stemmed from the exclusive focus on race and ethnicity. This tendency to overlook gender, class, sexual orientation, and other markers of difference serve to undermine the importance of intersectionality in identity formation (Ruth Vinz, 2000). Despite focusing mainly on Blackness and whiteness, my project transcends these shortcomings by illuminating the importance of multiple and complex processes of identification. Sleeter and Grant’s major concern with this approach was that it tended to place the burden of eliminating racism solely on the shoulders of the students and their teachers rather than on society in general, and “especially whites.” This tendency to usurp solutions strictly from within the dislocated communities may be an outgrowth from ideologies that blame the victims for whatever predicaments they may face.

Of the five approaches, Sleeter and Grant found that the multicultural education approach was the most common and fully developed. This approach strives to promote cultural diversity and social justice for all students by reforming the social structures, practices and policies of schools. Proponents who work within this frame also fight to
create spaces for all voices within the schools and position the recognition and affirmation of human diversity at the core of the multicultural project. Unlike the other approaches to multicultural education, scholars like James Banks and Asa G. Hilliard who work within this pluralistic tradition also emphasize a plurality of cultural differences, albeit not as much as they focus on race and ethnicity. However, while this approach was the most commonly found in the literature, Sleeter and Grant did find some loopholes among the writings that employed this perspective. One of the major weaknesses they identified was a lack of a clear focus on multiculturalism curriculum especially as it relates to addressing identity and difference. Mahalingam and McCarthy (2000) also cite this as one of the major drawbacks to multicultural education. They note that the lack of a cohesive attention to the complexities of cultural differences limits the epistemological, moral, and political effectiveness of the multicultural project. In spite of the wide variety of literature that was found using this approach, Sleeter and Grant found that relatively few of these texts did much to advance curriculum theory. Also tied to the curriculum, Sleeter and Grant found that not much was written about either instruction or classroom pedagogy. The authors found that this approach still left some relatively important questions unanswered. For instance, how should this multicultural approach play out in the classroom? What types of activities could be useful for classroom pedagogy? My approach to advancing multicultural education addresses these shortcomings by grounding curriculum specifically in discursive practices of critical media literacy.

Finally, Sleeter and Grant argue that in many ways advocates who employ this approach often misconstrue the central problem with culture in schools. They posit that
while a plethora of literature within this framework focuses on recognizing cultural differences, this is only one goal of multiculturalism. The issue of mobilizing minorities and the distribution of power for marginalized groups equal to whites must be continually pursued. To confront these shortcomings, I believe the “education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist” approach might be the most appropriate among those cited by Sleeter and Grant.

From the title, it can be inferred that the “education that is multicultural and socially reconstructionist approach” is an outgrowth of both the multicultural education approach and the progressive discourse on social reconstructionism, which had its heyday in the earlier part of the twentieth century. With George S. Counts (1932), as one of its primary spokespersons, social reconstructionism sought to expand and advance the theories of progressivism as espoused by John Dewey, et al. For proponents of this school of thought, it was not nearly sufficient to seek more democratic goals in a society that was racist, classist, patriarchal and homophobic, to name a few structural problems; students should be armed with the tools to “reconstruct” society into a more just and equitable democracy. The education that is multicultural and socially reconstructionist approach follows from this philosophy. According to Sleeter and Grant, the primary goal of this approach is to prepare students to challenge the social structural inequalities that confront them. This goal represents an extension of the multicultural education approach (Sleeter & Grant). The emphasis here is on helping students to gain a better understanding of the causes of oppression and inequality as well as working together to formulate ways of eliminating and challenging the social problems that often accompany them. Those who operate within this school of thought believe that teachers can
engender these changes by reconstituting their classrooms to make them more just and
democratic. They argue that teachers must become transformative intellectuals who must
then be committed to the goals of a democratic society.

Of the five approaches in Sleeter and Grant's taxonomy, I find that this
“education that is multicultural and socially reconstructivist approach” is most consistent
with my position on multicultural education. Like the authors cited by Sleeter and Grant
who utilized this approach, I believe that a primary goal of education should be to
challenge racism, sexism, patriarchy, exceptionalism, heteronormativitism, Eurocentrism
and other forms of structural inequality especially as these structures are manifested in
taken for granted discourses such as within the contemporary media. However, while
Sleeter and Grant sought to describe this approach in terms of literature constructed
primarily during the 1970s and 1980s, I believe that this approach must be
reconceptualized to meet the challenges of the 21st century. One important goal of this
project, therefore, is to reconceptualize this approach and position it within postcolonial
and cultural studies frames in order to recognize the importance of popular culture,
globalization, and contemporary experiences that fundamentally reshape the construction
of subjectivities within the United States. The challenge here is to rearticulate
multicultural education in order to engender a cultural studies focus on representation and
identity production and a postcolonial focus on counternarratives. My project embraces
this approach to a socially reconstructionist multicultural education with a specific
concern for engaging with contemporary discourses and valorizing the “alternative
curriculum” or “societal curriculum” in order to speak more effectively to the
empowerment of youth and the overall transformation of society.
While Sleeter and Grant's taxonomy synthesizes major literature and theories of multicultural education up until the mid-1980s, more recently, a slew of criticisms have been launched against the discourse of multicultural education. Steve Fuller (2000) lambastes what he labels as the “hypercapitalist” approach to multiculturalism. He notes that the dominant view of multiculturalism as merely a recognition of different cultures undermines the discursive potential for equality and justice and “amounts to little more than a ‘separate but equal’ doctrine for the human condition” (p. 15). Similarly, Mohalingam and McCarthy have attacked this practice of focusing multicultural education merely on the recognition of the “other.” I believe that both traditional and contemporary approaches to multiculturalism have placed too much attention on merely recognizing the various voices of students while broader structural entities have been left in tact. I agree that multicultural education must be expanded to challenge the realities of the “majorities” with a particular view to developing critical praxis that speak to social justice, liberation, emancipation and democracy for all social groups. I posit here that such a process can only be engendered through an engagement with popular knowledges and discursive practices that are performed by youth within contemporary society.

Another major problem with multiculturalism has been addressed by the new postcolonial understandings of reality and identities. Mohalingam and McCarthy for example challenge the Eurocentric response to multiculturalism. They note that this approach tends to essentialize cultures, fix them, and perpetuate ideologies that serve mainly to buttress the status quo through the Eurocentric narrative. They argue that multiculturalism must focus its attention on developing three major goals: a) confronting Eurocentrism, b) social justice and emancipation of marginalized groups, and c) attacking
globalization. With reference to the first argument, I believe that these writers are correct in asserting that Eurocentrism must be fiercely attacked. As I see it, multiculturalism as is currently espoused focuses mainly on treating the study of cultures as a somewhat condescending exercise. It has not sufficiently challenged Eurocentrism as a way of knowing. Consequently, multicultural education is still very much a marginalized discourse. For some, multicultural education is believed to mean the study of a variety of cultures. Again, Mohalingam and McCarthy lambaste this "shopping mall," "we are the world" approach that allows students to obtain a sample of some aspect of a multiplicity of cultures. From my perspective, by placing mainstream, “Eurocentric” culture at the center and other cultures at the peripheries, multicultural education is treated as an add-on – chocolate colored icing and sprinkles on a vanilla ice cream. This approach is common within the liberal approach to multiculturalism and surfaces in the form of special multicultural food days where students, teachers, parents, and community members sample various foods from a multiplicity of cultures. As Shohat and Stam rightly notes, this approach merely engenders multicultural bellies, but monocultural minds. My approach to multicultural education transcends these limited approaches by centering the discourse around critical media literacy with a specific view to identifying and producing counternarratives.

Cultural studies approached to education has challenged the high/low culture binary and have thereby created a space for the use of popular cultural texts in the curriculum. As a consequence of this discursive shift, popular cultural texts like television shows, movies and videos have begun to enjoy a limited space in the curriculum. Much of this space has been used to replace traditionally canonical,
Eurocentric texts with pop cultural texts written or produced by people of marginalized backgrounds. With its central focus on representation, the new cultural studies approach to multiculturalism has often been seen as a move that transgresses the discourse from a mere recognition of difference, and subsequently resists the essentializing treatment of the other. McCarthy (2000), Mahalingam (2000), Coffey (2000), Fuller (2000), Greg Dimitriadis (2000), Carlson (1998), Ruth Vinz (2000) and Nadine Dolby (2000) are among the scholars who have been seeking to employ cultural studies approaches to study the curriculum. In critical pedagogy, Giroux and McLaren have perhaps been the most prominent scholars to articulate cultural studies approaches to curriculum theorizing. While these recent attempts to articulate a cultural studies approach have been important for transforming multicultural education, many of them have tended to focus on how the dominant culture represents the “other” in terms of negativity, alterity, etc. And while there have been systematic attempts to oust Eurocentric canonical texts and replace them with popular cultural ones, rarely does this new scholarship look at text which have been created by minority groups that might challenge the dominant, hegemonic representations. Even in the few cases where such texts have been employed, there is a tendency to overlook the possibility that such texts produced by minority groups to counter the dominant representations, may themselves be hegemonic. This project is qualitatively different in that it confronts these issues through a critical interrogation of BET, regardless of its claims to racial authenticity.

As I see it, the media, especially television, and popular culture in general are sites where notions of multiculturalism are contested. I would even go as far to say that popular culture is a source of multicultural education, albeit in many cases multicultural
miseducation. It is the position of this project that centering curriculum and pedagogy around critical media literacy is fundamental to articulating a curriculum on multiculturalism. For one, the media are extremely vital to any discourse on multiculturalism (Cortes, 2000; Hudak, 2000; Shohat and Stam, 1996). Hall (1996) notes that one of the mass media’s main functions is in the “production and transformation of ideologies” (p. 160). He defines ideology as “the images, concepts, and premises which provide the framework through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (p. 160). This particular function of the mass media has been of grave concern for cultural scholars who are interested in how the media perpetuate narratives and representations about race, gender, sexuality and other social categories. Popular culture and the media, therefore, must be scrutinized for its ability to inscribe, contain and fix meanings, especially as related to identities and social relations. Mediated messages are part of the symbolic world in which students are constantly immersed. Hudak (2000) argues that both students and teachers alike forge their identities in part from these mediated discourses. According to Shohat & Stam, media content often reflect Eurocentric portrayals of the “other” that are marginalizing. This Eurocentrism has both been shaped and challenged by the media. They argue that the “media have the power not only to offer countervailing representations, but also to open up parallel spaces for symbiotic multicultural transformation” (p. 7). How do these arguments apply to BET? Is BET a space where countervailing representations of “Blackness” have been challenged and transformed? Or does the reality that BET’s representations are lodged within commercialized popular culture negate the possibility of “multicultural transformation?” What are the implications for using commercialized
pop cultural texts to engender emancipatory praxis in schools? These questions will be illuminated in this project.

**METHODOLOGY**

My approach to studying BET will engage with cultural studies, postcolonial, Gramscian, and poststructural methodologies. More specifically, I will employ textual analysis, deconstructionism, and Gramscian approaches in order to read and interpret BET in terms of their role of their struggle against cultural hegemony. Because of the specific nature of this project, these methodologies may be most appropriate for identifying and interpreting specific ideologies used to represent Blackness within BET’s texts. Television, as is the case with all novel forms of media, has for long been placed under severe public and academic scrutiny. From its inception, there have been concerns that television provides a warp sense of reality and therefore negatively affects its audiences. There have also always been concerns that TV promotes anti-social behavior and poses a significant threat to the existence of “high culture.” Beginning in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the major research trend among mass communication scholars was the so-called “effects” research. For the most part, most of this research was positivist and realist in its orientation and quantitative methodology was mainly employed to “measure” the impacts of television on audience behavior, values and attitudes. Subsequently, a plethora of theories and models emerged in an effort to explain how television affects people. However, this “effects” research has come under scrutiny for its failure to provide a definitive description of the social implications of television. In his essay entitled, “Ten things wrong with the ‘Effects’ Model” David Gauntlett (1998) describes research on the effects of the mass media as “fundamentally flawed,”
“surprisingly poor,” and useless. He writes that if these ‘scientific’ approaches to media effects studies were appropriate and found interesting things, that would be good. But they usually aren’t, and don’t. This is made worse by the fact that rubbish methodology seems to be very popular (p. 1). Gauntlett joins a slew of critics (Hall, 1980; Fairclough, N. 1995; van Dijk, 1985) who criticize researchers for offering very little to explain what effects the media have on their audiences. His argument is supported by John Meadow (1985) who earlier wrote, “after four decades of exploration, we are left with one answer to the question of media effects – ‘it depends’” (p. 158).

To counter this narrow focus by traditional, sociological media effects research, the field of cultural studies has evolved as a transdisciplinary discourse that embraces the study of mass media. Utilizing the “method of articulation” as one of its primary tools, cultural studies scholars seek to “define how cultural artifacts are overdetermined by political ideologies, and how social and political identities are related to and through their cultural representations” (Jacob Torfing, 1999, p. 211). Beginning primarily during the early 1970s, scholars at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England (Hall, 1980; Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1985) have opted to look at the mass media as a discourse (Torfing, p. 213). From this perspective they recommend that the study of mass media must include micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis. At the micro or representational level, they suggest that the analysis should focus on a critique of the syntax, semantics, lexical style, rhetorical devices and the presentation and organization of the text. The meso-level of analysis focuses on the institutionalized rules, principles, etc., that govern the production and consumption of mass media messages. Finally, at the macro-level the microscope is centered on illuminating the technical,
political and economic dimensions of the mass media. Questions concerning the
ownership, and regulations also surface at this macro level of analysis (Torfing, p. 213).
All three levels of analyses focus on the critique of texts and are useful for illustrating
how meaning is socially constructed by practices inherent to the mass media.

More importantly, borrowing from a Focauldian conception of discourse, scholars
working within a cultural studies tradition have illuminated the importance of analyzing
the relationship between power and resistance that are “reproduced within the discursive
formation of mass media” (Torfing, p. 214). The field of cultural studies thus lends us a
framework for understanding how the media functions to produce and promulgate
ideologies that serve certain political interests, but where also counter-hegemonic
materials are produced that can serve as tools for resistance. This recognition of the
ideological functions of the media as part of a hegemonic struggle reflects the influence
of Gramscian conceptions of ideology on Cultural studies. As an alternative to the
traditional, sociological view of mass media effects, cultural studies scholars allow us to
see how the historical and material conditions are produced and reproduced out of media
constructions. Therefore, employing cultural studies lenses may be useful for
interrogating Black Entertainment Television (BET) and its role in constructing social
identities in this project.

In terms of the impact of these media ideologies on identity, Ernesto Laclau
(1990) notes, “the constitution of a social identity is an act of power and that identity as
such is power” (p. 33). Furthermore, Hall (1977) emphasizes the importance of
analyzing identity within the contexts of the power relations that are “ideologized” within
the discursive formations of the mass media. Both Laclau and Hall appropriately link the
construction of identity to broader power relations. Fundamentally, because the media and sites such as BET are so pervasive in our lives, they have the power to shape our perceptions and construct various identity or subject positions for us. This is not to suggest that we play no role in the meaning-making process and that television has a “hypodermic effect” upon its audiences. However, what cultural studies approaches to the mass media reveal is that media images have the power to “arrest us,” (Hall, 1997) and influence our consumption practices and our regulation of cultural life. Recognizing these important functions of the mass media gives rise to the significance of interrogating BET as a way of destabilizing television’s power.

In this project, BET will be studied from two perspectives. The first approach surfaces in chapter five and relies heavily upon a Jacques Derrida’s (1981) notion of deconstructionism in order to highlight critical binaries that can help shed light on the binary oppositions, tropes, and other such rhetorical devices used to discourse Blackness within the popular media. The second approach to studying BET utilizes cultural studies textual analysis methods in order to interrogate BET’s texts. With regards to the first approach, the interests in deconstructing the mass media discourse on BET stems in part from an argument by Antonio Gramsci (1971) who notes that mass media and literary critics play an important function in illuminating the struggles against cultural hegemony within broader society. As such, the media may undertake a profound role in shedding light on how BET is positioned within the struggle over representation by Blacks in terms of their resistance or acquiescence to hegemonic representational practices. In constructing a reading of BET, I also use Richard Johnson’s (1996) circle of culture—recently re-appropriated by Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, et al. (1997) as the circuit of
culture—to help me think about engaging BET from micro, meso, and macro-levels as described earlier.

For the most part, the majority of the data used for interrogating the public discourse on BET in chapter five has been gathered from archival documents published about BET between August 2000 and December 2001. It was during this period that ownership of BET changed hands to Viacom. Subsequently, public criticism about BET reached unprecedented levels, particularly among Blacks who felt betrayed by the network and its owner Robert Johnson. The primary sources of the data on BET emerge from magazine and newspaper articles and Internet sources. I surveyed hundreds of documents written about BET in the popular press, many of which existed as full text on Internet sites such as InfoTrac, ERIC, or EBSCO HOST. In one instance, I utilized a book chapter which was devoted exclusively to a study of BET (Taitt and Barber, 1996), and in another I used the transcript of a National Public Radio broadcast (Linda Wortheimer, 2000). My case study, then, as is presented in chapter five, is based on the information published about BET in the print media, web sites, and other forms of archival documents.

The primary function of this data was twofold: to gather critical information about the “story of BET,” vis-à-vis how the network came into being, its triumphs, pitfalls, etc., and to interrogate the popular tropes, binary codes and oppositions which emerge from criticisms and discussions about BET. It is my position that understanding these criticisms and identifying common tropes, binaries and codes would serve as a strategic basis for interrogating the existence of counternarratives on BET. Chapter seven of this project, therefore, uses the tropes that emerged from an interrogation of the criticisms of
BET in order to identify moments of counter hegemony on the network. Before I arrive at chapter seven, however, I tell the story of BET in chapter four, highlight the binaries, codes, and tropes surrounding the media discourse on BET in chapter five and then provide a critical description of a hypothetical day of programming on BET in chapter six. The hypothetical day will be constructed by using samples of BET’s programs shown on the network during the week. Basically, segments recorded from a variety of BET programs were recorded from the network and compiled to develop a hypothetical day’s worth of programming.

The second approach to studying BET, which is illuminated in chapter seven employs textual analysis and deconstructionism methods to conduct a “critical” reading of one day’s worth of the BET texts. This chapter consists of a critical engagement with texts recorded from BET between December 2001 and March 2002. Based on several important tropes, binaries and codes which emerged from the analysis of data written about BET within the popular media, I performed a critical reading of several BET music programs, – which, by the way constitute the majority of the programming on BET – comedy, religious, public affairs, and human interests programming. Using postcolonialism, deconstructionism and Gramscian notions of hegemony/counter-hegemony as the underlying theoretical framework, I look at how these particularly tropes and codes are being represented on BET within various texts. By analyzing these texts, I make several critical conclusions about how Blackness is constructed and eventually used these conclusions to buttress my argument that critical media literacy must play an important curricular role in schools. It must be noted here that there are multiple ways to “read” texts such as those found on BET. In an effort to highlight the
particular form of “reading” that will ground this project, I believe it is important to distinguish between different forms of “critical” readings including the traditional, postmodern “deconstructive” reading, “the critical reading” fashioned after the Frankfurt School, and a cultural studies reading based on the method of articulation.

Traditional approaches to cultural analysis have taken on a somewhat naïve focus on “critical” reading. There are some who argue that a text should be scrutinized in order to determine the authorial intent. From this perspective, the nature of the project is to find out what the author is trying to tell us. Within contemporary cultural studies, this approach, which is underpinned by an anachronistic argument of encoding/decoding, has been problematized and viewed as outdated. For one, it is predicated upon the idea that meaning is stable and does not change. Therefore, the meaning that the author has in mind as well as that which is interpreted by the reader must always be the same. F. R. Leavis (1979) is perhaps one of the most notable scholars who espouse this philosophy. According to Nick Lacey (1998), Leavis’ approach tends to remove texts from their historical, political and social context. However, recently there has been a movement within literary and media studies to focus more attention on gaining an understanding of the author or the institutions within which these meanings have been produced and far less attention has been given to the idea of authorial intentions. Stuart Hall7 (1980) is one cultural scholar who calls for this latter approach and repudiates the traditional focus on authorial intent. He warns that the moments of encoding and decoding are never the same and assert that social factors such as positionality or social location influence the

7 I rely heavily of Stuart Hall throughout this project because his critical writings in postcolonialism and cultural studies have been central to my thinking
way an individual reads a given text. Despite his influential criticisms, many traditional literature courses still undertake this approach to text reading.

Another critical approach to text reading, models after the theories of scholars at the Frankfurt School in Germany. With a transformational shift that sheds light on the political dimension of schooling and culture during the 1960s, there has been a movement to understand and read texts as value-laden, and serving particular interests. Following this debate, critical theorists have sought to illuminate “critical” readings as a way of exposing and unmasking the “mystifying” ideologies that are embedded within all texts. Jurgen Habermas (1971) is often cited as one of the foremost scholars who employ this approach. While this type of reading was qualitatively different from those readings that sought to uncover the authorial intentions, their focus on demystification was similarly imbued with a modernist conception of a “truth” that underpinned all texts. In a sense, even though the basic motivation for uncovering hidden ideologies was somewhat different, in many ways this approach was similar to the traditional approach in its search for a truth within texts.

From a cultural studies perspective, Hall (1981) and others at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies note that there are at least three ways of reading a text:

The dominant hegemonic position, in which the reader accepts the message given by a text… The negotiated position, in which readers understand the dominant position but choose to apply it to their own social context, and the oppositional position, which, while understanding the dominant coding rejects the values it is putting forward. (p. 88)
Others have added a fourth reading, an aberrant reading, in which the text is read in a subversive, ironic fashion, in which there is a subversive “play” with the text (Tim O’Sullivan et al, 1994). The multicultural project that I am interested in strives to engage students to become active readers who can move beyond this hegemonic position in order to better understand the ideological codes that are imbedded in texts such as those found on BET.

A third form of critical reading that applies to this project is fashioned after the method of deconstructionism associated with Jacques Derrida (1976, 1984). The project for Derrida is to identify and expose those binary oppositions that govern the production of "truth" within texts, and to reveal them as contradictory oppositions, and as oppositions that serve the interests of a dominating power. Derrida's purpose, like that of Michel Foucault and other poststructural theorists, is also to "trouble" all attempts to establish a foundation or original, pure, authentic meaning upon which identity can be grounded. "Blackness," for example, does not refer back to some real world referent which serves as the standard, the authentic expression of Black identity. Instead, the meaning of Blackness, like whiteness and other markers of difference and identity, is only to be found in the play of difference with other words, with other markers of difference and identity. Their meaning is dispersed throughout a text, lost in the play of intertextuality, and takes on multiple and diverse forms through the reading process.

From the standpoint of the Marxist-inspired critical theoretical tradition in education, deconstructionism goes too far in its implication that we cannot distinguish between the ideological and the non-ideological, that democratic education must simply celebrate a diverse, plurality of "truths" that emerge from the reading process.
This tension between a critical reading, which focuses on demystification and a poststructural critical or deconstructionist reading, may be reconciled through a cultural studies focus on articulation, which in my view represents a syncretic approach of both of these bipolar positions. The method of articulation teaches us that meaning is constructed through a process of connections or linkages to a particular idea or concept. Those connections are always contestant and temporary. Articulation theory, though interesting in ideology, is not concerned with demystification in the sense that there is a truth that needs to be unmasked. Hall, (1996) for example, argues that ideologies serve to construct both individual and collective identities as well as knowledges which lead subjects to make ideological statements with the conviction that they arise from their own authentic experience. For Hall, the power of ideologies stem from the fact that they are unconscious and that they work most effectively through common sense, “naturalized and dwindle away in our ‘taken for granted” world of common sense (p. 161). It is also different from deconstruction theory in that most of these scholars who subscribe to articulation theory agree that meaning can be temporarily fixed. For them, media ideologies, for instance, help to temporarily fix meaning. While the method of deconstruction is not interested in how meaning is fixed, articulation focuses on how “the images, concepts and premises” represented in the mass media provide the frameworks for understanding how race is constructed. Nonetheless, ideas from both these latter approaches to reading will be applied to interrogating BET’s text in this project.
CHAPTER OUTLINES

As mentioned previously, chapter one outlines my dissertation project. I provide the rationale for a study of the Black visual media vis-à-vis BET by illustrating how the binary tensions within multicultural education have reified the colonial constructions of Blackness and whiteness in the United States. I introduce some of these binary oppositions and make a case that the Black visual media may be an important site for interrogating the persistence of colonial tropes and myths on Blackness. I critique the binary arguments contained within multicultural education and argue for a pedagogical engagement with popular cultural narratives such as those found on BET.

Chapter two illuminates the theoretical foundation that grounds this project. Fundamentally, I explore postcolonial theory and cultural studies as two critical approaches that may be useful for rearticulating multicultural education as the study of identity formation. I argue that employing postcolonial lens may require a rearticulation of the United States as a postcolonial society which must be subjected to the critiques of colonialism and its contemporary corollary, neo-colonialism. I re-articulate multiculturalism with postcolonialism and illustrate how concerns with colonialism have always grounded the multicultural education project. Moreover, popular culture, identity and representations of “otherness” have often come under the scope of scholars who undertake cultural studies lenses. Relying upon cultural studies approaches to better understand the contemporary construction of Blackness should therefore come as no surprise. From my point of view, postcolonial theorists and cultural studies scholars often work within similar theoretical frames and, therefore, I use the term postcolonial cultural studies to represent the conflation of these two discourses. My interest in
cultural studies is based primarily on its commitment to breaking down the high/low cultural boundary and the willingness of these scholars to institutionalize popular culture as a legitimate academic study. This debate will be significant for rationalizing a study of BET. In this chapter, I also introduce the postcolonial concept of syncretism, and in particular, creolization, and explore its usefulness as a counternarrative of Blackness which may have efficacy for the United States.

In chapter three, I bring a more specific postcolonial and cultural studies focus to understanding the historical construction and representation of cultural identity in the United States. Making a case for the exploration of postcolonial multicultural studies, I illustrate how multiculturalism and in particular Blackness has been constructed within nationalist notions of US multiculturalism. I trace the persistence of race as an important trope to colonialism and show how Blackness has been constructed as alterity to whiteness. This alterity has ultimately impacted the way Blackness is constructed within contemporary relations. I argue that the persistence of this trope needs to be interrogated and I suggest that the media, as a site of contestation, may be one source in which the taken-for-granted meanings about the “naturalness” of Blackness as an alterior category of difference may be disrupted.

Chapters four, five, six, and seven focus primarily on BET. Chapter four tells the story of BET by providing brief background information about the network. Chapter five engages with the public discourse on BET and illuminates the binary oppositions that have defined what this network should be in the eyes of Black communities vis-à-vis the popular media. Chapter six presents a narrative description of actual BET texts by constructing a hypothetical day consisting of several actual BET programs. And, in
chapter seven, I perform a more elaborate textual analysis of BET’s texts by highlighting several oppositions, codes, and tropes used in the production of actual text described during the hypothetical day. Finally, in chapter eight, I re-examine the issue of Black counternarratives and critique in more detail the theoretical binaries that have shaped the US multicultural education discourse and the construction of BET’s texts. In illuminating the educational implications of this project, I argue for a “syncretic pedagogy” that is grounded in critical media literacy and forces educators to critically examine their ideological commitments in order to better understand how otherness is constructed within the theoretical imagination. Fundamentally, I argue that a syncretic pedagogy aimed at academic achievement as a way of transforming the lives of students may be one way of decreasing the tensions between the various factions within multicultural education. This pedagogy is grounded in the discursive practices of critical media literacy which, I argue, must be at the heart of the curriculum.

SPECIALIZED TERMINOLOGY AND CAVEATS

In this project I have chosen to capitalize the words Black and Blackness and maintain white and whiteness in lowercase for strategic purposes. Derrida (1981) has implied that in order to subvert the dominant meanings of a particular binary it may be necessary to invert its discursive opposite. I capitalize Black and Blackness in an effort to destabilize the taken for granted superiority of whiteness over Blackness as entrenched categories of difference. Another critical term that must be defined is counternarratives.

indications, a counternarrative is portrayed in this text as a resistance narrative or an “oppositional response” to mainstream or “official” constructions about a given reality. In their chapter on “Postmodern Counternarratives,” Peters and Lankshear admit that the notion of a counternarrative is in dire need of theoretical advancement since, in their view, “It is as yet somewhat inchoate, and needs to be made explicit” (p. 8). The counternarrative focus of their book is depicted in two particular themes. The first examines and critiques counternarratives that question and destabilize the “grand,” “master” or “meta” narratives of modernism, in particular those linked to the Enlightenment utopianistic ideals about “Man, Truth, Justice and Beauty, representing the West, and ‘America’ as the last projection of European ideals, as the apex of an unbroken, evolutionary development of two thousand years of civilization” (p. 2). Peters and Lankshear cite Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s (1972) *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, as an example of a counternarrative with its focus on illuminating what they called the “dark side of the Enlightenment” (p. 2). According to these authors, “Counternarratives in this sense serve the strategic political function of splintering and disturbing grand stories which gain their legitimacy from foundational myths concerning origins and development of an unbroken history of the West based on the evolutionary ideals of progress” (p. 2). This first conception of a counternarrative may have some usefulness for understanding and representing Blackness and, conversely, for reading and critiquing BET. As articulated earlier, a critical goal of Black cultural productions has been to counter the “official” often Eurocentric narratives that either exclude or undermine the contributions of Diasporic Blacks through their Eurocentric constructions of civilization and progress. A disruption of these Eurocentric narratives provides an
integral moment for other narratives of history that depict the achievements and struggles of African Diasporic peoples before, during and after slavery. Afrocentricity, for instance, may fit the criteria for Black counternarratives, since many of its ideas seek to challenge and or subvert Eurocentric constructions of history. At the same time, it is important to consider here that some radical Afrocentric and nationalistic insinuations of an “unbroken history” between African Americans and Mother Africa may themselves need to be problematized in order for other narratives of Blackness to be illuminated. The primary function of a counternarrative, therefore, is not to replace one grand narrative with another, but to trouble and problematize all attempts to stabilize identity through the use of these master narratives. This perspective on counternarratives does not overlook the need for a “strategic essentialism” in some cases in order to mobilize support for fighting oppression, but such an employment of essentialism should be merely “strategic” and not meant to be either universal or stabilize meaning in any permanent way.

The second approach to counternarratives underscored by Peters and Lankshear reflects a direct confrontation between “official” and “hegemonic” “narratives of everyday life: those legitimating stories propagated for specific political purposes to manipulate public consciousness by heralding a national set of common cultural ideals” (p. 2). This second conception begs for clarity as, while it opens a critical space for the “subaltern to speak8,” it does not adequately define the critical components of a counternarrative. In some sense, this latter reading of counternarratives suggests that any text which purports to challenge official or hegemonic narratives can be classified as a

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counternarrative. This simplistic definition suggests that popular culture and cites such as BET may be integral spaces where such counternarratives are circulated and represented. I want to suggest here that this definition of counternarratives runs the risk of romanticism, and fails to take into account the fact that some texts produced and constructed by the “other” and claiming to challenge dominant, hegemonic constructions, may themselves be hegemonic. Given this reality, the critical bar must be raised higher in determining what should constitute a counternarrative. It is the position of this project, therefore, that counternarratives must be linked to some form of democratic transformative politics. I read postcolonial texts as engendering this perspective. Central to postcolonial counternarratives is the idea of intercepting taken-for-granted meanings that have been “normalized” as a result of the colonial process. Hence, several of these postcolonial texts have as their political and ideological goal, the need to “deconstruct European thought” as a way of providing agency to local cultures and modes of representation. I believe that any discussion of counternarratives must include a critical commitment that must clearly articulate an emancipation and empowerment of the group from whom the counternarratives seek to represent.

In linking counternarratives with empowerment and emancipation, I am very much aware of some perplexing criticisms especially concerning the unsettling dispute it presents regarding aesthetics versus ideological or political criteria for Black counternarratives. Cultural critic bell hooks (1990) sheds light on this vexing issue. She alludes to an insightful comment by Salim Muwakkil, who “raises the question of whether a ‘mature African American community’ can allow ‘aesthetic judgments to rest on ideological or political criteria’” (hooks, p. 135). In recognizing the importance of
aesthetic judgments, hooks conjectured that “an ideological or political criteria” should not be the sole basis from which texts should be evaluated. However, she argues, “this does not mean that such criteria cannot be used in conjunction with other critical strategies to assess the overall value of a given work” (hooks, p. 135). I agree with hooks here, and while I am in no way suggesting that a focus on aesthetics should be subjugated to more critical political and ideological criteria, I believe that these two later criteria are crucial for evaluating the Afrocentric or counter-hegemonic potential of BET, especially since it is in this ideological sphere that the media transacts much of its labor. It is this understanding of counternarratives that will ground this dissertation project.
Cultural identity is at the center of world politics today, and has been for some time… Indeed, cultural identity is broader even than politics—art and education and personal affinities are pervaded by incarnations: racial identity, ethnic identity, religious identity, national identity. Feelings of a communal self, based in a real or imagined history of shared practices and beliefs, inspire Afrocentric education explicitly, and Eurocentric education implicitly; they guide writers literary decisions from genre to diction; they constrain friendships and romantic love. In short, cultural identity is at the center not only of politics, but of daily life as well. And it is almost always bound up with colonialism—its historical causes, its ideological justifications, its continuing effects—and with struggles against colonialism.

Patrick Colm Hogan

I quote Patrick Colm Hogan (2000) at length here because his definition of cultural identity underscores salient positions that are crucial to my interrogation of mainstream multicultural education discourses. Hogan’s illumination of the centrality of cultural identity in the real lives of people, supports my contention that multicultural education must be reconceptualized as the study of student identity formation and the representational and discursive practices that constitute them. If Hogan is correct that notions of a “communal self” serve as the driving forces behind both “Afrocentric education, explicitly, and Eurocentric education, implicitly,” then, perhaps they must also be rearticulated as the sine qua non of multicultural education. In recent years issues pertaining to identity and difference have dominated critiques and discussions on America’s schools. Among the major concerns, a plethora of questions have surfaced regarding the place of a large number of students whose worldviews and lifestyles do not
match the traditional notions of American cultural identity encompassed in hegemonic views of culture and schooling. For instance, how does the Black, Gay, Female, Native American, Hispanic or Immigrant subject fit into existing notions of an “imagined” multicultural American community? How do schools imagine such a community? Who gets included? What texts are employed in the curriculum and what pedagogical practices are developed to valorize the experiences and importance of these racialized, gendered, sexualized or immigrant “others?” Addressing these questions help to “explore the historical construction of privilege and difference, the maintenance of power and privilege and the quest for resistance and critique” that are bound up with the constructions of cultural identity in contemporary American society (Mary Coffey, 2000, p. 37). These provocative questions also bring critical light to the reality that, in Benedict Anderson’s (1999) words, “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact, and perhaps even those, are imagined,” and, more importantly, that schools play an integral role in this imagining of community (p. 15).

Moreover, Hogan’s argument illustrating the interconnectedness and problematic relationship between colonialism—“its historical causes, its ideological justifications, its continuing effects”—and cultural identity, also points to another fundamental problem that must be addressed by multicultural education: the inextricable link between colonialism and cultural identity. Understanding this link requires an articulation between Eurocentrism—the dominant discourse employed by educators in the United States—and colonialism, especially as they relate to US identity politics. In this chapter, I explore the use of postcolonial theory and cultural studies in order to shed critical light on the US as a postcolonial multicultural society. I employ postcolonial and cultural
studies critiques of cultural identity in the United States and attempt to rearticulate multicultural education as the study of identity formation and performance. This discursive fusion between multiculturalism, postcolonialism, and cultural studies shall be aptly called “postcolonial multicultural studies.”

Fundamentally, I am interested in rearticulating multicultural education as the study of student identity formation in order to create an educational space that would speak more effectively to construction and deconstruction of taken for granted ideologies of Blackness and whiteness. My concern here is that traditional multicultural approaches have done very little to prepare kids to deconstruct racial ideologies, especially those found in the media and in popular culture, in general, which serve to define what they come to know as reality. In this chapter, henceforth, I lay out the theoretical framework for grounding a postcolonial multicultural studies project. Section one provides a rationale for rearticulating multicultural education from a postcolonial and cultural studies perspective. In order to do this, I address pertinent issues that limit the successful implementation of postcolonial studies in the US. Amongst those issues, I problematize popular arguments which on the one hand suggest that postcolonial studies is a United Statesian invention, but, paradoxically appear to exempt the US from postcolonial critique. My argument is that the United States is indeed a postcolonial society which must be subjected to the logic of postcolonialism. I interrogate both postcolonial and cultural studies and provide a conceptual frame that positions them as part of the broader multicultural education project. I must hasten to add here that my engagement with postcolonial and cultural studies discourses is also to shed light on the theories of
representation that may be useful in my interrogation of BET’s construction of Blackness later in this project.

In section two, my major focus is on interrogating the effectiveness of utilizing essentialism and nationalism as mobilizing resistance strategies. In problematizing common approaches to discoursing cultural identity that employ essentialist and nationalists ideologies, I illuminate postcolonial and cultural studies perspectives that shed light on the debate over essentialism and nationalism. Relying heavily on the work of Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall and Guyatri Spivak, I illustrate ways of transcending the debate of essentialism and nationalism beyond ethnocentric notions of cultural identity. Finally, in section three, I will introduce the postcolonial concept of creolization as one form of syncretism that may have usefulness for transgressing problematic constructions of fixed essences of racial identity.

WHY POSTCOLONIALISM AND CULTURAL STUDIES?

In these postmodern times when the modernist conception of a unified subject is being disrupted, it should come as no surprise that postcolonial theory and cultural studies are being articulated as the guiding frames within multicultural education. These two discourses are often inseparable and have provided some of the most important theorizing on contemporary cultural relations. Moreover, it should be no less surprising that American multicultural education engages these two discourses in order to revitalize its revolutionary spirit since both cultural studies and postcolonial theory have always been involved in the broader multicultural project. According to Henry Giroux (1997), one of the earliest infusions of British Cultural Studies in the United States was in the critical educational discourse (p. 1). Likewise, the postcolonial discourse can be traced to
broader efforts to develop a more compelling multicultural education in the United States. Jenny Sharpe (2000) articulates the links between multicultural education and postcolonial studies in the United States. She traces the institutionalization of multicultural education on U.S college campuses to late 1960s and early 1970s “through the establishing of Afro-American, American Indian, Chicano, and Asian American Studies programs and centers” (p. 11). According to Sharpe, the adoption of multicultural education can be attributed to a worldwide “anticolonial movement,” whereby American “Student activists drew on the anticolonial writings of Third World liberation movements to suggest that the disenfranchisement of racial minorities was a form of colonization” (p. 114). Drawing from this scholarship, American students began to make critical comparisons between the “savage inequalities” at home and the newly independent Third World nations. As such, “they declared the ghettos, barrios, internment camps, and reservations to be the ‘internal colonies’ of the United States” (p. 114). Sharpe further writes,

Sociologists, together with political activists outside the university, further developed the idea of US racial minorities as internal colonized "nations." They argued that these groups experienced the underdevelopment and dependency of Third World economies. As sociologist Robert Blauner declared in Racial Oppression in America (1972: 52): ‘The third world perspective returns us to the origins of the American experience, reminding us that this nation owes its very existence to colonialism, and that along with settlers and immigrants there have always been conquered Indians and black slaves, and later defeated Mexicans - that is, colonial subjects - on national soil.’ (p. 114)
Citing Sharpe’s historical analysis of postcolonial studies and multicultural education is crucial to developing a discourse of postcolonial multicultural education. She illuminates the important indebtedness that multiculturalism owes to “anti-colonialism.” However, while she aptly illustrates the critical links between multicultural education and postcolonial theory, I employ her depiction of this decolonization scholarship as merely an expression of “Third World liberation movements” with grave caution here. This portrayal of important critical writings such as those of Frantz Fanon and Aime Cesaire, as merely the concerns of Third World peoples diminishes its contributions to the discourse of postcolonial studies and by association, multiculturalism. Sharpe is conscious of this move and deliberately labels the scholarship of Fanon, Cesaire and others as both temporally and geographically removed from the academic institutionalization of postcolonial studies in the United States. She is interested mainly in defining postcolonial studies as an American or First World academic discourse. Her fundamental point is “that the term ‘postcolonial’ has greater currency in imperial centers like Britain and the United States, as well as former settler colonies like Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, than in Third World nations. As such, it is bound up with multicultural education, which is a concern of racially diversified First World nations alone” (p. 114). It is at this critical juncture that I part from Sharpe’s connection between multicultural education and postcolonial studies. In considering her argument, one has to take into account that while the formal name “postcolonial” might have been coined within the US academy during the 1970s, many critical thinkers such as Fanon, Cesaire, and Edward Kamau Brathwaite, were writing against colonial oppression long before postcolonial studies was formally named in the United States, or wherever the term was
coined. These writings represent a struggle to move beyond colonialism and to imagine postcolonial societies. While I may be willing to somewhat accept that the formalizing of the postcolonial discourse may be attributed to the presence of “Third World” scholars within the US or “First World” academy such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak or Homi K. Bhabha, I vehemently reject the idea that postcolonial and multicultural education are “United Statesian” inventions. To accept this argument would be to valorize the Eurocentric position that “Third World” peoples are incapable of abstract thought; hence, they inevitably must rely on the west for theory and ways of articulating meaning, among other things. As illustrated by Shohat and Stam (1996), “The correlative of this attitude…is to assume that all theory is ‘Western’…a view that projects the West as ‘mind’ and theoretical refinement and the non-West as ‘body’ and unrefined raw material” (p. 14). It is this attitude that has justified the bastardization of popular culture and texts, narratives, and knowledges associated with oppressed people such as the texts found on BET. This attitude is reflective in Sharpe’s choice of Eurocentric terms like “First world,” versus “Third world.” What scholars who eschew such a position like Sharpe’s fail to realize is that the scholarship produced by “Third world” scholars in US or “First World” academic institutions merely reflects their already formed postcolonial consciousness; they did not invent it. It is a result of their colonial memories and experiences that propel them to articulate oppression in terms of a “postcolonial” project. In refuting Sharpe’s claims, I do not mean to diminish the importance of these aforementioned writers; in actuality, they play key roles in the development of postcolonial studies. In fact, Said’s canonical text *Orientalism* (1978) deserves its rightful place as “the hallmark text of postcolonial studies as a field” (Henry Schwartz,
Similarly, both Spivak and Bhabha’s contributions to postcolonial studies are colossal. However, to attribute their scholarship namely to their formal training in “Western” institutions, is to undermine the postcolonial sensibilities that resulted from their experiences as former colonial subjects—not simply their academic training at First World institutions. Unlike Sharpe who dismisses any links between decolonization and postcoloniality, other writers recognize these links and have labeled the works of Fanon, Cesaire, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, etc. as intellectual antecedents of postcolonial theory or as the early stage of postcolonial theory.

Sharpe’s relegation of “Third World” discourse as “geographically removed” from the US academy reflects a common postcolonial distancing from Third World studies. For instance, while Third World discourse is earmarked by a commitment to activism, postcolonial studies enjoys a more prestigious aura of theoretical sophistication (Shohat and Stam, p. 38). To its detriment, the term “postcolonial” has presupposed an outdating of Third World, anticolonial, and neocolonial discourses, and theorists like Sharpe often jettison these discourses as “unfashionable, even irrelevant categories” (Shohat & Stam, p.40). In this sense, postcolonialism’s “globalizing gesture downplays multiplicities of location, as well as the discursive and political linkages between postcolonial theories and contemporary anticolonial (or anti-neocolonial) struggles and discourses” (Shohat and Stam, p. 39). According to Shohat and Stam, this has limited the revolutionary potential of postcolonial studies since “‘postcolonial’ posits no clear domination and calls for no clear opposition. This structural ambivalence, while appealing in a poststructuralist academic context, also makes ‘postcolonial’ a fragile instrument for critiquing the unequal distribution of global power and resources,”
especially with regard to contemporary relations of power (p. 39). However, these “struggles (Third World, anticolonial or neocolonial) cannot be dismissed as mere epigonic repetitions of obsolescent discourses” (Shohat and Stam, p. 39). It is against this background that Shohat and Stam argues for a rearticulation between postcolonialism, anticolonialism, Third World nationalism and neocolonialism. In the case of the latter term, neocolonialism, they argue,

    While ‘neocolonial’ also implies a passage, it emphasizes a repetition with difference, a regeneration of colonialism through other means. ‘Neocolonialism’ usefully designates geo-economic hegemony, while ‘postcolonial’ subtly downplays contemporary domination. (Shohat and Stam, p. 40)

This important distinction between postcolonialism and neocolonialism justifies an inclusion of the terrain of neocolonial discourse in order to address the contemporary relations of power from a critical postcolonial perspective. While Shohat and Stam are not saying that neocolonialism articulates with postcolonialism, they seem to suggest that a political engagement with neocolonialism could make postcolonialism a more transformative discourse. Moreover, it may be in the best interest of an emancipatory project if postcolonial discourse would embrace its connections to Third world discourse, since, according to Shohat and Stam, the term "‘Third World’ still evokes a common project of (linked) resistances, and has served to empower intercommunal coalitions of peoples of color in the First World. Perhaps it is this sense of a common mobilizing project that is missing in the ‘postcolonial’” (p. 40). Here Shohat and Stam imply that a strategic use of “unfashionable discourses” to develop a postcolonial metaframework
may be sufficient for forming an alliance to fight "internal" racism and “neocolonialism.”

Such a strategic usage again points,

To a need to deploy all these concepts in a differential, contingent, and relational manner. It is not that one conceptual frame is ‘wrong’ and the other ‘right,’ but rather that each frame only partly illuminates the issues. We can use them as part of a more mobile set of grids, a more flexible set of disciplinary and cross-cultural lenses adequate to the complex politics of contemporary location, while maintaining openings for agency and resistance. (Shohat and Stam, p. 41)

Nonetheless, Sharpe must be lauded for her brilliant attempt to show the important connection between postcolonial theory and multicultural education in the United States. She notes that while the early multicultural education writers and researchers attempted to redress the oppressive treatment that was meted out to racial “minorities” in the past, the discourse soon emerged to challenge the dominant identity construction models which viewed America as either a monocultural society or as a “melting pot.” In educational and sociological circles this meant deconstructing the dominant “White Anglo Saxon Protestant” (WASP) theory that was unproblematically employed by many political critics and leaders in response to what they called a “balkanization” of America. Balkanization, according to Kate Rousmaniere and Kathleen Knight-Abowitz (1998), represents “the idea Greeks, Italians, Scots, or other groups would come to America not to be Americans, but to retain their own cultural norms, languages, and customs within American society” (p. 29). Fearing such a construction of America, the monocultural perspective of the WASP theory was often invoked to suggest that all cultural groups should take on the norms and values of the
majority Anglo Americans. The melting pot theory varied slightly from the WASP or the anglo-conformity theory. Coined by “Israel Zangwill, a poet, novelist, playwright, who wrote the play ‘The Melting Pot,’” the term ‘melting pot’ suggests that “there is no one culture to conform to in America; rather, we are all melting into something new, always” (Rousmaniere and Abowitz, p. 29). While this theory appears at first glance to embrace the democratic ideals such as freedom and equality that is suggested in our Declaration of Independence and our national motto, *E pluribus Unum*, in actuality, as some critics have noted, melting pot theory is merely a euphemism for assimilation theory. For members of subordinate cultures, this “normalized” metaphor has come to mean the problematic melting, both literally and figuratively, of their cultures while those from the dominant groups maintain their culture in tact and, conversely, their social, economic and political power.

On the other hand, the cultural pluralism model was proposed by Horace Kalen (1924) to challenge both the WASP and melting pot theories. In a nutshell, Kalen’s cultural pluralism theory holds “that although each immigrant may become ‘Americanized’ externally, internally he [she] is still of another culture” (p. 29). For Kalen (1915), culture is ingrained in the total human experience; it is not an extrinsic quality and therefore cold not be melted or “anglicized.” He notes that assimilation was only one of many stages that a member of a non-dominant cultural group experiences in becoming Americanized. Faced with the reality of external differences, Kalen argues, members of subordinate cultures assimilate mainly as a result of “economic eagerness.” However, once the desired economic status is attained, a process of dissimilation takes over, whereby members of these groups draw back on ancestry and nationality. For him,
nationality is never repressed, and once immigrants reach a certain economic status, they revert to culturally familiar ways of thinking. Given the three options of cacophony, unison or harmony that a society can strive for, Kalen opts for the latter. Whereby cacophony presents, social chaos and anarchy, seeking a unison society would mean “the complete cutting-off of the ancestral memories of the American populations, the enforced, exclusive use of the English language and English and American history in the schools and in everyday life” (p. 269). This argument has particular relevance to the oppressive experiences of Blacks, Native Americans, women, Mexicans and other marginalized groups.

Sharpe notes that during the 1960s, cultural pluralism resurfaced as a powerful discursive element, albeit with new actors. She writes, “Proponents of cultural pluralism challenged the melting pot hypothesis by claiming that, instead of melding into an undifferentiated nation, social groups maintained distinct ethnic identities to form a nation of nations” (p. 114). She adds that this focus on ethnic identities as opposed to racial ones “expanded the category of historically under-represented groups to include unassimilated immigrants who maintained their unique cultural identities.” Moreover, the focus on internalized colonization that was adopted during the 1960s, allowed multicultural scholars to understand the construction of America from a unique and problematic perspective. As noted by Sharpe, these scholars viewed the “disenfranchisement of racial minorities as a form of colonization” (p. 114), and viewed the marginalized ghettos as forms of internal colonies. Sharpe writes, “The internal colonization model drew a sharp line between those people who came over to the New World as immigrants and those who were conquered or brought over against their will.
In doing so, it drew attention to the racial homogeneity of white colleges as the end-product of a long history of discrimination and unequal opportunities for racial minorities” (p. 114). This distinction between immigrants is evident in the early multicultural education research by John Ogbu. Ogbu (1997) posits a significant distinction between “voluntary” and “involuntary minorities” which impacts the way they perceive and are positioned within discourses of education. This research brought new meaning to the colonization process in the United States. It can be stated that since the colonial constructions of cultural identity are so paramount to contemporary debates, it is only fitting that postcolonial theory takes its rightful place within the multicultural education project. However, before embarking on such a mission, it may be important to shed some critical light on some inherent shortcomings with employing postcolonial theory and cultural studies. Many of the major issues confronting the employment of these two theoretical frames stem from significant problems defining the critical domains and meanings behind both the terms “postcolonial” and “cultural studies.” In the next few pages, I will illuminate some of these issues and specify how postcolonial theory and cultural studies will be used within this particular project.

The struggle to define the “postcolonial” has been a never-ending one. The eclectic nature of the discourse has made its definition more and more slippery. “The term itself is sometimes written with a hyphen (post-colonial/post-colonialism) and sometimes is left unhyphenated (postcolonial/postcolonialism), with the two forms being used to designate the same areas of interest by different critics” (Ato Quayson, 2000, p. 1). Padmini Mongia (1996) interprets postcolonialism as “an umbrella term that covers different critical approaches which deconstruct European thought in areas as wide-
ranging as philosophy, history, literary studies, anthropology, sociology and political science” (p. 2). Similarly, Homi Bhabha (1991) notes, “the term postcolonial is increasingly used to describe that form of social criticism that bears witness to those unequal and uneven processes of representation by which the historical experience of the once-colonized Third World comes to be framed in the West” (p. 63). Crucial to both Mongia and Bhabha’s reading of the term postcolonial is a commitment to disrupting dominant representational practices, including Eurocentrism. Mongia understands the domain of postcolonial theory as deconstructing mainstream “European thought,” whereas Bhabha reads it as a criticism against “unequal and uneven processes of representation.” By defining postcolonial theory from this perspective, their conceptions are consistent with my reading of postcolonialism as a deconstructive movement which interrogates naturalized colonial tropes and no longer take them for granted. Many of these colonial tropes have been “naturalized” through the Eurocentric discourse. Therefore, since Eurocentrism has been chiefly responsible for “normalizing” these tropes, Mongia and Bhabha’s definitions are useful for stabilizing the foundation for the anti-Eurocentric multicultural education that will be explored in this project in order to subvert taken for granted patterns of mainstream European thought.

Moreover, Bhabha’s understanding of postcolonialism as a struggle against “uneven and unequal processes of representation” is also helpful for adding another critical dimension to this project. Among the many goals of this dissertation, I am interesting in deconstructing the processes of representation that have privileged whiteness over Blackness in the United States and that have naturalized both whiteness and Blackness as entrenched categories of difference with fixed essences. While,
Bhabha’s definition focuses mainly on uneven processes that constructed subjects in the so-called Third World, I extend his definition to include anywhere in the world where colonization existed. This extension is consistent with the argument made by Quayson (2000), who writes that “a growing concern among postcolonial critics has also been with racial minorities in the West, embracing native and African Americans in the US, British Asians and African Caribbeans in the UK and Aborigines in Australia among others” (p. 2). Extending Bhabha’s definition allows us to recognize how these “uneven processes of representation” were utilized to construct subjectivities among former “Third World” people living within the United States, thereby recognizing the existence of “internal colonies.” Henceforth, extending the postcolonial territory to include “First World” nations like the US allows for the deconstruction and denaturalization of Blackness and whiteness.

As Quayson reads it, postcolonialism “involves the discussion of experiences of various kinds, such as those of slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race, gender, place, and the responses to the discourses of imperial Europe…” (p. 2). Rearticulating multicultural education as a study of these “uneven and unequal processes of representation” to which Bhabha describes, and linking it up with some of these important factors that have helped to shape the American cultural identity, may provide an important platform for grounding multicultural education as a counter-hegemonic discourse grounded in radical democratic politics. Such a multicultural project would be geared inevitably towards troubling dominant representational practices and undermining problematic treatments of racial and other forms of cultural identity. By challenging factors that contribute to “uneven processes of representation” in the United States,
schools become crucial sites for democracy where alternative texts are constantly being engaged and co-constructed among students and educators. This production and circulation of counternarratives become a special function of schooling, especially since there are very few other cultural sites of struggle that are engaged in such counter-hegemonic productions.

Schwartz (2000) notes that given the complex history with colonialism in the United States, “One would expect residents of the Americas to make the strongest case for inhabiting a properly "post" colonial/imperial region, and so to take the opportunities offered by postcolonial studies to study themselves. But this is not the case” (p. 8). He cites many factors that inhibit the critical development of an effective postcolonial discourse within the US academies. Among the explanations, Schwartz chides the Western academic tendency of compartmentalizing knowledge into discrete pockets and multiple fractured identities. According to Schwartz, this practice often evokes cynicism among US scholars who “may be skeptical about supporting a field of study which seems at first glance to concentrate on Africa, Asia, or South America while neglecting the internal colonialisms still practiced within the United States” (p. 8). “So while postcolonial studies is at present a hot topic in US universities,” Schwartz adds, “it has not been seen necessarily as the way to reconfigure American studies. Instead, given the division of knowledges into disciplines and of regions into discrete area studies, postcolonial concerns tend to get added on to departments of national literatures such as English” (p. 8).
Another critical reason for the divide between postcolonial studies and the various ethnic studies is the pervasiveness of what Schwartz calls "American exceptionalism."

This American exceptionalism, according to Schwartz,

Claims, in short, that the history of America is fundamentally different from that of Europe, and especially that of England from which most of its early settlers came, in that history began anew with the entry of white settlers into North America. White settlers, on this view, did not reproduce the rigid hierarchies of religion and social class that pertained in England and from which they reportedly fled. Instead, the settlements they created were said to be egalitarian, inclusive structures that benefited from strong interaction with the native populations, thus resulting in utopian communities of tolerance and diversity. (p. 9)

This attempt at exempting the US from postcolonial critique is based on a Eurocentric narrative that blatantly denies the oppressive and racialist histories of the United States. This imaginary view of the US history ignores or treats as complimentary the dehumanizing experiences of slavery, the dislocation and genocide of Native Americans, and the economic exploitation of Asian and Mexican Americans. Schwartz warns that American exceptionalism is very much alive and well within the US academy. He pinpoints its contemporary legacies within discourses of US history and literature that are taught to students at every level in US schools. While they may have been some efforts to move beyond this “American exceptionalism” tradition, Schwartz expresses concern that its pervasiveness continually promotes “ethnic exclusivism” and limits the effective incorporation of postcolonial studies in US academic institutions.
In addition, Schwartz argues that it is this same American exceptionalism that the US uses to construct a hegemonic view of itself, “both at home and abroad, … as the one place where diversity could exist. The irony of this image in light of its conquistadorial and slave-holding past required great ideological effort” (p. 9). It is the recent employment of this American exceptionalism during the “War Against Terrorism,” that justified the US bombing of Afghanistan, while at the same time delivering tons of food and emergency supplies. Only an “exceptional” nation like the US, it is implied, would express such grave concern for the residents of the country at which it is at war.

Along with the many issues affecting the implementation of postcolonial studies in the US, postcolonial theory has also been opened to many other vexing criticisms. Mongia argues that the term “postcolonial” is fraught with ambiguity. She illuminates the complexity of the term by asking several critical questions. “Does the term refer to texts or to practices, to psychological conditions or to concrete historical processes? Or does it perhaps refer to all?” (p. 1). Many of the other concerns also stem from the use of the “post” in postcolonial. Some critics have pondered whether or not the term “post” in postcolonialism is the same as the “post” in postmodernism. Appropriating Ata Aidoo’s (1991) interrogation of postcolonialism, Mongia suggests that there is widespread trepidation that the “post” in postcolonialism, with its emphasis on periodicity, “fallaciously suggests the installation of regimes of power substantially different from colonial structures” (Mongia, p. 1). Other critics have also challenged this conception of postcoloniality that implies a complete erasure of colonial tropes at a precise, given moment. Their argument usually goes like this: If postcolonialism does not represent the period “after” (hence the word post) decolonization, then, when does postcoloniality
actually begin? The responses to these questions have pointed to the reality that post-independence is not synonymous with postcoloniality. As Gareth Griffiths (1996) argues, “Crucial as national independence has been to recuperation, it is not in itself a guarantee of the end of external manipulation and control at the level of politics, economics, or culture” (p. 165). Similarly, Helen Tiffin (1996) warns that the term postcolonial is not to be equated with post-independence. Instead, it is more about the “persistence of colonial legacies in post-independence cultures, not their disappearance or erasure” (p. 158). While the debates over the term postcolonial as a historical marker are valid, it is important to note that the struggle to pin down an exact moment where postcoloniality begins in any concrete way—like that struggle to define the beginnings of any other post such as postmodernism, postFordism, poststructuralism, etc.—is perhaps a futile one. As Stuart Hall (1980) warns,

> In serious critical intellectual work, there are no ‘absolute beginnings’ and few unbroken continuities…. What we find, instead, is an untidy but characteristic unevenness of development. What is important are the significant breaks—where old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes. (p. 57)

In this dissertation, I appropriate Mongia and Bhabha’s reading of postcolonial theory as an intellectual approach which disrupts “old lines of thought,” specifically “normalized” Eurocentric/colonial thought. Moreover, postcolonialism within the US multicultural education context will also be employed to refer to a performance of oppositional reading strategies that displaces traditional hegemonic representational practices and “regrouped around” alternative conceptions of identity formation within the discourse on schooling.
One may also understand this process as “decolonizing” the minds of both cultural majority and minority students. That is to say, this project seeks to interrupt the colonial thinking which essentializes, takes for granted, and problematically defines identity in America. Unthinking and deconstructing these colonial tropes is equated with the decolonizing process.

Like postcolonial theory, cultural studies provides a useful lens for problematizing our traditional conceptions of culture and, hence, for rearticulating multicultural education. For instance, cultural studies scholars have been caught up in the struggle to define what the term “culture” signifies. What is this word ‘culture’ in multi-“cultural” education or “cultural” identity anyway? This question has been critical to the study of culture vis-à-vis a cultural studies perspective. According to Coffey (2000), one problem is that critical scholars often assume that we all mean the same thing when we use the word culture. “However, culture is not simply an empirical phenomenon, and the commonsense approach to it as though it were obscures its relation to values, epistemological pursuits, and subject formation, all significant concerns for multiculturalism” (p. 37). And, while a definition of culture still remains moot among critical scholars, it is imperative to establish a basic framework for understanding the general domain of cultural studies. It must however be forewarned that such a framework is not as cut and dry as many would expect. Reflecting the difficulty in positing any precise definition of cultural studies, Colin Sparks (1996) writes:

It is not possible to draw a sharp line and say that on one side of it we can find the proper province of cultural studies. Neither is it possible to point to a unified theory or methodology which are characteristic to it or of it. A veritable rag-bag
of ideas, methods and concerns from literary criticism, sociology, history, media studies, etc., are lumped together under the convenient label of cultural studies.

(p. 14)
The limited degree to which cultural studies represents a unified set of practices and theoretical approaches has prompted some scholars to question its goals, especially given the overwhelming popularity of the discourse in the US and other countries worldwide within the last decade. For example, taking the educational discourse as his point of reference, Giroux (1997) illuminates some of the major criticisms of cultural studies. He notes, “Given the lavish attention that cultural studies has received, many critics have dismissed it as simply another academic fashion. More serious criticism has focused on its Eurocentric tendencies, its narrow academic presence, and what some have called its political fuzziness” (p. 232). However, like Giroux, I believe that “cultural studies is a field that holds enormous promise for progressives who are willing to address some of the fundamental problems of our times” (p. 232-33). It is against this background that I will reconceptualize multicultural education around cultural studies in order to challenge constructions of cultural identity which lead to structural problems such as racism, sexism, classism and heteronormativism that restrict the development of counter-hegemonic identities.

Richard Quantz (1999) takes the risk at defining the domain of cultural studies and in so doing provides a basic but useful framework for getting a sense of what the discourse entails. He writes:

One thing to understand at the outset, while scholars in the field of cultural Studies study culture, not everyone who studies culture is in the field of cultural
studies. In fact, few are. Cultural studies…studies people in everyday life that includes the study of popular culture as well as “high culture.” Its focus is on the complex cultures of contemporary industrialized societies. Besides trying to understand these cultures and how culture works, scholars in cultural studies are overt in their commitment to the political goals of progressive democracy—a democracy in which more people play an active part in their everyday lives. (p. 2)

Here Quantz delineates fundamental differences between cultural studies and other discourses on culture. Among the critical differences, he cites the study of culture, from a cultural studies perspective, as located in “everyday life,” namely the complexities of living in “contemporary” society. Through this demarcation, Quantz writes cultural studies as a study of culture as living and intersubjective, not an already achieved construct. This definition, somewhat closely linked to similar conceptions in sociology and anthropology, is loaded with an implicit understanding that culture is constructed out of the everyday realities and experiences of people. By reading culture in this manner, Quantz allows us to recognize the social aspect of culture and, therefore, lays the foundation for the interrogation of social practices such as schooling, television viewing, etc. as critical elements in the process of youth identity formation. This argument is central to the rationale for interrogating Black Entertainment Television (BET) as a critical space involved in the construction of plural and contradictory identities.

Also related to Quantz’s designation of culture as living, is an expansion of the conventional “meaning” of culture from merely pertaining to “high culture,” to also include the domains of “popular culture.” This represents a significant contribution by the discourse on cultural studies to the shifting treatment and meaning of culture. Under
this new guise, sites like BET are seen as legitimate spaces for studying culture since they provide important frameworks from which many youth use to make sense of reality. Traditionally, culture has been linked to what Quantz terms as “the idea of civilization.” In this regard, culture was perceived as the “best” a society had to offer or what has often been referred to as “high culture.” Under that traditional perspective, television networks like BET would have no cultural value, since television viewing was perceived as a “mindless” exercise. Rousmaniere and Abowitz (1998) provide an interesting genealogy of this conception of culture within educational discourses:

Culture as ‘high culture’ has been a very powerful part of school curriculums for practically as long as there have been schools in America. Its contemporary legacies in today’s schools might include a ‘Great Books’ curriculum that is used in some schools and colleges, where students read through ‘classics’ of Western history, literature, philosophy and other fields. The argument for this type of curriculum goes like this: if students learn the thoughts, ideas, concepts and facts that have shaped the Western culture in which they live, they will truly be educated. Without knowledge of these basic ideas and information that form the foundation of our society, citizens will not be ‘culturally literate.’ (p. 3)

The major problem with this traditional conception of culture is that it is both elitist and exclusionary. It limits culture to the practices and the experiences of a select few, namely upper class European Americans. In a pluralistic society such as the United States, such a description of culture is extremely limiting and can be both oppressive and inimical to the kind of “progressive democracy” where, in Quantz’s words, “people play an active part in their everyday lives” (p. 2). It is also confounded by a belief that only the ruling
classes can produce culture; therefore, what the elites deem as knowledge or culture is what and only what should be engaged in classrooms. Important cultural enterprises such as Black Entertainment Television (BET) are portrayed as “culture only below the waste,” and therefore the meanings that children ascertain from these critical sites are rejected as pedagogically inappropriate material. This perspective rightly portrays school as an institutional process of acquiring culture. However, if schooling is to be understood as such a process of enculturation, then, unlike its traditional or marginal treatment, a study of the popular culture and sites such as BET that also represents and constitutes the lived realities of a large number of students must be centered as part of multicultural education.

Another critical point that Quantz makes about cultural studies might help to re-ignite the revolutionary spark in multicultural education. Quantz asserts that cultural studies scholars are marked off from others who study culture by an “overt commitment” to emancipatory praxis. Here he sheds light on a fundamental tenet of critical educational discourses: persistence on democratic political goals. Following the lead of Paolo Freire (1970), critical scholars have been arguing that educators must have a clear view of education as a political process. Freire argues that education can have only one of two political goals: either to domesticate students or to liberate them. It can never be a neutral exercise. Positioning multicultural education as committed to engendering liberatory, democratic practices through an engagement with the popular knowledges that students bring with them to school is perhaps more urgent today in light of certain hegemonic realities confronting minority students and teachers in schools and society. These hegemonic realities include extremely high levels of school failure, feelings of
apathy, hopelessness and despair among minority students, violence and other forms of self-destructive behavior. It is in view of these harsh realities that a cultural studies focus on an “overt commitment” to emancipatory praxis can be useful for “re-revolutionizing” multicultural education.

Even more valuable, both postcolonial theory and cultural studies appear to recognize the performative nature of cultural identity. Postcolonialism, for instance, often explores the significance of place and location and their impact on how subjectivities get “played out” among exiled subjects. Postcolonial theorists also often borrow from postmodernism, including the works of Michel Foucault (1979) and Judith Butler (1990) which posit identity as a performance. Within the same vein, cultural studies scholars such as Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (1996) argue that identity formation should be seen as a process or a production that is never fixed in any absolute sense, but always contested. They understand that all social identities are constructed within historical, discursive practices of power and are always contingent. These postcolonial and cultural studies depictions of identity are helpful for transgressing multicultural education beyond anachronistic conceptions of cultural identity as a fixed and given construct. Therefore, against the customary educational practice that conceptualizes identity as a fixed, already achieved construct, positioning cultural identity as a performance or a production maybe one way of rearticulating multicultural education as a more progressive study of identity formation.

Postcolonial theorists, and in particular those of Caribbean origin, have been offering creolization as a process which appears to capture the performative and hybrid state of contemporary identities. Creolization is a theory on identity production that has
been used to describe the process of interculturation in postcolonial societies such as those in the Caribbean. According to Kathleen Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau (1998), creolization may be defined as a “syncretic process of transverse dynamics that endlessly reworks and transforms the cultural patterns of varied social and historical experiences and identities. The cultural patterns that result from this ‘crossbreeding’ (or cross-weaving) undermine any academic or political aspiration for unitary origins or authenticity” (p. 3). This definition has particular implications for rethinking multicultural education, from a postcolonial and cultural studies perspective, as a study of identity formation. For one, it troubles the mainstream discourses’ problematic conception of American national identity as linear and contradicts any notion of a stable, essential identity. As a syncretic and hybrid process of interculturation, creolization suggests an intermingling among cultures that results in a transformation into something new that is always changing. This crossbreeding of which Baluntansky and Sourieau so passionately describe is perhaps one way of destabilizing the discourse on multicultural education and moving it beyond what Mahalingam and McCarthy (2000) characterize as its essential treatment of cultures. How can the performance of a Creole identity reduce the need for ownership or vested interest in a particular cultural identity? What lessons can American multicultural theorists learn from Caribbean and other forms of postcolonial scholarship? How can an understanding of Creole identity expand traditional conceptions of Blackness and whiteness beyond their problematic focus on authenticity and absolutism?

While I am not proposing a formulaic approach to rethinking multicultural education as the study of student identity formation, I argue that an acceptance of the
postcolonial idea that all cultural identities are creolized and syncretic may reduce the political conflicts that are associated with the dogmatic affirmation and construction of absolute difference and subsequently help to reduce the high levels of student failure among ethnic “minorities.” I am not talking here about a totalizing multicultural discourse which is void of conflicts and oppositional voices since I recognize the importance of conflict and struggle in the development of cross-cultural coalitions. My concern is with the persistence of the colonial myth of ethnic absolutism which problematically assumes and perpetuates an essentialist and fixed notion of difference between various ethnic groups and, conversely, scholars who claim to occupy distinct positions along the political spectrum (Shohat & Stam, 1996). Because mainstream approaches to multicultural education perpetuate the colonial trope of ethnic absolutism through their impassioned emphases on natural, absolute differences and ethnic purity, students and multicultural education scholars alike perform identities based on their perceived ownership of certain symbols, styles, norms or modes of signification. For instance, with regard to students the linguistic domain is often a hotly contested arena among cultural majorities and minorities. Marginalized youth often employ vernacular traditions to identity with each other as well as exclude non-members of their group. For whites to employ these vernacular codes would often be considered an impositional border crossing. Similarly, for minorities like Blacks to identity with certain Eurocentric vernacular codes (the performance of standard English, for example) is often read as “acting against their true cultural nature.” The situation is not that much different among scholars who claim to be acting within the best interest of students. The language of conservatives and progressives are thought to be so absolutely distinct that these groups
very seldom even speak to each other. My concern is that these oppositional identities, whether they take place at the local level in terms of the relationships between students or in academia between the various warring factions, only serve to reify differences in ways that buttress the existing status quo. A celebration of cultural hybridity and, in particular, Creole or syncretic identities allow room for self-definition but at the same time is not confined to the colonialist myth of ethnic absolutism. In fact, the reality may be that students are already performing these Creole identities within popular cultural spaces. Within popular culture students are permitted to “rap” like each other, dress like each other and perform “hip hop” identities in similar fashion. Unfortunately, schools do not seize upon these moments’ potential for coalition building by appropriating the shared knowledges that the students relate to. Instead, students are taught explicitly that they should not speak in certain ways, relate to certain forms of expressions or identity with the “other.” A more detailed exploration of Creole identities will be conducted later in this chapter. For now, it may be crucial to illuminate some of the ways in which postcolonial and cultural studies scholars have addressed the concept of cultural identity.

**POSTCOLONIAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES CONCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY**

Notions of ethnic absolutism, essentialism and national identity have all come under the critical scrutiny of postcolonial theory and cultural studies. For instance, Paul Gilroy (1993) has taken on the mission of deconstructing both absolutist and nationalist conceptions of cultural identity. Taking the conception of racial and ethnic purity to task, Gilroy denounces all attempts to construct identity in national, or absolute terms. This argument has particular relevance to African American scholars. Gilroy writes, “Much of the precious intellectual legacy by African American intellectuals as the substance of
their particularity is in fact only partly their absolute ethnic property” (p. 15). Gilroy calls this effort to make such claims “ethnic particularism” and warns that it promotes a form of “cultural insiderism;” his term for an essentialistic construction of ethnic difference. Ho notes that this cultural insiderism “…is maximized so that it distinguishes people from one another and at the same time acquires an incontestable priority over all other dimensions of their social and historical experience, cultures, and identities” (p. 3).

What Gilroy appears to be arguing is that cultural insiderism makes a case for only the “authentic” insiders or natives of a community to speak on its behalf. In education, this logic often manifests itself in the commonly held idea that white people are not capable of teaching Black children since they are not “authentic” members of their “race” and therefore cannot identify with their struggles. Gilroy’s position is grounded in “a concern to repudiate the dangerous obsessions with ‘racial’ purity which are circulating inside and outside black politics” (p. xi). He notes that by asserting an ethnic absolutist stance, cultural insiderism is often used to legitimate claims of racial or ethnic authenticity that are often unleashed to promote and justify Afrocentric notions of a Black essence. At the same time, this homogeneous focus on authenticity through experience denies a place for those who do not fit some prescribed cultural characteristics, such as gender, birthright, skin color and social class standing. Steve Fuller (2000) names this practice as one element within a process he calls “hypercapitalism, an exaggerated—perhaps essentialized—sense of cultural difference that tends unwittingly to incapacitate the people on whose behalf it advocates” (p. 16). I quote Fuller at length here to illustrate this view:
Only natives of a culture are authorized to speak on its behalf. Others’ voices are regarded as suspect because they have not immersed themselves in the life of that culture. Max Weber is an important target of this argument, as he set the pace for Western understandings of the sociology of India and China without having visited either country or mastered its language. Yet if Weber is excluded on those grounds, then what do we say about Aijaz Ahmad (1992), who performed the reciprocal function of diagnosing the Western fetish for ‘third world’ and ‘postcolonial’ cultural studies from a strategically detached vantage point in New Delhi? Indeed, can the hyperculturalist in good faith condone the activities of Edward Said, a Palestinian Christian, whose academic training and practice has been in the United States but whose scholarship primarily concern’s Europe’s orientalization of Islam? (p. 17)

A critique of this cultural insiderism also illuminates the importance of “otherness” in the production of not only hegemonic discourses, but also counter-hegemonic efforts to subvert dominance. In discourses where subaltern groups use their marginality in order to claim a privileged authenticity, they often simultaneously construct the dominant group as an excluded other. Thus, anti-essentialist critics may be correct in asserting that nationalist, essentialist and absolutist notions of cultural identity require a necessary “other” in order to gain currency. However, writing off essentialism as an “othering” strategy does not address the importance of marginality in the critique of an oppressive, hegemonic discourse.

Moreover, Gilroy admonishes the problematic focus on ethnic origins that have sterilized much of the debate over multiculturalism. Again pointing his critique towards
the practice among many Black intellectuals, Gilroy notes, “Marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process or movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes” (p. 19).

Typical of many postcolonial and cultural studies scholars, Gilroy locates essentialism within a modernist frame, questions the origins thesis and is skeptical about the place of essence within discourses of cultural identity. He asserts:

- At this point, it is necessary to appreciate that any discomfort at the prospect of fissures and fault lines in the topography of affiliation that made pan-africanism such a powerful discourse was not eased by references to some African essence that could magically connect all blacks together. Nowadays this potent idea is frequently wheeled in when it is necessary to appreciate the things that (potentially) connect black people to one another rather than think seriously about divisions in the imagined community of race and the means to comprehend or overcome them, if indeed that is possible. (p. 24)

More importantly, Gilroy believes that our interests would be better served through recognition of the “inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas” (p. xi). Gilroy posits a theory of the “Black Atlantic” which he argues is necessary to engender a Diasporic consciousness among Blacks in order to move beyond essentialism, and “discrete national dynamics” that have characterized cultural criticism.

Gilroy’s repudiation of essentialism may be linked to his agenda to promote his Black Atlantic consciousness. In spite of his personal agenda, his attacks on essentialism may also be applied to a wider conversation. Feminist scholar Diana Fuss (1989)
brilliantly illuminates some of the critical tensions surrounding the use of essentialism as a cultural strategy. “To some,” she asserts, “essentialism is nothing more than the philosophical enforcer of a liberal humanist idealism which seeks to locate and to contain the subject within a fixed set of differences” (p. xii). From this perspective, essentialism is defined as the antithesis of cultural difference, whereby “the doctrine of essence is viewed as precisely that which seeks to deny the very radicality of difference” (Fuss, p. xii). However, Fuss notes that other scholars find usefulness in essentialism. She continues, “to others, essentialism may not be without a certain tactical or inventionary value, especially in our political struggles and debates” (p. xii). Guyatri Spivak (1993) is among those who find some particular usefulness for essentialism within discourses of cultural identity. Spivak is interested in a specific use of essentialism, what may be called, “strategic essentialism.” To some, this may appear at first glance to be an oxymoron; however, Spivak finds a way of articulating essentialism as a strategy for mobilizing people to engage in political work, “without invoking some irreducible essentialism” (p. 3). Spivak relies on the Oxford English Dictionary which defines the word “strategy” as, “Usually an artifice or trick designed to outwit or surprise the enemy” (p. 3). She notes that one of the most crucial things to consider is that a strategy is neither disinterested nor universal but must always take into consideration the location and position of those responsible for its invocation. Spivak asserts:

If one is considering strategy, one has to look at where the group—the person, the persons, or the movement—is situated when one makes claims for or against essentialism. A strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory. (p. 4)
In taking this position, Spivak appears to be echoing Fuss who is similarly reluctant to dismiss essentialism. Rather than expose or “discredit closet essentialists,” Fuss argues, it is more important to “investigate what purpose or function essentialism might play in a particular set of discourses” (p. 3). Fuss is more interested in the historical and discursive events that motivate people to use essentialism in order to mobilize others. This focus on essentialism as a strategy may be somewhat useful for thinking about identity construction in non-totalizing ways. By denouncing the tendency to think about essentialism as having a universal and timeless meaning, Spivak paves the way for a particular usage of essentialism at “strategic moments.” Spivak further writes:

The strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan or masterword like woman or worker or the name of a nation is, ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized. This is the impossible risk of a lasting strategy. Can there be such a thing? (p. 3)

While Spivak embraces some uses of essentialism, she recognizes that “the strategic use of essentialism can turn into an alibi for proselytizing academic essentialisms” (p. 3). In this case, she argues that unfortunately the bigger problem is that “strategies are taught as if they were theories, good for all cases” (p. 3). This discussion on essentialism may be vital for thinking about African American culture and its use of essentialism. A critical strategy in the self-production of Blacks has been to distinguish Blackness as far a way from whiteness as possible. Thus the term African American is still somewhat problematically defined and treated as an essentialized label for Blackness in spite of its obvious hybridity. On the one hand, African American represents a hybrid between African and American, Blackness and whiteness, a prefix and a suffix. On the other
hand, this identity label is not treated as a hybrid but as pure, “authentic” Blackness. This point will be explored further later in this project.

Stuart Hall also seems to be in agreement with Spivak and Fuss about the value of a “strategic essentialism.” In his oft-cited article, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” (1992) Hall suggests that there are at least two ways to think about cultural identity. One way is to consider identity as consistent with a singular, shared culture—what Hall describes as “a sort of collective ‘one’ true self.” This cultural identity is underpinned by a shared history and heritage of a people. Hall admits that this form of identity has been extremely useful for postcolonial and anti-racist struggles such as the Pan African movement. He cautions that even though this form of identity is somewhat essentialist, “we should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance” of this conception. Here Hall seems to recognize the use of essentialism as a “strategy” for mobilizing disenfranchised Blacks and others at critical, strategic moments. While Hall recognizes the limitations of this form of essentialism, he is not willing to dismiss its usefulness altogether. And, though he never directly endorses a strategic essentialism by using those words in any specific sense, one gets a sense that his focus on a “strategic or positional identity” (1996, p. 3) is somewhat similar to the strategic identity that Spivak embraces.

Hall appears to be extremely cautious about embracing essentialism. He is particularly concerned about the tendency among some African Americans and other Diasporic Blacks to invoke notions of biological or genetic essences. In his view, this move valorizes the ground for the racism that it tries to problematize. He illustrates this point in his (1995) essay entitled, “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?”
Concerned about the use of the term “Black” to denote a category that is fixed and absent of historical and political influences, Hall rejects the idea of any pure form of art, citing that this promotes a type of ethnic absolutism. Like Gilroy, Hall believes that these art forms, which we often mistake as “authentic,” are the results of “partial synchronization” and negotiation between minority, subordinate, and dominant cultures. Hall and other scholars have referred to this so-called “partial synchronization” as cultural hybridization. It is important to note here that Gilroy also makes this same point by illustrating that contrary to the common perception of hip-hop culture as a “pure” African American invention, its roots can be traced directly to the Caribbean. In addressing the specific concern of the use of the word “Black” in the term “Black Popular Culture,” Hall writes:

> It has come to signify the black community, where these traditions were kept, and whose struggles survive in the persistence of the black experience (the historical experiences of black people in the Diaspora), of the black aesthetic (the distinctive cultural repertoires out of which popular representations were made), and of the black counternarratives we have struggled to voice. (p.129)

Here Hall joins Gilroy and wants to replace the notion of an essential racial identity with a perspective that links Africans in the Diaspora to historical experiences.

According to Hall, the focus on origin or essence is not the only way to conceptualize cultural identity. A second way is to think of identity, not as essential and buried underneath the colonial experience waiting to be uncovered or recovered, but as the product of history. Therefore, rather than talk about who we are, Hall’s vision of identity focuses on whom we have “become.” From this vantage point, identity should always be conceived as both “being” and “becoming” or as Hall puts it, as a production.
He illuminates the fact that identities have histories, and like everything historical, they are constantly transformed. With regards to his conception of cultural identities, Hall (1992) writes,

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (p. 52)

Hall’s preference for the positional view of cultural identity is somewhat tempered by the reality that a strategic use of essence has been effective for some important cultural movements in the past. For instance, such a strategic use of essence has been crucial to the development of many postcolonial societies, such as those found in the Caribbean and in other “Third World” spaces, especially during the decolonization movement and in the post-independence era. Granted their autonomy and right to self-definition during the 1960’s, many of these countries struggled to find their own identities. Sharpe (2000) notes, “…in order to do so they had to break the authority Western culture had over indigenous languages, forms of knowledge, and literary production” (p. 113). Hence, postcolonial studies emerged to counter the hegemony that was put in place during the colonial period. In order to address the needs of their new societies, national leaders and scholars often conceptualized identity mainly in terms of nation and nationality; henceforth, nationalism was evoked as the “mobilizing slogan.” Within the Caribbean, notable scholars and leaders such as C.L. R. James, Eric Williams, Walter Rodney, and
Edward Kamau Brathwaite, for example, have been among the foremost thinkers involved with imagining nation and nationality.

However, nationalism was not limited to the “non-West;” it also played an integral role in the struggles for identity formation in “First World” countries such as the United States, especially during and even long after the civil rights era. Pan Africanism, as noted earlier, was often invoked as one of the major approaches to combating oppression during the “Black Power” movement, the Black Arts movement, and the Afrocentric movement in the United States. Similarly, nationalism has also been instrumental within discourses of education, both in the development of new countries as well as in the United States. As noted by Rousmaniere and Abowitz (1998), schools are crucial institutions in the imagining of a nation. “At no time in society is the role of education more valuable than when a nation is beginning or in the process of change. This is because a new society requires new values, and new education in those values” (p. 22). The perplexing civil rights battles over identity in the United States during the 1960s had made the conditions ripe for the use of nation as a mobilizing slogan in the construction of identity from the perspective of public schooling. But even before that period of US history, nationalism was evoked as a strategy to elicit support for constructing a unified America. Texts such as Eleanor Roosevelt’s, “It’s Patriotic to Teach” (1943); Hyman Rickover’s, “Education: America’s first line of defense” (1959); Richard Rotriquez’s, “What is An American Education?” and more recently, Edward Stevens and George Wood’s, “A Nation at Risk” all illustrate important ways in which nationalism has been invoked within educational discourses in the United States. The recent call for patriotism that emerged following the September 11, 2001, tragedies also
reflects a use of nationalism to gain American support for a “new war on terrorism.”

From these examples, an argument can be made that the “American student” identity has always been articulated in nationalist terms. Today, this nationalism manifests itself within educational rhetoric that constantly compares the performance of American students against those in other parts of the world such as China, Japan and many European countries. It is also evident within curriculum debates over the employment of a national curriculum or national standards. Thus, nationalism continues to be one of the most powerful symbols used to articulate discourses on schooling in the United States, especially within mainstream approaches to multicultural education.

One of the major problems with employing nationalism in educational discourses is that it privileges the “national” or the universal above the local. That is to say, curriculum and pedagogy often gets conceived in terms of a national perspective or in the formation of a set of national goals such as the idealistic, “America 2000.” Henceforth, local cultures and individual subjectivities often get lost within this homogenizing approach to education. By comparing collective school results on standardized tests and then using those results to determine whether or not a school would be closed or replaced by a Charter School, for example, illustrates how problematic a homogeneous perspectives of student identity can become. Moreover, a focus on essences and geography provide similar limitations for articulating cultural identity. These simplistic ways of conceptualizing identity are often ahistorical and totalizing. They provide simpleminded approaches to cultural identity that do not take into consideration the wide variety of “minority cultures” and the multiple historical factors that bring them into being. In addition, they often have the crippling effect of promoting ethnic absolutism.
This view on absolute differences between one’s group and the “other,” often results in youth developing vested interests in their cultural identity which they perceived as fixed and impenetrable. Within this view of identity, no form of “cross-over” is allowed, and youth go to great lengths to mark off their territory. Thus passing, a strategy often invoked by Americans of mixed parentage, is repudiated as inauthenticity. Consequently, these perspectives on identity often lead to an exaggeration of difference which limits the effective development of cross-cultural “coalitions across differences.” By focusing on difference as irremedial and concrete, schools often reify these attitudes.

Mahalingam and McCarthy (2000) have deconstructed this essentialistic tendency within multicultural education. As argued by these scholars, “the social production of multiculturalism is elaborated in a pedagogy that is rooted in the essentialized representation of various minority cultures” (p. 3). They write against the practice by many scholars to treat multiculturalism as a minor goal within civic education in order to teach children “that there are other cultures that exist in the world and we should respect them” (p. 4). Elaborating on these essentialist strategies in multicultural education, Mahalingam and McCarthy write,

While the essentialized, homogenized, bounded notion of culture has been problematized in anthropology and in critical theory, the notion of culture in the production of multiculturalism—especially in textbooks—is still a romanticized, classical notion of culture.... ‘other cultures’ are also conveniently homogenized into discrete units such as Asian American, African American, Hispanic Americans, and so forth. The relative stability and instability of these cultures
and the historical flux and patterns of variation in their elaboration are rarely discussed. (pp. 4-5)

A reading of their argument suggests that multiculturalism must not be conceptualized as a homogenized discourse which conveniently absorbs the “Other,” but must illuminate the political and power relations that are involved in their historical, and social experiences.

Lawrence Levine (1996) expresses a similar concern about the essentialistic approaches to multicultural education. He is especially critical of the conservative attacks on multicultural education which invoke a monolithic view of a European essence to the American identity. To speak of an essential, singular “Western European” culture, Levine argues, is to deny the existence of “a host of different peoples and a series of cultures—languages, religions, nationalities, worldviews, political systems, folkways—that often were in tension with and ran counter to one another.” Levine insists,

We must stop talking about dominance and purity and all begin thinking about transformations. Western European cultures and institutions were transformed in the United States because they interacted with and affected each other and also came into close contact with peoples from other cultures who brought with them their own values, attitudes and practices. Out of that ongoing contact cultural transformations took—and are still taking—place which define American culture. (p. 303).

Critics who deny the syncretism of the American cultural identity, often charge that a non-essentializing focus on cultural pluralism limits our fundamental goals of developing a unified society. They portray multiculturalism as the antithesis of national unity.
Levine cites Arthur Schlesinger (1991) as one of the major proponents of this view. Schlesinger creates a binary opposition between national unity and the celebration of ethnic differences. As Levine interprets him, “either one believes in ‘one people’ or one is contributing to the ‘disintegration’ of the national community, apartheid, Balkanization, tribalization” (p. 305). While Schlesinger often refers to an American identity with a European essence, he paradoxically fails to see any connection between Africa and African Americans claiming that unless one subscribes to “biological determinism…it is hard to see what living connection exists between American blacks today and their heterogeneous West African ancestors three centuries ago” (p. 305). The increasing popularity of the Afrocentric discourse is due in part to resistance against Schlesinger and a multiplicity of other conservative educators who portray Africa solely as the Dark Continent, and who attempt to subjugate African Americans. Many of these Afrocentric scholars feel compelled to offer counternarratives to what has been historically institutionalized as the official narratives of Africa and the American national identity. Levine articulates the negative portrayal of African culture that likens it to “despotism, superstition, tribalism and fanaticism” (Schlesinger) or that attributes Africa’s main contributions to the world as “disease and massacre” (Lewis S. Feurer). He provides us with a troubling quotation by historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, who, in response to a student’s query regarding the absence of curricular content on African history, noted “there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is just darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Colombian America. And darkness is not a subject for history (p. 305). Levine cites this display of ignorance and the motivations that perpetuate this racial logic as the rationale for
multicultural education. But while many Afrocentrists attempt to recover this “lost history,” it is important to consider whether replacing one form of absolutist essentialism with another does not in effect reproduce the same racist ideologies that are used to perpetuate Eurocentrism. In saying that, I must hasten to warn of the dangers of reading Afrocentrism as a monolithic discourse. There are multiple strands of Afrocentrism many of which are not susceptible to the absolutist claims; the version that is being addressed here is the nationalist approach which in my opinion, while important for the retraction of racist histiography and the promotion of important counter memories, still poses significant limitations for constructing notions of cultural identity.

As noted earlier, postcolonial and cultural studies scholars often move beyond nationalism and essence and prefer to think about cultural identity as contingent, syncretic, relational, performative and based on historical relations of power. A postcolonial examination of cultural identity in the United States would require the student of multicultural studies to interrogate both historical and contemporary links between colonialism and cultural identity, and especially implicate schooling as a central part of that discussion. For instance, the problematic relationship that existed between the colonizer and the colonized, and how they are illustrated in curricular texts and narratives must always be an issue of contestation for the discourse of postcolonial multicultural studies, especially since colonial grammar and relationships still effectively govern our patterns of contemporary notions of cultural identity and are often still appropriated within schooling experiences. Therefore, rather than solely trace the roots of cultural identity back to a mystical Western Civilization or to pre-colonial Africa, it is important to deconstruct the ideologies that became existent when the colonizer and the
colonized met and engage educational narratives that represent the cultural politics that
subsequently emerged as a result of those encounters. By confronting this racializing
history, the student of postcolonial multicultural studies may be better able to bring a
postcolonial sensibility to understanding the contemporary construction of cultural
identity in postcolonial American schooling.

Several excellent texts have been written on the complex identities that emerged
as a result of the tense relationships between the colonizer and the colonized. Albert
Memmi (1965) is among those who brilliantly articulate the pervasive elements of
colonialism. Without confining himself to a Marxist reductionism, Memmi traces the
roots of colonialism to a desire for economic privilege. He argues, “…the idea of
privilege is at the heart of the colonial relationship—and that privilege is undoubtedly
economic (p. xii). Memmi offers this explanation in order to debunk the common myth
of “the so-called moral or cultural mission of colonization and shows that the profit
motive in it is basic.” He further argues, “The deprivations of the colonized are the
almost direct result of the advantages secured to the colonizer.” Memmi’s articulation of
privilege can be used to expand Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) conception of white privilege
in order to illustrate the economic functions of slavery in the US and the subsequent
patterns of relationship and privileged identities that emerged. However, Memmi cautions
it is important to recognize,

Colonial privilege is not solely economic. To observe the life of the colonizer and
the colonized is to discover rapidly that the daily humiliation of the colonized, his
[her] objective subjugation, are not merely economic. Even the poorest colonizer
thought himself [herself] to be—and actually was—superior to the colonized.

This too was part of colonial privilege. (p. xii)

Memmi interrogates the logic of colonialism and the subsequent responses to it by the colonized. While denouncing the oppressive colonial discourse, he attempts to rationalize the dehumanization process in order to make sense of the inner workings of colonialism. As is expressed by Jean Paul Sartre (1965) in the introduction to Memmi’s text, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Memmi is clear that “The colonizer can only exonerate himself [herself] in the systematic pursuit of ‘dehumanization’ of the colonized…” Sartre queries this fabrication of history. He asks,

How can an elite of usurpers, aware of their mediocrity, establish their privileges?

By one means only: debasing the colonized to exalt themselves, denying the title of humanity to the natives, and defining them as simply absences of qualities—animals, not humans. This does not prove hard to do, for the system deprives them of everything. (p. xxvi)

Again Sartre’s appropriation of Memmi allows us to understand the discursive production of Blackness worldwide where a colonial relationship existed. A more contemporary postcolonial focus could also employ Memmi’s reading to bring meaning to the ideological state apparatuses such as schools or the mass media that are used to reproduce hegemony in a way that perpetuates white privilege. Tracing the racist historiography of colonial education, one may get a sense of how education was and still is used to maintain privilege to a select few elites. One may also get a sense of the hegemonic functions of schooling. Postcolonial theorists often focus on language, namely the English language, as a tool for promoting hegemony. Bhabha, for instance, writes about
the “colonial ambivalence” that exists within former colonized subjects whereas on the one hand they may resist colonialism, yet they are still bound to the oppressive system by the same colonial language they employ. This has caused some critics like Audre Lorde (1993) to query whether or not it is possible to use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house.

Moreover, Memmi is also concerned about another form of ambivalence that exists between the colonized and the colonizer, even after colonization ceases to formally exist. While on the one hand the colonized may resent the former master and what he/she stands for (oppression, violence, self-righteousness, etc.), paradoxically, there is a kind of admiration for what the colonizer has, vis-à-vis privilege. In view of this privilege, former oppressed people are confronted by somewhat contradictory options. Faced with a crucial moment of self-determination, the former colonial subject struggles to choose between two limited choices. “He (the colonized) attempts either to become different or to conquer all the dimensions which colonization tore away from him” (Memmi, p. 120). Memmi explains,

The first attempt of the colonized is to change his condition by changing his skin. There is a tempting model very close at hand—the colonizer. The latter suffers from none of his deficiencies, has all rights, enjoys every possession and benefits from every prestige. He is, moreover, the other part of the comparison, the one that crushes the colonized and keeps him in servitude. The first ambition of the colonized is to become equal to that splendid model and to resemble him to the point of disappearing in him. (p. 120)
In postcolonial circles, this practice is known as purgative mimeticism, whereby the colonized “may seek to purge every suggestion of indigenous culture from his or her thought or action” (Hogan, p. 320). Traditionally, marginalized peoples want so much to empower themselves, according to this logic, that they detest what they current identity stands for. Here Memmi appears to be echoing the argument made by Frantz Fanon (1967) that the “Antillean Negro wants to be white.” Fanon, like Memmi, cites the oppressive colonial relationship as central to the self-hatred that is common among many Black and former colonial subjects. Deconstructing this argument may be useful for understanding the contemporary practice by many Blacks to bleach their skin in an effort to “lighten” their complexions. Pop star Michael Jackson maybe the paragon of this perplexing practice. It may also be helpful for explaining the practice by many Blacks to use many forms of chemicals to straighten or die their hair to the point that the textures or colors resemble their white counterparts. Fanon also identifies language as a dominant vehicle in which these colonial ideologies are perpetuated. He is especially concerned about the existence of many colonial myths that are at the center of contemporary constructions of cultural identity. One particular colonial myth that Fanon interrogates is the myth of Black sexual potency. Fanon attributes this myth to the colonial fable that Blackness represents the incomplete formation of humanity, henceforth, their “bestiality” sanctions and promotes uncontrollable, promiscuous sexuality. This “incompleteness” also allegedly causes Black males to have enlarged penises. Moreover, their sexual potency is thought to be so tantalizing that they could convert or “turn out” the most sanctified or innocent white male or female; hence, the commonly repeated adage that “once you go Black, you can’t go back.” As a result of this racist ideology, inter-sexual
relations are prohibited, especially among Black men and white women who are considered to be the “forbidden fruit.” This colonial myth, Fanon suggests, is what fueled the common practice of white plantation owners raping Black women. It also was the compelling force behind the lynching and castration of Black males. To castrate a Black man was to take away his power. The negative perceptions of miscegenation or inter-racial relationships that exists today are a direct inheritance from these colonial myths. Ironically, both Black males and females to this very day often appropriate this same myth in order to assert notions of a sexualized “Black Power” or sexual superiority. All of these myths can be traced to colonial notions of ethnic purity and white supremacy. They continue to gain currency through the explicit use of stereotypes by both dominant and subordinate groups. As mentioned earlier, these ethnic absolutist tendencies have been thrown out by postcolonial and cultural studies thinkers and replaced by notions of syncretic identities. In the following section of this chapter, I will illuminate postcolonial and cultural studies’ syncretic approaches to cultural identity. Specifically, I will further explore theories on creolization that may be useful for moving beyond nationalists, ethnic absolutist, essentialist, and colonial conceptions of cultural identity.

**SYNCRETISM, HYBRIDITY AND CREOLIZATION**

One of the most important contributions of postcolonial studies comes via a complex understanding of the idea of cultural mixing. In part reacting against the colonial myth of ethnic purity, postcolonial thinkers often think about cultural identity in terms of syncretism or hybridization. Syncretism may be defined as an intentional or spontaneous synthesis between two or more contact cultures, usually metropolitan and indigenous, to produce a new culture (Hogan, p. 320). In the words of Shohat and Stam,
postcolonial syncretism “calls attention to the multiple identities generated by the geographical displacements characteristic of the post-independence era, and presupposes a theoretical framework, influenced by antiessentialist poststructuralism, that refuses to police identity along purist lines” (p. 42). The logic of ethnic purity has been turned upside down within the last few decades where transglobal migration has produced the reality of multiple hyphenated identities: Asian-American, Mexican-American, Hispanic-American, Afro-Caribbean-American, to name a few. These new hybrid identities have produced significant contradictions for those who traditionally relied upon strict physical characteristic as the major criterion for understanding various categories of identity. In a way, it has awakened many scholars to the reality that race is simply, in Stuart Hall’s⁹ (1996) words, “a floating signifier.” Shohat and Stam attribute this increasing hybridization to a proliferation of mass-mediated cultural products which have effectively constructed a more interconnected world. However, it is important to note that the idea of cultural hybridity is not a new one; it has always been a reality, albeit a stigmatized and highly proscribed one. Shohat and Stam note that the term syncretic once carried with it a negative connotation. For instance, it was often unleashed as a racist trope which engendered Christian prejudice against African religions (p. 42). Subverting that colonial signification constitutes what Shohat and Stam call a “reversal of valence” (p. 42). Today, with the postmodern fetishization with difference, it has become increasingly fashionable to assert a hybrid identity.

Cultural hybridity produces a fundamental slippage that allows for more self-definition and agency on the part of the individual actor. This is clear in the assertion of

golf-legend, Tiger Woods, who avows that he is neither Black nor Asian, but he is "Caublinasian," a term he constructed to define his African, Asian, Native American and Caucasian heritages. Woods’ assertion produced widespread debate within various minority communities, and was a source of criticism among many Blacks who feel that he is denying his identity. Hybridity allows for this type of assertion.

Creolization represents one important type of syncretism. The term is mainly used to describe the syncretic processes that take place in the Caribbean and in the various Americas. Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1974) traces the roots of the word “Creole” to a fusion of two Spanish words: “criar (to create, to imagine, to establish, to found, to settle) and colon (a colonist, a founder, a settler). These terms joined together to form the word “criollo” (a committed settler, one identified with the area of settlement, one native to the settlement though not ancestrally indigenous to it” (p. 10). Brathwaite notes that term Creole is used differently in various geographically spaces. In Peru, for instance, it was used to refer to Spanish descendents born in the New World, “who ‘were of upper social reaches but distinctly below their peninsular born relatives’” (p. 10.). Brathwaite adds,

In Brazil, the term was applied to Negro slaves born locally. In Louisiana, the term was applied to the white francophone population, while in New Orleans it applied to mulattoes. In Sierra Leone, 'Creole' refers to descendants of former New World slaves, Maroons and 'Black Poor' from Britain who were resettled along the Coast and especially in Freetown, and who form a social elite distinct from the African population. (p. 10)
As noted by Supriya Nair (2000) the word Creole is also often entangled with other contradictory identity markers such as, “Racial, as in white or black Creole, with both sides claiming precedence as in the case of Louisiana; national, as in French Creole or Spanish Creole; linguistic, as in the (French) Creoles spoken in Haiti or Martinique; mixed race, as in mulatto Creole or mestizo Creole” (p. 237). As if these complications do not sufficiently blur the signification of a Creole identity, Nair notes,

In these already slippery categories are other slippages of class, color, bloodline, continental ancestry, and native lineage. And further muddying the waters of this formidable contextualization are the various cultural nuances to the process of creolization, depending again on specific historical and political contingencies. (p. 237)

Caribbean scholars prefer to focus on creolization that emerges within the region and often offer it as a model of interculturation and resistance which has usefulness for contemporary constructions of cultural identity worldwide. Many of these scholars also believe that patterns of creolization within the Caribbean have influenced hybridization in the New World. Brathwaite cautions,

What one has to recognize from the outset is that the term creolization..., refers to a cultural process perceived as taking place within a continuum of space and time, but which, for purposes of clarification may be divided into two aspects of itself: ac/culturation, which is the yoking (by force and example, deriving from power/prestige) of one to another (in this case the slave/African to the European); and inter/culturation, which is an unplanned, unstructured but osmotic relationship proceeding from this yoke. The creolization which results (and it is a
process not a product), becomes the tentative cultural norm of the society. (pp. 5-6)

While Brathwaite (1974) is explicit about the dual process of creolization (acculturation/interculturation) it is not transparent from his definition whether creolization is to be conceived as a dialectical process or as a dualism. In a Marxist or Hegelian dialectical fashion, creolization would suggest a synthesis between the master/slave, Black/white, African/European dialectic. As articulated by Nigel Boland (2001), “The dialectical perspective… draws attention to the contradictions and conflicts that are inherent in the relationship between these elements, a relationship that actually defines the nature of the constituent parts. Master and slave, for example, have no independent existence because each is defined in terms of its relationship to the other, in dialectical terms a unity of opposites (p. 2). Trinidadian scholar J. Michael Dash (1996) appears to be among those who support the idea of creolization as a dialectical process. Dash writes, “The term already suggests the later hypothesis of creolization that the oppressed and the exploited were not merely the passive victims of an oppressive system but rather, through a pattern of apparent consent, opposition, and overt resistance, managed to create unprecedented cultural transformations from a series of dialectical relations that united oppressor and oppressed” [my emphasis] (p. 47). In contrast, a dualistic approach to creolization suggests a constitution of two distinct parts. It is important to recognize, Boland argues, “When these elements are conceived as if they are separate, the interaction between them is viewed mechanically and the process of creolization becomes simply a blending of elements borrowed from each part (Boland, 2001, p. 2). Articulating the production of creolization as a process of dualism or
dialecticism is extremely pertinent in light of an often under-theorization of cultural hybridity which fails to consider whether or not such syncretism distinguishes “between the diverse modalities of hybridity: colonial imposition, obligatory assimilation, political cooptation, cultural mimicry, and so forth” (Shohat and Stam, p. 43). In addressing this issue, Sylvia Wynter (1974) notes that “the creolization process represents … a more or less ‘false assimilation’ in which the dominated people adopt elements from the dominant… in order to obtain prestige or status… She delineates between creolization and indigenization, noting that while the former is based on this “false assimilation,” the “indigenization process represents the more secretive process by which the dominated culture survives; and resists (Brathwaite, p. 16). Brathwaite’s usage of the two terms acculturation and interculturization is meant to illustrate both obligatory assimilation as well as a reciprocal intermixture between dominant and subordinated cultures. As Brathwaite understands it, the two processes are interrelated. He argues that the strength of creolization is a direct result of the synthesis of these two processes.

The issue of dualism versus dialecticism is addressed more directly by Boland (2001). In a paper delivered at the “Conference on Rethinking Caribbean Culture (Barbados),” Boland argues that neither dualism nor dialecticism adequately captures the process of creolization. This critique represents a reversal of Boland’s earlier privileging of the dialectical approach to creolization (1992). His more recent works move beyond dialecticism in order to embrace a more Afrocentric or “Eastern” approach to creolization. Boland’s recent writing repudiates the use of both dualism and dialecticism. He suggests, “The dualistic approach sometimes creeps back into the analysis of scholars who are thinking dialectically because dualism is predominant in the European
intellectual tradition.” However, Boland argues, “Such dualism shapes the hegemonic paradigms within which we think, but they may inhibit or distort our understanding of cultural processes like creolization.” To move beyond these Eurocentric approaches, Boland suggests a comparison with other philosophical traditions which “emphasize a more wholistic and organic perspective” (p. 3). For example,

In Chinese philosophy, … the cosmic principles known as *yin* and *yang* interact like light and shadow. Moreover, in Caribbean religions such as Vodou in Haiti and Orisha in Trinidad the philosophical perspective is closer to the African than to the European tradition. For example, the “sacred” and “profane” are viewed in European religions and philosophy as mutually exclusive spheres, and they should be kept separate. If profane elements occur within sacred rituals, for instance, the ritual is believed to have become defiled. By contrast, when the sacred and profane are conceived as more organically interconnected and mutually constitutive, rituals may remind the participants of this relationship. The purpose of many Vodou rituals is to facilitate communication between the sacred and profane, the spiritual and the worldly, and spirit possession is the ultimate achievement of flow between them. (Boland, p. 3)

Boland is among many scholars who want to move the study of identity beyond binary dualisms. Balutansky and Sourieau repudiate these traditional approaches to constructing Black identities, citing that the discourse “…almost exclusively limited itself to binary opposites: White/Black, master/slave, civilized/primitive, autonomous/independent, etc.” (p. 3). Boland is particularly interested in the oppositional/resistance dualism. He appropriates Richard Burton’s (1997) reading of Michel de Certeau’s distinction between
resistance and opposition. “The former is possible only when a dominated group has enough of a base of its own that it can develop a ‘strategy’ of resistance, whereas those who are too weak to establish such a ‘space’ of their own may resort only to the ‘tactics’ of opposition from within the system” (Michel de Certeau, 1984). Boland transgresses this binary and notes, “Creolization, then, is not a homogenizing process, but rather a process of *contention* between people who are members of social formation and carriers of cultures, a process in which their own ethnicity is continually re-examined and redefined in terms of the relevant oppositions between different social formations at various historical moments” (p. 72). [emphasis in original]

Brathwaite posits three conditions that lead to an emergence of a Creole society: some form of colonial arrangement with a metropolitan power; some form of a plantation arrangement; and a multi-racial society that is organized for the benefit of a minority of European origin. “Creole society,” in Brathwaite’s view, “is the result therefore of a complex situation where a colonial polity reacts, as a whole, to external metropolitan pressures and at the same time to internal adjustments made necessary by the juxtaposition of master and labour, white and non-white, Europe and colony, European and African (mulatto Creole), European and Amerindian (mestizo Creole), in a culturally heterogeneous relationship” (pp. 10-11).

To many of these creolization theorists, the plantation is perceived as the crucial link in the development of a Creole society. Consider, for example, Cuban scholar Antonio Benitez Rojo’s (1998) poetic articulation of the plantation as the vital organ in the development of his Creole identity. He writes,
it is the womb of my otherness—and of my globality; if you will allow me this world. It is the bifurcated center that exists inside and outside at the same time, near to and distant from all things that I can understand as my own: race, nationality, language, religion. Yes I repeat, the plantation is my old and paradoxical home…the hollow center of the minuscule galaxy that gives shape to my identity. (p. 54)

While appearing to agree with Brathwaite on the vitality of the plantation to the development of a Creole society, Benitez-Rojo also posits two words that were equally important to the development of Creole society in Cuba: rhythm and performance. He refers to a colonial period when Creole rhythms and performances were placed at the center of debates, both in Cuba and metropolitan Spain. Moreover, he applies a “postmodern scientific” approach, chaos theory, to understanding creolization processes in the Caribbean which he determines are unpredictable, non-linear, and fractal-like. He writes:

To borrow the jargon of Chaos here, I would say that the plantation is the strange attractor of all the possible states of creolization, given that all of them, in their disorder, hide forms of order that look for their guiding model in the black hole of the plantation. (p. 56)

And like fractals, “…it could be said that the plantation repeats itself endlessly in the different states of creolization that come out here and there in language and music, dance and literature, food and theater” (p. 56). Another example of the chaos metaphor can be discerned from Benitez-Rojo’s (1996) notion of “discontinuous conjunction” of the Caribbean “the features of an island that ‘repeats’ itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and the lands of the earth, while at the
same time it inspires multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs” (p. 3). In this passage, Benitez-Rojo leaves the possibility of an appropriation of creolization, albeit without guarantees. How can creolization help to advance theories of multiculturalism? Can a focus on creolization illustrate a strategic form of essentialism that can move beyond ethnic absolutism, discrete nationalism, and the struggle over origins that plagues multicultural education? How might an engagement with creolization and other forms of postcolonial syncretism as well as cultural studies bring critical meaning to cultural identity within the United States?

It is my position that creolization is one form of syncretism that may be useful for rearticulating multicultural education as the study of identity formation. In my opinion the culinary models that have been thrown out to describe cultural identity in the US such as melting pot, gumbo, salad bowl, etc. have proven ineffective for addressing the needs of a contemporary multicultural society. Unlike these assimilationist models, creolization represents a syncretic approach to identity, while at the same time transcending the identity discourse beyond problematic and essentialized notions of whiteness and Blackness. As argued by Boland, “Creolization, therefore, helps conceive of the “African diaspora” in terms of a socio-historical process rather than by essentializing Blackness. Hall (1990) is similarly interested in the development of Diasporic identities that resists the colonial trapping of essence and purity. He writes

The diaspora experience as I intend it is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity.
Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (p. 235).

Moreover, any discussion of a Creole or any such type of syncretism must be articulated in terms of power. Though it is often overlooked, power looms at the center of any such articulation of multiculturalization or syncretism. Shohat and Stam alert us to the reality that power relations are often overlooked. They remind us, “A celebration of syncretism and hybridity per se, if not articulated with questions of historical hegemonies, risks sanctifying the fait accompli of colonial violence” (p. 43). One needs merely take a look at various historical narratives to understand Shohat and Stam’s concerns. They cite the following examples: “Elites have always made cooptic top-down raids on subaltern cultures, while the dominated have always "signified" and parodied as well as emulated elite practice. Hybridity, in other words, is power-laden and asymmetrical.” (p. 43). Articulating the implications of power relations, therefore, becomes a necessary component in embracing notions of creolization or cultural hybridity especially when considering a study of BET.

One important contribution that celebrating a Creole identity in the United States may make is a “denaturalization” of discourses of Blackness and whiteness. By understanding the American multicultural identity as creolized, the possibility of cross-cultural coalitions may become more of a reality when Blackness and whiteness are not perceived as taken for granted dichotomous categories. In fact, an argument can be made that the American identity is already creolized. “American,” while underpinned by an implicit understanding of whiteness, has been shaped by a multiplicity of cultures, one of the chief among them being of African origins.
Moreover, the plantation arrangement, colonial arrangements and the organization of a multiracial society that existed in the US satisfy the criteria developed by Brathwaite for the emergence of a Creole society. It may be then that because we are so fixated with colonial constructions of ethnic absolutism that we overlook the fundamental creolization of American society. That is to say, our focus on absolute ethnic differences has proved to be more convenient, albeit problematic, ways of thinking about identity construction in the United States. Ironically, a model of creolization exists in Louisiana and has been in existence for centuries. What would such an assertion of creolization do for the American cultural identity? What lessons can other states learn from the creolization that is taking place in Louisiana?

Another possible contribution to the development of the American multicultural identity stems form the performative nature of hybrid subjectivities such as Creole identities. According to Shohat and Stam,

Such hybrid identities are not reducible to a fixed recipe; rather, they form a changing repertory of cultural modalities. The hybrid diasporic subject is confronted with the "theatrical" challenge of moving, as it were, among the diverse performative modes of sharply contrasting cultural and ideological worlds. (pp. 42-43)

A discourse on cultural identity as a creolized performance may be particularly useful for resuscitating multicultural education as the study of identity formation. In his seminal texts, Authentic Blackness, Martin Favor (1999) calls for a discourse on performative identity. He argues that we must imagine, perform, and reinvent the concept of Black identity in order to denaturalize the distinction between African American and American.
This is extremely important especially in light of the reality that the label, African American is grounded by a conception of cultural hybridity; a cultural fusion between African and American. While this term represents a movement towards self-definition to replace the racist ascribed and often avowed labels such as Negro, colored, etc., it is important to deconstruct what the term African American implies both from a critical perspective as well as ways in which it is often appropriated to suggest a distinct Black—not totally African, but definitely not white—cultural identity.

Favor argues:

If racial-cultural identity is derivative of, or assimilable into, hegemonic constructions of both Blackness and whiteness, performative identity offers another option by postulating alternative identities and cultures that not only are made difficult to categorize and subsume into hegemony, but also, in their performativity, demonstrate the imagined and possibly tenuous status of constructed, denaturalized hegemony itself. (p. 147)

Not only does a Creole identity lend itself to such performativity, it also enables subjects to take up the “theatrical” challenge of denaturalizing both Blackness and whiteness. Because of its adverse position against purity and fixed essences, creolization embraces the homogenization process of cultural identity formation. In terms of racial identity, Blackness and whiteness may lose their grounding within a discourse of postcolonial syncretic performativity. As Favor argues “Indeed it appears difficult to reconstruct Blackness through an emphasis on the performative without affecting whiteness. The two opposites are inseparable” (p. 148). In eschewing a postcolonial creolized performative discourse on Blackness one may also be able to subvert the discourses on
American-ness that employ Blackness as a reference point, picking apart “specific ways in which whiteness is a politically constructed category parasitic on Blackness” (Favor, p. 146).

Moreover, a performative Creole identity may also allow for transcendence of cultural boundaries. In this sense, “It appears that if signified in a certain way, whiteness can indeed become a form of Blackness” (Favor, p. 148). On the same token, Blackness may be performed as whiteness or the two can be harmoniously performed as creoleness. Favor adds,

The value of a performative, tropological employment of “race,” however, is precisely the ability of the performer to be at once “inside” and “outside” racial discourse, both “racially” black and not “black” at all… (p. 151).

Significant evidence of this “crossover” and performativity can already be found within discourses of popular culture and on sites such as BET where the boundaries have become difficult to police. For instance, “The American Music Award for Best Black male Vocal in 1989 was awarded to the British singer George Michael (who is not Black), while a year later the white rapper Vanilla Ice hit number one with his album To the Extreme” (Marshal, Sears and Schubert, 2000). Moreover, scores of youth, Black and white, utilize the same identity symbols: they listen to the same rap music, celebrate the same Hip Hop culture, utilize the same dress codes, hairstyles and often employ the same vernacular speech. In addition, in spite of the reality that the vast majority of rap music artists are Black, white youth accounted for 74 percent of all the rap music purchases within the first six months of 1992 (Lusane, 1993). Are such performances of identity taking place on BET? What lessons can American educators learn from these creolized
performances of cultural identity that are taking place within popular culture? What are the implications for multicultural education? These questions will be explored later on in this project. In the next chapter, I employ postcolonial and cultural studies lenses to shed some further light on how Blackness and identity in general have been historically constructed and performed in America.
CHAPTER THREE:

UNTHINKING COLONIALISM:
Historicizing Multiculturalism from a Postcolonial Cultural Studies Perspective

The purpose of this chapter is to articulate historical and contemporary constructions of the US national identity from a postcolonial cultural studies perspective in order to identify particular continuities and discontinuities that underpin US identity politics. In a scrupulous critique of multiculturalism and the media, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1996) cite the need for a critical understanding of contemporary media representations and subjectivities as the major rationale for *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. While their project is centered primarily on deconstructing Eurocentrism, I argue that multicultural education must take up the simultaneous goal of unthinking colonialism. As I see it—and I think Shohat and Stam would agree—Eurocentrism and colonialism go hand in hand. Therefore, any deconstructive multicultural project which seeks to unpack Eurocentrism, must also disarm the discursive politics of colonialism. In this chapter, I critique US approaches to multiculturalism and expose the colonial roots of the way difference is articulated in America. I argue that much of the way identity is represented and constructed in American schools and within popular culture today results from an anachronistic inheritance and continuation of colonial tropes in terms of absolutist representations of difference. According to Shohat and Stam, “Colonialist discourse saw different races as different species, created at different times, and therefore forbidden to interbreed” (p. 41). This “colonialist fetishization” is still a pervasive element within contemporary discourses of U.S. identity politics. If multicultural
education is to engender the goals of a critical democratic society, the goal of unthinking colonialism, and this includes neo-colonialism as well, must be paramount.

It is the position of this project that mainstream multicultural education discourses in the United States have been guilty of promoting the colonial trope of ethnic absolutism through a tendency to reify and essentialize cultural difference. A compelling example of this can be discerned from the way Eurocentric discourses have historically “otherized” the Black identity in relations to an American identity. Eurocentric Blackness has always been constructed in terms of its alterity and negativity to whiteness, whereas whiteness is portrayed as pure and everything positive about American culture and Blackness depicted as banal, evil, uncivilized and antithetical to democratic values. This Eurocentric construction of Blackness has had crippling effects on African Americans and Diasporic African people. As Ralph Ellison (1972) has noted, “it was the Negro misfortune to be caught up associatively on the negative side of the basic dualism of the white folk mind and to be shackled to almost everything it would repress from conscience and consciousness” (p. 48). Mainstream multicultural education discourses has done very little to intercept these popular, taken-for-granted meanings and negative associations of Blackness. However, critical scholars have recently been launching an all-out attack on multicultural education in an effort to deconstruct the logic of colonialism that has been naturalized through Eurocentric discourses. Since the major concern in this project is with interrogating the persistence of colonial tropes within contemporary discourses of cultural identity such as multiculturalism, perhaps it may be helpful to illustrate the links between colonial ideologies and Eurocentrism.
According to Shohat and Stam (1996), “Eurocentrism first emerged as a discursive rationale for colonialism, the process by which European powers reached positions of hegemony in much of the world” (p. 2). Eurocentrism was specifically unleashed in order for colonial powers to construct a homogeneous view of the world “in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the world’s center of gravity, as ontological ‘reality’ to the rest of the world’s shadow” (Shohat and Stam, pp. 1-2).

Shohat and Stam argue that colonialism and Eurocentrism are directly related discourses, whereas “the former explicitly justifies colonial practices, the latter embeds, takes for granted, and ‘normalizes’ the hierarchical power relations generated by colonialism and imperialism without necessarily even thematizing those issues directly” (p. 2).

Eurocentrism manifests itself in educational discourses today through a curricular focus on Western civilization and other pedagogical practices that promote a commonsense view of Europe at the center of world history and all others, either without history or having little significance to the making of the world.

Eurocentrism bifurcates the world into the ‘West and the Rest’ and organizes everyday language into binaristic hierarchies implicitly flattering to Europe: our ‘nations,’ their ‘tribes’; our ‘religions,’ their ‘superstitions’; our ‘culture,’ their ‘folklore’; our ‘art,’ their ‘artifacts’; our ‘demonstrations,’ their ‘riots; our ‘defense,’ their ‘terrorism.’ (Shohat and Stam, p. 2)

Moreover, another critical function of the Eurocentric discourse in contemporary society is the production of a set of taken for granted popular knowledges that masks colonial tropes and normalizes ethnic and cultural differences. In spite of the fact that colonialism is not as widespread as it was during its zenith, much of its tropes are still perpetuated by
Eurocentric discourses. However, it is important to note that despite its critical association with European scholars, Eurocentrism, the discourse, is not to be confused with Europeans. Shohat and Stam warn,

“Eurocentrism is the ‘normal’ view of history that most First Worlders and even Third Worlders learn at school and imbibe from the media…. And since Eurocentrism is a historically situated discourse and not a genetic inheritance, Europeans can be anti-Eurocentric, just as non-Europeans can be Eurocentric.

(p.4)

Making this distinction is critical since an important part of my project is deconstructing naturalized Eurocentric and colonial ideologies that are often employed by both cultural majorities and minorities in their discursive production of difference, especially within the popular media. As I see it, if multicultural education is to ever subvert the Eurocentrism that has dominated educational discourses throughout the United States (and indeed many other places around the world), then, it must also tackle head on the corollary discursive practices that demonize the “Other” and depict them as primitive, savage and animalistic; practices that owe their roots to colonialism and that are still evident within the contemporary media.

This project is grounded by the overwhelming belief that a major reason why students develop and focus exclusively on impenetrable ethnic boundaries is because they are taught to mark themselves off as different from the “others.” This argument can be applied to both cultural majorities as well as minorities. Ray McDermott and Kenneth Gospodinoff (1979) brilliantly explicate this point in their highly acclaimed text, “Social Contexts For Ethnic Borders And School Failure.” They argue that contrary to the
popular, common sense belief that school failure and miscommunication among ethnic
groups is due to certain “irremedial,” natural differences, it is necessary to recognize how
people develop “vested interest in being different from one another” (p. 92). They assert,
“Our point is that without such vested interests being created from one moment to the
next, people usually develop metacommunicative procedures for altering communicative
codes in order to make sense of each other” (p. 92). This argument suggests that one
issue surrounding the reproduction and construction of identity and difference in the
United States has to do with how members of different ethnic groups are taught to
interact and identify with each other. It implicates multicultural education in a
hegemonic plot, along with other similar “ideological state apparatuses” such as the
media, the church, and our legal system, in promoting and reproducing certain ethnic
absolutist perspectives on “racial” and other forms of cultural identity. Through their
treatment of difference as natural and “irremedial,” these institutions often discourage
and in some ways obstruct the development of “metacommunicative procedures” that
may engender the cultural negotiations necessary for the suspension of cultural politics.
This argument has important implications for deconstructing the colonial myth of ethnic
purity and other such colonial tropes that promote “vested interests” in cultural
difference. My fundamental position in this chapter is that popular ways of addressing
cultural identity in the United States are often a direct result of or are in many ways
related to an anachronistic, colonial myth of absolute cultural difference, what Gilroy
(1996) refers to as ethnic absolutism. In this chapter, I will interrogate these traditional
approaches to constructing cultural identity and expose this ethnic absolutism.
In this project, I focus particularly on racial identity, particularly the performance of Blackness and whiteness. Most Americans invoke these two categories regularly, and treat them as though they are natural, God-given categories of difference. I contend that in order to understand the continual entrenchment of Blackness and whiteness as “natural” categories of difference, one must understand both the colonial history of the discourse on race relations within the U.S. context, as well as interrogate contemporary discursive and institutionalized processes that promote ownership or vested interests in such a focus on difference. I focus mainly on the treatment of Blackness and whiteness in both schools and in popular cultural spaces such as on BET, in part because of the intense historical struggle between these two racial categories, and because both schooling and popular culture are crucial sites for the production and interrogation of notions about cultural identity and difference. For example, both schools and mass media sites such as BET often reproduce racial absolutist ideologies by perpetuating the common sense logic that “there is a recognizable, repeatable, and agreed upon thing that we might call Black authenticity” and conversely, white authenticity (Martin Favor, 1999, p. 2). Subsequently, students develop “vested interests” in certain discursive practices that they perceive as making up their cultural identity and, therefore, formulate strategies to act out these differences and mark off their territories—strategies that are at times self-defeating from an academic and democratic standpoint. If multicultural education is ever to play a critical role in engendering a more just democracy, then scholars must seriously critique and problematize these naturalized conceptions of cultural difference.
This chapter employs postcolonial and cultural studies lenses in order to critically examine the roots of this ethnic absolutism as a way of interrupting problematic constructions of multiculturalism. In section one, I provide a historical overview of multiculturalism in the United States in order to show that, as a representation of the American national identity, multiculturalism has traditionally been conceptualized to position both whites and non-whites in particular, imaginative ways that privilege whiteness. This section critiques the social construction of whiteness and Blackness in the United States. My position in section one is that colonial constructions of Blackness and whiteness in the United States provided the initial staging for a polarizing of America and a problematic definition of multiculturalism. Section two provides a brief critique of the historic representations of Blackness as well as addresses various theories and strategies that have been used within discourses on Blackness. I argue that in their quest for self-definition and self-representation, Blacks have often employed the same ethnic absolutist strategies as whites. These nationalist strategies to developing a unified Black cultural group have often been limiting and merely represent one way of thinking about cultural identity formation. I conclude this chapter in section three by locating the discussion on whiteness and Blackness in a broader theoretical conversation on essentialism and ethnic absolutism.

**HEGEMONIC CONSTRUCTIONS OF WHITENESS AND BLACKNESS**

If there are a few common threads that can be said to tie together the multiple facets of multiculturalism they would probably be the struggle to assert multiple identities, and to both understand and rearticulate the representations that are constitutive of and that bring meaning to these identities. Henceforth, a critical understanding of the
complex identity politics that interplay between different subjectivities and the texts that help to construct them must ground any discussion on rearticulating multicultural education. Multiculturalism is about how a society defines itself, which identities get valorized and, perhaps most importantly, who has the power to speak and define these identities. This definition speaks directly to the social, economic and political dimensions of multiculturalism. At the core of the multicultural project is the canonical debate over knowledge. This debate is often contested around the question of whose narratives and social experiences get validated in the curriculum (James Banks, 1993). Many scholars see multiculturalism as a discourse on power sharing among a multiplicity of cultures. In defining the term multiculturalism, Kate Rousmaniere and Kathleen Knight-Abowitz (1998) note that, “multiculturalism is a term used to describe both the fact of America as a culture of many cultures, and a movement in contemporary society to acknowledge the presence and contributions of all these cultures in our society” (p. 30). This definition, though somewhat limiting in terms of promoting an ethnocentric perspective, suggests that multiculturalism is the binary opposite of monoculturalism, the notion that a singular group, its historical experiences and ways of life, are ultimately responsible for the character of a society. By using multiculturalism as a way to both describe the character of the United States and as a recently contested discursive terrain, Rousmaniere and Knight-Abowitz illuminate the ambiguous focus and treatment of multiculturalism. While their conception is crucial to understanding important political dimensions of multiculturalism, they at the same time call to mind a critical component of multiculturalism, a tendency among US scholars to speak about multiculturalism as strictly an American concept. On this point, it must be duly noted that in spite of the
popular claim that the US is the world’s first multicultural nation, multiculturalism did not emerge and is by no means limited to the United States. As Shohat and Stam (1996) and other multicultural scholars have noted, there was cultural syncretism in many areas of the globe long before there was a United States. Therefore, “‘Multiculturedness’ is not a ‘United Statesian’ monopoly, nor is multiculturalism the ‘handmaiden’ of US identity politics” (Shohat and Stam, p. 5).

In a sense, it can be argued that there is no such thing as a monocultural society; indeed all societies are influenced by a number of other cultures, both within and outside of their national boundaries. Yet, many world leaders, critics, and scholars have sought to affirm national identities that are based solely on the historical experiences of one particular cultural group—usually the dominant group which wields the most political and, conversely, economic power. It is this paradox that has plagued the discourse on multiculturalism in the United States especially as it plays out between Western traditionalists and other radical scholars. While with one breath it is often affirmed that “we” are “the” most multicultural nation in the world, “our” history and discursive practices tell another story of systematic attempts to “proselytize,” and “assimilate,” so-called minorities, forcing them to suppress their rich cultures that are “supposed” to blend together in a multicultural nation. The term “Anglo-conformity” is often thrown out to refer to this process “which understands ‘being American’ as the taking on of the customs, language and morality of the majority white, middle class, Anglo-American (northern European) culture” (Rousmaniere and Abowitz, 1998, p. 29). In an imagined sense of what Americanness represents, this theory of identity served as the dominant approach to acculturating students, namely immigrants and those from traditionally
marginalized backgrounds. Hence, as Toni Morrison (1992) has argued, the American identity has been traditionally constructed in terms of whiteness. In her highly acclaimed text, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison asserts,

Deep within the word “American” is its association with race. To identify someone as a South African is to say very little; we need the adjective ‘white’ or ‘Black’ or ‘colored’ to make our meaning clear. In this country it is quite the reverse. American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen. (p. 47)

To find evidence to support Morrison’s contention that the American identity has been historically constructed as white, one needs not look far to seek out narratives that illustrate how the acculturation process played out in United States. For instance, the downright persecution of “minorities” who showed resistance to the assimilation process provides clarity on how the American identity was conceptualized by the dominant cultural group; thus, “whiteness” has always been perceived by the cultural majority as the preferred cultural identity to which all “others” should acquiesce. However, given the complex history and pluralistic nature of the US society, it is fitting to ask, what do “we” mean when we say “we” are American? Is place of birth or origin prerequisites for an American identity? How does ‘race,’ social class, gender and sexual orientation factor into conceptions of an American identity? What are the necessary requirements for classification as an American? These questions are extremely important especially because both nation and nationality serve as key determinants of identity and affiliation, and are at the root of the US identity politics (Michael Moon and Cathy N. Davidson, 1995, p.3).
I use the pronoun “we” here in order to both problematize the notion of an American identity and to make sense of what it means from a personal perspective. In part, “we” represents a way of asserting and affirming my own identity as at least partially American. But, this affirmation does not come without paradox and fear of castigation from more than one front. For most people, I would have no right to make claim to an American identity, partial as I may claim it to be. I was born in Barbados, West Indies, and have been living in the United States “in the belly of the beast”\(^{10}\) for all of my adult life. I still have a very deep “Barbadian” accent with a strategic U.S. twang. In America before I speak, I might more likely be seen as an “African American” because of my “Black skin;” and then once my accent is detected, I would often have the ascribed identity of a “foreigner” or an “islander” or simply someone from the tropical Caribbean who made a “crazy” decision to leave “paradise” to live in the Midwestern United States.

Conversely, in Barbados to say that I am an American would be read as “selling out,” denying who “I really am,” as if to suggest that identity is a fixed, singular, monolithic or essential construct. If I am lucky, I might be labeled as a “Bajan Yankee,” a hybridized term used to describe all Barbadians living in New York or the U.S. for that matter (to many Barbadians New York is synonymous with the US). In a sense this term Bajan Yankee has undergone a shifting valence, since it was originally used as a criticism or insulting term for Barbadians who returned after a sojourn in the “The States” with pretentious ostentation and calling themselves Yankees. The term Bajan Yankee was therefore constructed as a way of reminding the immigrant that they could never evade their “bajanness.” Today, it is used to celebrate the syncretism that is taking place as a

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\(^{10}\) This term is borrowed from Stuart Hall (1992) and Cameron McCarthy (1996) who use it in describing their positions as postcolonial subjects.
result of the contact between US and Barbadian cultures. While I still cling steadfastly to my Barbadian and conversely, Caribbean and African ancestry, it would be foolhardy of me to deny that much of who I am today have been influenced by my American context. For me the multicultural debate hits home in a personal way as I constantly struggle to define and redefine myself under the pressures of conformity in different spaces and at different moments. These struggles are often further complicated because of the historical treatment of “race” in constructions of Americanness where in one sense I am confined to my place as a Black man, but at that same time often excluded from asserting an African American identity because of my presumed “inauthenticity.”

In its most simplistic usage, the United States was founded as a “multiculturalized” nation. From the historical moment that the Republic was established, there were people here representing multiple ethnicities, including the peoples of the many tribes whom today we conveniently call “Native Americans,” slaves captured and uprooted from a plethora of tribes in Africa, as well as Europeans representing numerous ethnicities, nationalities and social classes. Yet in spite of this pluralism, the controlling elites have historically sought to assimilate all of these cultural groups, in particular the so-called minorities, many of whom were stereotyped as “savages’ ruled by passions rather than ‘civilized’ virtues such as self-control and hard work” (Tanaki, 2000, p. 9).

Moreover, from the early stages of the country’s development, the framers of the U.S. constitution were faced with the Herculean task of trying to construct an “authentic” American identity that was not only unique from its British colonizer, but that would also represent a kind of newness, a place where the “citizens” could be renewed in the New
World. There were struggles to define the United States as a country that was qualitatively better, and whose system of government was characteristically different from the monarchy that reign over Great Britain. Hence, the infamous “Declaration of Independence” was conceptualized to assert the equality of “all men” and to create a space where “every one” could adequately engage in the “pursuit of happiness.” However, in spite of the reputation of America as the “land of the free and home of the brave,” as many scholars have pointed out, there was a limited definition of “freedom” and “equality” for “every one.” One particular component of American society proved to be a compelling force in determining how much of America would look like or be different from its Motherland, Great Britain—the presence of African slaves. What did such a presence represent for the early leaders of America? What problems and purposes did their presence serve in constructing ideas of America? Eventually, debates over the extension of certain inalienable rights to these African slaves would guide the framing of the Constitution and pervade almost every aspect of economic and political life.

Moon and Davidson (1995) suggest that, “groups designated as Other are always susceptible to discrimination and exclusion from full citizenship within the nation or deprived of their constitutional rights” (p. 4). This statement is extremely relevant in depicting the experiences of African Americans in their struggles against oppression. With their “official” presence in the United States dating back to as early as the first settlement in 1607, Blacks have been exploited as physical labor and have been portrayed as savages, who needed to be saved from their cannibalistic, brute ways. As a

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11 It should be noted that many Black scholars dispute this date and claim that Africans reached America long before Columbus. Nonetheless, the exploitation of African slaves and the oppressive treatment by whites is an idea that receives mutual agreement from a variety of scholars, white and Black.
way of justifying this robbing of humanness or what Martin Favor (1999) calls “the dehumanization of Blackness,” the white majority constructed grand narratives which posited that God “himself” had created white people to go out and save the souls of the hedonistic Blacks. By enslaving Blacks, whites saw themselves as carrying out God’s holy work. Henceforth, in holding true to Moon and Davidson’s argument, Blacks were positioned as the “Other” and, thereby, prohibited from constructing and participating in fundamental discourses such as politics and education.

As a matter of fact, in many states not only were Blacks denied formal education, it was also illegal for Blacks to assemble in groups of more than four or five with the exception of at highly-surveyed church activities. To illustrate this point consider the following excerpt from the infamous “Mississippi Law Forbidding Education of Slaves or Free Negroes” (1823),

All meetings or assemblies of slaves, or free Negroes, or mulattoes, mixing and associating with such slaves above the number of five, at any place or public resort, or at any meetinghouses, in the night, or at any school or schools, for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext, shall be deemed and considered an unlawful assembly…. (p. 1621)

Laws such as this prohibiting the education and socializing of Blacks were prevalent throughout the country—albeit not as popular in the North as in the South. Blacks were systematically barred from constructing and claiming an American identity, and from participating in American civic discourses. Moreover, because they were not regarded as citizens of the United States, they had no rights in the eyes of the law and could not even give courtroom testimony against their white counterparts. Other evidence to illustrate
this can be discerned from the famous 1857 Dread Scott case and the two-thirds Constitutional Compromise, which granted the legal status of Blacks as sixty percent human. Both of these historical examples made it clear that, fundamentally, Blacks were perceived as merely the property of their white masters. More importantly for the discourse of multicultural education, Blacks were prohibited from identifying with education through specific state laws such as the aforementioned Mississippi state law as well as through more informal plantation rules and regulatory policies. In a nation that is characterized as multicultural, how was the exclusion of Blacks from formal education justified? What are the implications of this exclusion from formal schooling for understanding contemporary attitudes among Black students about schooling? I argue that the roots of contemporary perceptions of formal education as a “white” discourse may be traced to this colonial historical privileging of schools as a space exclusively for whites. If education is still treated as a white exercise, it may be due in part to this colonial and historical practice of confining this institution strictly to whites.

Furthermore, in considering the positioning of Blacks as non-citizens of the United States and, therefore, unworthy to claim an American identity, one must query the historical forces of the day that led to such expressions of inhumanity. From this perspective, it is important to examine the historical, economic and political functions of slavery to the foundations of the United States. Illuminating such a history could provide a critical understanding on the inner workings of the Eurocentric discourse in inventing and constructing a particular representation of Blackness that was underpinned by a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in the interest of whites. While I am not interested in reproducing this rich scholarship in this project, Morrison’s earlier quoted

It is Morrison’s position that if one peruses American national literature, one can find clear evidence that the American identity has been imagined as white. Morrison’s major claim is that portraying Blackness as the polar opposite of whiteness was vital not only for legitimating the dehumanizing of Blacks and the development of racial hierarchies, but also for the overall “imagining” of an American nation. She argues, “Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities. For in that construction of Blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me” (p. 38). Morrison calls this invention American Africanism, and defines it as, “a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American” and which was constructed out of “collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation” (p. 38). It is her conclusion that the African presence in the United States provided the extremely vital background for constructing Americanness. She notes that the American identity, as is defined through the literary imagination, was constructed out of a compelling fear and response to a “dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” (p. 5). She writes,

Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness. And it shows. (p. 6)
It was this Africanism, according to Morrison, “deployed as rawness and savagery,” that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity (p. 44). Later in that chapter, she further defined Africanism as “the fetishizing of color, the transference to Blackness of the power to illicit sexuality, chaos, madness, impropriety, anarchy, strangeness, and helpless, hapless desire” (p. 81). This imaginative African persona was constructed not only out of fear, but also out of vested political and economic interests. In an economy that depended exclusively upon cheap, manual labor, the majority white plantation owners needed a way of justifying their positions of authority. The visual dark skin of the slaves, their extraordinary languages and cultural practices, served as physical markers from which to “fabricate” narratives to support the myth of racial hierarchy. According to Morrison, positioning slaves as animals, constructing myths about savagery, paganism, irrationality, etc., served to justify whiteness as the preferred and only valid American identity.

Citing Morrison’s important work here helps to illuminate the colonial roots of ethnic absolutism as well as the inextricable link between Africanism and the American identity. Morrison is adamant that the persistence of the American identity has at its starting point the Otherness of people with dark-skin. But while her major focus is on shedding light on the perceived necessity of positioning Blackness as alterity and negativity in hegemonic constructions of the American identity, she also points to an important area in the construction of Blackness, i.e. the internalization and discursive responses to this representation of Blackness.
The response by Blacks to white racism has been well articulated in literature. Prominent African American scholar, W.E.B. Dubois (1897), is among those who have sought to address this issue. Dubois argues vehemently that American Africanism has shackled and locked Blackness in a perpetual strangle-holt. Tracing the history of the development of the social concept, “race,” Dubois alerts us to the reality of the extremities that have resulted from the contact of races in the United States. He understands race as an articulation of cultural difference based on physical characteristics, but also recognizes that these races have come to develop different “spiritual strivings” as a result of their historical and political locations. Dubois asserts that the most profound result of this contact between races, namely Black and white, and the subsequent Africanism that was used to construct indelible Blackness, is a double-consciousness that manifests itself among every displaced Black person living in the United States. According to Dubois,

…the Negro is sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (p. 230)

Dubois further articulates the pervasiveness of this doubleness and its impact on African Americans. He adds,
One ever feels this two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 230).

Beginning this section with Dubois seems fitting for exploring ways in which Blacks have sought to construct their identities in light of years of oppression by the dominant, European culture, and as a way of interrogating claims of a privileged consciousness that emerged as a result of this marginalization. Dubois paints an extremely grim picture, not merely of the physical and economic results of oppression, but more importantly of the ideological consequences. Confined to the margins of society, depicted as insignificant darkness against an impenetrable whiteness, Dubois ponders the vexing question of how then should Blacks view themselves in relations to their nation? Dubois (1897) again riddles us with his portrayal of this conflict. He writes,

Here, then, is the dilemma, and it is a puzzling one, I admit. No Negro who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America has failed, at some time in life, to find himself at these cross-roads; has failed to ask himself at some time: What, after all, am I? Am I an American or Am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White America? Is not my only possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American? Does my Black blood place upon me any more obligation to assert my nationality than German, or Irish or Italian blood would? (p. 232)

Here Dubois raises critical questions that illuminate one of the major problems with racial classification: the struggle over representation and self-definition in relations to
one’s community or nation. This issue has been particularly troublesome for Blacks in light of their compelling struggles against racist and stereotypical portrayals by the dominant culture. In order to be classified as Americans, Blacks have faced the challenge of seeing themselves as first and foremost American, whatever an American signifies in the eyes of the dominant culture. On the other hand, Blacks often feel an overwhelming desire to reaffirm their Blackness and position their identity as equivalent to other American ethnic identities and different from the negative and stereotypical portrayals that have become a part of the hegemonic, taken for granted meanings about race in America. Which form of assertion is most valid? Does focusing on Blackness promote ethnic absolutism? Dubois is concerned about the possibility of a dual existence; that is to say, of being American and Black at the same time without necessarily perpetuating the “cleft” of racial absolutism that “threatens and separates Black and white America.” In the final analysis, he underscores an integrationist ideology and supports the idea of essentializing Blackness as a singular cultural group, not bound necessarily together by biological or genetic essence, but by common historical circumstances, “common laws and religion, similar habits of thought and a conscious striving together for certain ideals of life” (p. 274). While Dubois’ argument may be deemed as essentialist in some ways, it varies from the biological determinism that undermines many of the essentialist discourses. Dubois seems to accept the position that there is an absolute difference in the “spiritual strivings” of Blacks and whites, but somehow those differences could be resolved through some form of co-existence in a Stevie Wonder and Paul McCartney sense like “ebony and ivory, living in perfect harmony” in a single America.
Notwithstanding the power of the Eurocentric discourse to shape consciousness, Blacks have always struggled to resist the ideological indoctrination wrought upon them by the dominant hegemonic group. In spite of widespread efforts to brainwash them such as the bastardization of their cultural and signifying practices, and marking these practices as illicit, Blacks have developed particular cultural strategies to resist white oppression. In a sense, much of the cultural strategies employed by Blacks are in direct response to the oppression they experienced as a result of white racism. While in many cases these strategies have been useful for mobilizing Blacks to support important political movements, at other times these strategies have been self-defeating. This has certainly been the case in discourses of schooling where Black students have often responded to schooling by rejecting and labeling it as a primarily white exercise. As previously noted, this may be an understandable response since formal education in the United States was initially and in many critical regards is still constructed as a discourse about whiteness. Moreover, the struggle to develop more progressive strategies for discoursing Blackness has been underpinned by a need to challenge racist, colonial representations. Many Blacks often feel a need to perform their Black identities in direct opposition to what whites expect of them. That is to say, Blacks often conceive Blackness as an oppositional category to whiteness. To find evidence of this, one needs only to examine a few of the most popular historical, resistance movements within the African American community. Take, for instance, the Pan African movement which has manifested itself in terms of a separate discourse itself and also as a fundamental strategy in Garveyism, the Harlem Renaissance Movement, the Black Power Movement and more recently, the Afrocentricity movement.
Pan Africanism may be defined as a movement that advocates a shared, common culture among all people of African descent. According to Robert Chrisman (1974), “The Pan-African movement has as its basic premise the conviction that the people of African descent throughout the globe constitute a common cultural and political community by virtue of origins in Africa and common racial, social and economic oppression” (p. 1). This movement has been the most popular strategy for projecting African American culture in the United States among critically minded Black intellectuals. Proponents of Pan Africanism seek to unite all Blacks along the notion of a common culture. This common culture includes, not just Blacks in the United States or continental Blacks still living in Africa, but also displaced persons from African descent, commonly called the Black Diaspora. One of the earliest manifestations of Pan Africanism in the United States came by virtue of DuBois in the late 1800s and early 1900s. One of DuBois’ primary goals was to transform the realities of all Americans into accepting and acknowledging the important contributions of Blacks to the cultural development in metropolitan “centers” of the world such as the United States. In order to do this, he would first have to mobilize the Black population. He writes,

For this reason, the advance guard of the Negro people—the 8,000000 people of Negro blood in the United States of America—must soon come to realize that if they are to take their just place in the van of Pan Negroism, then their destiny is not absorption by the white Americans. That if in America it is to be proven for the first time in the modern world that not only Negroes are capable of evolving individual men like Toussaint, the Saviour, but are a nation stored with wonderful possibilities
of culture, then their destiny is not a service imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture, but a stalwart originality which shall unansweringly follow Negro ideals. (p. 275)

Again Dubois seeks to provide a way of moving beyond double-consciousness by ushering Blacks into recognizing and developing a “stalwart” and “original” African American culture. Dubois’ focus on an “original” African American culture that represents more than a “service imitation of Anglo Saxon culture” underscores the common fixation with creating an oppositional culture that serves as a resistance against and a binary to whiteness. He offers Pan Africanism as a strategic response to the white oppression in the United States. Dubois recognizes the need to unite in order to challenge the hegemonic discourse. While Dubois’ rhetoric was extremely appealing among the Black elite, perhaps no other Pan Africanist captured the imagination of lower class Black Americans and, conversely, the world, like Marcus Garvey.

Garvey’s radical approach often placed him in conflict with the more liberal approach undertaken by Dubois; henceforth, there was much antagonism between the two. Garvey adopted a revolutionary Black nationalism, which gained popularity through his United Negro Movement. Garvey, a Jamaican by birth, is often remembered for his position calling for the exodus of Africans in the “New World,” more commonly known as the “back to Africa” movement. However, Molefi Asante (1987) argues that such a focus on Garveyism undermines the profound influence that Garvey had on the cultural critique in the United States and elsewhere. Asante intimates that “Although the press concentrated on the Back-to-Africa concept, it never was a central part of Garvey’s program,” (p. 11). This idea of “Back-to-Africa” represents an important movement within Pan Africanism as Blacks sought to articulate their identities in relation to an
oppressive American nation. For many Pan Africanists, living in the colonial West—namely Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States—was disastrous for people of African descent. In societies where racism and white supremacist ideologies still persist, they often argue that the only way Blacks could regain their consciousness is by returning to their native lands and re-connecting with their native cultures.

Other forms of Pan Africanism are more tempered on the idea of migrating back to Africa. However, they often argue that all Diasporic Blacks must trace their roots back to the civilizations of Africa in order to center and regain their consciousness. Afrocentricity and the Black Liberation Movement stand out as contemporary discourses that eschew such a position on developing an African consciousness. Afrocentricity, with Asante as its chief architect, seeks to unite all Blacks—continental and Diasporic—based on the affirmation of common cultural symbols and signifying practices grounded in African history. According to Asante (1987), “the non-Afrocentric person [read Black] operates in a manner that is negatively predictable. The person’s images, symbols, lifestyles, and manners are contradictory and thereby destructive to personal and collective growth and development” (p. 1). A common assumption underlying extreme versions of the Afrocentric position is that within the African continent lies a mystical culture which provides a tantalizing power to fix Black consciousness and restore broken lines of history. In order to resolve years of psychological lapse and perpetual mental slavery engendered by a “white-washed” pedagogy, Blacks must resurrect their “true” history. This “lost history,” according to some Afrocentrists, has been clouded by a Eurocentric invasion of philosophy and history. For instance, Afrocentrists often point to Africa as the “cradle of civilization.” If the truth is ever told, Afrocentrists argue, the
“original man” is from Africa and, unlike Eurocentric efforts to mask the reality of the overwhelming contributions made by Africans to cultural development of the world, Afrocentricity inverts dominant narratives of history and rightly inserts Africa as the cultural metropole for Blacks. While this argument has been thought provoking, it is important to consider what Afrocentricity represents from the standpoint of a multicultural identity. Does Afrocentricity apply also to the development of white subjectivities in the US as well? Or does it apply only to Blacks? Are Afrocentrists content to leave Eurocentrism and colonial tropes in tact as the dominant discursive elements that construct notions of an American identity among all of the other cultural groups with the exception of Blacks? These questions are crucial to the re-articulation of multicultural education as the study of student identity formation.

Moreover, the subversion of Eurocentric hegemony served as the background for much of African American cultural criticism. Within the discourse of cultural identity, Black utterances such as Afrocentrism have justifiably responded directly to Eurocentric and colonial ideologies. These responses have summoned some to ask whether Black cultural responses ultimately privileges whiteness. Richard Merelman (1995) indirectly addresses this issue by offering “cultural projection” as a necessary element in constructing cultural identity. His theory on cultural projection may be useful for understanding Black cultural responses to white oppression in the United States. According to Merelman, subordinated groups are often engaged in a fierce battle against the dominant group to portray themselves in alternate ways that better serve their interests. Merelman labels this process “cultural projection” and defines it as, “the
conscious or unconscious effort by a social group and its allies to place new images of itself before other social groups, and before the general public.” Merelman asserts,

Cultural projection is the instrument for representing Black culture to Americans. A politically, economically, and socially subordinated group engages in cultural projection when it and its allies put forth new, usually more positive pictures of itself beyond its borders. By inviting respect, commendation, debate, and engagement, these new images contest the negative stereotypes that dominant groups typically apply to subordinates. (p. 3)

Black Entertainment Television (BET) is precisely engaged in this project. As the primary television site for showcasing Blackness, one of the primary goals of BET is “to become the dominant medium engaged in the production and distribution of quality Black-oriented entertainment and information to cable television households in the nation” (Taitt and Barber, p. 187). While BET has been involved in circulating meanings about Blackness in America, the debate is still moot on whether or not these images are subversive and therefore “more positive” than traditional stereotypical constructions of Blacks. According to Merelman, cultural projection usually results in one of four cultural identity positions: hegemony, syncretism, polarization or counter-hegemony. He notes that with the hegemonic approach, the dominant group constantly attempts to keep subordinated groups in their place by offering new projections. He adds,

For its part, a dominant group engages in cultural projection when it and its allies develop a newly positive set of self-images, and put forth such images to subordinate groups. These new images not only contend that dominant groups
deserve the right to rule, but also ask subordinate groups to approve rather than resist or distrust rule by dominants. (p. 3)

Here Merelman relies on Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) conception of hegemony, which he defines as a process of developing “cultural, moral and ideological leadership over… subordinate groups” (p. 6). He argues, “this hegemony takes place when a dominant group controls the flow of projection” and what is known in cultural studies circles as the process of representation (p. 6). What Merelman does not mention in this situation is the reality that subordinates often perpetuate hegemony. Shohat and Stam brilliantly illuminate this point by asserting, “In a systematically racist society, no one is exempt from a hegemonic racist discourse, including the victims of racism. Racism thus ‘trickles’ down and circulates laterally; oppressed people can perpetuate the hegemonic system ‘sideways,’ in a manner ultimately benefiting those at the top of the hierarchy” (p. 19). What are the implications of this argument for considering Black responses to the Eurocentric hegemony? Does BET perpetuate racist ideologies and thereby reproduce hegemonic constructions of Blackness? These questions will be explored later in this project.

Furthermore, Merelman’s thesis may be better understood through an interrogation of the word “representation.” While this term is often used to refer to a form of cultural projection, there is no consensus on exactly what the term signifies. What do we mean when we “represent” something? Is representation simply a matter of portraying an image of something that is not present? These questions are crucial especially since the term representation is often used uncritically in discourses about
cultural identity. Take, for instance, the efforts among African Americans to “represent” themselves in the visual media such as on BET.

Much of this struggle to offer more “positive” depictions of Blackness has been motivated by the stereotypical portrayals which often project Blacks in ways ranging from, “indolent, subservient, buffoonish men and women to vicious male rapists” (Smith, 1996, p. 1). In minstrel shows, whites often performed black-face roles that relied heavily on stereotypical and problematic representations of Blacks. Many Black performers also relied on Jim Crow performances to entertain white audiences. Contemporary efforts by Blacks have been motivated by a need to construct alternative images to these traditionally racist depictions. Merelman would probably refer to this as a struggle to insert a counter-hegemonic projection. Historicizing about the variety of approaches employed by Blacks to engender such counter-hegemonic representations, Phyliss Klotman and Janet Cutler (1999) warn,

Of course, representation is not a simple matter… there is no single truth of a community, nor is there an unmediated relationship between film/video and reality. Although many film/videomakers embrace ‘the real’ as a way of expressing their own truths, it is important to recognize that ‘realism’ is a style influenced by the demands of genre, just as ‘truth’ is both a personal and collective construct influenced by political and historical factors. (p. xvii)

Here Klotman and Cutler provide a basic explanation about the problems surrounding the issue of representation. For one, any discussion on representation must take into consideration that there is no single truth or essence of a community.
To get a better sense of what the term representation signifies, Stuart Hall (1997) suggests reading the term as having a double meaning. In the first place, representation may be interpreted as a process of “re-presentation.” This focus illuminates the commonly held assumption that there is some true and concrete meaning—an essence—behind a cultural phenomenon and that by unmasking some “distorted” reality we can get to that truth. As Klotman and Cutler illustrate in the above quotation, the struggle for representation among African Americans in the visual media can be understood, from this perspective—as a process by which Black artists attempt to demystify the “false” or “distorted” representations that have been constructed by the white dominant groups. In light of these hegemonic depictions, Blacks have been mobilized to offer up more “positive” or “true” depictions of Blackness. Henceforth, the major goal among these Black media practitioners has been to “re-present” an alternative presentation of Blackness. However, while this particular reading of “representation” has some usefulness, Hall suggests that it may be more appropriate to think about representation as the process of giving meaning to a particular cultural construct or phenomenon. In this sense, to represent implies “to stand in for,” or “to act in the place of something.” Meaning is, therefore, not distinct from, but constitutive of the process of representation. How does “race,” for instance, get infested with a certain signification? What tropes are used to present it? What popular ideologies, myths, symbols, etc. are employed to construct it? In this second reading of the term representation, meaning is considered a part of the representational process itself. Therefore, whether these portrayals of Blackness are negative or positive is only part of the issue; how meaning is given to the
particular construct of Blackness, who attempts to inscribe such meaning and by what channels are equally important factors. Hall (1996) explains,

What recent theories on enunciation suggests is that, though we speak, so to say, in our own name,’ of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place. (p. 163)

Hall also gets support from Valerie Smith (1997) who argues against the traditional denotation of the term representation. Smith notes that, “the project of black film might thus be read as the search for an authentic Black subject”(p.1). However, according to Smith, this focus is problematic for several reasons. In the first place, it writes the term “authentic” as synonymous with “positive,” suggesting that because African Americans might be the source of the representations, they will automatically be positive, moral and counter-hegemonic. She cites several African American films that contradict this logic. Second, Smith argues that these discussions of positive/negative representations are founded upon a grammar that is at the very least outdated. Smith is especially skeptical about the simplistic criticisms of the representation of Blackness in the visual media that positions the argument within the binary dualisms of negative or positive. She asserts that, without a doubt, critics like Edward Mapp (1972), Donald Bogle (1973), James P. Murray (1973), Gary Null (1975), Daniel Leab (1975), and Thomas Cripps (1977) have offered an important element to the discourse on African American film criticism. Among many other contributions, they have helped to illuminate some of the frustrations offered up by Black audiences about the prevalence of stereotyped representations in the visual media. Paradoxically, these authors have also “legitimated a binarism in the
discourse around strategies of Black representation that has outlived its usefulness” (p. 4). Her major concerns are that these arguments continue to be framed in dualistic terms such as “negative/positive,” “distorted/real,” “authentic/inauthentic” as though there is some essential meaning to the social concept of “race.” She argues that such representations need to be problematized and interrogated in a way that (1) connects them to broader analytical, theoretical and historical frames; (2) is non-essentializing; (3) uncovers their ideological and narrative functions, and (4) illustrates the importance of intertextuality, especially with relations to class, gender, sexuality, etc. (p. 4). Smith paraphrases Hall as arguing:

The overreliance on the positive/negative discourse, like the uncritical deployment of the term, ‘black,’ [mistakes] what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological and genetic and [valorizes] the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct. (p. 4)

Applying Hall’s reading of representation, one may better understand Merelman’s argument on cultural projection as “the instrument for representing Black culture to Americans.” In that argument, one can decipher how Blacks have sought to both represent themselves as well as give new meaning to the concept of Blackness by offering portrayals that “stand in for” those popular depictions constructed by the dominant culture. However, with Hall’s depiction of representation partially destabilizing the foundation used by many Blacks to ground notions of an authentic subject, the integral question becomes which representation of Blackness is to be accepted and which will be rejected? One of the central ways in which this issue has been addressed has been by asking the troubling questions pertaining to the ultimate source of the representation.
Smith illuminates this point in the above quotation by challenging the commonly held position that self-definition brings about a positive cultural projection. Moreover, this struggle over representation has also often been phrased in terms of who defines whom? As McCarthy (1998) notes, “it is fundamentally a question of who gets to generate theory about whom, whose experiences are appropriated, whose theories are considered appropriate, who has privileged access via ‘Old Boy’ or other networks to dominant journals, books, and general circulation” (p. 38).

In their quest for cultural projection, African Americans have often sought to develop a counter-hegemonic reality that would successfully engender whites to conform to their ways of perceiving the world. Blacks have deemed this step necessary in light of repeated efforts by the dominant groups to construct a hegemony that has been continually oppressive. In Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, this form of counter-hegemonic conformity represents the final step toward progress. From the position of Blacks, having been powerless to shape the representational process historically, a counter-hegemonic reality becomes urgent in order to correct centuries of white supremacy being offered as the dominant narrative that shaped both their consciousness and their positions with regards to an American identity. In view of this, Blacks have often challenged the hegemony by asserting their right to self-definition. However, this struggle for self-definition has also been marred by an internal struggle over the issue of which voice should re-present or “stand in” as the “authentic” voice for African Americans.

Consider again the issue with the visual representations in the media. Discussions on how Blacks are to be represented in the visual media often include questions that
illuminate the complex and ambiguous nature of racial authenticity and representation. One question that emerges speaks directly to the issue of self-representation. Given the opportunity to engage in acts of self-definition, how should Blacks “represent” themselves? J. Fred MacDonald (1992) illustrates the ambiguity of this issue by asking the following questions:

Should Blacks be shown only as middle class and assimilated or as most whites, or is this a denial of racial authenticity? Should Blacks be portrayed in terms of the urban underclass, especially when such imagery might appear as crude or unaccomplished? Should the folk images of rural blacks—often with characteristics that have fed the distorted, racist stereotypes so familiar in American pop culture—be propagated now as authentic, or should they be buried as anachronistic and self-defeating? (p. 252)

Illuminating these questions is extremely important to this project especially in light of continual conflict over self-representation that cripples the discourse on Blackness. This struggle over authenticity has often taken on the appearance of a struggle between two warring factions of Blacks: folk versus bourgeoisie, both competing for the right to define Blackness as it relates to an American identity. Favor (1999) in his highly influential text, *Authentic Blackness*, sheds light on the problems surrounding the whole issue of authenticity. Favor notes that while the ‘one-drop rule’ has been historically used to define Blackness in the United States, few recognize the struggle to define Blackness that goes on among Blacks themselves. He argues that while Blacks have been engulfed in this struggle to develop an authentic subject position, “there is no single best set of
characteristics that manifest the fiction of ‘racial authenticity.’ Rather it is the process of representation that must become preeminent” (p. 142).

Moreover, Favor points to popular culture as a pertinent example of how notions of Blackness are inscribed into people’s everyday realities. He asserts,

When hip-hop artists remind themselves and their audiences to ‘stay black’ or ‘keep it real,’ they are simply suggesting that there is a recognizable, repeatable and agreed upon thing that we might call black authenticity. By the same token, one can still hear the epithet ‘Oreo’ being tossed at certain people; generally proffered as an insult, it suggests that such a person is black on the outside but white on the inside. (p. 2)

Therefore, according to Favor, rather than think about Blackness from a monolithic perspective, it is important to recognize that the notion of Blackness to African Americans requires more than a consideration of skin pigmentation. Manning Marable (1992) presents an interesting perspective on this issue by making a distinction “between race as a passive affiliation, a category in which one happens to be born, and ethnicity as an active affiliation, citing Justice Clarence Thomas as someone who is racially but not ethnically Black, in that he may be regarded as having ceased to function as a member of the Black community” (Shohat and Stam, p. 20). Both Marable and Favor point to a very important factor to consider regarding cultural identity—the reality that it is partially avowed, partly ascribed and, perhaps most importantly, partially performed. In order to better understand how Blackness is constructed within Black America, Favor cautions that it is crucial to consider that the “African American identity rely on complex, though
perhaps not thoroughly examined, intersections of attitude, style, tradition …class, 
gender, and geography” (p. 2).

One of the major problems with the discourse of Blackness is that it offers 
highly limited definitions to Blacks. In other words, because Blackness has been 
defined in such limited ways, there are concerns that a large number of people do not fit 
into the few, problematic constructions. Favor asserts,

In choosing and maintaining one ‘stable’ subject position, the complex person runs 
the risk of effectively amputating certain interests and desires for the sake of 
conformity. This, it seems to me, calls into question the desirability of many kinds of 
rigid, stable self-definitions, yet at the same time, it points out the kinds of difficulties 
one faces in refusing to accept paradigmatic performances of subject position. (pp. 
91-92)

In providing an example of these limited representations, Favor also points to the ways in 
which the struggle over Blackness is often depicted as a clash between two different class 
representations of Blackness. This folk /bourgeoisie struggle is evident in MacDonald’s 
(1992) interrogation of the visual media quoted above. MacDonald depicts the struggle 
in the visual media as one which pits assimilated Blacks, vis-à-vis Black middle class 
versus the “folk.” By using the word “assimilated” in this context, MacDonald opens up 
space for a critique of the common notion that Blacks who make it to the middle class 
often deny their Blackness and are therefore unworthy to claim a Black identity. Such 
Blacks, like Clarence Thomas, are often portrayed as inauthentic or as “Uncle Toms” or 
“sell outs” and therefore not worthy of celebrating a Black identity. In Favor’s words, 
“Blackness and material wealth are diametrically opposed.” Understanding the tension
between the Black middle class and the so-called folk, requires an interrogation of the field slave and the house slave metaphor that still prevails in contemporary conceptions of Blackness. Malcolm X’s sharp critique of the Black middle class by using this metaphor during the late 1960s evoked skepticism and furthered the ambivalence over the Black middle class ideology as authentic Blackness. Molefi Asante (1987) elucidates Malcolm X’s descriptions,

Malcolm focused on the ease of access to the white power structure and he defined class according to the level of identification with that structure. The so-called privilege position of the ‘house slave’ occurred because such a slave had access to better food, to the master’s ear, and to the master’s favors. (pp. 18-19)

In this house slave-field slave dualism, there is always an antagonistic relationship going on. House slaves, because of their relative comforts, are depicted as interested only in their own material self-gains, and not the emancipation of their fellow slaves. Any move they make, therefore, are placed under a racial microscope by fellow Blacks as well as by whites, who never fully trust them. The Black middle class is often likened to the house slave. From this perspective, one has to be a folk—a field slave—in order to be “truly” Black because, in Asante’s words, “the field slave could always take out anger by sabotaging the crops and machinery.” The folk position is perceived as the only legitimate position from which Blacks can occupy to offer any meaningful resistance to oppression. However, while there has been a tendency of depicting the struggle over representation as a clash between these two factions, “Both bourgeois and folk can prove unsatisfactory as markers of Blackness if they link themselves to a conception of ‘race’ that provides for an essential unity of Blackness” (Favor, p. 89). In the next
section of this paper, I will interrogate this notion of a Black essence as well as explore an alternative way of thinking about cultural identity.

**ESSENTIALISM AND CULTURAL IDENTITY**

The concept of “race” as a specific marker for constructing notions of cultural identity has taken on shifting meanings within discourses of multicultural education. Initially conceptualized during colonial times to represent absolute differences, some multiculturalists today tacitly acknowledge race as a socially constructed category with no fixed essence; paradoxically, many working within a multicultural frame still propagate notions about racial purity and racial essences. It is the position of this project that this focus on racial purity and essence, aptly labeled as ethnic absolutism, has a perverse effect both on student academic performance and on the social and political relations between students from different cultural groups. Because they are taught to reaffirm these absolute differences, students often develop discursive practices that reify differences. One blaring example of this may be discerned from Signithia Fordham’s (1996) excellent ethnographic study on Black students at an urban high school in Washington, D.C. Her study brilliantly illuminates the struggle over defining and developing strategies to perform Blackness in public schools in light of absolutist conceptions about education and difference. Her fundamental conclusion is that for many Black students, education is often perceived as primarily a white discourse. Succeeding academically, therefore, is perceived as acting white. Fordham found that some Black students often either deliberately “play dumb” or achieve the minimal level of academic achievement as a strategic way of “fitting in” with their peers, while at the same time not running the risk of being labeled as “acting white,” because of high
academic achievement. In an effort to affirm their “absolute” differences from their white counterparts, these Black students, therefore, engage in self-defeating strategies at school.

Similarly, Oscar-nominated director Gus Van Sant’s recent movie, *Finding Forester*, visually illuminates the struggle over defining Blackness in relation to academic performance. The protagonist, Jamal Wallace (played by newcomer, Rob Brown), portrays the role of an extremely well versed African American high school student and basketball player. Initially, Wallace performs his Black identity in stereotypical ways by maintaining merely a C average while attending his inner city high school. Wallace’s English teacher is aware of his inherent potential and his deliberate, minimal academic efforts and attempts to engage his knowledge during class one day, but to no avail. That Wallace has been “playing dumb” comes to light once his ACT scores are returned. His extremely high scores warrant his recruitment to a private, majority white, sub-urban school. Wallace’s English teacher confers to his Mom, “basketball is where he gets his acceptance,” suggesting that his Stardom on the basketball court merely represents his performance of a stereotypical and acceptable representation of Blackness. In another scene, Wallace pleas with his elder brother, Terrell (played by Busta Rhymes) “jus’ don tell nobody bout dem test scores, aw’ight.” He is fearful that his “boys” may not accept him if they were to find out that he is actually smart. This representation and performance of Blackness is predicated upon the racial grammar that “smartness,” vis-à-vis high academic performance, is equated strictly with whiteness. Shohat and Stam refer to this in their assessment of the Eurocentric tendency to stereotype Blacks as having natural athleticism. They argue that this “adulation of Black physical agility has at its
corollary a presumed mental incapacity. The lauding of the ‘natural’ talent in performance implies that Black achievements have nothing to do with work or discipline” (p. 21). In this case, Wallace is interested solely in performing a strategic identity that marks itself as a binary opposite to whiteness.

However, once Wallace enrolls at his suburban school, he performs his Blackness in a totally different way. Contrary to the customary and strategic low grades which he earned at his inner-city school in order to avert peer pressure, Wallace now recognizes that as a “Black” male athlete he is expected to conform to certain stereotypical forms of representation—the myth of Blacks as purely physical. Evidence of this stereotype can be discerned from his new English teacher, who specifically warns Wallace that he could not survive in his classroom on purely basketball talent alone. The underlying assumption of this admonition was that as a Black male it was his basketball talent—not his grades or his outstanding ACT score—that earned him the scholarship. It is against these racist conditions that Wallace performs his identity as “contradictory Blackness” and “represents” himself as perhaps the most literate, in terms of reading and writing, and moral student in the school. In this second instance, he is inspired by the problematical and stereotypical representation of Blackness. He performs his identity in a way that does not conform to what whiteness expects Blackness to be. These two examples illustrate a significant paradox over how Blackness is often conceived and performed in discourses on schooling. They also illuminate a common problem confronting many African Americans who go to college and on return to their communities often have to combat criticisms of acting white because of their education. Going to college or wanting to empower oneself by becoming a part of the middle class is still perceived as a
signifier for wanting to act white. These examples shed light on the critical need to rethink formal education and to ask critical questions about what is going on that perpetuates this perception that schooling is primarily a white discourse.

Moreover, the colonial idea of a “racial essence” is in need of theoretical scrutiny. As mentioned previously, both Blackness and whiteness rely heavily on notions of essentialism in order to gain meaning. In *Essentially Speaking*, Diana Fuss (1989) defines essentialism as a commonly held belief “in the true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given reality” (p. xi). Given this definition, one can clearly see the relationship between essentialism and ethnic absolutism. The hegemonic discourse has often employed essentialism to marginalize and fix Blackness. By propagating ideas of a “natural” superiority of the “European race,” whites try to assert a cultural essence to the way things are, racially. This idea of European superiority is often exposed when multicultural scholars seek to centralize Europe as the alpha and omega of the American identity. Similarly, Blacks have often employed inverted notions of essentialism. For instance, in their quest to promote a unified Black race, Pan Africanists and Afrocentrists often utilize essentialism in order to argue for a particular African essence. The use of essentialism has sparked widespread controversy. Fuss illuminates the tensions over using essentialism as a cultural strategy. “To some,” she asserts, “essentialism is nothing more than the philosophical enforcer of a liberal humanist idealism which seeks to locate and to contain the subject within a fixed set of differences.” From Fuss’ perspective, essentialism is defined as the antithesis of cultural difference, whereby “the doctrine of essence is viewed as precisely that which seeks to deny the very radicality of difference” (Fuss, p. xii). However, Fuss notes that
other scholars find usefulness in essentialism. She argues, “to others, essentialism may not be without a certain tactical or inventionary value, especially in our political struggles and debates (p. xii). Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (1993) brilliantly expose some of the tensions over the use of essentialism in educational discourses. They argue that notions of racial essences and origins are paramount to debates between education and cultural identity.

The world is a Lacanian mirror in which theorists on racial purity and racial essence see themselves standing in front of their ancestors. It is a perfect image, the snapshot of history collected in the nuclear family photo album. It is the story of the singular origin, the singular essence, the one, true primary cause… The proponents of Western Civilization and Eurocentrism and their critics, and the proponents of Afrocentrism, now struggle over the heart and soul of the educational enterprise. (p. xiv)

The usefulness of essentialism has perplexed many intellectuals who theorize about African American culture. Favor, for instance, is not sure that essentialism has a place within discourses of Blackness. His major concern comes from the dominant employment of essentialism as a way of subjugating Blackness. He writes,

…Blackness is constructed as non-self-defining in racist discourse. That is, whiteness is dependent on a Blackness that can be subordinated—a Blackness that, as the constructed ‘other,’ has its number of possible subject positions limited—by the ‘natural’ superiority of whiteness. (p. 93)

However, Favor asserts that it maybe possible to construct notions of a Black identity without necessarily being reactionary to the essentialized, hegemonic representations.
Although a discourse of Black identity may construct itself as an oppositional voice to white oppression, such positionality may also be proactive as well as reactive. Rather than allowing itself to be delineated by the centrality of whiteness in Western culture, an idea of ‘race’ that views itself as a performative trope offers the possibility of infiltration into, and subversion of, white-privileging hegemony along with a critique from the margin itself. (Favor, p. 141)

In spite of recognizable problems with the term essentialism, prominent African American scholar and cultural critic bell hooks (1990) is not sure that we should dismiss its usage altogether. She is concerned about a postmodern movement to get rid of essentialism at the very moment that Blacks are now beginning to represent themselves and produce their own counternarratives. She argues that essentialism was crucial to the gains that were made during the civil rights movement. As hooks interprets it, discussions of a racial essence provided the necessary grammar for mobilizing support to challenge the racism that continually crippled Black communities. Cultural critic hooks affirms that in light of the continual persistence of white supremacy, it may be too risky to give up the concept of racial essence altogether. She believes that we should be skeptical about the voices that are central to calling for the elimination of this term. In her view, the crucial movement should not be to advocate the dismissal or essentialism, but to consider who is seeking such a dismissal. However, acknowledging the dangers of employing essentialism unproblematically, she argues that the notion of a racial essence should be re-articulated and connected to broader historical, analytical and political frames. In this sense, hooks appears to be advocating the use of a strategic essentialism.
On the same token, Fuss makes an argument that is identical to hooks’ in warning that, “In and of itself, essentialism is neither good nor bad, progressive nor reactionary, beneficial nor dangerous.” Moreover, Fuss continues, “The question we should be asking is not ‘is this text essentialist (and therefore bad)?’ but rather, ‘if this text is essentialist, what motivates its deployment?’” (p. xi). Fuss, while acknowledging the tensions between essentialism and cultural difference, admonishes the problematic articulation of essentialism as bipolar opposites since such an articulation can be, in her words, “restrictive, even obfuscating, in that it allows us to ignore or to deny the differences within essentialism. Rather than think about essentialism as a singular construct, Fuss argues that we must more aptly think about essentialisms. From that perspective, she contends, “essentialism can be deployed in the service of both idealist and materialist, progressive and reactionary, mythologizing and resistive discourses” (p. 3). The struggle for this project, therefore, is to identify strategic ways of employing essentialism to engender counterhegemonic identities that resist and or subvert dominant representational practices. Fuss’ conceptions of essentialism provoke several pertinent questions that point directly to engendering such counterhegemonic identity, especially as related to my interest in highlighting counternarratives: Does essentialism still have usefulness for constructing notions of cultural identities? Is there a place for articulating notions of essentialism within discourses of multicultural education as the study of identity production? Or, does the use of essentialism merely promote ethnic absolutism and a reified focus on vested interests in particular ethnic properties? Should multiculturalists resist all notions of essentialism altogether? Or, is there a way of strategically employing essentialism to construct notions of a cultural identity? Does BET essentialize
Blackness? If so, what motivates its essentialism? How does BET construct ideas about Blackness? Is BET a significant source of counternarratives of Blackness? These perplexing questions will be taking up more directly in the remainder of this project.
CHAPTER FOUR:

THE STORY OF BLACK ENTERTAINMENT TELEVISION

Before embarking on a critical analysis of BET and engaging the questions presented in chapter three, it is crucial that important background information on the network be highlighted. The purpose of this chapter is to tell the story of BET Holdings, Inc., the parent company of BET, and to identify narratives that are important to performing a critical analysis of the network’s construction of Blackness. Fundamentally, I trace BET’s history, triumphs, and pitfalls in order to set the stage for a more detailed analysis of texts in chapters six and seven. This discussion of BET will serve as the basis for further interrogation throughout the remainder of this project. The impetus for engaging BET stems in part from a relative dearth of research on the construction of Blackness within the visual media and efforts by Blacks to produce their own representations of Blackness. While standing out as a primary space for the production and distribution of narratives of Blackness in the US, BET is arguably one of the most contradictory sites on television. For instance, despite its claims of being a Black television network, BET is watched by just as many whites as it is Blacks and is now owned by a majority white-controlled multinational corporation. To complicate matters even further, BET founder and CEO, Bob Johnson, has often maintained that BET is just another company and, therefore, should not be judged according to any color-coded criteria. In fact, Johnson begs for the network only to be evaluated as any other company would—Black or white—based on merits not on the hopes and expectations of a marginalized community. What determines BET’s Blackness? Does merely using the
word ‘Black’ in its label legitimize its Blackness? Or does its staff, which is majority African American, and the fact that an African American founded the network, sanction its claims of Black authenticity?

To put the contradictions over BET into perspective, BET has a sort of love-hate relationship within communities of color. On one hand, many Blacks, especially youth, adore BET for its cutting edge programming which feature Black actors, actresses and performers in a variety of leading roles. BET is also revered by many others for being the first Black-owned and operated media conglomerate of its magnitude in the US. On the other hand, the network is despised by a significant number of Blacks who often accuse BET of offering extremely limiting representations of Blackness and charge that the images are not within the best interests of Blacks. Many people even joke that BET stands for “Bad Entertainment Television,” (Brett Pulley, 2001, p. 50) and an African American syndicated cartoonist, Aaron McGruder, often lambastes Johnson and BET in his weekly comic strip, The Boondocks (John Simpkins, 2001). “Black Entertainment Television,” McGruder once quipped, “is neither Black nor entertainment” (Pulley, p. 50). Yet in spite of the antagonism and the perceived significance of BET as the nation’s first and only television site charged with the responsibility of disseminating narratives of Blackness, BET has somehow failed to attract any significant scholarly engagement in academic literature. For the most part, the debates over BET have been confined to the mass media and to informal conversations among concerned Blacks. In comparison, even though it emerged after BET and its content is somewhat similar, BET’s sister network Music Television (MTV) has been the subject of significant intellectual inquiry. MTV is also popularly used in slogans that define contemporary youth of all ethnicities,
such as “MTV generation” or “MTV culture.” This begs the question, is BET merely a Black MTV? Or does the network have its own identity? BET is being engaged here not merely because of its ambivalence within communities of color, but also because the network plays an important role in perpetuating ideologies of Blackness to millions of worldwide viewers on a daily basis. Such a role is far too important to be ignored by critical scholars, especially in light of the reality that the media and sites such as BET are crucial spaces engaged in the social production of identities. If nothing else, a critical engagement with BET may offer valuable lessons pertaining to the struggles over representing Blackness in America and how an engagement with popular culture in schools could help students marginalized by race, class, gender, sexual orientation and other markers of difference. It also calls to question BET’s role in perpetuating ideologies of ethnic absolutism which may serve to further naturalize the entrenchment of Blackness and whiteness in the United States. In this chapter, I tell the story of BET in order to provide valuable information that grounds a critical analysis of BET’s texts in chapters six and seven.

Black Entertainment Television (BET) Network was founded in August 1979 and went on the air for the first time in January 1980. The first television network of its kind which purports to cater primarily to Blacks, BET was the brainchild of African American Robert L. Johnson, a former lobbyist for the cable industry. Because it was founded by an African American and carries the symbolic label “Black” in its title, BET has always held a special significance to African Americans. Blacks, in a sense, hold firmly to a vested interest in BET and often regard it as the nations first and only Black television station—their own “authentic” television station. In a way, its name makes a powerful
and symbolic statement about the nature of its programming and interests which encourages and sustains this investment by Black audiences. By employing the signifier “Black” BET relies upon a vexing discourse that has propelled the struggle for counter-hegemonic representations of Blackness. As I will illustrate later in this chapter, by projecting BET as a product of Black communities, BET employs a critical strategy that sustains the ownership of its brand among Black viewers.

According to Alice Taitt and Ron Barber (1996), from the outset Johnson wanted to utilize the narrow casting format to reach African Americans by providing programming that resonated within African American communities (p. 186). This early decision to focus on Black audiences and so-called “Black entertainment” set the stage for a pressing set of responsibilities that Johnson would later learn carried arduous economic, political and social baggage. What influenced Johnson’s decision to focus on Blackness? What social obligations are tied up with the use of this “floating signifier” Black? What would Blacks come to expect from BET and Johnson as a result of this label? These questions will be explored later in this chapter.

The idea of a Black television station is one that had circulated within Black communities since the 1960s. However, there were no real serious efforts made to put such a station in place due, in part, to a lack of the capital investment. As the story goes, Johnson, the ninth of ten children and the first in his family to attend college, used his cable industry connections he had made while serving as a lobbyist for the cable industry in order to develop a series of strategic alliances with powerful media tycoons which enabled him to get his venture off the ground. Johnson, who graduated with a bachelor of arts in political science from the University of Illinois and a master of arts in international
relations from Princeton University, first solicited one-half million dollars in financial
backing from John Malone of Tele-communications, Inc (TCI). In exchange, Malone
agreed to accept a minority stake in BET (Johnathon Chait, 2001). Some critics often
question Malone’s ulterior motives for providing such a generous financial backing with
such little demand for returns, especially since Johnson’s financial contribution was a
meager $15,000. If it were strictly a business move, critics contend, it would seem
unrealistic that Malone would not demand a fairer share in BET. However, Chait (2001)
clearly understands the idiosyncrasies of this business arrangement. According to Chait,
the social, cultural, and economic climate during the early 1980’s made it favorable for
BET to solicit financial support under the grounds agreed upon with TCI. All Johnson
had to do was simply play the race card. Chait notes that during this historic period,
cities represented cable television’s only remaining untapped market (p. 31). Many cable
operators were in a sprint to win over contracts for these valuable markets. And since a
large number of Blacks lived in the inner city, cable companies that purported to support
“Black culture” stood a much better chance of winning contracts in these highly
populated Black areas. In the case of John Malone, “The benefit to TCI was clear,” Chait
argues. “It could tell the mayors and city councils in charge of doling out contracts that it
carried and financed a black-owned, black-themed station” (p. 31). Chait quotes one
TCI executive as saying, “Under traditional investment standards, the return on
investment has not been what one would look for. But that doesn’t account for how
much goodwill we get from making a major attempt to provide programming of interest
to the minority community” (p. 31). While Malone and other TCI officials often made
such claims of goodwill to the community as their rationale for investing in BET, it is
clear that the marketability of Blackness played a major part in the decision of backing
Johnson’s venture. And, by claiming to offer an authentic stew of Blackness which
could not be otherwise found on white networks, Johnson’s BET proved to be the perfect
investment opportunity for TCI and Malone who stood to make millions from the
emerging urban market.

Once Johnson had the start-up capital in hand, his next mission was to find a way
to get BET to viewers. To do this, Johnson reportedly convinced USA Network to allow
him use of some of its extra satellite time so he could launch his programming (Taitt and
Barber, p. 186). Johnson also persuaded several major cable providers “such as Warner
Cable, American Telecommunications Corp., TelePrompter, and TCI to carry his
programs” (p. 186). When BET was eventually launched in January 1980, it reached
approximately 3.8 million cable subscribers in 350 markets across the nation (Wiley
Woodard, 1990). Initially, programming was limited to merely two hours every Friday
night in which an old movie was shown. The first of these movies was the 1974 safari
film, *Visit to a Chief’s Son* (Pulley, 2001, p. 50). Johnson gradually increased the
programming time and filled time slots by showing sitcoms and infomercials (Linda
Wertheimer, 2000).

After a meager four years, Johnson was able to expand BET to full 24-hour
programming. This expansion materialized due to a shift to a satellite broadcasting
system. Taitt and Barber explain, “Time Warner’s Home Box Office (HBO) was the
owner of the transponder and accepted 16% ownership of BET instead of charging a
lease fee for time on its satellite” (p. 186). To fill this extra time the network now had,
BET relied heavily on “canned” programs whose content included “a mix of old movies,
gospel, black college sports, infomercials and a few music videos” (Pulley, p. 46).

However, a turning point for BET came during the mid-1980s, when upstart Music Television (MTV) began penetrating the entertainment market by offering music videos. As noted by Pulley (2001), “Johnson soon recognized that MTV, which started a year after BET, was finding fast success by focusing on pop and rock music and it ignored black acts entirely. This left the door open for BET to carry rhythm and blues, soul and the then-fledgling genre of rap” (p. 46). It is important to note here that among Black audiences, MTV was under intense scrutiny for ignoring Black music. Johnson remembers that, “They barely played Michael Jackson videos” (Joshua Hammer, 1991, p. 42). However, realizing the great market potential for hip-hop culture in America, MTV soon took on a giant initiative in the area of “Black entertainment” and beat BET to the punch in 1988 by offering *YO! MTV Raps* as the first weekly hip-hop music show televised in the US (Hammer, p. 42). Johnson quickly responded and from that point onward music videos and Hip Hop became a crucial aspect of BET’s programming content.

Johnson’s next mission was to increase BET’s viewership and to attract advertising revenues. Again, race would come to play a major role in how he approached this venture. Pulley explains,

To sign up cable operators and undercut the perception that the new channel would appeal only to blacks, Johnson shed the original name—Black Entertainment Television—calling it simply BET. Still, to build audience loyalty Johnson emphasized that this was a channel for black people, operated by black people. BET’s salespeople visited black civic and social organizations across the
country, urging community leaders to lobby their cable operators to carry the channel. (p. 46)

Here Pulley introduces a major contradiction that BET would face as a result of the interception between “Blackness” and “business.” On one hand, Johnson’s claim of reaching Blacks might have been appealing to many businesses and corporate advertisers, Black and white, who could have access to the Black market by purchasing commercial time from BET. Paradoxically, a focus exclusively on Black audiences had limited reach and income potential since Blacks represented only about 11 percent of the population at that time. Therefore, many white companies were reluctant or skeptical about investing or advertising with BET. As one critic bluntly puts it, “Black shows like UPN’s ‘Moesha’ and ‘Malcolm & Eddie’ are effective at selling cars and soda to blacks, but not to whites” (Phillip Morris, 1999, p. 2). BET was therefore confronted with conflicting goals vis-à-vis satisfying advertisers need for a more general or broad-based audience and at the same time live up to the interests and desires of the Black communities it claimed to serve. According to Pulley, Johnson’s response was to try to mask Blackness through a semiotic play on words. The ambiguous use of the label BET, which could also be used to mean taking a chance on something as in placing a bet, was a strategic move on the part of Johnson to do what was considered to be in the best interest of the network while at the same time not totally backing away from the core market from which the network grounded its base. In an industry where officials are influenced by a “desire to make profit, their desire to beat the competition in the ratings, and by pressures created by advertisers” (Kathleen Hall-Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs -Campbell, 1992), Johnson reportedly decided to mask the network’s association with Blackness by focusing on the
acronym, “BET,” as opposed to the full name, Black Entertainment Television. Was this a signal of Johnson’s lack of integrity and commitment to Black communities? Or was this merely a common sense survivalist business decision? What ever the response to these questions maybe, this “strategic” use of the label BET might have been appealing to advertisers as Johnson successfully convinced “Anheuser-Busch, Champale, PepsiCo, Sears-Roebuck, Kellogg, and Time, Inc., to provide advertising with a view toward increased African American viewership on the growing cable network” (Taitt and Barber, p. 186). Conversely, there may have been some implicit understanding that BET would ultimately transcend Black audiences and eventually set its sights on penetrating into mainstream white markets. Nonetheless, Johnson’s immediate focus appeared to have been centered on Black audiences.

In addition to unleashing his salespeople to rally the support of Black civic organizations, Johnson reportedly played on statistics which suggested that Blacks in general would be attracted to BET over other general television networks. Taitt and Barber cite an interesting report published in Advertising Age (August, 1989) that brilliantly documents how BET uses Blackness to win advertiser contracts. In this report S. Donathon,

Explains that BET approaches advertisers with a three-pronged pitch: African Americans watch more television than any other groups in the nation; African Americans watch programming that features African Americans more than any other types of programming; and BET is the tool for reaching African American consumers. (Taitt and Barber, p. 187)
This marketing strategy of focusing on a particular audience—in this case African Americans—which is aptly called niche marketing in business circles, is a common one used to win advertiser dollars by television networks. As argued by Hall-Jamieson and Kohrs-Campbell (1992), “When television networks solicit the attention of advertisers, they do so in terms that make plain the fact that what they are selling is their audience” (p. 131). This argument is consistent with the position of Dallas Smythe who “first described commercial media as a system for delivering audiences to advertisers” (Alexander and Hanson, 1993). In a sense, therefore, it can be said that BET is in the business of selling Blacks and, conversely, Blackness, an ironic twist in light of the complex racial history and racializing experiences of African Americans and the mass media.

With regards to how BET goes about selling Blackness, Donaton’s (1989) depiction of BET’s strategy is intellectually enticing. It points to some accurate yet troublesome aspects of BET and African American audiences. In the first place, BET’s assessment of African Americans’ television viewing habits was right on cue. According to a 1990 A.C. Nielsen rating, Blacks watch more than 50 percent more television than the general U.S. population. More recent A.C. Nielsen ratings (1999-2000) reveal that though the difference in the number of consumption hours between African Americans and other US households may be waning, Blacks of all age groups watch significantly more television than all other U.S. demographic groups at any given time of day.
FIGURE ONE
African American TV Usage:
Late Night

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Groups</th>
<th>Household</th>
<th>Adults 50+</th>
<th>Adults 18-49</th>
<th>Teens 12-17</th>
<th>Children 2-11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total U.S.</td>
<td>7:24</td>
<td>3:32</td>
<td>3:06</td>
<td>2:54</td>
<td>1:01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Other</td>
<td>5:03</td>
<td>3:19</td>
<td>2:54</td>
<td>2:01</td>
<td>0:51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Americans</td>
<td>5:43</td>
<td>4:28</td>
<td>3:14</td>
<td>1:37</td>
<td>1:50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure Two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Household Rating %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Who Wants To Be A Millionaire (Tuesday)</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Who Wants To Be A Millionaire (Thursday)</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Who Wants To Be A Millionaire (Sunday)</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>E.R.</td>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>NFL Monday Night Football</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Frasier</td>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Frasier (9:30 p.m.)</td>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>60 Minutes</td>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Practice</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nielsen Media Research, 2001

Top Primetime* Programs – Total U.S. Homes
Figure Three

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Household Rating %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Parkers</td>
<td>UPN</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Malcolm &amp; Eddie (Monday)</td>
<td>UPN</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>NFL Monday Night Football</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>City of Angels</td>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Steve Harvey Show</td>
<td>WB</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Moesha</td>
<td>UPN</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The Steve Harvey Show (Sunday)</td>
<td>WB</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Grown Ups</td>
<td>UPN</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Steve Harvey Show</td>
<td>WB</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Malcolm &amp; Eddie</td>
<td>UPN</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nielsen Media Research, 2001

Top Primetime* Programs - African-American Homes

Figure one pictured above illustrates the comparisons of late night television viewing between African Americans, total U.S. households and against all other demographic groups. It shows that disparate levels of television consumption beginning at an early age. For example, African American children consume television at almost twice the total national rate. Other research studies also illustrate that Blacks as a whole are highly attracted to television (Bower, 1985, Darden & Darden, 1981). Moreover, Blacks do tend to give preference to programs that feature Black characters, performers or themes that emphasize Black experiences (Gail Jones, 1990). The aforementioned Nielsen report also shows this polarization trend between African Americans and other US households in terms of programs watched. For instance, a comparison of top ten programs viewed by

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both African Americans as well as the general population revealed that Blacks and whites do not have the same consumption patterns and programmatic interests. All of the programs on the top ten African American list featured Black characters and themes while among general audiences white characters and themes dominated the top10 list of mostly viewed programs (See Figure Two and Figure Three).

By focusing on the consumption practices of Blacks in their sales pitch, BET illuminated what some have characterized as a problematic dynamic about African American cultural practices vis-à-vis excessive television viewing. This raises some critical and moral issues regarding the commodification and objectification of Blackness of television. Chief among them is the impact of television viewing on Black audiences, and particularly children, as well as the function that BET plays in sustaining and promoting this practice. According to a survey of fourth-graders conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, almost 50 percent of Blacks surveyed reported watching six or more hours of television daily (Jon Jeter, 1996). This figure almost doubles the 27 percent reported by Hispanics and is almost three times the number for white children in the same grade level.

As Joseph Amatuzzi (1983) has brilliantly characterized, the emergence of television during the1940s brought with it a profound excitement about the pedagogical and educational benefits the technology would bring. Some regarded television as not merely a “revolution,” but also a “cataclysm” (Daniel Boorstin, 1973). This sentiment was reflected in the comments of “Milton S. Eisenhower, Co-Chairman of the National Colleges Committee for Educational Television: ‘We can develop the educative and commercial opportunities of television as complimentary partners, as associates in one of
the grandest opportunities any group of men or women ever had to provide to intellectual leadership” (Amatuzzi, p. 1). However, as Amatuzzin notes, these sentiments were soon lost as “television for the most part became a predominantly entertainment medium while education, its ‘complimentary partner,’ became an incidental function at best” (p. 1).

While there has been no direct correlation between excessive television viewing and poor academic performance, there is evidence to support the idea that watching high levels of television can affect classroom variables such as performance on standardized tests. For example, Jeter (1996) notes that among the 22 percent of fourth graders who reported watching six or more hours of television daily, scores on the math-proficiency test averaged around 203 of a possible 300 total. In comparison, for students who reported watching one hour or less daily (21 percent), the average score was around 220 on the same test (p. A08).

Moreover, other research has indicated that excessive television viewing by Black children may also be promoting poor health practices. A study by researchers at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas revealed that Black children consume about 62 percent of their meals while watching television (“Black Children Eat Most of Their Meals While Watching Television, March 12, 2001). By comparison, 43 percent of Hispanic American and 32 percent of white children reported eating dinner while watching television, while 21 percent of Asian Americans reported engaging in similar practices. The study concludes that overweight children tend to eat about 50 percent of their meals in front of television and sheds light on a possible relationship between excessive television viewing and potential health problems particularly among African American children.
In terms of the impact of television, cultural studies scholars often illuminate the ideological functions of the media in terms of how they construct for audiences a common sense and naturalized representation of what roles they should play in society (Hall, 1981). Many people have argued that television serves as one of the primary obstacles to schooling since, in their view, schooling and the media have diametrically opposed values. While I am not fully in agreement with this latter view, it is important to ask some critical questions about the role of BET given that it functions in an industry which is potentially potent for African Americans. Given the complex educational and economic issues that confront many African Americans, should BET be focusing on encouraging mass viewing of television and thereby the delivery of this oppressed audience to the mouths of sales predators? Does BET have any social or moral responsibilities to the Black community? Or as a business, should BET’s content and focus be merely oriented towards making a profit by “any means necessary?” Several of these questions will be the interrogated further in chapter five.

Philip Morris (1999) raises similar concerns about Blacks and television in a thought-provoking editorial which referenced a planned NAACP boycott of the four mayor television networks: ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox. Concerned about the relative absence of Blacks on these networks, NAACP President Kweisi Mfume threatened to encourage his organization’s members to boycott the networks if the 26 new television shows scheduled for the fall1999 season did not include more Black characters. However, Morris queries whether boycotting just these four networks is sufficient. He asks, “Why not boycott television period?” As Morris sees it, “There’s a lot of bad television that should be boycotted. And given that black children spend far more time
than any other demographic group vegetating in front of televisions, any effort to alter the viewing habits of young blacks especially should be encouraged” (p. 7B). Unplugging television altogether would no doubt have serious implications for the survival of BET. However, given the unlikelihood of Blacks unplugging television, multicultural educators may need to seriously consider a curricular response that could engender a more media savvy Black audience who are equipped with critical tools to challenge taken for granted meanings portrayed on television networks such as BET.

Notwithstanding the issues associated with Black children and television viewing, BET must be lauded for positioning itself as having a privileged access to Black audiences. Through its innovative marketing techniques BET was able to successfully entice several large corporations by convincing them that no other network could adequately appeal to Black communities in the way that its officials could. Among those corporations which fell under BET’s reins was one of the nation’s largest media advertisers, Proctor and Gamble (P&G). As noted by Taitt and Barber, “Prior to that time P&G had been under criticism from African American media executives for not spending much of its $1.5 billion advertising budget with African American-owned and operated media entities” (p. 187). This notion of gaining equitable advertising revenues points to another critical issue that BET faces. Critics have been charging that large corporations like P&G unfairly overlook minority-owned businesses. With regard to BET, though gaining popularity among advertisers and earning revenue from increasing subscriptions, the network had to face up to the reality of being paid significantly less for both advertising time and subscription cost than other white-owned networks. According to Joshua Hammer, in 1991 the average monthly subscription fee BET received was seven
cents per household. The national average at that time was 13 cents (p. 42). Black and Hispanic media often have been subjected to this predicament of having to charge less for their media products. Writing specifically about Black newspapers, National Publishing Association executive director, Steve G. Davis, argues that Blacks have always been treated unjustly when it comes to fair pricing for advertisements. He notes, “We have never managed to capture a share of advertising revenue proportionate to what black consumers spend” (Hammer, p. 42). Similarly, David Mays, publisher of the Source magazine, reasons that large, white-owned corporations often under value the market potential of advertising with Black-owned media outlets. “They see it as black, inner city and low income,” Mays contends (Hammer, p. 42). BET’s vice president for eastern regional sales, Raymond Goulbourne points to a 1998 report which illustrates that a thirty-second commercial on one of BET’s top rated programs would cost a meager $700. By contrast, one similar advertisement on MTV would cost about $8900 (Chuck Ross, 1998). Similar disparities also exist with regard to Hispanic television networks Univision and Telemundo. As cited in Channels/Field Guide (1990),

Hispanics number at least ten percent of the population nationally, and much more than that in key markets such as Los Angeles, New York, and Miami. Yet advertisers spend only $300 million plus annually on network Spanish language TV. The two national Spanish networks, Univision and Telemundo, struggle to sell 60 percent of their inventory. And the rate of advertiser spending on Spanish TV is plummeting. (p. 83)

As these examples illustrate, minority businesses face tremendous pressures if they are to make a profit and ultimately survive in an industry that is dominated by white males
To what extent does this struggle for revenues influence what gets shown on BET? Do advertisers control or influence the content on BET?

In spite of the hurdles relating to parity for advertising rates, BET’s reach began to increase exponentially which allowed the network to gain respect and admiration among African Americans. By 1990, BET reached 25 million homes across the nation. In addition, between 1990 and 1998 the network added about four million subscribers a year, doubling Johnson’s expectations (Pulley, p. 50). However, Johnson was not content with merely owning a television station. In 1990, he began to diversify BET’s interests and invested in the magazine industry. He first debuted the now-defunct YSB (Young Sisters and Brothers), a magazine targeting teen audiences (p. 50). The following year, Johnson bought control of Emerge, a newsmagazine catering to younger, more sophisticated African American readers, from Time Inc. (Hammer, p. 42). Both of these magazines were subsequently sold. Johnson also made vital investments in other genres. In 1993 he bought 80 percent of Action, a pay-per-view channel and in 1996 launched BET Jazz with service overseas (Pulley, p. 50). He also opened what was to become the first of BET’s three restaurants, BET Soundstage, in Largo, Md. Moreover, Johnson launched a BET Clothing Line and a Visa Credit Card (1997), and in 1998 BET bought Arabesque Books, which publishes Black-themed romance novels, with the hope of turning the books into low-budget movies to be shown on BET (Pulley, p. 50). But by far the most outstanding achievement for BET came in 1991 when the network made its first public offering on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE). In so doing, BET made history by becoming the first Black-owned company to be publicly traded on the NYSE (Taitt and Barber, p. 188). BET’s initial offering of 4.2 million shares sold at $17 a share.
earning the company a net profit of approximately $72.3 million (Taitt & Barber, p. 188).

Johnson had high praise for the network. “It’s incredible,” he lauded, “how a company with $9 million in earnings in 1991 could leave Wall Street with a market value of $475 million” (Hammer, p. 42). These outstanding achievements no doubt served to increase a sense of pride and ownership in BET by members of various African American communities. BET was therefore celebrated for taking Black entrepreneurship to the level that was comparable to white corporations.

However, in spite of its economic success, there was a growing sense among African Americans during the decade of the 1990s that the time had come for BET to start producing more original programming that better served the needs of African Americans. This sentiment is still common among African Americans today. In fact, the most vocal critics chide BET for what they characterize as problematic content. However, perhaps no aspect of BET evoked more ambivalent criticism than when Johnson announced that BET was being sold to Viacom in November 2000 at a price of $3 billion. As Pulley notes, the sale of BET was a moment for celebration in the views of many because, “It was the highest price tag ever placed on the black consumer market” (p. 46). However, news of this sale was met with more direct opposition within African American communities. As will be explored in chapter five, many saw BET’s sale to Viacom as a grave disappointment, depicting Johnson as yet another Black person who had “sold out” against Black people. In the period following the announcement of the sale, public discourse over BET soared. This discourse will be the subject of critical analysis in chapter five.
CHAPTER FIVE:
CONTESTESTATION OVER BET IN THE POPULAR MEDIA

In spite of all its outstanding economic accomplishments, BET’s major legacy may be the antagonism it sparks within African American communities. More than any other African American business entity, BET has been engulfed in brewing conflicts and debates primarily over the way it “stands in” for Blackness. As noted previously, BET is arguably the most highly controversial “African American corporation” in the US. Mention of BET often evokes sentiments ranging from abject disappointment to ambivalence. In this chapter, I interrogate some popular media criticisms launched against BET between October 2000 and December 2001. I am interested in this particular period because it was during this time that popular sentiments over BET reached their zenith. While there have always been vicious attacks on BET within public discourse, the level of attention the Network received following the announcement that it was being sold to media giant, VIACOM, in November, 2000, was unprecedented. News of the sale was met by widespread criticism within Black communities as many debated the “loss” of the nation’s first and only African American owned-and-operated television network. Shortly afterwards, BET terminated fifty of its staff members including Tavis Smiley, popular host of talk show BET Tonight (Megan Larson, 2001). This move confirmed to many that Bob Johnson had “sold out” against Black communities. Immediately, several people protested outside BET and Viacom, and thousands of others sent emails and personal letters demanding that Smiley be rehired. By placing this public discourse over BET under a critical microscope, I illuminate the important codes and colonial tropes that play a crucial role in the debate over the construction and
representation of Blackness vis-à-vis BET. Rather than lay out this chapter in terms of a chronology of texts constructed about BET during the aforementioned period, I organize this chapter in terms of three major binary codes which emerged from an analysis of the public discourse on BET during the year under review. Several important binary oppositions and colonial tropes support these binary codes, which include mind/body, master/slave and social responsibility/profit motive. These codes and the binary oppositions and tropes that underpin them will also be the basis of my interrogation of actual BET texts in chapter seven.

**MIND/BODY BINARY CODE**

I begin this chapter with a rather controversial email (Figure 4) because, troublesome as it may be for some, this correspondence raises some critical issues that are fundamental to my interrogation of BET and its representation of Blackness. I position this email under the mind/body code, in part, because at the core it relies upon an ideological argument which positions Blacks as more interested in highlighting the body as opposed to developing their minds. As such, it dichotomizes the mind and the body and attempts to permanently fix Blackness with body, the pleasurable, the non-rational, and the vulgar. The subtext of this argument suggests that Blacks are mindless who care more for the physical appearance of the body rather than for intellectual or spiritual accomplishments. Narrated from the perspective of a mythical (or real) racist cynic, the email identifies and sheds light upon some perplexing issues that have vexed many critically minded Blacks, yet still continues to represent the harsh reality for many others,
A view from a white man’s eyes

THEM ARE STILL OUR SLAVES. We can continue to reap profits from the Blacks without the effort of physical slavery. Their IGNORANCE is the primary weapon of containment. A great man once said, “The best way to hide something from Black people is to put it in a book.” We live now in the Information Age. They have gained the opportunity to read any book on any subject through the efforts of their fight for freedom, yet they refuse to read. There are numerous books readily available at Borders, Barnes & Noble, and Amazon not to mention their own Black Bookstores that provide solid blueprints to reach economic equality (which should have been their fight all along), but few read consistently, if at all. GREED is another powerful weapon of containment…. Last year they spent 10 billion dollars during Christmas, out of their 450 billion dollars in total yearly income (2.22%). Any of us can use them as our target market, for any business venture we care to dream up, no matter how outlandish, they will buy into it. Being primarily a consumer people, they function totally by greed. They continually want more, with little thought for saving or investing. They would rather buy some new sneaker than invest in starting a business. Some even neglect their children to have the latest Tommy or FUBU. And they still think that having a Mercedes, and a big house gives them ”Status” or that they have achieved the American Dream. They are fools! With the help of BET, and the rest of their black media that often broadcasts destructive images into their own homes, we will continue to see huge profits like those of Tommy and Nike. (Tommy Hilfiger has even jeered them, saying he doesn’t want their money, and look at how the fools spend more with him than ever before!). They’ll continue to show off to each other while we build solid communities with the profits from our businesses that we market to them. SELFISHNESS, ingrained in their minds through slavery, is one of the major ways we can continue to contain them. One of their own, Dubois said that there was an innate division in culture. A ”Talented Tenth” he called it. He was correct in his deduction that there are segments of their culture that has achieved some ”form” of success. However, that segment missed the fullness of his work. They didn’t read that the ”Talented Tenth” was then responsible to aid the Non-Talented Ninety percent in achieving a better life. Instead, that segment has created another, a Buppie class that looks down on their people or aids them in a condescending manner. They will never achieve what we have...When they do get together; their selfishness lets their egos get in the way of the goal. Their so-called help organizations seem to only want to promote their name without making any real change in their community. They steadfastly refuse to see that ”TOGETHER EACH ACHIEVES MORE (TEAM)! They do not understand that they are no better than each other because of what they own. In fact, most of those Buppies are but one or two paychecks away from poverty. All of which is under the control of our pens in our offices and our boardrooms. Yes, we will continue to contain them as long as they refuse to read, continue to buy anything they want, and keep thinking they are ”helping” their communities by paying dues to organizations which do little other than hold lavish conventions in our hotels. By the way, don’t worry about any of them reading this letter, remember, ”THEY DON’T READ!!!! (Prove them wrong. Please pass this on) --- Author Unknown
particularly within lower class communities. Unpopular as this idea may be, some of the arguments raised in this email are part of the reality for some Blacks. This email was sent to me at least six times in the period immediately following the sale of BET to VIACOM; as such, it participates in the discourse on BET. The fact that the six people who forwarded this email to me were all Black and given the context in which it was repeatedly sent—during Black History Month, for example—tells me in some minor way that this email engendered some form of personal meaning among them. While the accusations of excessive greed, ignorance and selfishness by Blacks are indeed important issues worthy of critical deconstruction, it is the direct implication that BET is in part responsible for perpetuating these ideologies that is of primary concern in this project. The email writer asserts, “With the help of BET, and the rest of their black media that often broadcast destructive images into their homes, we will continue to see huge profits like those of Tommy and Nike” [My emphasis]. If one considers the fact that on any given day BET televises at least four times as many infomercials as it does either religious or news and public affairs programming, the arguments that BET’s images allow white corporations to “continue to reap profits from Blacks without the efforts of physical slavery” is at least worth considering.

Furthermore, some important discursive practices that often take place within Black communities may also have a profound influence on the way this text is read. For instance, the recent national craze over the latest Air Jordan tennis shoes may be read as evidence supporting the narrator’s claim of vulgar materialism that cripples African
American communities. Typical of the popular sentiment that Blacks are the most brand loyal ethnic group in America, on the day these shoes went on sale scores of young Blacks flocked to stores eager to purchase them. At one Foot Locker store in Indianapolis, IN, for instance, the manager reported that within the first two hours of the sneakers being placed on the shelf, the store had grossed more than $11,000 in sales from the popular tennis shoes alone (Personal Communication, February 2002). To put this in perspective, this means that at $200 a pair, this store sold on average one pair every two minutes and 11 seconds. In the days prior to the launching, I personally observed several elementary, middle, and high school students attending Indianapolis area public schools conversing about “who is getting the new Jordan’s,” and several of them used their free time to critique and peek at the shoes on the internet. While my ultimate concern here is with the pedagogical implications for critical pedagogy that speaks to the empowerment of Blacks, I am particularly alarmed by the consumeristic reductionism of this email that essentializes Blackness as mindlessness and I am even more interested in the forthright implication that BET is in part responsible for creating this hopeless condition. This commonsense email depicts Blacks as essentially passive consumers and BET is implicated in playing an integral role in promoting this passivity through materialistic images in its music videos and otherwise “mindless” content. Pointing the blame on BET raises some alarming issues about the network that begs for critical interrogation. Does BET endorse or participate in a contemporary “enslavement” of Blacks by promoting the suggested, “IGNORANCE, GREED, and SELFISHNESS?” Or, as has been suggested by some scholars, is the network Afrocentric and liberatory? Is BET a source of
counternarratives? Or does the network merely promote hegemonic and stereotypical representations of Blackness?

Whether this email represents the position of an actual cynical white person, or even if a Black person created it for rhetorical purposes, the email text plays on a troubling and unsettling dynamic that places BET in a crucial role in representing Blackness. Coded within this text, one finds many ideological issues and binary oppositions that need to be deconstructed. As mentioned previously, these binary oppositions may be placed under the umbrella of a mind/body binary code. In the first place, the email suggests that ignorance is a primary reason why Blacks lack any real empowerment in the United States. Contributing to this ignorance, the writer sites aliteracy, a proclivity toward not reading —as opposed to illiteracy, which stems from an inability to read—as the fundamental cause of the alarming levels of ignorance. Ignorance is juxtaposed in this text against intelligence as the primary binary opposition. To give meaning to this argument, the author justifies this ignorance/intelligence binary by employing other important binaries which position Blackness within a series of oppositions such as consumer/producer or passive/active. Blackness is linked within this argument to the docile side of these binaries. Evidence of these binaries can be discerned from the author’s notation that, “Being primarily consumer people, they function totally by greed. They continually want more with little thought for saving and investing.” The implication here is that Blacks are “naturally” consumers, which in this case depends on a Frankfurt school interpretation of consumers as docile, passive, mindless and easily dominated by producers through advertising and marketing schemes. Again, the suggestion is that because Blacks are more interested in the physical body and they do
not utilize their intellectual minds, “Any of us [white people] can use them (Blacks) as our target market, for any business venture we care to dream up, no matter how outlandish, they will buy into it.”

Another critical binary opposition that the author uses as part of this mind/body code is conspicuously placed within a series of statements which position Blackness as materialistic. In other words, not only are Blacks “natural” consumers, there are also “naturally” overly concerned with material wealth and possessions as opposed to spiritual and intellectual accomplishments. This fixation with the material is perceived as excessive and Blacks are perceived as constantly spending to the tune of 10 billion dollars alone at Christmas. The author asserts that this materialism is so ingrained within the psyche of Blacks that “Some even neglect their children to have the latest Tommy and Fubu.” From the perspective of these statements, Blackness is articulated as spendthrift as opposed to parsimonious. This apparently “natural” materialism is linked to an absence of any real status among Blacks who, from the position of the author, “still think that having a Mercedes, and a big house gives them ‘status’ or that they have achieved the American dream.” Do the images on BET promote or represent Blackness in the problematic ways suggested by the author? Is their any evidence of these binary constructions on BET? What other binary codes are suggested by the popular writings about BET?

As mentioned previously, the year following the announcement of BET’s sale to Viacom saw a significant increase in vicious attacks against Bob Johnson and BET. It is no surprise, therefore, that an email implicating BET as a primary source of the “problem with Blackness” would emerge within the public discourse. Much of the criticism over
BET stems from concerns about the programs that are offered on the network and employ a similar mind/body binary code to give meaning to their arguments. This mind/body code was especially popular in the many articles that critiqued BET’s music video program content. BET’s content consists mainly of music videos which are provided free of charge by record companies to promote various albums. According to Johnathon Chait (2001), as recent as 1999, these videos accounted for 50 percent of the network’s daily program diet. Brett Pulley (2001) estimates the percentage of music videos on BET to be much higher and places the figure somewhere in the ballpark of 70 percent. In a personal analysis of BET’s television schedule, I found evidence that supports Pulley’s estimates. More specifically, of the 20 actual scheduled hours on BET\(^{13}\), music video programming accounted for a total of 14 hours (70%). It is mainly these videos that have perplexed BET’s Black audiences.

Chait’s (2001) opinion on the music videos shown on BET represents the perspective of many African Americans and is one in which relies upon the mind/body code. He argues, “Unfortunately, the videos tend to feature the least edifying elements of African American culture—gangsta rappers and booty-shaking dancers” (p. 31). Here, Chait illuminates BET’s focus on the bodies of Blacks and complains that other important elements of Blackness are not featured. Similarly, Yemi Toure (2001), an editor with the Internet-based Center for Blacks and the Media, which monitors visual images of Blacks in the media, also expresses stern disapproval over BET’s music video content. This website has devoted much of its space to an interrogation of the BET Network. In Toure’s words, Johnson has become one of the richest people in America in

\(^{13}\) This figure does not including the infomercials hours, which are not scheduled by BET.
part by “pushing the predominant image of Black males as thugs who only care about
heartless sex and Rolex watches, and the predominant image of females as brainless, and
best known for shaking their behinds.” Similar positions are also shared by many
prominent African American media personalities including 2001 Stellar Award winner
Tom Joyner, a nationally syndicated radio host, Spike Lee, who has been one of the
leading producers of African American films within the last two decades, and Aaron
McGruder, the creator of a nationally syndicated comic strip called the, *Boondocks*.

Joyner is perplexed by the limited programmatic offerings on BET. He criticizes
the social construction of Blackness by the network. “The problem is how BET
represents Black people,” Joyner charges. “They’ve been running the same old stuff for
20 years. Shaking that booty in a video is fine, but you need a lot more than that,” Joyner
argues (Pulley, p. 42). On another critical level, Spike Lee has likened BET and other
mainstream Black-oriented programs to a contemporary minstrel show where Blacks
were often featured as Zip Coon Comedians or Jim Crow-type characters. Lee’s 2001
film, *Bamboozled*, satirizes BET music videos and exposes the materialist, sexist and
racist depictions of Blackness contained within them. Similarly, nationally syndicated
cartoonist, McGruder has charged publicly that, “BET does not serve the interests of
African-Americans” (John Simpkins, 2001). In one comic strip, a McGruder character
asserts he “used to be a firm believer that powerful Black business people would then act
in the best interests of Black America.” But then, “BET shot a few holes in that theory”
(Chait, p. 31). In another, McGruder’s character, Huey, makes a plea to “Stevie Wonder
not to watch BET should Wonder ever get his sight back” (Simpkins, p. 43). In a
November 2000, interview on National Public Radio’s (NPR) *All Things Considered*, McGruder further chastised BET. He notes,

“It’s disappointing to see more offensive images of Black people on a Black network than I see on the white network. You’re talking about a lot of gyrating Black women in virtually no clothing and close-ups on body parts. And considering the burden of the racist stereotypes that we have, I just find a tremendous amount of hypersexualized images of Black women to be just really, really disturbing.” (Linda Wertheimer, 2000)

But it is not as though BET is unaware of these perceptions. According to Toure, in June, 2000, BET conducted a poll on its own website, BET.COM, which asked respondents, “What is the most overdone trend in music videos?” In response, a whopping, “77 percent of its own respondents said, ‘Half-naked dancers’” (Toure, 2001). BET executives have countered that their own research shows that its audience is attracted to the music videos. In fact, in 2001 BET’s ratings were up 23% over the previous year among its core audience of 18-to-34-year-old Blacks (Pulley, p.44). And on June 19, 2001, the inaugural BET Awards received the network’s highest market overnight rating, a Nielsen rating score of 4.26 (Gail Mitchell, 2001, p. 1). These statistics appear to indicate that in spite of popular criticism, BET’s content is very appealing to a cross section of Blacks. More importantly, the arguments put forth about the contents of BET’s music videos may be useful for understanding the mind/body binary code that may be influencing the reading of BET’s texts. In addition to the implications about the materialism that is illuminated in the above email, what these criticisms have in common is a similar concern over an emphasis on “booty shaking” and a relative absence of other
“positive” images of Blackness. This complaint over the emphasis on the bodily representations of Blackness may also be articulated as a construction of Blackness as body, hence mindlessness, as is suggested in the quotations by Toure, Chait, McGruder and Lee. From this perspective, these authors can be said to illuminate a mind/body binary code with particular concern that BET perpetuates colonial ideologies of Blackness as body and, conversely, whiteness as mind, hence supporting the colonial myth that the only Black culture is that which can be found below the waistline. In light of the history of racist stereotypes against Blacks in the media and the power of Eurocentrism to highlight this mind/body trope, it may be important to ask some critical questions about BET. Is there any evidence on the BET Network to support the claim of these critics that BET promotes this mind/body binary? Or does BET provide counternarratives of Blackness that problematize these tropes and binary codes?

**SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY/PROFIT MOTIVE BINARY CODE**

While the focus on BET’s content has occupied much of the public debate, perhaps the crowning moment when sentiments about the network reached their most critical level began in early November 2000, when Johnson announced that he was selling BET to media-giant, Viacom, the second largest media conglomerate in the world behind AOL-Time Warner. In considering the response of the sale to Viacom, it is imperative that BET be understood as a business—big business in particular—whose raison d’être is to make a profit. Therefore, while BET represents itself as Black, its interest in Blackness must be considered against the reality of a need to make a profit. According to Alice Taitt and Ron Barber (1996), BET has three major business goals:

“(1) to become the dominant medium used by advertisers to target the Black consumer
marketplace, (2) to become the dominant medium engaged in the production and
distribution of quality Black-oriented entertainment and information to cable television
households in the nation and (3) to use the power of the medium to contribute to the
cultural and social enrichment of the network’s viewing audience” (p. 187). These goals
often come into conflict with each other as BET’s quest to become the gateway to the
African American community for advertisers clash with its desire to produce and
distribute culturally and socially enriching programs. As the arguments in this section
illustrate, BET is caught up in an important struggle between a requirement of social
responsibility to Blacks and its desire to make a profit.

Discussions employing the social responsibility/profit motive binary code raise
critical questions pertaining to the normative aspect of BET. Many of the writers who
raise these issues articulate their concerns mainly by locating BET within a struggle
between having a commitment to social responsibility to Black communities versus a
vulgar focus on its own bottom line. Given its status as a “Black” corporation and as the
primary source involved in the production of narratives about Blackness, should BET
have a particular interest in challenging the racist stereotypes often meted out against
Blacks in the visual media? Or should the network be primarily concerned with making a
profit? As a “minority” owned and operated corporation, does BET have any underlying
requirement to provide content that is educational and more critical of the dominant
society? What happens if people reject that content? These issues are brilliantly summed
up in a question by Pulley (2001). “At what point—if any—should a corporation’s
raison d’être go beyond creating value for shareholders and entail making the world a
better place to live?” (p. 44). These vexing questions are some of the many which
utilized this social responsibility/profit motive binary code in their critique of BET. In a November 2000, National Public Radio interview, Tricia Rose, an associate professor of African-American studies at New York University, notes that BET “is caught in the contradiction between race and capitalism.” On one hand, race, in so far as it is used to refer to Blackness, is often associated with “communitarianism” while capitalism is predicated upon individualism and profit-motive. Hence, an individual/community binary opposition is utilized to illuminate some of the contradictions BET faces as the primary source of Black narratives within the visual media. As Rose rightly notes, the laissez faire attitude of capitalism often conflicts with the social responsibility tenet that is associated with communitarianism. In some versions of democracy, the rights of the community precede over the rights of the individual whereas capitalism can often infer the reverse with the individual right to the “pursuit of happiness” often taken to vulgar and perverse levels and upheld above the needs of the community. In other depictions, democracy associates with striking a balance between individual rights and freedoms with public responsibilities and some tentative, partial belief in the common good. One’s conclusions about the role of BET may very well be based on one’s perspective of democracy. Ultimately, how BET navigates these contradictory roles become a critical issue within Black communities.

The major argument for reading BET as a socially responsible text stems from an implied commitment that Blacks should bind together to fight all forms of oppression, and BET as a major site in the construction of Blackness, is often regarded as having a “compulsory role” in producing counternarratives of Blackness in order to engender a more just and democratic society. The criticism against BET during the period under
review, therefore, calls into question its commitment or lack thereof to providing such counter-hegemonic images. Sheldon Perry and Raoul Dennis (2000) note that “Johnson has always said he was a businessman and in it for the money. The fact that BET was a Black channel was incidental: He filled a niche in the market -- not a mission from God” (p. 5). Johnson reportedly tells his employees, “We don’t have to reinvent the wheel. We just have to paint it Black” (Chait, p. 31). These comments may be read as suggesting that BET’s content does not have to be counter-hegemonic but merely labeled as Black and that the profit motive should be the driving factor that determines how and what gets shown on the network. In other words, BET has no moral or political obligation to Black communities. This point has been taken on more directly by Johnson himself. Frank Saxe (2001) quotes Johnson saying, “Black media companies have an unfair burden placed upon them by the community to spend more time and money on social issues than general-market media companies do” (p. 78). Furthermore, in a stinging 1992 interview with CSPAN, Johnson attempted to distance himself and BET from any inherent social responsibility to Black communities. He argues,

There are thousands of white businessmen who never get asked, ‘Are you a hero?’ And never are asked what they have given back to the white community. What are my responsibilities to Black people at large? If I help my family get over and deal with the problems they might confront, then I have achieved that one goal. That is my responsibility to society at large. (Chait, p. 32)

This denial of the importance of race in factoring how Johnson should articulate his network is ironic. While claiming that race doesn’t matter, BET paradoxically profits from the sale of racialized narratives. This point is a fundamentally important one
because it illustrates the complexities involved with defining Blackness. Here, without denying BET or his own “Blackness,” Johnson invokes an argument that speaks more to social class as a deflection from the criticism that he does not represent the interest of Blacks. I posit here that in order to fully understand the complexity of BET, one cannot rely exclusively on racial tropes alone, but rather understanding cultural hegemony must be also recognize BET and Johnson as engulfed within a struggle to reach upper class status. While many critics appear to read BET strictly in terms of Black and white, they wrongfully overlook the dynamics of social class that are at the crux of Johnson’s argument.

Nonetheless, Johnson does raise some perplexing issues related to the role of BET in terms of social responsibility. Johnson’s position depends on an acceptance that individuals should preside over their own destinies, which has the ironic effect of diffusing any claims that “race matters.” As Johnson illustrates in this quotation, neither he nor BET has a social obligation to Black communities. His concern for Blacks, in his view, should only extend as far as providing assistance to his family members. Johnson’s classist position is interesting especially when one considers the fact that in the early days of BET he rallied “Black civic and social organizations across the country, urging community leaders to lobby their cable operators to carry the channel” (Pulley, p. 46). In other words, given that an integral part of BET’s success was garnered on the support of Blacks, accepting Johnson’s pronouncements may be somewhat troubling for some. Nonetheless, Johnson leaves open the question of social responsibility: Should Black businesses be expected to carry the weight of social responsibility? Or as Johnson
suggests, should Black businesses be judged merely on the same criteria as white corporations?

While the purpose of this chapter is to illuminate the binary codes that were employed within the discourse on BET during the year in review, my critical orientation requires that this issue be placed within a historical context. One way of addressing this question of social responsibility versus the bottom line binary code is to understand BET as part of a broader discourse which involves a struggle for the empowerment of Blacks, economic, representational and otherwise. Contrary to their hopes and expectations, the Reconstruction period did very little to improve the lot of African Americans and to transform society in any significantly just and equitable way. Though they were a few gains, Blacks in general struggled laboriously to gain any significant economic power by the end of the 19th century. Booker T. Washington emerged at the beginning of the 20th century to become one of the primary advocates for economic empowerment within Black communities. Even though his major mark was in improving the state of education for Blacks, Washington founded the Negro Business league in 1900. According to Benjamin Quarles (1987) “This organization became the colored man’s Chamber of Commerce, whose members might receive encouragement and inspiration from one another” (p. 169). The purpose of the organization was to stimulate Black business and to enable Blacks to compete in the business world. By 1915 there were some 600 state and local branches of the League all across the nation. In spite of Washington’s efforts, On the whole, the Negro was a failure as an entrepreneur. In general the only large-scale Negro businesses that managed to survive were those in fields in which there was no white competition. Negroes had met with some success in the
insurance business, most companies not preferring to “write up” Negroes, whom they considered bad risk. Similarly in the field of banking, Negroes were able to make a good start because white banks tended to discourage the deposit business of Negroes, feeling that it would cost too much to handle accounts which were likely to be both small and subject to frequent withdrawals. (Quarles, pp. 169-170)

Moreover, Blacks tended to do fairly well in businesses that marketed “race products” like the beauty industry where Madame C. J. Walker and Mrs. A. E. Malone had made their fortunes. As Quarles has noted, “the fate of Negro business was more likely to be determined by the economics of buying and selling, of credit and debit, than by the exhortations of Mr. Washington and others” (p. 170). This brief historiography illustrates the struggles that Blacks have long had to face regarding their existence within a capitalist society. As described by Quarles, Blacks had been forced to respond to the oppressive social system by developing their own industries which were then expected to provide a form of support for the Black communities. The same can be said for Black media entities. African American media practitioners have always been particularly concerned with portraying Blacks in ways that counter the dominant representations of the mainstream media. In some ways, then, African Americans have come to expect that a commitment to providing counternarratives of Blackness would drive the programming diet of any Black owned corporation like BET. Understanding this history may be useful for transacting a critical reading of the discourse on BET and its representation of Blackness. Reading this history also helps to position BET in terms of another critical binary opposition that positions the consumer against the citizen. Johnson, in his
disinterest in selling BET as a socially responsible network, may be read as primarily concerned with producing consumers who contribute to the economy by buying into the logic of capitalism. As consumers watching BET, viewers are “enticed” to buy records and CDs of the various artists as well as the multiplicity of other items commercialized on BET. On the contrary, an interest in critical citizenship would be reflected in an emphasis on programming that promotes a form of participation in the polity. These discussions blatantly illustrate that Johnson has no interest in promoting such participation on BET.

**MASTER/SLAVE BINARY CODE**

Another closely related set of discussions over BET speaks directly to the issue of ownership of Black businesses. Many of these discussions employ the master/slave code in order to give credence to their argument. At the center of the master/slave myth is a contestation over the control and representation of images brewing between the master (whites) and the slave (Blacks). Discussions about the ownership of BET in this sense are not limited to contradictions surrounding the bottom line versus social responsibility; they also raise issues about the power to represent oneself and to see oneself other than through the master’s eyes. A critical point to illuminate up front is that despite, the fact that a multinational corporation like Viacom has no single race, the assumption by many is that Viacom is a white corporation and as such, Blacks have lost control of BET to the “white master. Control over one’s representation is seen as empowering and allows marginalized people to become subjects of history rather than the Caliban-type objects who cannot speak for or lead themselves. Continuing from the historical context I presented in the previous section, it should be noted that when BET came into existence
in 1980, Black-owned businesses still struggled laboriously for economic empowerment. It should also be duly noted that while Blacks were making significant strides in radio and newspaper industries, there had been no Black-owned visual entity prior to BET. A large number of these Black-owned businesses catered primarily to the limited African American population and were often forced to merge or sell due to economic pressure from larger, usually white corporations. In their critique of BET, Sheldon Perry and Raoul Dennis (2000) assert, “Black-owned companies providing services or products to Black consumers were, in the latter part of the 20th century, as prone to sell or merge their interests with larger, white-owned companies as with other Black business leaders” (p. 47). They cite several pertinent examples including, “Berry Gordy’s sale of Motown Records in 1988 to MCA and Boston Ventures for $61 million…. [and] Black-owned hair-care companies like Johnson Products and Soft Sheen have been grafted into larger corporate behemoths” (p. 47). While the practice of mergers have become commonplace in contemporary society, Perry and Denis note that the sale of Black companies have particular implications that may not be as relevant to white-owned companies. Chief among the ramifications is a loss of power. “Let's face it,” they assert, “ownership means power, and no matter how shrewd a deal, when Johnson gave up ownership, he gave up power; and in the minds of many [Blacks], our power” (p. 47). Furthermore, in their view, a loss of BET could also mean the loss of a training facility for upcoming Black media professionals. Secondly, they add, such sell-off of Black companies often result in a reversal of hiring practices, from majority Black to majority white which has an adverse impact on employment and income of Blacks. These authors also note that,
There is a sensitivity and balance, particularly by Black professionals who manage Black media, toward the communities and the audiences they target. When African-Americans lose control of editorial and visual content, the product or service is likely to slide into a conveyor belt pattern of producing news and images -- damaging the product's uniqueness and balance…and, the lack of Black-controlled news, entertainment, print and television sources place additional pressure on the few that exist to cover more social, economic and political bases. (p. 48)

Here Dennis and Perry conceptualize ownership of BET in terms of control or being the master over Black representation. Their particular concern is that the sale of BET may mean a move from Blacks being the masters of Black representations to becoming the slaves in terms of their dependent relationship once the network lost its ownership to Viacom. In so doing, Dennis and Perry rely upon the master/slave binary code in order to make their argument meaningful. In other words, Blacks no longer have control over the means of production, therefore, may once again have to rely upon the master’s depiction of reality. They literally move from being knowers, who understands and can articulate their plight, to becoming the known, who now must rely on the master to represent them. This argument also employs the social responsibility/profit motive binary to suggest that a lost of ownership would mean even less interest in addressing programming that is of concern to Blacks and also there would be no commitment to hiring Blacks as had been done while Blacks had control. Similar sentiments are also echoed in this rather lengthy who quote by Makani Themba (2001), who expresses her disappointment in the sale of BET.
Those of us who heeded his [Johnson’s] call to demand that cable companies carry the network were fighting for a space of our own where we could find programming that respected African-Americans, valued our intellects and offered a real venue for discussion. The network's initial offerings were so promising. Great Black films, innovative news and public affairs programs, and youth-oriented productions were a welcome respite from standard TV fare. Now, the network that promised to reflect the breadth of Black images has become one of the worst purveyors of Black stereotypes. Well over half the program day is a steady diet of exploitative music videos and comedy. And even though these changes predated the Viacom deal, in a world where even PBS only reflects us in February, seeing BET come under white ownership is a hard pill to swallow. (p. 20)

In a nutshell, many Blacks like Themba see Johnson’s sale of BET for a whopping $3 billion dollars as the biggest “sell-out” in African American history. An article in Mediaweek carrying the headline, “SELLING OUT OF SELLING UP?” illustrates this sentiment (Verne Gay, 2000). Despite her quivers about BET’s content, Themba admits that a loss of ownership to VIACOM is indeed the most problematic element regarding BET. Moreover, as Perry and Dennis (2000) have cited,

In a recent poll conducted by the website BlackPlanet.com, 52 percent of respondents saw BET's sale as another example of a Black company that sold out. Making more money is one thing, losing control of Black images on the nation's largest cable network geared toward African-American viewers is quite another. In short, many African-Americans believe that having media control over Black
images and culture within a larger culture that often portrays Blacks in negative or imbalanced light is worth more than the relatively short term gains of the Viacom deal. (p. 47)

Again, the commonsense argument here is that in order for images of Blackness to become counter-hegemonic, Blacks must have control over their own representation. Self-production by the slave is perceived as key to any group social or economic empowerment. But for Johnson, becoming the nation’s first “Black” billionaire is worth all of the criticism as he claims the “right” to run his business how he pleases. This highlights another critical binary opposition that further subdivides the master/slave code to include the house slave/field slave relationship. This opposition is important to the above conceptions as it places Johnson as a “house slave” in an antagonistic relationship with the “field slaves.” Both the house slave and the field slaves are portrayed in a struggle for freedom and against oppression. The two groups are depicted as having different conceptions of what freedom represents, Johnson, according to the arguments, is interested in economic freedom for himself and his family and is therefore willing to “sell out” to the “master,” while the field slaves remain grounded in a struggle for community empowerment.

However, it must be noted that discussions about BET are not always negative. As noted earlier in chapter four, mention of BET often evokes mixed feelings among African Americans. In fact, it can be said that BET enjoys a form of love-hate relationship among Black audiences. This ambivalence over BET is summed up by Pulley (2001). He writes,
BET, treasured by some as the only channel devoted to Black entertainment, is trashed by others for a lack of social conscience, a surfeit of off-color comedy and a predilection for music videos rife with flashy cars, abundant cleavage and gyrating derrieres. To many Black Americans, BET is like an ill-mannered relative—dearly loved, but a little embarrassing. (p. 42)

To get a better sense of the complex emotions about BET, consider also the recent rueful remarks of Teresa Wiltz, a staff writer for *The Washington Post*. Verne Gay (2001) quotes Wiltz as saying,

> Many of us have been angry at BET for some time now. We couldn't get with the infomercials, the endless reruns of tired sitcoms, the music videos peddling images of materialism, misogyny and mayhem...We shook our heads at the rump-shaking hootchy mamas and the glorification of the playa lifestyle. But despite all of the disappointments, ‘it was ours’ she added. At least that's the way many Black people saw it. (p. 4)

Again, like Themba, ownership is perceived by Wiltz as the most significant dimension to BET. Troubling as the images may have been, the ability to claim BET as “ours” is perceived as the most important dynamic. As such, both Wiltz and Themba may in some ways be indicating precedence of the master/slave code over the mind/body or the social responsibility/profit motive binary codes. As they read it, neither the bodily and conversely mindless representations of BET nor the emphasis on the bottom line over social responsibility is as critical an issue as the loss of control or ownership to Viacom.

The master/slave binary was also an important code used regarding the issue of ownership in March 2001, when Tavis Smiley announced on the *Tom Joyner Morning*
Show that he had been terminated by BET. Smiley had become a popular household name for his advancement of Black political and economic concerns. Smiley told the approximately 7 million listeners that he was disappointed that he was not even afforded the decency of a telephone call. “Five years, four sentences,” is how Smiley summed up the impersonal note sent to his agent on March 21, 2001 telling of his dismissal.

Immediately, rumors of a conspiracy to silence Smiley spread rampantly throughout Black communities. Consider the email excerpt that addressed this issue in Figure 5.

The letter was framed to position the sale of BET and the subsequent firing of Smiley in terms of a conspiracy against Blacks and made use of the master/slave binary code. As one of its first official acts of business, the new master, Viacom, is perceived as making a conscious decision to rid BET of all dissidents as a way of keeping the slaves in their place. The termination of Smiley, who represents the primary spokesperson of the slaves, is projected as an act of retaliation for his forthright attacks on corporate America and the hegemonic power structures. In response to the rampant criticisms which included several emails and a protest outside BET headquarters in Washington, DC, BET’s founder and chairman Bob Johnson went on the air in a special edition of BET Tonight (March 26, 2001) to set the record straight. In the hour-long interview, Johnson assured viewers, “There is no conspiracy on the part of Viacom to silence Tavis’ voice.” In his rationale for the termination, Johnson repeatedly noted that, “talent and networks often part company.” Johnson was adamant that “I made the decision” citing that BET and Smiley had reached irreconcilable differences, particularly after Smiley made a decision to sell his exclusive interview with Sara Jane Olsen, an alleged member of the Symbionese Liberation Army, the group that kidnapped Patty Hearst.
Calling all Black people

This morning on the Tom Joyner Morning Show, Tavis Smiley explained the reason why his show was cancelled on BET. Recently BET was purchased by giant corporation Viacom and BET is no longer a "Black Owned" network. Tavis Smiley informs all the listeners to the Tom Joyner morning show about important issues that affect us in a negative manner. Through the Tom Joyner morning show, Tavis and Tom got many of us to get out and register to vote and this past presidential election, blacks got out to vote in record numbers.

In 2000, Tavis informed us that CompUSA advocated that black radio stations’ advertisements be sold at a lower rate than white radio stations….After the public support (calling, faxing, writing) the CEO of CompUSA met with Tavis and talked about the issue of advertising fees inequities. Just recently, Tavis and Tom let us know that HBCUs (Historical Black College/Universities) were being dropped from a specific educational committee and would be placed on a subcommittee that would not allow HBCUs to be among the list of institutions to keep money allocated in the way that it always has…. If Tavis Smiley had not let the public know about this fact, HBCU’s would have suffered a big injustice. Rosa Parks’ Congressional Medal of Honor was being delayed but through Tavis letting us know this fact, the public called, faxed & emailed our local congressmen and senators to let them know that we support Mrs. Parks to receive this honor. Tavis Smiley now needs our help. His show’s cancellation is clear retaliation in an effort to SILENCE Tavis and the black community. What can I do to help this effort you may ask --- you can call, write or fax the CEO of Viacom and tell them you want the Tavis Smiley Show renewed. If we don't stand up and let our voice be heard in protest, then other rights and things will be taken away.

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The interview was shown on ABC on March 1, 2001. Johnson notes, “I didn’t see any way we could continue to have a mutually beneficial business relationship under these conditions.” Johnson’s argument was constructed on the position that he, not Viacom’s top wig Mel Karmazin, was the “boss” at BET. On several occasions during the broadcast he repeated that he was still at the helm of BET. Johnson and BET’s president Debra Lee had been retained to run the company for at least the next five years. He also made it clear that he was not a front man for Viacom. In his words, “I make way too much money to be a front man.” Johnson’s insistence that he was still the master and not merely a “house slave” was meant to diffuse any claims by critics that he is merely a pawn for white owned Viacom. Again here the underlying goal is to racialize Viacom and link it to the master. In this regard, Johnson is portrayed as the house slave who still has access to the master’s favor. The fact that Johnson found it necessary to go on air to address the firing of Smiley was read by many Blacks as suspicious at the least. In a Christian Science Monitor interview with Kim Campbell, Ken Smikle, head of Target Market News, a Chicago firm that tracks Black media and marketing, notes, “This is a modern-day version of how black celebrities went on black radio at the height of the Civil Rights riots. Bob Johnson is trying to cool the tempers of angry viewers through a personal appeal. It is pretty unusual for a boss and an employee to do battle over a firing in public this way” (p. 12).

Yet another critical moment in the public discourse over BET when the master/slave binary code was utilized came in the fall of 2001 when a coalition of Black fraternity and sorority leaders gave serious consideration to launching a national boycott of BET. The Council of Presidents, a coalition of leaders from national African
American college sororities and fraternities, expressed grave concern over the way in which BET represents Blackness in its music videos. In a November 28 article entitled “Brouhaha Over BET Continues,” Times Staff writer Greg Braxton (2001) notes that the coalition members “are scheduled to meet this weekend to discuss continuing concerns over videos airing on the black-themed network that feature scantily clad women and rappers bragging about their money, jewelry and sexual prowess. The group has been worried about the impact of the videos on youth.” In a similar vein, Yemi Toure has been arguing that BET perpetuates problematic stereotypes of light-skinned, long hair Black women. The article and the meeting it detailed was meant to distance the fraternity and sorority leaders from a drafted email letter circulating on the internet which linked them to an all-out call for a boycott of BET but illuminated the concerns of BET’s constructions of Blackness. While the concerns of the coalition can be located as part of the mind/body binary code, it also speaks specifically to issues relating to the master/slave binary code. Specifically, it calls to question the representational practices of BET, who as a member of the slave community is expected to act in the interest of the slave. As such, BET is being criticized for failing to project positive images of beauty and decency that run counter to those portrayed on networks owned by the master.

As postcolonial writers have illuminated, the slave has always been sensitive to aesthetic issues. Historically, African Americans have had to contend with stereotypical images produced and circulated within the mainstream media. These stereotypical images, which owe their roots to the white colonial imagination, run the gamut from thieves and rapists, to lazy, indolent and shiftless Blacks. They were effective in constructing and “naturalizing” ideas about Blackness in America. Several scholars have
illuminated the effects of these stereotypes on the psyches and bodies of Blacks. In postcolonial circles, it is generally accepted that one’s self-concept is “derived from other people—their view that one is beautiful or ugly, smart or stupid, human or bestial” (Hogan, p. 46). As illustrated earlier in this project, Blacks have been particularly vulnerable to these criticisms. Postcolonial scholar Horace Campbell (1987) ruefully notes that, “Blacks were forced to deny a decisive part of their social being: to detest their faces, their colour, the peculiarities of their culture, and their specific reactions in the face of life, love, death and art. All this was done so that they would idealize the colour, history and culture of Europeans” (p. 39). Similarly, another postcolonial critic, Walter Rodney (1969) argues that, “The popular version of beauty…suggested that a Black person…was ugly and offensive…Some Black people, both men and women, went to great lengths to look European (p. 33). Stereotypes such as these, according to Michel Focault, function in a way that fixes and stabilizes the body within historical moments as a means of disciplining and controlling subjects. In his ascription of Focault, Craig Owens (1992) writes that the stereotype is a “form of symbolic violence exercised upon the body in order to both assign it a place and to keep it in place” (p. 195). According to Owens, “the stereotype works less through persuasion (the role of traditional rhetoric: ideological adherence, consent) than through deterrence—what Jean Braudillard calls ‘dissuasion.’” These stereotypes promote a form of “passivity, receptivity and inactivity” or “docile bodies” in Focault’s words (1979, p. 195). The visual media, the Cinema and television in particular, no doubt play an integral role in perpetuating these ideologies about Blackness. The fraternity and sorority leaders are therefore legitimately concerned with the stereotypical representations on BET and their potential impact on youth.
Despite the raving concerns about BET, Johnson is somehow convinced that BET provides a valuable service to Black communities. He is willing to live with the public scrutiny citing that, “We understood that we were not running a popularity contest for Hollywood, and we were not trying to be socially redeeming for Black intellectuals. We had the right to run our business the same way that MTV and HBO run theirs” (Pulley, p. 54). He has become notorious for his self-serving employment of race. Chait provides an interesting analysis of Johnson’s contradictory use of race which might shed light on his apparent distancing of BET with Black communities. Chait argues, “Johnson has spent his career converting the moral capital of the Black struggle for equality to his own personal economic advantage” (p. 30). He notes that Johnson uses race when it is convenient for him. Chait writes,

As Johnson tells it, he asks only to be treated like any entrepreneur, Black or white. But he applies his disregard for race selectively. When he’s asked to help the Black community, he’s just a businessman. On the other hand, when Johnson’s own interests are at stake, he portrays himself as a stand-in for Black America. (p. 32)

Chait relies on the social responsibility/profit motive binary to show blatant contradictions in Johnson’s philosophical positions. He no doubt argues that Johnson’s selective use of race is evidence to the fact that BET’s major concern is with making a profit and not providing counternarratives of Blackness. Chait illuminates one pertinent example of Johnson’s contradictory use of race in his recent strategic alliances with President Bush. Politically, Johnson has become a bedfellow with President Bush and has been central to promoting Bush’s conservative agenda. Particularly, Johnson, who
before this was a “friend” to President Clinton, has become critical to Bush’s debate on the elimination of Estate Tax and more recently the privatization of social security. As Chait argues, Johnson’s claim that the elimination of the Estate Tax is in the best interests of Blacks are misleading and illustrates his use of race to buttress his own personal agendas. While Johnson’s family stands to lose millions due to the Estate Tax, in actuality Blacks, who on average make up about 12 percent of the population but are responsible for less than about one-half of a percent of the Estate tax payers, benefit tremendously from government subsidies made possible by income received from this controversial tax (p. 30). Moreover, even though most Blacks do not favor a preference for privatization of Social Security, Johnson recently colored this debate by arguing that privatization is best for Blacks. Again, Chait reiterates that Johnson frames this issue as a race issue in order to further his own personal interest. For his efforts, on May 2, 2001, Bush named Johnson to the presidential commission charged with transforming the social security program. Johnson is now characterized as Bush’s “go-to man” in the Black community (Chait, p. 30).

In this chapter, I illuminated several important codes used in the public discourse over BET. This debate is significant in part because it highlights BET’s role as part of a real struggle over hegemonic and counter-hegemonic representations of Blackness. In the next chapter, I will examine actual BET texts to ascertain whether or not these same codes are being used as well as highlight other binary codes, oppositions, tropes and rhetorical devices that are being used in the representation of Blackness.
CHAPTER SIX:
Organizing BET’s Text: Hypothetical day in the life of BET

In chapters four and five, I illuminated critical background information that may influence the way BET’s texts are read by its mass audiences. The purpose of this chapter is to describe actual texts found on BET in order to pave the way for a critical analysis of these texts in chapter seven. In order to provide such a detailed description, I construct a hypothetical day, which will include segments of programs recorded from the network between December 2001 and March 2002. The day will be described in terms of a personal narrative as I watch each individual program. I describe the format and highlights of each program and illuminate some critical questions as I proceed.

Basically, my goal is to illustrate what viewers may see if they watch BET on a given day. In constructing a hypothetical BET day, all efforts were made to utilize as broad a spectrum of programs offered on BET as possible. As such, I include a variety of programs that viewers can watch on the network throughout the entire week. I also perform a thorough interrogation of these programs with particular emphasis on format, content and particular codes that are used to represent Blackness. In the case of the music video programs, I focus specifically on the format and narratives on each individual program, and restrict the analysis of actual music video content to a detailed critique following the analysis of the various programs. The reason I analyze the music videos separately from the programs is that there is significant overlap between the music video content on the programs. For the sake of reducing this overlap, I describe the particulars which make the various shows unique and illuminate the ways in which Blackness is being represented on the programs.
Figure 6: BET’s Program Content Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>TOTAL DAILY HRS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. MUSIC VIDEOS</td>
<td>14 HRS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. COMEDY</td>
<td>2 HRS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. HUMAN INTEREST</td>
<td>2 HRS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. NEWS &amp; PUBLIC AFFAIRS*</td>
<td>1 HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. RELIGIOUS</td>
<td>1 HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. INFOMERCIALS**</td>
<td>4 HRS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This category represents movies, talk shows or features which vary daily.
** For the purpose of this study these infomercials will not be included in the tabulation.

Figure 7

A typical BET day may be subdivided according to content into six distinct categories: Music shows, comedy, human interest, religious, news and public affairs and infomercials. For the purpose of this study, infomercials will not be included in the analysis, since they are not a part of the actual BET’s programming schedule, but subjected to the discretion of local stations. Figure 6, above, illustrates the total number of hours devoted to each category on a daily basis. Excluding the infomercials, music
videos represent more than twice the total number of all other content combined. I begin this chapter by providing a brief description of the types of programs that make up each category.

MUSIC VIDEO PROGRAMMING

As the name implies, music video programming consists of several music shows that showcase the music videos of a variety of artists as well as interviews, and other information about various performers and celebrities. Figure 8 illustrates the variety of music programs shown daily on BET. In the hypothetical day, I interrogate one segment from several of these programs. As mentioned previously, rather than focus specifically on the music videos shown on each program, I critique the format of the shows and illuminate what is being highlighted in each show. The primary reason for this stems from the fact that the music video content is very similar among most of these programs. In fact, in some cases the same videos can be seen on three or more programs. Despite the similarities in content, however, each program employs its own unique format in order to appeal to its specific audience. For example, Cita’s World uses a sassy, cyber host who keeps viewers abreast of the latest gossip and music videos, while 106th and Park, which is quite similar in music video content, is primarily a top ten countdown show which relies heavily on a live format and the input of its live studio audience. In order to avoid redundancy caused by analyzing the same videos, I first describe what is going on within each program and later do a more specific analysis of the music video texts.
An analysis of BET’s actual schedule reveals that music videos account for 70 percent of its daily programming (Figure 4). That means that on any given day during the week, BET viewers could watch about 14 hours of music videos of the 20 hours of actual BET programming time.¹⁴ These videos are produced by various record companies and provided to BET at no charge. The videos range from R & B to Rap and are an important part of BET’s identity. Despite the fact that the network has gone to great lengths to distance itself from being labeled as a music video station, the large quantities of music video programs may cause some to question the legitimacy of BET’s claim that they are more than a music video channel.

¹⁴ See BET’s web page http://Bet.com/betshows/schedule
COMEDY

BET’s comedy content comes in the form of two main programs: *ComicView* and *The Way We Do It!* Now in its 10th consecutive season, *ComicView* is the longest running BET signature program. This stand-up comedy show is televised Monday through Saturday from 10 p.m. to 11 p.m., and repeated at 1:00 a.m. every morning. The show takes on either a live format, where the MC generally introduces specific performers who tell jokes about any preferred topic, or a more thematic format where excerpts from a variety of comedians on a common theme are combined to offer the viewer a collage of comedy about some issue, person or event. Both formats are set against the background of a live studio audience. As part of their 10th anniversary celebration, *ComicView* is currently being filmed in New Orleans. The zydeco theme music and *ComicView* dancers give this program an “authentic” Louisiana flavor. In the past *ComicView* had its home in Los Angeles, but BET officials made a conscious decision to re-locate after coming into conflict with the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). Concerned about potential exploitation by BET, the AFTRA barred its members from performing on *ComicView*. Their main concern surrounded the remuneration comedians received for performing on BET. At that time, the comedians were paid a meager one-time fee of $150, with no residuals, even if their performances were re-televised on the network. In September (1999) the AFTRA ran ads in various industry magazines and newspapers, which included a petition signed by several members of the AFTRA including Jay Leno, Tim Allen and Richard Pryor, ridiculing BET for what they deemed as unfair treatment. Linda Moss (1999) notes that “In addition to the flat $150, comedians have to pay for their own airfare and hotel rooms when they appear on the show… while other networks cover those costs for comedians”
(p. 16). Subsequently, BET raised the appearance fee to $1000 and relocated its show from Los Angeles, first to Atlanta and more recently to New Orleans where the show is currently being recorded.

Unlike the stand-up format of ComicView where many of the jokes are presented in an impromptu approach or a play on the audience, The Way We Do It! takes on a more satirical or variety show format, similar to In Living Color or Saturday Night Live. Televised every Thursday and Saturday from 8:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., this show highlights some of the follies of living in some Black communities. Comedian Rickey Smiley hosts the show which also showcases live music performances and funny home videos submitted by viewers. I employ one segment each of ComicView and The Way We Do It! as part of my hypothetical day on BET.

**HUMAN INTEREST**

I use the designation “human interest” content to refer to a variety of programs which vary nightly and from week to week. These programs include the infamous Black Star Power movies, which are televised every Monday, Friday (8:00 p.m.) and Saturday nights (10:00 p.m.), Oh Drama!, a talk show which addresses contemporary issues and features prominent African American celebrities which is shown every Wednesday and Thursday night (9:00 p.m.); and How I’m Living, “exploring the lifestyles of Black America’s ‘rich and flossin’” (Wednesdays from 8:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.). Other programs that come under this category include the lifestyle show, Life Track, which sheds light on the everyday lives of plain folks (Wednesdays from 8:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.), and the BET biography program, Journeys in Black, which is aired once per
month. For the purpose of constructing a hypothetical day in this study, I will confine this section to one episode each of Oh Drama! and How I’m Living.

**NEWS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS**

Content for the news and public affairs program derives from BET Nightly News, BET Tonight, Teen Summit and Lead Story. BET Nightly News is a nightly television news magazine show which features national and international news from an African American perspective. It is televised between 11:00 p.m. and 11:30 p.m. Immediately following BET Nightly News, BET Tonight is televised. This half-hour program features important issues and entertainment highlights that are in the headlines. Frequently BET Tonight plays host to prominent celebrities. In the past both President Clinton and former Vice President Al Gore were hosted on the program. President Bush declined an invitation to be featured on the show during his election bid in 2000. Teen Summit represents an engagement of current issues from an African American youth perspective. The teens discuss topics that have relevance to America’s youth. Finally, Lead Story, a weekly television magazine, is televised every Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and repeated at 12:30 p.m. This show features a group of prominent African American journalists and scholars who analyze important issues in the headlines that occurred during the previous week. One segment of each of these programs will be included in the hypothetical day on BET.

**RELIGIOUS PROGRAMMING**

While gospel programming is a constant part of BET’s daily diet, the particular content used for the fictional day was selected from a Sunday broadcast. The decision to
use the Sunday broadcast as opposed to the early morning (6:00 a.m.) broadcast stems from my personal belief that more people watch BET’s religious programming on Sundays because this day is traditionally designated as a day for religion. The programs used to construct a fictional day include *Bobby Jones Gospel, Lift every Voice* and one segment of a religious sermon. *Bobby Jones Gospel* comprises live contemporary gospel performances by the New Life Singing Aggregation and also features gospel celebrities or up and coming artists. Similarly, *Lift every Voice* showcases a variety of gospel music videos and is accentuated by live interviews or information about various artists or events. Moreover, in order to provide the reader with a sample of the religious speakers engaged on BET, I also include one sermon recorded from BET’s Sunday programming. The following is a schedule of the hypothetical day on BET.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Sermon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Bobby Jones Gospel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Lift Every Voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Video Soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Videolink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00 a.m.</td>
<td>NYLA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midday</td>
<td>How I’m Living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Cita’s World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Hits from the Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Rap City: Tha Bassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:00 p.m.</td>
<td>106 &amp; Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Teen Summit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Oh Drama!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 p.m.</td>
<td>The Way We Do It!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00 p.m.</td>
<td>ComicView</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00 p.m.</td>
<td>BET News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30 p.m.</td>
<td>BET Tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midnight</td>
<td>Lead Story</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DESCRIPTION OF HYPOTHETICAL DAY ON BET

It is 6:00 a.m. on a Tuesday morning in early January. Unable to rest, I turn on the television and tune to Black Entertainment Television (BET), channel 62 on my COMCAST dial. On the television is a sermon being preached entitled, “God Has Wonderful Things For You In 2002.” Given that this is the beginning of the year, the message seems timely and the prophetic words speak of an upcoming storehouse of blessings that make the tragedies of September 11 seem pale in comparison. Prior to his actual preaching, Bishop Gilbert E. Patterson extends an offer to viewers. It is for a 2002 calendar which viewers can receive free of charge. He goes to great lengths to assure viewers that the offer is free. He exclaims, “Actually, it does not matter whether you would order today’s message or send a donation or not.” The offer seems tempting, but there is an aura of suspicion that I am unable to overcome. The sermon begins with a brief allusion to the September 11, 2001, tragedies. Bishop Patterson draws upon the emotions of the congregation surrounding the tragic events in order to refute the general belief that life for Americans will never be the same after the terrorist attacks. In utilizing the typical “call and response” format that has come to characterize African American spirituality, Bishop Patterson notes that contrary to popular belief that the freedoms we knew prior to September 11 were gone forever, “God has wonderful things for you, in 2002.” He directs the masses into reciting, “I want you to turn to someone and tell them that, ‘God, has wonderful things for you in 2002.’”

His use of “call and response” may be understood as one of the critical elements that classify his sermon as Black. Black religious sermons are often thought to be set aside from other religious practices, through this distinctive use of call and response, a
strategy where a shout by the speaker or storyteller is often met by a response by the audience. Unlike the monologue that is often characteristic of many religions, the use of “call and response” in Black religions represents a dialogue between the speaker and the audience. The speaker is spurred on and encouraged through the supportive responses by the audience. “Call and response” has been characterized as a significant surviving element of the African oral culture which was kept alive among Diasporic Africans through such practices as religion and signification. On this program, the preacher actively engages the audience by using this strategy often asking, “can I get an amen?” or through the voluntary responses by the audience such as, “preach pastor!,” “well!” among numerous other responses.

The preacher then moves on to read the Biblical scripture which comes from Joshua 3: 1-5. Immediately, a quotation of the verse appears as a subtitle on the television screen. Viewers who don’t have their Bibles handy can, therefore, follow along with the written text on screen. In watching this ceremony, I can’t help but be perplexed by several dynamics. Since this is the first time that I am actually watching a religious ceremony on BET, I question many aspects about the significance and the purpose of this program. The initial questioning is brought to mind by a subtitle on the screen about two minutes into the program. It reads in purple and gold, large font which takes up about one-third of my 27-inch television screen:

TO ORDER TODAY’S MESSAGE #1148
1-800-544-3571

IN MEMPHIS 322-HELP. VHS. $20/ CD $12/ AUDIO $5

The ad or subtitle—whatever you may call it—stays on the screen for about two minutes. It re-appears on numerous other occasions during the broadcast. Immediately, I ask
myself what is the purpose of this broadcast? Is it to provide a form of Black spirituality
that is linked to a struggle for freedom and social justice for the oppressed? Or does it
merely represent a form of religious “hucksterism” and commercialized fundamentalism?
If it is for spiritual uplift, why $20 for a video tape of the program? Why does this ad
keep appearing on screen? Does this program merely represent a commodification of
religion, that is to say, spirituality for sale? I tell myself that in order to spread the “word
of God” in this forum, there are definitely certain costs that are incurred which the church
must somehow offset. From this perspective, it seems somewhat logical to ask for
donations to cover the cost of the tapes, etc. Except in this case, this was not a donation.
This was a price tag. In fact, at the end of the program Bishop Patterson tells viewers that
they must send “at least $20 for a VHS” or “at least $12 for a CD.”

My feelings about the potential commodification of religion are further
exasperated when the preacher abruptly switches "gears" and moves on to the subject of
tithing. He notes,

It is said in the word that the first fruits of all your increase belongs to the Lord.
But you said, ‘I work too hard; I’m not going to give no preacher, in no church,
10 percent of what I make.’ But God said, ‘if you want to be blessed, you’ve got
to move out of your place and go after it’ [the word of God].

I am concerned about the timeliness of this argument. Even as a Christian who tithes on
a consistent basis, his infusion of an argument for tithing seems irrelevant to the context
of the overall sermon and to be projecting the self-serving interest of the Bishop. The
preacher senses similar tensions on the part of the audience. “I notice y’all done got quiet
on me in here. But I want you to know, I’m not preaching for entertainment,” he asserts
to a roaring response of laughter by the audience. “I’m not even preaching anymore for a
living.” While the excitement of the crowd over the Bishop setting the record straight may be read as an illumination of his sincerity, I can’t help but again question the ulterior motive of the program. I begin to seriously consider this idea about preaching for entertainment. I immediately recognize the binary logic that surfaced through his statement, preaching for entertainment versus preaching for soul saving or for salvation.

This can be seen as an authenticity/inauthenticity binary opposition or as true/false whereby the Bishop asserts that as an “authentic man of God” he is commissioned to tell the “truth” and not merely “entertain” the audience. But I ask myself, why then is this program being shown on Black “Entertainment” Television? In a space where viewers may be viewing to receive entertainment, how do viewers consume this religious programming? What propels the Bishop to position himself in opposition to the entertainment preacher? I watch carefully for the remainder of the program, perplexed by these questions. And as the preacher begins to conclude the sermon, I can’t help but ask whether or not his shift to a melodic tone, in which he appears to be rapping to the audience, is not meant to entertain the audience. This melodic strategy is commonly referred to as “hooping” in African American circles. From my point of view, the audience seems very “entertained” by this and responds in kind through their shouts of “amen!,” “preach!,” “yeah!” and other typical responses. While this “hooping” supposedly symbolizes the “Holy Spirit” moving the preacher, I can’t help but wonder if this is not all part of the performance meant to entertain the audience as a way to sell religion though BET.

The experience is not altogether negative, however. The preacher confronts the audience and illuminates the mind/body binary code in a way that challenges the
audience to become active readers of the Bible as opposed to passive accepters of the preacher’s word. In typical rhetorical fashion, he queries the audience:

How many little cults are there that are springing up in our communities where people don’t care about what the ‘word’ says. It’s about what the ‘Rev’ says, it’s about what Bishop says, its about what the Apostle says. It’s about whatever the man calls himself says. And many of these folks won’t even check… I don’t care how much you love any preacher. Let me tell you, don’t take what the preacher says if it don’t line up with the ‘word’ of God. (Patterson, 2001)

Here the preacher sternly encourages the viewers and the congregation to conduct their own Biblical research and to draw conclusions for themselves based on their own interpretation of the Bible not on the word from the preacher. It is an interesting but contradictory encouragement in light of the overall context of the sermon where the preacher uses the “call and response” strategy to engender a form of acceptance and support by the audience. Whereas on one breadth the preacher encourages independent thinking, the rituals of the sermon require the audience to affirmatively respond to the pastor’s affirmation. In other words, within the context of the sermon there’s no room for active engagement but merely a passive response and forced agreement engendered through a tacit acceptance of the “call and response” ritual. Overall, more questions than answers surface following this program. What kind of religion is being offered on BET in the name of Black spirituality? Is religion being commodified on BET? Are these televangelists merely entertaining mass audiences through BET as a way to make a profit? Given its focus on entertainment, is BET an appropriate forum for religion?

Following the religious broadcast, I am treated to another dimension of Black spirituality, the performance of gospel music first on the Bobby Jones Gospel Show,
followed by videos and interviews on *Lift Every Voice*. Unfortunately, these shows only
serve to further exacerbate my critical concerns about the performance of religion on
*BET*. *Bobby Jones Gospel* is a Sunday staple for many Blacks in the United States. This
show has been running on BET since 1980 and is the longest running program on the
network. It takes on a concert format with Bobby Jones serving as the Master of
Ceremonies. Today’s show consists of the performances of many up and coming gospel artists who perform contemporary gospel songs. In watching the show, one cannot help but notice the physicality that undermines the performances. In many ways, the show seems strikingly close to a Hip Hop concert as many of the performers employ codes of dance, fashion and melody in their performances that are quite similar to the performances seen in the Hip Hop music videos. For example, the group Natalie Wilson and SOP Chorale performs a contemporary tune that begins with the announcement to the audience, “Raise yuh hands up! Raise yuh hands up! Raise yuh hands up! Uh! Uh! Uh! Come on and bounce with me, bounce with me, bounce with me. Come on and bounce with me, Uh! Uh! Uh!” In the background, the minimum twenty-member choir provides a visual demonstration on bouncing. Their performance is characterized by symbolic uses of the body such as head-bopping and hand moving to add emphasis to their performance. Throughout the show, one sees numerous examples of these types of performances. Whether this use of the body represents a “movement by the Holy Spirit” as many people would have you believe or merely a stylized performance of spirituality befuddles me.

Another thing that captivates me relates mainly to the flashy jewelry, and casual outfits being worn mainly by the male vocalists. One group who performed a rap gospel selection is clad in head scarves and the long chains on their necks represents a common
“bling-bling” symbol that has become central to Hip Hop culture in recent times. Several other individual performers wear similar necklaces and are clad in baggy jeans outfits and baseball caps. The Hip Hop influence on this aspect of Black spirituality is extremely clear from watching this program. Most of the songs were primarily gospel rap, or remakes of older songs which now carry more up tempo beats that could also be classified as Hip Hop. One could make the case from this program that Hip Hop culture, with its emphasis on style and performativity, is having a profound influence on the way religion is constructed on BET vis-à-vis *Bobby Jones Gospel*. Could this be a particular set of "Diasporic vibes" impacting the way religious sermons are conducted on BET? Could it be a re-appropriation of African discourses manifested in religious ceremonies? Could it be a hybrid between Western conception of performativity [predicated on utility not spirituality] with the way it is mediated by people of African descent?

Moreover, the segment of *Lift Every Voice* was slightly different in its depiction of Black spirituality, but not in any fundamental way that forces me to stop questioning the celebration of Black religion on BET. Today’s program focused almost exclusively on soliciting the opinions of gospel celebrities and provides the viewer with a preview of what to expect at the upcoming Stellar Awards. The program consists of a few Gospel music videos (four in particular) and much of the program simply showcases brief interviews with celebrities regarding expectations and opinions of the Stellar Awards. Some of the questions asked include, what are your expectations for the awards? How do you feel about the Stellar Awards? Overall, even though I recognize that a behind the scenes look at the Stellar Awards may be important to some viewers, I was left disappointed by the focus on celebrities and the relatively few videos shown on the program.
For the next few hours, I am drowned in a sea of music videos. First there is Video Soul Gold. This program may be classified as the site for “Black music classics.” Viewers are treated to a collection of some of the most popular hit songs of the past, primarily the 1980s and early 1990s performed by African American artists. On today’s program, renditions such as New Edition’s, “Mr. Telephone Man;” Shanice’s, “I Like Your Smile;” “Rock Steady,” by the “Whispers;” and Johnny Gill’s, “Fair Weather Friend” take me back to the 1980s. While there are also a few more recent videos, the uniqueness of this program stems from its exclusive display of these former hit videos. For the critical viewer, watching this program provides a moment to contrast the images between early music video productions as opposed to more contemporary renditions. From this perspective, one can see obvious differences in fashion trends, hair styles and despite similarity in the primarily love themes, one sees within these videos less emphasis on bedroom images and the plays with sexuality that are extremely common to more recent music videos. One can also easily notice a difference in the pace of these videos. The advanced technology of today has made it easy for producers to jump through various scenes and the quick, flash images typical of today’s music videos can be contrasted with the slower more focused images, usually of the performers, that are evident in this program.

Following Video Soul, I am humbled by my own ignorance of popular culture as is evident from watching Video Link. Fundamentally, Video Link is a show for the music video “scholar.” Relying heavily on advance split-screen technology which allows for multiple images to be shown on screen simultaneously, Video Link challenges viewers to find the common link between videos. The links appear to be subtle, but by this time I am joined in watching by my three teenage nephews who find humor in watching me
struggle to make the connection. For them, the connection is quite clear and it is a form of pay back for drilling them about the State capitals the night before. In my view, finding the link is senseless. This attitude may very well stem from my ignorance of the subject matter and my inability to pinpoint the links. This is primarily a music video show, but its distinction comes from the challenge viewers receive in attempting to find the connection between the various images. On another level, the show is very informative and characterized by a series of subtitles which flash across the screen providing specific details and alerts to the viewers. These subtitles are characterized by a distinct sound that prompts viewers that some information is about to come on screen. For instance, seconds into the show viewers are welcomed and told what video highlights will be featured on the program. Later in the show during the performance by Maxwell of his hit, “This Woman’s work,” viewers are informed, “Maxwell was born in Brooklyn to West Indian-Puerto Rican heritage. He first began playing music at the age of 11 when a friend gave him a Casino keyboard. He started to compose music and eventually became a regular on the NY club circuit. He signed to Columbia Records in 1994 and recorded his first debut album the same year. This song comes from his album ‘NOW’ which is in the stores ‘now.’” While Maxwell’s video is still playing, in the top left hand corner of the screen appears another visual alerting viewers to “Get ready for VIDEOLINK. Email your answer to videolink@bet.net.” Yet another example of these subtitles gives viewers a preview of rap artist, DMX’s upcoming movie during his, “I Miss You” video. It reads, “DMX TO STAR IN FILM AGAIN: DMX is set to team up with the producers/directors of Romeo Must Die and Exit Wounds for a third time. The new flick is inspired by the 1931 thriller M. The film is about a child murder/stalker who eludes police and police’s search for him cause problems for organized crime syndicates.
So in turn the criminals decide to help the police catch the murderer. DMX plays a crime boss who helps the police.” These short captions are meant to keep the viewer informed about the happenings of particular artists and current news about artists and the industry.

As far as the links go, the first clue surfaces immediately before Erick Sermon’s video, which features Marvin Gaye entitled, “Music.” Viewers are alerted by a computer simulated voice as well as a full screen image which announces, “Get ready for VIDEOLINK.” The next image is in bright orange and yellow. It is seemingly of a tornado or some strong windstorm passing over land at astronomical speed. As it passes over, it forces the yellow, dry grass and the small shrubs to bow humbly in submission. On screen viewers are told, “You are about to break the speed barrier not on land.” At this point, I am unclear of the meaning of this statement but I suspect it has something to do with how fast one can make the connections between the videos. As I watch on, I learn the rules of the game through the next image. It is a full screen image of the Video Link logo, characterized by several lines of small circles running vertically and horizontally across the screen and a small, hammerhead type symbol. It reads, “The single connecting element between 3 or more visual song interpretations. Watch Carefully! Think Logically! Respond Accordingly!” These instructions remain flashing up and down to the top of the screen for the rest of the show. As the video plays in the center of the screen, a smaller version of the video is displayed on the left hand side of the screen. There are boxes for an additional three images. During the song, viewers are again alerted, “Prepare for Video Link.” As the second video is being displayed, Lucy Pearl’s, “Dance Tonight,” the same routine is repeated. Lucy Pearl’s video is the dominant visual element and remains center screen. To the left of the screen their video occupies the second small-boxed image. During this time viewers also see the first video
being shown in the first box and have an opportunity to analyze the images and make connections. This same routine is repeated for the third and fourth songs, R. Kelly’s, “Feelin’ on your Booty,” and Mr. Cheeks’, “Lights, Camera, Action.” Finally, I submit unable to make any connections between the various images. The answer is revealed to me at the end of the show. The common link between the videos is disco balls. I admit that I would have never made that connection.

The next program is NYLA. NYLA brings an entertainment magazine approach to programming. Today’s show features interviews with various African Americans and highlights about specific events. The show begins with host Kathy May-Brown previewing an upcoming play at the Erin Davis Hall in New York City. The show is entitled, Fangs and viewers are given an opportunity to see a rehearsal, get a perspective of what the show is all about from the director and some of the actors. Viewers quickly are treated to an interview about singer Mary J. Blige’s collaboration with Mac Cosmetics in the fight against AIDS. Blige and two other Hollywood celebrities are collaborating in a major fund raising event to support communication and other such efforts to combat the spread of AIDS. It is an opportunity to see a successful Black entertainer in a philanthropic light and to hear her shed light on the importance of doing cultural work such as raising money to fight AIDS. Blige asserts that it is crucial for her to “Be a voice, not just a face on television.” This representation is consistent with Mary J. Blige’s recent image as a moral voice within the Hip Hop community. Blackness is associated here not in terms of only having a capitalist self-interest in making money, but more importantly in terms of a communitarian democratic ethic geared towards the transformation and, in some small but significant way, the eradication of AIDS. Blackness is also projected in an important way when Blige was describing her current
tour. She makes it known that “there’s not much concentration on the visual going on, there’s a lot of singing. A lot of ‘real’ stuff going on.” This distinction between singing and the visual sets up a very important binary that may be useful for articulating the music programming on this network. It is apparent from her comment that singing is being associated with the “real” counter posed against the visual, the “unreal.” These singing/visual, real/unreal binaries do raise some critical questions about the nature of music video programming. Are there any fundamental differences between the singing/lyrics of the songs as opposed to the visual representations in the music video? If so, how do viewers reconcile those differences? When watching a music video, do viewers focus mainly on the visual, the “artificial” or on the singing, the “real”?

From there, viewers are treated to a preview of *It’s All About the Benjamins*, starring Ice Cube and Mike Epps. At first the movie seems troublingly close to *Next Friday*, a show in which both of these actors are cast in similar comedic roles and which, in my opinion, was a major disappointment in terms of popular expectations engendered after the original film, *Friday*. The clip provides a synopsis of the movie from the perspective of Ice Cube who narrates to the audience as various scenes are being shown. In one scene, Epps playfully presents himself as the first Black president. As he hums the symbolic, “Hail to the Chief,” he pretends to be smoking marijuana while sitting atop his convertible. In the final scene of the clip, Ice Cube notes that what it boils down to is that “It’s all about the Benjamins, and I am trying to get some.” Symbolically, this movie’s title and its inferences about the bottom line may be an adequate descriptor for a common ideology that pervades popular culture. The term Benjamins is a reference for money, Benjamin Franklin representing the symbol on the $100 bill, and many popular cultural artists often espouse the rhetoric of using Hip Hop culture or rap music as a way
of “getting paid.” African Americans often also employ this popular and very important cliché in their critique of capitalist ideologies that run antithetical to democratic values. In particular, many African Americans express concern that a vulgar focus on capitalism places too much emphasis on making or saving money and not enough on developing meaningful programs that can help to empower marginalized citizens. The title of this movie serves as a red flag to me and immediately calls to mind a critique of BET, which suggests that the network and its chairman, Bob Johnson, are “All about the Benjamins.” I can’t help but chuckle at this ironic association.

The next scene is a report by NYLA reporter, Mia Butler, of an emerging Hip Hop hot spot thought to be the new entertainment Mecca for up and coming Hip Hop artists. Urban Jamz, located in Atlanta, GA., is a nightclub which showcases new and already established artists. From the perspective of Butler and a few officials she interviewed, Urban Jamz is the new talent discovery showcase in America. The clip featured artists like India Arie and Jill Scott, and Butler notes that it was this spot where these two artists among others were originally discovered. The next two clips represent interviews with popular entertainment celebrities Shamar Moore (actor) and Jill Scott (R&B artist). But perhaps one of the more interesting clips of the show is an interview with Teen Summit’s hosts about their views on the teen-oriented magazine show. In the interview, anchor Jay Cooper and co-hosts Marcelle Kroll and Cinque opine on what makes Teen Summit meaningful to youth. For example, Cooper notes, “This ain’t even no regular music video show, we ain’t doing no fluff or nothing like that. We trying to give y’all (youth) information that y’all can use in your life. We trying to do some positive things.” Later in the segment, Kroll describes, “The show is about how to be yourself.” And Cinque asserts, it’s about letting youth know, “It’s cool to have faith in
God. It’s cool to want to go to school. It’s cool to read books. It’s not cool to want to hang out in the streets.” This segment was perhaps one of the more meaningful ones to me. While the shows overall purpose is to provide viewers with information on the ins and outs about the entertainment world, hearing these youth provide their personal hopes and expectations for *Teen Summit* was a welcome respite from the entertainment dominated aspect of the program.

*How I’m Living* emerges next on BET. From the beginning I am perplexed by this program. It is a celebration of the lives of celebrities and the show is replete with images celebrating excess, materialism and what one of the celebrities admits proudly as gaudiness. Today’s show features interviews with Radio Disc Jockeys Big Boy and Wendy Williams, both hosts of radio programs in New York City. Both Williams and Big Boy, whose name adequately sums up his 510 pounds, invite BET viewers into their worlds to share “how they are living.” Viewers are first treated to an interview with Big Boy as well as clips from various artists whom he interviews on his show. Two of his guests include actor Will Smith and R&B artist, Usher. In his segment with Will Smith, Big Boy playfully engages discourse about his excess weight. Smith challenges Big Boy to get on the scale and agrees to contribute thousands of dollars for every pound he loses. The two engage in wise cracks and witty banter back and forth. Big Boy also convinces the viewer of his overall acceptance of his weight and his refusal to be succumbed to negativity as a result of it. He appears confident and willingly boasts of “living large,” no pun intended, despite the weight. Next Big Boy takes BET into his home and provides viewers with an emic perspective of his world. He begins by taking them inside his Recreational Vehicle (RV). It is a cozy refuge equipped with a bar, several mirrors laminated throughout and nine television monitors. Parked beside this RV are two
additional vehicles including a Suburban, which Big Boy proudly displays the various automatic functions included in the vehicle. Inside his multi-room mansion, viewers are able to get a first hand look at what it means to live the life of a celebrity.

The same format is repeated with Williams. She explains the content of her show, sources of information for radio talk show and then takes viewers inside to examine her stately home. Like Big Boy’s viewers are given a room-to-room tour and Williams willingly points out the expensive items she has accumulated. At one point she says, “This is gaudy. My mother, who is equally gaudy, pointed this out to me the other day. She said, ‘Wendy, you can stand in one section of your house and see four chandeliers.’” Pointing to each one individually, Williams boasts, “One, two, three, four. Kinda gaudy but I like it that way.” Overall, the show’s emphasis on giving viewers an inside look of “Black America’s Rich and Flossin” is somewhat troublesome to me. The emphasis on excess and materiality represents a reckless celebration of the gaudery that has come to be such an important aspect of the “bling-bling” Hip Hop culture.

Surprising as it may be to some, Cita’s World, the next program on BET’s schedule provides some of the most thought-provoking segments I have seen on BET so far today despite of its excessive focus on music videos. Fundamentally, this is a two-hour long music video program but very different in format from other typical BET music shows. The show is hosted by a sassy, computer generated cyber host, who advertises herself as a “bomb Black woman.” Every day Cita chooses a particular controversial issue and provides an unequivocal critique through her Sassy attitude, street parlance, witty use of Black urban vernacular, rhythmic display of dance moves and creative uses of the body. She is to the point and spares no emotions in her unrelenting
rebuke of issues she finds unacceptable. Today Cita addresses the body politics
revolving the issue of excessive use of thin women in music videos. She asserts,

    I notice something the other day that I’m sure a lot of y’all already notice. I just
got to talk about it on TV and a lot of y’all can’t. So listen to hell up! Why is it
that sistas is trying so hard to get that skinny Hollywood model shape going on. I
mean what happen to be proud of your feminine back. Now e’rybody trying to be
MS. Six O’clock, straight up and down. Ya’ll know I can’t relate to that, but I can
relate to these fat ass videos.

Her language is considered by many to be vulgar; her tone is loud and celebratedly
“ghetto-fabulous” and is bound to repulse many viewers. Yet her critique is fresh and
matches my own concerns about the obsession with thinness that seems to be becoming
more commonplace amongst African American females, particularly those seen in music
videos. The fact that she is critiquing the images in these music videos is very refreshing
since it had previously occurred to me that such potentially problematic images are going
unnoticed by the general public and critical scholars in particular. As part of the show,
Cita also reads letters from viewers concerning similar topics. Today’s letter reads:

    Dear Cita,

    I am what you would consider a thick girl. The reason I am writing is because I
was at this club and this girl try to crack at my man. I guess she thought that since
she was one of those skinny, weave-head chickens she could take him from me. I
told her she look sick and she needs to gain some weight before I stamp a mud-
hole in her forehead. Girl, don’t you know she had the nerve to put her hand on
me. I snatched off her weave and blackened one of her eyes before the bouncer
had dragged me out. Don’t you know my man stayed in there with her; I ain’t
heard from him since. By the way, I heard he talking to her now. Cita, should I
knock him out, too, or should I catch them both at the club and beat both they ass.
Cita’s reading of this letter is interesting. As the words of the letter flash across the
screen, one can’t help but notice the disparity between the Standard English in the letter
and the highly dramatized vernacular codes being used to convey the message by Cita.
Her mixture of “obscene language,” sassiness and attitude is a way of giving this letter a
particular tone of Blackness. In a sense one could say that she was valorizing a particular
version of Black vernacular but could be read as engaging in gossip, hence, perpetuating
the myth of the gossiping Black woman. While it may be difficult to admit that her
critique of the gendered bodily representations in the music videos is an important one,
two other things are befuddling about Cita’s World. The first deals with the issue of the
reliance on a computer-animated figure to offer a critique on this very important issue.
The second related concern is the use of stereotypical, vernacular codes to articulate that
critique. There is legitimate cause to be concerned about how these images are
interpreted by BET’s audiences given that it is being presented by a sassy cyberhost
whose signifying practices may be deemed as stereotypical and vulgar by viewers. Are
viewers paying attention to her important critique? Or do they merely play her off as a
fictitious character whose comedic and direct approach is only meant to entertain as
opposed to challenge representations? Why is this not a “real” woman? How would
viewers react to a real woman using such language or signifying Blackness in these
stereotypical ways or, more importantly, a “real woman addressing these issues in an
“intelligent” manner? Would she be perceived as too threatening? These are crucial
questions worth considering.
In total, Cita appears about five times during the two-hour long show. During her third performance she notes,

For those of you just tuning in... We was talking about this trend that has weaved its way into our community... My daddy always used to tell my brothers, 'boy, it ain't the beauty; it's the beauty and the booty. Nowadays it seems like the less rotunda you got, the more attractive you are.... Let me get this straight y'all, I ain't mad because I understand that fitness is pertinent to well being. Drink lots of water, brush your tongue, eat your vegetables, I know 'bout all a that. But if you're a little fuzzy-ass Ally McBeal type, sisters that got me working. Eat a meal or some thing.

And in her final appearance she asks viewers to imagine

... there was this secret rappers island, where all the girls are built like Gloria Valez or who ever her name is. “Video hoes,” O.K. And they all walked around in thongs all day. The fact of the matter is, it’s the same girls in these videos, taking turns to be head “video hoes.” Ain’t no whole lot to this y’all; they just recycle them. It’s just that if rappers were smart enough, they’d be biggin’ up the sistas that was down with them when they ain’t had no advance check, O.K. When they wasn’t all the ice-ice and the cars-cars and all the flossy, floss. Keep it real.... Now let's be true to yourself, the models may be the ones you stick back there in your videos, but that ain't whatcha got at home. Let’s keep it real, shall we!

Cita’s World is immediately followed by Hits from the Streets. BET’s website, BET.COM, describes Hits from the Streets as the following: “This funny music video/comedy show does everything you didn't think it would and more.” As is
suggested by the title, the background for this program is the streets. While the major purpose of this program is to show music video “hits,” the highlights of this show stems from a series of short scenarios which the hosts perform or ask others to perform some form of ridiculous behavior. These short segments provide the show with its defining character. Everyday the show’s host known only to many as “Hits,” pays a surprise visit to a college, city or town armed with his camera crew and a slang word of the day. An audience member submits the slang word of the day as representative of that particular area. The key to the show is to catch ordinary bystanders or passersby off-guard and ask them to define the word. This is done usually in a humorous yet potentially invasive manner. In some cases, the hosts develops some humorous theme and dramatizes it by approaching ordinary people in the street and acting out in absurd ways. Home audiences often hear the under the breath or the secret comments of the host or in some cases descriptive statements flash up on their television screens about the respondents or the host.

Today’s show is being televised from Miami, FL. Hits announces, “Hello Ladies and Gentlemen. Today’s word of the day is, ‘laying pipe.’ Definition: a guy putting it down the right way.” The sexual implications of this word are obvious. In the first scenario, Hits approaches two young African American males and queries them about the word of day. He asks, “If your buddy over here ask you would you lay pipe with him, and he’s your partner would you do it?” Both men agree that it would be an acceptable proposal. He then asks a white foreign tourist the definition of laying pipe. Struggling to explain in English, she responds, “I don’t know, I’m not English. I’m not American.” For some reason, the show seems fixed on this scene. In the next half-minute they repeat this exact scene a total of three times in between queries with other passers by, usually
white. What is the fixation with this image? Is it a way of playing with whiteness or challenging its often perceived authority by highlighting its eccentricities? The segment is completed when an African American responds, “It depends on if you’re a plumber or a playa.” “What do you mean,” the show’s host asks to which the respondent asserts, “When a plumber lays pipe you might pay him $40. When a playa lay pipe, he receives $40.”

Meant for personal and private usage, the majority of these slang words used on the show have gained common sense meaning to a specific population but by designating them as slang, they are supposedly confined to highly particularized usages. Henceforth, by publicizing these words and making them available for public consumption removes them from their informal, local context and places them within a new context. The show relies heavily on irony and the buffoonery of the host. Part of the issue for respondents is caused by the surprise of being video taped and audiences can expect the show’s host to ask respondents to demonstrate some form of ridiculous behavior. The show opens everyday by showing a demonstration of these behaviors, which included the host smelling people’s feet, or jumping onto the back of a moving car. In fact, such rituals characterize the show. One of these rituals is the “Act A Fool” segment where participants have the opportunity to act a fool. In today’s segment the show’s host caught up with two ladies on a college campus and provided them with the following scenario:

You just came down here as an exchange student to stay with her. She doesn’t speak any English. She only speaks Spanish. It’s your time of month, flowy, flow, flow, the ‘reds’ are in town. You need to walk up to somebody who speaks
Spanish and tell them to relate to her that you need a tampon because she only speak Spanish, O.K.

The ladies agree to “act a fool” and the camera operator follows them as they try to solicit a Spanish interpreter who could convey the information. After finally finding some person, the scenario climaxes as the Spanish-speaking roommate responds, “No Comprendo,” to the interpreter. It then becomes obvious to the translator that she was actually speaking to an English speaker and that this had all been part of a joke. The show prides itself in utilizing this absurd type of irony and the zany approach by its host to create a relationship with its audience. Because the show is constructed in the name of humor, audiences may be willing to suspend the intrusiveness or the apparent attempt to ridicule whites that have become characteristic of the show. For example, in another scene on today’s show, the host approaches an older white, or Latino, seemingly homeless man, who apparently does not speak English. It is part of his Miami Lice scenario. He calls him crumpy. “Excuse me, I’m Jacob Michael Thomas, Miami Lice Investigation. We’re checking for lice. Can I check you for lice.” The man agrees. Armed with a magnifying glass, a comb, tweezers, a pair of gloves, and a spray bottle the host then proceeds. “If I find a hole bunch of them it’s OK to spray your hair, yes?” The man responds affirmatively. “You gay, yes.” “The man queries, gay?” in an unintelligible tone. The host, repeats, “You Gay, yes?” The man unsure how to answer, mumbles something in an unintelligible tone which the hosts concludes, “You gay, Ok.” The host then places a plastic shower cap over the man’s face, counts to three then removes it. By this time the camera has zoomed in directly on the man’s face and once the shower cap is removed his eyes are opened to an imposing camera. For the rest of the show, the man
accompanies the host and he has him flash faux gang signals and repeat ridiculous sayings.

*Rap City the Bassment* immediately follows. Like Cita’s World earlier, it is a two-hour-long music video show. There are, however, major differences. Hosted by Tigger, the show is set in a basement and in the background Tigger always has a guest DJ who discusses some particular project. Tigger usually sits casually on a couch and can often be seen playing video games on television. This causal basement set-up is part of what defines this show from other music watching video shows on this network. Even more defining, the show features guest Hip Hop artists who promote their CDs, tours etc. The guests also play video games and eat food prepared by Tigger’s mom—or Mama Tigger, as she is poetically called. Other than the information on the artists’ CDs and tours, there is relatively little substance in this program. What qualifies for Black masculinity may be summed up as a childish display of Blackness. The entire hanging out in the basement, playing video games and watching/listening to music videos may be read as profoundly stereotypical. *106 and Park*, BET’s most celebrated program, follows *Rap City*.

“106 and Park - Free and AJ interview the industry's hottest talents and countdown the days top videos voted on by you.” — BET.com

Of the numerous music video programs, *106 and Park* is the most successful. As the above quotation suggests, *106 and Park* highlights the top ten most popular videos of the day as well as interview popular and emerging African American stars. Named after the Harlem, NY., street in which the new BET music production studio is headquartered, *106 & Park* is the most popular and the highest rated of BET’s total programs. It is
televised daily at 6:00 p.m. (Eastern Time) and the Encore is repeated the following day at 11:30 a.m. BET officials often tout this program as the highest-rated music video countdown show on television. Part of the appeal of *106 and Park* stems from its interactive format and engagement with its home and live studio audience. For instance, *106 and Park*’s viewers select the top-ten videos from a pre-selected list, which are then aired on the program. To do this, viewers have the option of either voting on BET’s website, BET.COM, or by calling the toll free number (1-800-617-LIVE).

The show’s host Free and AJ celebrate the audience as the, “livest audience” on television. On today’s show, the audience is kept engaged from the beginning as the hosts announce the various groups, cities and organizations that are being represented in the audience. The audience receives this with tumultuous roars. In between each video, the hosts find some unique way to engage the audience. In the second segment, the hosts are sitting directly in the audience armed with their microphones. “Right now we are just here chilling with the livest audience. How y’all doing.” The crowd responds with the usual boisterous roar. Free then gives a “shout out” to people celebrating a birthday in the audience and interviews one of the patrons from Savannah, GA about his organization. The next video is introduced from the audience.

While *106 & Park* comprises mainly of top ten videos, each episode also showcases an “Old School Joint,” “New Joint,” and an interview. It is a way of appealing to viewers through nostalgia as well as providing them with a first look at upcoming videos. Free and AJ also keep the audience engaged by highlighting these Old and New School performances as well as upcoming guests on the show. Today Free introduces the new video by stating, “My man Baby and Many Fresh are going a stop by. They’re going to bring a new joint. It’s called, Still Fly.” AJ adds, “Still Fly. Still bling-
bling, flossy, floss, doing their thing.” Free joins in, “I’m telling you, I check the couch for diamonds every time they leave.” This is especially interesting when one considers that even though this is a relatively new song, they are encouraged to live up to an “established” lifestyle complimented by radiant diamonds. AJ then introduces the “Old School” song. It is Oran “Juice” Jones’, “The Rain.”

In one segment, the host solicits an audience member to come to the stage. “Come here Nelson. Come here for a second. Do that dance, you were doing when that song was playing.” Nelson, a white boy from Savannah, GA., then starts to dance. It is a comically awful sight. He is way off beat, but watching him smacking his own butt and his serious facial expressions are enough to win encouragement by the audience. “Go Nelson! Go Nelson! Go Nelson,” the crowd chants in support. Meanwhile, Free, unable to contain herself, tells the audience that Nelson is AJ’s cousin as a way of soliciting more laughter. While I smile at this idiotic display, I can’t help but consider the insinuation that whiteness may be represented here as without rhythm and without soul. Conversely, the underlying code here suggests that Blackness, as the discursive opposite of whiteness, is all soul and all rhythm. Meanwhile, Nelson’s dance moves remain as the topic of conversation on at least another two occasions on the show.

Another way BET engages the audience is by soliciting responses to trivia questions about videos or artists. This is usually done to introduce the upcoming video. These questions often range from performances an artist has made in the past to other important facts or historical information. On today’s show, the audience members are given a quote, “Chicks that romance me, don’t tickle my fancy.” It is from P. Diddy featuring Usher and Loon, “I need a girl- Part 1.” After several guesses by audience members, one finally gets the answer and the video is introduced. Perhaps the logic
behind this live, engaging production format is to engender an identity between BET
viewers and the personalities that they listen to on the radio or on CDs. This being the
case, 106 and Park provides a virtual moment for its audience to meet important
entertainment personalities and to learn valuable information about them. To viewers,
the productions on 106 and Park may be deemed as meaningful and valuable since they
provide vital background knowledge that they might not have learned elsewhere.
Moreover, by including actual viewers and audience members in the production of these
shows, 106 and Park may be creating an important association with its audiences. These
programs become meaningful because viewers and participants come to believe that they
can have a say in BET’s content such as which video becomes number one or even who
is hosted on the program. The emotional appeal that comes from knowing that the video
that one votes for is declared number one may perhaps reinforce feelings among BET’s
audiences of proper taste and of being in-tune with the latest.

In addition, today is Freestyle Friday on 106 and Park. This provides two
audience members, usually the returning champion from the previous week and a
challenger, an opportunity to contest each other in a rap-off session live on national
television. Today’s returning champion appears to be Asian American. AJ explains the
rules. “Absolutely no cursing. One y’all curse, you automatically disqualified. You
have 30 seconds to do your thing. When you hear the beat, stop rhyming.” Again the
audience is engaged in the decision of the winner, but ultimately the champion is decided
by one of BET’s three guest judges. The impromptu rival between the two rappers is
engaging with each other taking wise cracks at each other. Ironically, “Nelson,” the
white dancer from Savannah, GA, is referenced in one of the raps for the third time since
his rendition.
Yet another strategy is to read the email or posted comments of its audience members live on the air. It is clear from the format, that BET’s goal is to provide viewers with a sense of ownership in 106 and Park. By providing them with several opportunities to participate, BET’s 106 and Park may be striking an important chord with its young audience.

Following 106 and Park, it is time for Teen Summit. This half-hour teen magazine show is one of BET’s most influential programs and can be classified under the news and public affairs programming. BET often advertises this show as the recipient of a Department of Education Award for Excellence. Today’s program addresses the issue of cliques in high school and engages youth in a dialogue over cliques. The segment is based at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles, LA. In these segments, hosts Marcelle and Cinque spend three days at the school exposing some of the cliques which include: “Cheerleaders,” “Gangstas,” “Jocks,” “Piss Drunks,” “Punk Rockers,” “Slip Knot Heads,” “Goths,” “Barbies,” “Wiggers,” “Greasers,” “And 2,” “Irresistibles,” “Super Sonic Brothers,” “Ska Dudes,” “Skaters.” The hosts introduce the various cliques and then spend a few minutes talking about their own individual experiences with cliques in high school. The show consists of interviews with members of various cliques and engages them in definitions of other groups. The hosts also spends time engaging a representative from select cliques by asking questions such as, do you hang out with people from other cliques? What do you think about a select clique? The show is all about calling to question the practice of developing cliques by highlighting important problems with stereotyping. Ultimately, the conclusions drawn about stereotyping individual cliques could lead to an engagement with stereotypes of Blackness.
From the youthful focus on high school cliques, BET then takes me to a more mature subject of religion on the human-interest show, Oh Drama! Oh Drama! is an informal talk show that tackles many controversial issues. Tonight’s program, “Saint or Sinner,” addresses the origins, rightness and constructions of religion. Guests on the show include Stephen Hamilton, a Christian minister, Bobbie Kirkhart and her daughter Monica Davis, both atheists, Knowledge, a five percenter and Prince Asiel-Israel, a Hebrew. The show’s hostesses Kim Whitley, Julissa Marquez and guest hostess Sheryl Underwood who is standing in for regular host Vanessa Bell Calloway, open up by illuminating their experiences with religion. Julissa admits that she grew up in the church but rejected it in order to experience other things; she later returned and gained new meaning from religion. The other two hostesses both claim to be devout Christians.

Bobbie Kirkhard, a white atheist explains how she came to reject Christianity and become an atheist. As a social worker in downtown L.A, Kirkhard claims she dealt mainly with oppressed African American women: “This experience caused me to really question the nature of the God I was thought to worship. I could not believe that the almighty, all-powerful God, would allow people to suffer that way” Kirkhart contends. As the crowd boos in disapproval, immediately, Sheryl Underwood interrupts, “Wait a minute, you trying to say that you came down to the hood and you saw poor Black people suffering but still praising the Lord and you decide to become an atheist?” Kirkhart counters, “I’m saying I was seeing people putting all their money in the offering and refusing to feed their children. That’s oppressive.” Interrupting again, Underwood opines, “I’m sorry y’all but that’s some racist liberalism.” Similar tattling and personal attacks earmark the remainder of the show as the hostesses engage guests on questions such as, “Is there one right religion?” “Does God exist?” “What color was Jesus?”
“What color are the people in the Bible?” “Is Christianity a Black or white man’s religion?” Or “Do people need to be saved to go to heaven?”

Tempers are flared, voices are raised and sometimes it is impossible to follow the dialogue as the guests try to talk over each other. One thing that is clear to the critical viewers is that in spite of the various religions and religious ideologies represented among the guests, Blackness is overwhelmingly depicted as spiritual, religious and moral, whereas whiteness as is represented by the two atheists and through the various criticisms of “White Christianity,” is seen as the discursive opposite. This is clear from the defense of God and Christianity by the various Black guests and the outright claims of the non-existence of God by Kirkhart and her daughter Monica Davis. At one time, Kirkhart intimates, “I’m sorry y’all, but what kind of God would murder his own son? I’m sorry, I can’t worship a God like that.” Many of the responses are simplistic and in some ways troublesome but the show, in general, is interesting.

The next two BET programs, The Way we Do It! and Comic View are both comedy programs. Watching these two programs back to back provides the average BET viewer with an opportunity to see and hear some up and coming comedians. As mentioned previously, The Way we Do It! takes on a variety show format similar to In Living Color or Saturday Night Live and Comic View is more of a stand-up comedy. The Way we Do It! is multi-segmented and explores various themes through the use of parody. The various scenes include a cab scene with “Gus the Cabbie,” a live radio talk show scene; “Phone Jones,” with Mad Maggie and Irritated Irene; Doin’ it With Delicious, a supposedly culinary show with extreme sexual overtones; Spoken Revolution, a live poetry reading segment; Word on the Street, a news magazine; Cell phone friends, Rolling with da homies, Playa Dawg, Mobb Boss, Freeze Tag, Soap Dish,
and Funny View. In typical variety show format, there is no connection between the numerous scenes. The one commonality is the use of parody to ridicule some aspects of Blackness. To do this, the actors play on stereotypes that have often been used to describe African Americans. The Phone Jones segment epitomizes this approach to parodying Blackness. The names of the host themselves, Mad Maggie and Irritated Irene, suggest to the viewer the ridiculous nature of the program. The subject in this segment is “booty call” and a guest, who claims to be French, accompanies the hostesses and whose name they pretend not to be able to pronounce and whose Frenchness they question. The hostesses begin with the usual response, “Caller number one, what the hell you want.” They pretend to be rude, obnoxious, irritated and mad, stereotypical Black people. The caller responds,

How the hell you doing there Mad Maggie and Irritated Irene? Hi my name is Bartholomew and I’m from Tulsa, Oklahoma. I just had my first booty call two days ago and it was very, very exciting. Only thing, the girl took me to her house, she had whips, chains, a hammer, a saw and the cutest little sheep. Is that normal or is that just me?

Irritated Irene tells the caller, “I think it’s just you” but she refers him to her expert, French host. He asserts,

First of all, you said she had the whips and the chains and a little animal, it was a sheep. Well, I guess that’s not too bad. In America we have the doggie style.

Perhaps if you try the sheep style it won’t be that ‘baaaad.’

The segment, and the entire show for that matter, is replete with similar allusions to sex. The second caller, for instance, calls the program from the county prison. That’s
probably my cousin Ray Ray calling trying to get me to bail him out, Mad Maggie assumes. Nonetheless, she agrees to take the call. The male inmate responds.

First of all, I’m not your cousin, but I’ve had him a couple of times. My question is how do you tell your cellmate in a nice way that you have a headache and you’re not in the mood for a booty call?

The obvious reference to homosexuality and prison life is clear. It is also a play on the adverse experience many Black males have with the penitentiary system. A similar use of sexual references was done in the “Doin’ it with Delicious” segment. As a viewer, I was expecting the parody to be culinary oriented. Ironically, Delicious demonstrates to viewers how to use a turkey baster for contraceptive purposes. As he puts it, the segment is to help promiscuous people “in times when the condoms don’t work.” He calls it the go-getter and provides viewers with a visual demonstration on how to use it to extract sperms. Further sexual references also surfaced in the “Word from the Street” segment. This news magazine segment presents the perspectives of a conservative Black bourgeois journalist who has great contempt for lower class Blacks. He shows this contempt through in noting, “That’s why I’d don’t agree with that ‘Affirm Law.’ What’s it called, Affirmative Action.” In his news highlights of the day he focuses on a news item about a new law in Tampa, Fl. which states, “strippers can’t come within six inches of a customer.” It was an obvious reference to sexuality and this becomes clearer when his guest asserts, “usually they can’t come within 14 inches of me.” It is a play with the myth of the Mandingo warrior.

Other than sexuality, there are two other references to Blackness that may be of interest on this program. Both employed stereotypes of beauty in unique ways. The first emerged in the scenario on “Cell Phone Friends.” Two friends sit beside each other
under hairdryers at a beauty parlor talking to each other on cell phone. In comes another African American lady and asks another person to tell the hairstylists “I’ve already washed and conditioned my hair. All I need is a little bump.” Immediately, the two women engage in gossip over the lady’s hair. Unable to contain their laughter, one notes, “She look like she been in a fight with a grizzly bear.” The other one replies, “She gon’ need a whole lot of jerry curl juice and a perm to get a bump on that head.”

After the lady angrily walks out, in comes an older lady claiming to need her weave tightened. The two friends begin to engage in gossip once again. “Did you see the asymmetrical on her head? It is so messed up. The lady responds, “If I wasn’t a Christian, I’d whip both your asses.” And, as she turns to walk away her weave falls embarrassingly to the floor. I am appalled by this scenario because of its engagement with the politics of hair that has always been a critical element among African Americans. It forces me to question whether hair still matters to African Americans in determining what is considered as beautiful. In a similar vein, I am reminded of the hair and colorism issue as determinants of what is considered as beauty when the protagonists in the Mobb Boss scene asks, “Are you laughing at me, Ms. Light Skin, Miss Straight Hair? You think you pretty?”

Once this notion of long, straight hair as a precondition for what is considered to be a beautiful Black woman is brought again to my consciousness, I can’t help but look for similar representations in the segment on Comic View. The show begins with a rendition by the ComicView dancers. They all have long hair, some of it probably sewn, braided or glued on. On the stage, two girls are seated enjoying the show. They too have long hair. It isconcerting that this is the only or rather dominant representation on
ComicView. Even when the camera zooms in on women in the audience, they seem to focus exclusively on women who fit that mold.

In terms of the actual content, Comic View usually takes on one or two formats as mentioned earlier. Tonight’s program employs a collage format, which consists of several clips about various themes, mainly political in nature. The show represents several intercut images and jokes by various comedians. Some topics highlighted on this particular program include President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinski, Jesse Jackson’s affair and subsequent announcement that he has a child outside of wedlock and Al Sharpton’s announcement that he will be running for political office in 2004.

The first set of excerpts focused on President Clinton. Jokes are often interrupted with a quick snap shot of the audience laughter. The jokes in this first section parody President Clinton. It begins, “Y’all put your hands together for the Black president of the United States.”


COMEDIAN TWO: (Parodying President Clinton, this time with a Jamaican accent): America, how ya been? I am your president Delroy Banton Clinton. (INTERCUT, back to comedian one).

COMEDIAN ONE: As many of you know, I was getting a lil’ some’n, some’n ma self. I was creepin’. I was tappin’ the Ill na-na on the down low. True dat, True dat. What I did was not right. In fact, it was my bad. (INTERCUT, Comedian Three)

COMEDIAN THREE: Basically, this whole situation is ridiculous. I cannot believe that the people of the United States of America (Gesturing to a laughing crowd). Be quiet hootchies. (INTERCUT, Comedian four)

COMEDIAN FOUR: I did not have sexual relations with that woman. (INTERCUT, Comedian five).
COMEDIAN FIVE (Singing): Cause I’m just a Bill, Kicking and Freaking everything on Cap-it-ol Hill (INTERCUT, Comedian six).

COMEDIAN SIX: So Mr. President, are you admitting that you had sex with Ms. Monica Lewinski? No, Jerry, that’s not what I’m saying. What I’m saying is, I penetrated, but I didn’t pump.

These few excerpts highlight some of the many “jokes” told on BET about President Clinton. They are meant as commentary on his controversial affair with Monica Lewinski. It becomes obvious to the critical viewer that there was much support for Clinton among the comedians in spite of his actions. Take the following jokes, for example:

COMEDIAN SEVEN: And for Lewinski for keeping stains on your dress for ten months, you is the nastiest little slut hoe…Talking bout she couldn’t find the dress it in her momma’s closet. Yo mamma a nasty hoe, too. (INTERCUT, Comedian eight).

COMEDIAN EIGHT: (Falling to her knees) Oh Mr. President, what can I do? What can I say? Wait a minute (by now lying on the floor with legs in the air) hold on, hold on, hold on. (INTERCUT, Comedian nine).

COMEDIAN NINE: We need to make Bill ‘Pimp of the Year.’ (INTERCUT, Comedian ten).


COMEDIAN SIX: Ms. Lewinski did you have sex with the president? Yeah I did, but it wouldn’t all that good. He came in like two minutes. (INTERCUT, Comedian eleven).

COMEDIAN ELEVEN: You know he got a presidential pecker. You know he do, you know he do.
COMEDIAN TWELVE: Mrs. Lewinski, how long has Monica been doing these things. They couldn’t even find the momma she over there under the judge’s chamber. Wait a minute, come out Ms. Lewinski!

COMEDIAN THIRTEEN: Bill, Got poor Hoe Management. Got hoes calling the crib. You never let a hoe call you crib. If you do, you in for a hoe lot of problems.

COMEDIAN FOURTEEN: The whole nation knows she give head. You know fellows making it hard on her. Every time they see her they, ‘Hey, hey. What’s up? Hook a brother up. Hook a brother up.

COMEDIAN FIFTEEN: Clinton was getting his freak on, wasn’t he? That’s why the country was in such good shape cause Clinton was happy. Clinton was getting head every morning. That’s what you call a head start.

COMEDIAN SIXTEEN: The man didn’t commit no crime. The man got a blow job. What he do wrong? If that was a crime every man in this room would be on death row.

COMEDIAN SEVENTEEN: I was never once mad at him when he messed up that girl’s dress. You know why, he’s a man. He did a man thing.

You know I want people to leave President Clinton alone because he’s the closest thing to a Black president that we had. Think about it. I mean his woman is more intelligent than him, like a lot of Black men. She makes more money than him, like a lot of Black men. He likes ugly white women, like a lot of Black men.

The show is a continuous flow of jokes about various issues and viewers are afforded a unique opportunity to be entertained about a variety of political subjects. Given the various stereotypes of Blacks as comedians and buffoons, it may be fitting to ask how is this program interpreted by Blacks as well as by the whites who watch BET equally as much as Blacks. How do youth interpret and consume BET?

The final programs on today’s schedule shifts the focus from comedy into the more “serious” realm of news and public affairs. BET Nightly News, BET Tonight and Lead Story are all half-hour news magazine shows which feature news and current affairs.
that may be of interest to African Americans. *BET Nightly News* is consistent with the format of other similar nightly news programs. The major difference is that it features more stories and features involving Blacks than most nightly news programs. It is a mixture of national and international news as well as features about African Americans.

In tonight’s show, they are approximately thirteen different news items, more than half of them have Blacks as central characters. The remaining items are national headline issues and include coverage on the War in Afghanistan, video coverage of the highjacked plane crashing into the Pentagon on September 11, President Bush on the Enron debacle and UN/Iraq talks, among others. In terms of the news items that centered Blacks, a story concerning the legacy of civil rights leader Malcolm X was the lead story tonight. It provided valuable information on a proposal to auction several items belonging to the slain Civil Rights leader, which were recently discovered in a storage room in Florida. The spin of the article highlighted the need to preserve these important records, often quoting Black scholars testifying to the historical significance of these documents. In one segment, lawyer for the family shed light on the fact that that the family had filed a lawsuit trying to block the proposed auction. Other stories included a bid by former DC Mayor Marion Barry for a position on the city council, a feature on AIDS in South Africa, a meeting between Jesse Jackson and Enron officials and a story about the granting of bail to a New York City police officer who beat and sodomized Haitian American, Abner Louima. Officer Charles Schwartz was released on $1 million bail pending a re-trial. The story featured a statement by the victim as well as comments by angry African Americans who expressed concern that police brutality to African American victims too often goes unpunished. The show is concluded with a feature about a Hip Hop video which seeks to challenge dominant representations of Black
masculinity. The video by rap artists Benzino highlights positive relationships between rappers and their sons.

_BET Tonight_ carried an exclusive interview with newly crowned Miss USA, Shantay Hinton, who is African American. It was a very important highlight of today’s programming. I say that because Hinton does not represent the typical Miss USA look and the program goes a long way to highlight that. She is average height, and wears short hair. Unlike the images I have seen in the _Comic View_ and the concerns I had about the way Black beauty was being represented, Hinton’s crowning as the America’s new beauty queen is somewhat refreshing. Host Ed Gordon opens the show by noting,

She’s beautiful. She’s smart and the nation’s new beauty queen. Twenty-three-year old Howard University senior represents us at Miss USA.

Gordon mentions the fact that of the five finalists in the pageant, a total of four were African Americans. Aware that Hinton does not fit the stereotypical representation of ideal beauty asks, “I know diplomacy may end up working here but, did you believe that because you don’t fit the quote unquote traditional standard, you know, you have short hair and the like, did you think, ‘Well, it’s nice to make it this far?’” Hinton quickly responds, “I actually thought that I had a good chance. I did break the mold. I was different. I was a breath of fresh air.” I read this program and Hinton’s victory as a moral victory for young girls who struggle to conform to mainstream constructions. Moreover, it was obvious from the interview that Hinton was more than just body. She spoke of her interest in staying in good physical shape, but she also illuminated her greater interest in “volunteerism,” “active citizenship” and “being informed.” As a broadcast journalism major, Hinton appeared to be very composed and spoke intelligently about issues presented to her.
Finally, *Lead Story* features a panel of distinguished African American journalists and leaders who address several important news items and raise articulate responses to critical questions raised by the hostess. The panel tonight includes Clarence Page, *Chicago Tribune*; Dwayne Wickham, *USA Today/Gannett News Service*, and April Ryan, White House correspondent for the *American Urban Radio Networks*. The show begins with a lively interview with New Orleans’ Mayor, Marc Morial, President of the American Conference on Mayors. President Bush was expected to attend the conference the following week and panelists engaged Mayor Morial on numerous issues. Chief among these issues was the security concerns that mayors are having following the September 11 attacks. While the mayor admitted that most mayors feel more prepared following the terrorist attacks, he planned to ask the President for special funding that would even further increase the security of cities. Asked what issues of concern to African Americans he planned to raise to the President, Mayor Morial replied,

One issue I think is of great interest to African Americans is certainly also of great interest to all Americans. But, most particularly, that we need to be safe and secure in our cities. That is an issue that affects everyone, including African Americans. And I think also very importantly to the African American community in our cities is the need to make sure that we have an economic stimulus package that isn’t just about the big guys or fat cats. It’s also about small business. It’s about the workers. It’s also about job creation for those who find themselves on the lower end of the economic strata.

Following the discussion with the mayor, the panel engaged in heated debates over racial profiling, the timeliness of proposed legislation to narrow the “disparities between severe punishments for crack cocaine and lighter ones for powder cocaine” and other issues.
Discussions on racial profiling stemmed around a current proposal to have a national driver’s license which would provide states with pertinent information about individuals including arrest records. The rationale for this license is to have better coordination between local, state and federal agencies. While two members of the panel felt positive about the proposal, one vehemently rejected it, citing that such a practice is merely ‘big brother’ intrusion.

With reference to the disparities between punishments meted out to crack cocaine offenders as opposed to those convicted for possession of power cocaine, the panel unanimously agreed that race and class are at the heart of the current practice. Notes one panel member, “The real issue here is the fact that crack cocaine is used by the poor and minorities, and the powder cocaine is used by wealthy fraternity boys. The disparity is racist. It is classist” (Page, 2002). The panel also agreed that this legislation is long overdue arguing that legislators have danced around the issue for too long. Page notes that, “Even Brother Bill Clinton equivocated around this issue.” I chuckle at Page’s proclamation of President Clinton as Brother Bill Clinton and can’t help but ask myself, is this an insinuation that President Clinton as a “brother,” failed to enforce legislation that would serve the interest of the Black community. If so, can this assumed kinship between “Brother” Bill and African Americans explain the apparent sanction of his adulterous relationship with Monica Lewinski among the comedians on Comic View?

The two other issues the panel address include a recent meeting organized by Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Push Coalition to foster economic development and a controversy arising from an effort to honor prominent African American actor, James Earl Jones. In terms of the Rainbow Coalition debate, the moot question was, “Has Jesse Jackson’s efforts to create business and wealth in the Black community been successful?”
Most of the panel members agreed that it was somewhat premature to make any assessments but generally agreed that the fact that the Coalition was able to bring several Fortune 500 Wall Street Executives to the table with African American business leaders as a major accomplishment. In the other story, a plan to honor James Earl Jones turned sour when the plaque that was made was inscribed with the name James Earl Ray, the man convicted of assassinating Martin Luther King. The panel agreed that the inscription was “a slip that represented a thought.”

In describing the hypothetical day on BET, a conscious decision was made not to describe the actual music video content contained within the various programs. In the next few pages I describe fifteen music videos which were recorded from BET’s 2001 Top 100 countdown. The reason these videos were selected is because they were chosen by BET as the top 15 videos for 2001. Selection for these videos on the 2001 countdown was based on their popularity among viewers as was determined through requests on BET programs like 106 and Park and BET.COM. The videos were classified in terms of one or two formats: narrative or performative. A narrative format uses various images to tell a story. The images flow logically and viewers can follow the story line as the images are dramatized across the screen. On the other hand, a performative video is more concerned with either the singing or dancing performance aspect of the video. Even though performative videos have images, these images are not concerned with telling a story but merely show the performer in various incohesive scenes.

An excellent example of a narrative format can be found in Eminem’s video, “Stan”, which was produced by Dr. Dre and Philip Atwell. It was rated number 25 on BET’s Top 100 countdown. The song is about a fan named Stanley, who is obsessed with Eminem and writes letters to him everyday. His reverence for Eminem is so intense
that it causes him to act violently toward his pregnant girlfriend and ultimately costs him his life. The video begins with a scene where Stanley or Stan as he prefers to be called is in the bathroom dying his hair in order to look like his idol, Eminem. His girlfriend, who needs to use the bathroom, knocks on the door. “Stanley, open the door,” she pleas. Angry because she interrupts he yells, “What!” Taking notice of his new look the girl asks, “Stanley, what are you doing to yourself?” Stanley responds, “What the hell, you don’t like it?” peering in the mirror in sheepish admiration. “Stanley!” she pleas again. With his fist folded, Stanley fights the urge not to hit her, “Don’t call me that,” and pulls her into the bathroom. As he walks away she asks, “Don’t you think you’re taking this too far?” As the song plays in the background, viewers see a multiplicity of pictures plastered all over the house. Stan is also portrayed unable to sleep thinking about his idol and writing letters in frustration when Eminem delays in his response. The video also follows the lyrics and as Stan expresses concerns or describes what he’s doing to Eminem the video dramatizes the various scenarios. While the song was playing, BET popped up a caption across the screen noting that this video redefined the notion of video-storytelling. It was a powerful visual display and the narrative adequately matched the theme of the lyrics. In saying that, I must hasten to add that all video narratives do not adequately correlate with what is being portrayed in the lyrics. In fact, most of these narratives do not. I present these videos in the same format that they were presented on the countdown beginning with number 15.

#15  **TITLE:** “I Cry”  **ARTIST:** Ja Rule Feat. Lil’ Mo  **DIRECTOR:** Irv Gotti & Ja Rule

This video employs a narrative format and tells the story of love, in particular a “thug’s love” for his girl/wife. The song begins with Ja Rule’s signature lyrics, “Every
thug needs a lady.” As Lil’ Mo sings, “When I cry, you cry, we cry together,” tears trickle from Ja Rule’s eyes. It is a humbling experience and a challenge to the myth that men don’t cry and even more so it confronts the assumption of thugs as being heartless and emotionless. Instead, the song is replete with images of passion, consideration and love. The song’s first scene is set in a party that Ja Rule attends after work. He is hanging out with numerous women and winding down after a day’s work. His girlfriend/wife calls on his cellular and one of the females he is hanging with snatches the phone and hangs it up. Immediately, his girlfriend/wife sends a message on his two-way pager. Realizing that she’s obviously upset, he leaves the party and heads home. At home he is met by an angry girlfriend/wife whom he quickly consoles by lifting her in his arms and taking her to bed.

In the other narrative segment, Ja Rule’s best friend is robbed of his gold chains and shot to death in the streets by a fellow African American. Again, this is cause for Ja Rule to cry and we see images of him crying at the funeral. Ja Rule has thoughts of avenging his best friend’s death and along with a few members of his posse, Ja Rule drives up to the guy who murdered him. One sees Ja Rule attempt to take revenge by possibly killing the culprit, but he is somehow able to fight the urge to continue the cycle of violence. Instead, as an act of symbolism, he rips his friend’s chains from the murderer’s neck as an act of protest against the senseless murder over jewelry. Ja Rule portrays Blackness here as logical and rationale and sensitive. Because he understands the pain associated with losing a love one, he refuses to succumb to the temptation of taking this man’s life.

There are several other people in the video and among them girls are glamorized. The majority of these girls have long hair and match the limited representations of female
beauty that I expressed concern over earlier. These women are almost always thin. However, the dominant visual elements surround the two aforementioned narratives.

#14 **TITLE:** I.Z.Z.O (Hova) **ARTIST:** Jay- Z **DIRECTOR:** Dave Meyers

This video employs a performative format. It depicts the artists singing and dancing in the streets. It is like a block party with scores of people portrayed as having a good time in the streets. One sees images of Mercedes Benzs, Stretch Limos, long platinum chains on the necks of the males, some of who engage in smoking large cigars. The superstar life of a Hip Hop star is being glamorized here in this video and the primary function of the women in the video is to dance or to obsess over Jay-Z. The majority of these women fit the long hair, slim figure image and are dressed primarily in shorts and short, cut-off shirts exposing their stomachs. Here Blackness is linked primarily to a celebration of wealth, superstardom and materiality especially in terms of the “bling bling” imagery illuminated through the flashy jewelry. However, it is important that I make mention of some important factors that may lend to a critical reading of this video. While the “bling-bling” trope is being glamorized in this video, it is important to understand what the lyrics of the song are all about as well as important background information about the artist. The images of wealth being displayed in the video depict a wealth that the two young rappers were able to create for themselves by founding their own record label. The lyrics speak against the common practice of the record industry, which is run by majority whites, enslaving and “pimping” young men. The rappers make the claim that they are taking over and are encouraging others like themselves to gain control over their own representation by following suit. They see this move as a form of payback for the exploitation meted out to earlier generation Hip Hop
artists by industry officials. While the images in this video are problematic, the lyrics and the story about the artists provide vital information that may influence the way this video is read.

#13 TITLE: “Puppy Love” ARTIST: Lil’ Bow Wow DIRECTOR: Dave Meyers

This video is an example where the main narrative does not directly conform to the lyrics of the song. In this song, the 14-year-old teen-sensation, Lil Bow Wow, raps about often being propositioned by young girls to settle down in a relationship. Despite really enjoying their companionship and having an opportunity to “Hit the movies, hit the mall, Then come out with big bags; Next day do lunch then head to Six Flags,” Lil Bow Wow asserts, “But it don't mean nothing… Cause I'm just too young to get down like that… See its just puppy love.” On the contrary, the visual imagery tells an entirely different story. The video narrative begins with a scene featuring Lil Bow Wow and JD exiting the front door of a mansion, apparently belonging to JD. The two engage in a dialogue which sets the stage for the narrative told in the music video. Standing erect behind them is a butler, clad in a Black Tux and a maid, dressed in a stereotypical “mammy-type” maid uniform. As JD prepares to leave his gigantic mansion, he impels on Lil Bow Wow:

Bow Wow, listen! Don’t mess up the house! Please! Please don’t mess up my house! This is Mr. Belvedere (pointing to the butler) and this is Ms. Jackson (gesturing to the maid), you know they got’ch you. Don’t let them call me and tell me you destroyed my beautiful house, man, you hear me!

Bow Wow: Come on now JD, you know I’m gonna’ take care of the house, just go on…have you a good time! Just go on! Just go! Have yourself a good time!
As JD prepares to get into his car a young teenage girl pulls up in a Lincoln Navigator walking towards Lil Bow Wow. Immediately, JD shakes his head in concern and pondering whether or not he has made the right decision to leave Bow Wow at his home. Meanwhile Mr. Belvadere and Ms. Jackson look at each other with a smirk indicating an approval for Lil Bow Wow’s guest. An interesting point of this video is the employment of a Black maid and butler, a practice that is more “typical” of white, upper class. In addition, the parents leave their children to be taken care of by the maid another practice that is more common among upper class whites. The video is replete with images of defiance as Bow Wow and his teenage girlfriend repeatedly defy the butler and the maid. For instance, they drive a toy-model sports car big enough to fit two young adults through the house, and when the butler tries to serve them with a snack, they chase him away by driving the car towards him. They also proceed to unleash several puppies on the kitchen counter and are ultimately chased all over the house by the subservient butler and the maid, who try desperately to contain them. The video cleverly integrates with the lyrical theme by articulating a “Puppy Love” that exists between Bow Wow and his teenage companion. However, this articulation appears to be minor in comparison to the dominant theme in the video which illustrates Bow Wow’s youthful defiance of JD, Mr. Belvadere, the butler, and Ms. Jackson. The video appears to draw from the popular adage, “when the cat’s away, the mouse will play,” except in this case it may be more appropriate to think about it as “when the Big dog’s away, the puppy will play.” It is important to remember here that the story told in this video, though not necessarily contradicting the lyrical content, was constructed to sell Bow Wow’s album and plays upon notions of youthful deviance and the generally masculine myth of spending the summer or the weekend at a rich aunt or uncle where boys can meet and, if possible, have
their way with some beautiful ‘honeys’ who may be, as in the case of this video, a few years their senior. The opportunity to “sneak in” company or to entertain them in the absence of a parent or an adult is one that appeals to the fantasies of a youthful audience. Conversely, the images in this video may also provide a sense of nostalgia for older viewers who can relate to either having or fantasizing about these experiences. Overall, while childish romance is depicted heavily in this video, I believe the mansion and the rich upper class lifestyle it represents is being glamorized. The fact that JD can afford such as gigantic home which is equipped with an in-door basketball court, swimming pool, and that he can hire a maid and a butler, has a Cadillac Escalade, a Mercedes Benz SUV, and a chauffeur sends signals of extreme wealth and excess. In another narrative, Lil’ Bow Wow’ goes out to eat with his girlfriend at a local fast food restaurant. So fascinated with Lil’ Bow is the cashier, who is probably in her late twenties, that she is unable to contain herself and is forcibly dragged away by another employee. Shortly afterward, several teenage girls flock to the window outside where Bow Wow is sitting and find it hard to contain themselves in awe over the teenage sensation. Again, this is a celebration of stardom and in spite of his youthful age, the opportunity to meet, greet or see this young superstar is enough to provoke even mature adults to behave in unexpected ways.

#12  **TITLE:** “Differences”  **ARTIST:** Genuwine  **DIRECTOR:** Hype Williams

Again, this video employs a performative format. Much of the setting for this video is in the clouds as the singer appears to be going to cloud nine as a result of his love for a girl. The other part of this video apparently takes place at the artist’s home where he engages in petty romance with his girl, who is the subject of the video. What marks this video as different from many others is its focus on love and compassion. Of the
videos described so far, this is the only one that focuses exclusively on a single female. This is not to mention the fact that the female in this video conforms to the stereotypical half-naked, long hair image that is consistent with all the other videos. Even though Ja Rule’s video was about love as well, he was portrayed having social encounters with other females. In this video, the artist confesses deeply to his girl, “My whole life has changed, since you came in. You’re that special one.” The one who drives him to the clouds. I label this video as performative because even though the lyrics tell this story of romance, the visual images are incoherent and it is difficult for the viewer to ascertain the story through the visual display.

#11 **TITLE:** “Who We Be” **ARTIST:** DMX  **DIRECTOR:** Joseph Kahn

Of the videos reviewed so far, this is by far the most political. It was extremely difficult to label this video because the images are so multifaceted. In the end, I classified this video as a narrative. The song is about an intense struggle to convey Black life to people who really don’t understand “Who we be.” This video tells the story of pain, suffering, oppression, frustration, injustice and imprisonment by pulling together a collage of images. These images range from the March on Washington, police in riot armor running in the streets, looting and destructive scenes from the Los Angeles riots, fires, images of Blacks picking cotton, and funerals all flashing continuously across the screen in Black and white. As DMX emotionally expresses his frustration, the words matching the lyrics to his song also flash before me. DMX’s lyrics identify the complex relationship between Blacks and jail and he passionately unravels the complexities between Black life and prisonhood. His major argument appears to be that the critics have no idea of experiences of the Black male living in the inner city, especially as it
relates to issues with the legal and penal system. His verse addressing the frustrations about incarceration is particularly moving to me. He angrily hollers,

   What we seeing is, The streets, the cops, The system, harassment (Uh-huh)
   The options, get shot, Go to jail or, Getcha as* kicked (Aight)
   The lawyers, the part, They are, of the puzzle (Uh-huh)
   The release, the warning, "Try not, to get in trouble" (Damn)
   The snitches, the odds (Uh) Probation, parole (What?)
   The new charge, the bail, The warrant, the hole (Damn)
   The cell, the bus, The ride, up North (Uh-huh)
   The greens, the boots, The yard, these hearts (Uh)
   The fightin', the stabbin', The pullin', the grabbin' (What?)
   The riot squad, With the captain, Nobody knows, What happened (What?)
   The two years in a box, Revenge, the plots (Uh),
   The twenty-three hours, That's locked, The one hour that's not (Uh)
   The silence, the dark, The mind, so fragile, (Aight),
   The wish, that the streets, Would have took you, When they had you (Damn)
   The days, the months, The years, despair,
   One night on my knees, Here it comes The prayer

   This song brilliantly confronts the cycle of incarceration and the contemptuous issues that are related to being institutionalized such as mistreatment, violence, revenge, hopelessness and despair. In the end, DMX appears to be transformed through some form of spirituality when he gets on his knees and says a prayer. Throughout this video, there are images of young children innocently standing by observing. The message this video seems to be conveying is that all these negative portrayals of Blackness and the struggles kids bear witness to affect the way they see and experience the world. It is a powerful commentary on an important social issue.

#10 TITLE: “U Got It Bad” ARTIST: Usher  DIRECTOR: Little X

   Usher’s video can be classified as narrative. This singer, who is influenced by Michael Jackson, seeks to emulate Jackson’s dance moves in his videos. As such, most of his videos are centered on him singing and dancing and may be classified as performative. However, in this video, while there are many such performances, the
majority of the video portrays him in pain apparently over the loss of his girlfriend. He is portrayed as unable to sleep and either dreaming, reminiscing or fantasizing about his estranged girlfriend. As a result of this relationship gone sour, Usher is in pain and unable to contain himself. One senses intense feelings of love, regret, loneliness and submission with Usher. It is apparent from this video that Usher accepts responsibility for the break-up, recognizing that he made mistakes. As such, he misses the water after the well runs dry. Again Blackness is associated with love and humility and masculinity as sensitive and remorseful. Unfortunately, as was highlighted by a close friend recently, Usher, like many other R & B performers draws upon this image of a sensitive male in order to appeal primarily to females.

#9 **TITLE:** “Fallen” **ARTIST:** Alicia Keys **DIRECTOR:** Chris Robinson

Cita, cyberhost of *Cita’s World*, introduced this video. In her usual up front, sassy personality, Cita sends a message to Alicia Keys. “You such a pretty girl, take out them braids out your head.” Given the red flags that were sent off about Black women and hair in an earlier program, I easily recognize and make this connection. This video is primarily performative with the emphasis being placed on the artist singing in the streets. It is a love song and Alicia is captured walking or on the bus singing. The final scenes in this video follow Alicia on a bus ride to visit her boyfriend in prison. As the female prisoners stand attentively outside line up watching the bus go by, one of the inmates begins to cry. By this time, I assume she was related to Alicia, and that she was the one she was about to visit. It is not until moments later that I realize there was no connection and that Alicia was merely visiting her boyfriend. I ponder the use of the prison scene when the lyrics suggest nothing about her boyfriend being in jail or no other such
references to prison. The boyfriend portrays that thug image and Alicia upholds the image of a deep impassioned love for her thug even though he is incarcerated.

#8 TITLE: “I’m Real” ARTIST: Jay Lo feat. Ja Rule DIRECTOR: Dave Meyers

Jay Lo’s video represents only the second one by a female so far. It can be classified as a performative video. The images are set in the context of a street party. What I find most interesting when I think about the gender aspect is that whereas a few of the videos showed women obsessing over men, none of these two videos by female artists so far show men going crazy over them. This is an interesting observation given that all of these videos are produced/directed by males. It suggests in some ways that women are sexual predators and men are their prey. Even now women are the subjects of the videos, there appears to be no interest in reversing this trend. In general, the idea of having fun and partying in the streets apparently during summertime is being glamorized mainly in this video. It has several images of youth playing basketball outside and dancing in the streets. This video is an example of one of the many videos where the lyrics do not match the visual images, which may best be characterized as a fashion shoot.


Once again this is a performative video which is set within the context of a tropical beach party. Like the typical party videos, there are several women in this video, perhaps outnumbering males ten to one. The images of these women are quite similar in terms of physical appearance and they are clad in swimsuits. The whole idea of a tropical
fantasy conceived through the male sexual mind in terms of partying on the beach with several women and tropical alcoholic beverages is being glamorized in this video.

#6 **TITLE:** “Peaches and Cream” **ARTIST:** 112 **DIRECTOR:** Little X

The dominant image in this video serves the purpose of demonstrating the sexual, seductive element to peaches and cream. It is a performative video with most of the scenes being shot upstairs in a secluded building. While the images of the group dancing are important to the performance, the video also employs several females to enhance the performance. The primary function of these females is to serve as objects of seduction upon whose bodies the male vocalists could laminate their peaches and cream. The women demonstrate the uncontrollable arousal that results from having peaches and cream licked off their bodies, and are clad primarily in T-Shirts and panties. This video celebrates the Mandingo warrior who can ignite the sexual Jezebel through the use of peaches and cream.

#5 **TITLE:** “Contagious” **ARTIST:** Isley Brothers feat. R. Kelley **DIRECTOR:** R. Kelley and Billie Woodruff.

The visual imagery in this video is another great example of a narrative approach. Part of the success of this narrative is that the images follow along closely with the words. The video portrays the story of an older man being betrayed by his younger wife. The video begins with a phone call to R. Kelly by Ron Isley’s wife, informing him that her husband would be leaving town the following day. In the next scene, she is seen hurrying her husband out the door ensuring that he doesn’t forget anything. Once her husband is safely gone, she sneaks in her lover (R. Kelley). However, once her husband
is away, he immediately begins to miss his wife and decides to call and check in with her. She refuses to answer the phone because she is in bed with her lover. When his numerous calls are not answered, he decides to call her mother to no avail. Concerned, he returns home to find his wife in the bed with another man singing, “You’re contagious, touch me baby, give me what you got.” R. Kelley responds, “Sexy lady, drive me crazy, drive me wild.” Immediately he summons his bodyguards who are seen running. Within seconds of their arrival, R. Kelley’s bodyguards arrive. The two groups stand poised for a confrontation but in the end walk away. This is the second of such narrative videos between Isley, known as “Mr. Big” and R. Kelley. In this video, like many of the other videos, the woman is projected as the sexual predator, whereas R. Kelly is portrayed as the prey and Isley as the victim. He myth of the over-sexed Black female is very evident in this video. This Jezebel is unable to control her sexuality. She has all the luxuries of living upper class life including a huge mansion, but her older husband cannot seem to quench her insatiable appetite for sex. The imagery also suggests that despite being unhappy in the relationship due to her insatiable sexual appetite, she is willing to stay with her husband because of the materiality and wealth he can provide her. Pretending to be happy with her husband is fine as long as she can make a “booty call” when he’s away.

#4 **TITLE:** “Bad Boy for Life” **ARTIST:** P. Diddy **DIRECTOR:** Chris Robinson

P. Diddy’s video is a prime example of a narrative that does not necessarily fit the words of the song. Nonetheless, it is a very interesting narrative video. It attempts to challenge the notion of urban sprawl or white flight as it is commonly known by moving
a Black family to the suburbs. The lyrics represent a celebration of Thug Life as P. Diddy sends a signal to all and sundry that,

We ain't, goin’ nowhere, we ain't, goin’ nowhere
We can't be stopped now, cause it's Bad Boy for life
We ain't, goin’ nowhere, we ain't, goin’ nowhere
We can't be stopped now, cause it's Bad Boy for life.

The video, on the other hand, attempts to subvert the commonly held stereotype that when Blacks move into the neighborhood that it automatically runs amok. In a play with this stereotype, P. Diddy and his Bad Boy Family including Snoop Doggy Dog and Ice Cube, among others, move into this primarily white suburban neighborhood located in “Perfectown, USA.” Pulling up in large Coach buses, Mercedes Benz, P. Diddy and friends are watched disapprovingly as they get out the vehicle and remove the for sale sign that was posted in front of the house. As heads of the white community members turn, immediately a white female living next door faints, apparently in disbelief that Black people are moving in next door. Before long, P. Diddy and his crew transforms the entire neighborhood with house parties, which are either attended by many white members of the community, including senior citizens, or are peeked at in admiration from behind the backyard fence. Also, “drop-top” vehicles with hydraulics, scooters and motorbikes transform the street. In one segment, P. Diddy and his friends are playing golf from his rooftop and accidentally breaks the window of one of his neighbors. Immediately, the neighbor comes over and converses with P. Diddy:

Hey, how you doing, Puffy or Diddy, P, Papa, Papa Diddy Pop? I am sorry, I don’t know what you call yourself these days. Mr. Daddy, listen! Glad you’re here in the neighborhood, welcome! But this golf balls through the window, it’s not gonna fly, alright. That happens once and it doesn’t happen again, understand
what I am sayin’ dawg? Sorry dawg, ok! I just wanted to clear that up cause am’, I’m a big fan of yours; I love your music. I enjoy that whole…, I love that whole thing, good. Listen, ah! If you got another one of your crazy, house party things, shout me a holla dawg!

The video represents a troubling of the stereotype that blackness represents a depletion of morality. It also suggests an interesting obsession and fascination that whites have with Black entertainment. While many of P. Diddy’s imagined neighbors might have disapproved of him moving into their neighborhood, perhaps a play with the myth that the property value would go down, they were simultaneously thrilled by his parties and many unreluctantly indulged themselves. Even for those who did not have the forthrightness to attend, they could be seen peeking at the spectacle by peeking over the backyard fence. At the end of the video, the lady who fainted when P. Diddy moved in engaged him in a brief dialogue.

**NEIGHBOR:** P. Diddy!

**P. DIDDY:** Ms. Johnson, had a good time last night? Yeah, I saw you shaking that ass.

**NEIGHBOR:** Yes I was!!!

This scene is also complemented by an ironic twist where four white-teenage punk-rock type youth, apparently moving next door, gestured hello to P. Diddy. P. Diddy responds, “Damn! There goes the neighborhood!”

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#3 **TITLE:** “Get UR Freak On” **ARTIST:** Missy Elliot  **DIRECTOR:** Dave Meyers

This is basically a performative video. It is set underground in some form of creepy, graveyard type area. On the ground there are lots of leaves, wet mud and one
sees in the background antiquated or abandoned buildings. The caption across the screen, states that this video redefines style. The caption is probably referring to the multiple images of what may be considered to be grotesque behavior. For example, in one scene the singer spits directly into the mouth of one of her male dancers. The underground setting of the video, the creepy outfits and the unusual freaky behavior are images which support this caption that style is being redefined in this video. In essence, Missy projects Blackness here as the knower who understands and redefines style.

#2 TITLE: “Rock Da Boat” ARTIST: Aaliyah DIRECTOR: Hype Williams

While watching this video, I cannot help but recall the tragedy that took place last year in which this singer and several members of her crew were killed in a plane crash on their way from filming this video in Bahamas. I suspect that much of the way this video is read by many people will be based on the sympathy they feel when seeing the life cut short of this young woman. The video is performative and set on the beach in Bahamas. It is characterized by its explicit dancing, what many would call gyrating. What is interesting here is that while song is asking a man to “Rock da boat,” and “change positions” which have sexual inferences, there are no males in the video. Some of the females, Aaliyah and at least two others in particular, conform to the stereotypical construction, thin and long hair discussed earlier. This uncritical obsession with thinness raises important concerns about the constructions of beauty in these music videos. The female body in its rhythmic display is being glamorized in this video.
Topping the chart for the most popular video for 2001, this video took a narrative approach. It is also one of those videos whose narratives appeared to be fundamentally different from the story being told in the lyrics. The lyrics of the song tell a story of love—deep, passionate, Black love; of a couple pouring their hearts and souls out to each other. Ja Rule expresses his strong love for his girlfriend and begins the song by asking the rhetorical question:

Where would I be without my baby,

The thought alone might break me

And I don't wanna go crazy

But every thug needs a lady

What is being glamorized here is that while he may live the life of a ruthless thug, Ja Rule is illuminating his humanitarian side, which is adequately summed up in the phrase, “every thug needs a lady.” Conversely, his girlfriend (Vita), uses this production moment to express her gratitude for the many years the couple has had together and for the material things he has given her including the “rocks and gifts” and the “house on the hill.” In order to give this video meaning, the producers cleverly portrays a story of Ja Rule getting arrested and using his time in the prison cell to reflect on his love for his girlfriend while she’s at home lonely and anxiously awaiting his release. This prison image is one that is common in at least three of these fifteen videos including Alicia Keys’ "Fallin" and DMX’s “Who we be.” This use of a prison as backdrop raises critical questions. What is this obsession with the prison image? What is the historical or ideological significance of this image? How do BET’s mass audiences read images like these? What other symbols, imagery, codes or tropes are used in the construction of
Blackness within BET’s programs? In chapter seven, I provide a critical analysis of these programs and shed light on common codes and tropes used to represent Blackness.
CHAPTER SEVEN:

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF BET’S HYPOTHETICAL DAY

A critical goal throughout this project has been to locate and identify sources of Black counternarratives. BET is engaged here because it serves as the nation’s premiere site that produces narratives of Blackness. As a site where Blacks still have relative control over the representational process, many people have come to expect that its texts would somehow challenge and or subvert mainstream, hegemonic constructions of Blackness. This chapter critically analyzes BET texts in order to highlight particular codes, tropes and other rhetorical devices that are inscribed within its programs to construct narratives of Blackness. My fundamental objective for interrogating BET’s content is to ascertain whether or not the network may be considered a significant source of counternarratives of Blackness. By analyzing BET’s text, the intent of this chapter is neither to undermine nor de-legitimate the network nor its parent company, Viacom, but merely to interrogate the meanings engendered within its texts as a way of critiquing and identifying any possible counternarratives of Blackness. Henceforth, the critical question in this chapter remains, is there a way to critique BET while harnessing its undeniable pleasures?

In this chapter, I employ a mixture of postcolonial, postmodern and cultural studies methods in order to interrogate BET’s texts. More particularly, I use textual analysis and deconstructionism in order to read actual BET texts which were presented in chapter six as part of the hypothetical day. Because of my interest in developing a postcolonial multicultural studies project, postcolonial theory will be employed in order to identify particular colonial continuities and discontinuities. My fundamental
assumption is that BET can be classified as a neo-colonial text which must be subjected to a postcolonial critique. I therefore use textual analysis and deconstructionism in order to intercept taken for granted meanings that are encoded within BET’s program. As has been demonstrated throughout this project, colonial tropes have had a profound influence on the way Blacks have historically understood their culture and their identity, especially in terms of their bodies, ideas about beauty, aesthetics, and schooling which have ultimately impacted their material relations and lived experiences. “Troping,” notes Hayden White (1978) “is the soul of discourse” (p. 2). The influences of these colonial tropes often reveal themselves in the way Black women wear and treat their hair—the politics of Black hair. It also manifests itself in the various colorisms that influence the complex character of the discourse on Black authenticity, and in the institutional and discursive practices that structure the social, intimate, and interpersonal relationships between Blacks and whites. But while these tropes have the power to restrain, repress or ideologize subjects, they are also open to subversion and contestation (Shohat and Stam, 1996). The challenge in this chapter is to expose taken for granted colonial tropes that are being used to construct ideas about Blackness on BET.

I begin this chapter with an interrogation of BET texts which will be organized around the five program categories identified in chapter six: religion, music, news and public affairs, human interests and comedy. Following my analysis, I make several critical conclusions about the network and attempt to address the critical question of whether BET may be classified as a source of counter-hegemonic narratives of Blackness. But before I begin my analysis, it is crucial that I lay down some caveats. As a function of all critical scholarship, it is prudent that I shed light on the biases I bring to the reading of BET’s texts. As a postcolonial subject of Caribbean descent who has
been schooled in cultural studies, Gramscian approaches to ideology, critical theory, and Derridian deconstructionism, I am committed to the postcolonial project of deconstructing all taken for granted ideologies, and particularly those which owe their roots to colonialism. I bring to this study critical and cultural studies orientations, which ultimately impacts the way I interpret BET’s texts. I am particularly interested in texts that are subversive and potentially counterhegemonic. Moreover, having worked and conducted research for several years in the mass media, I am especially concerned with television’s role in perpetuating and naturalizing representations of Blackness and other forms of racial, cultural and other ideologies associated with the marking of difference. I am also aware of the role that popular culture plays in perpetuating important meanings that youth rely heavily upon in order to shape their identities. My politics, therefore, stems from my perception that popular culture and sites such as the mass media and in particular, BET, must be subjected to intense ideological critique in order to intercept the taken for granted meanings that are available for youth consumption. As such, I employ deconstructionist and cultural studies methodologies in this chapter in order to gain a critical understanding of how BET represents Blackness.

In deconstructing BET’s texts, I look specifically for evidence of the three binary codes which emerge from an interrogation of the discourse on BET in chapter five: mind/body, master/slave, democracy/capitalism. I also critiqued the texts and illuminated several other important tropes, binary codes, and oppositions that emerge from the textual analysis found on the hypothetical day on BET, which was presented in chapter six. Before reading the texts, my critical assumption was that as a commercialized space, there may be little evidence of counter-hegemonic narratives of Blackness on BET. This stemmed from my general belief that given BET’s contradictory role as a corporation,
which seeks to make a profit from the commodification of Blackness, BET may place more emphasis on the bottom line than it does on engendering any form of social responsibility to empowering Blacks. As such, BET may merely perpetuate stereotypical ideologies of Blackness that ultimately serve to engender and sustain the ethnic absolutism which is at the core of the entrenchment of Blackness and whiteness as “naturalized” categories of difference in the United States. I interrogate BET’s texts by asking critical questions such as the following: How does BET represent Blackness? What particular codes and rhetorical devices are used to give meaning to Blackness? Is there evidence of a Creole or hybrid identity being celebrated on BET? Is BET a source of counternarratives of Blackness?

**ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS PROGRAMMING**

My analysis of BET’s religious programs, *Bobby Jones Gospel, Lift Every Voice* and the religious sermon by Bishop G. E. Patterson, raises critical questions concerning the form of religion being offered on BET. My major concern stems from the relevance and performative nature of these programs given that, first, BET is primarily an entertainment space and, second, BET is a commercial space. These lead me to two important questions. Does the religion on BET represent a form of spiritual empowerment that can be linked to the struggles for emancipation, freedom and social justice for Blacks? Or, given its location within a commercialized, entertainment space, does this form of religion on BET merely represents a form of religious hucksterism meant mainly to commercialize religion?

These questions emerge from the reality that BET is both a commercialized and an entertainment space. With regard to the first point, BET’s identity depends heavily on
its label as a “Black entertainment” television station which makes a statement about the nature and or focus of its programming. What role does this linkage between Blackness and entertainment play in the production and consumption of religious programming on BET? In marking itself as an entertainment television station and, in particular, a Black entertainment television station, BET conjoins Blackness and entertainment in potentially essentialist and problematic ways. As such, Blackness has become articulated, attached, and in some ways momentarily fixed with the signifier “entertainment,” which according to the Encarta World English Dictionary has a threefold definition: (1) the various ways of amusing people, especially by performing for them (2) the amount of pleasure or amusement you get from something and (3) something that is produced or performed for an audience. This linkage suggests in a critical way that Blackness is performative and can be articulated in “various ways” to amuse people.

While religious spaces are generally thought to be privileged zones exempt from critical critique, the amusement/salvation binary becomes clear from watching these religious programs on BET. For example, despite the fact that Bishop Patterson goes to great lengths to deny “preaching for entertainment” the overall tone of the three programs and the stylized representations within the sermon and the gospel music programs point to some elements of both entertainment and potential “salvation.” While there can be no guarantees to the way these religious sermons are read, the emphasis on stylized performances such as “hooping\textsuperscript{15}” as a way of inciting the audience, as well as the physical movement, stardom, and use of hip hop codes and fashions within the religious musical programs do raise critical questions about the nature and purpose of these

\textsuperscript{15} I discussed this practice in chapter six. It may be defined as a signifying practice used by Black Ministers which is characterized by a sing-song approach meant to incite the audience.
religious programs. This is not to suggest that there may not be spiritual uplift and salvation going on in the religious programming on BET. However, given that BET is primarily an entertainment space, whose audience may ultimately expect to be entertained, it may be prudent to ask critical questions about the representational codes used within these programs in order to ascertain whether they lean more heavily toward entertainment than salvation.

In considering this amusement or entertainment/liberational spirituality binary, critical scrutiny must be placed on particular codes used to define Black spirituality within these programs. Within these programs, Black vernacular, Black spiritual music, the use of “call and response,” and the presence of primarily Black people were the most telling features of Black spirituality used in the sermon. Within contemporary studies of African American culture, spirituals have become validated as a critical element of African American particularity (Portia Maultsby, 1996). These particular codes used in the performance of these spirituals such as stomping, dancing, shouting and clapping, have been thought to be particular to peoples of African heritage. Hence, one of the critical elements used to define Black religious practices is the use of spirituals signified through intense body movement and emotions, what can be considered a particular stylized performance of Black spirituality. Another important element of African American religious practices with roots to the African culture is the use of “call-and-response” as a signifying practice. “Call-and-response: has at its core a certain performative element which points, in some ways, to a performative trope employed within the religious sermon on BET. As Maggie Sale (1992) aptly explains, “Call-and-response patterns provide a basic model that depends and thrives upon audience performance and improvisation…” (p. 42). I want to add here that such an approach also
relies heavily on the performance and the improvisation of the speaker or storyteller. Sale notes that the characteristics of call-and-response “suggest that importance lies not only in what is said, but how it is said” (p. 42). While I am not de-emphasizing the importance of “call-and-response” as a cultural practice, the performative nature of this approach, coupled with the almost exclusive focus on hip hop styled gospel music raise critical questions about the employment of style that was evident within these programs. Does the use of these particular signifying practices legitimate Black style? Does the emphasis on Black style influence the “salvation” on BET? Part of the reason I am interested in deconstructing the production of Black spirituality on BET stems from my awareness and interest in a liberational theology that speaks to the empowerment and emancipation of Blacks. While many of my peers often jettison Christianity as a “white man’s religion,” I remain committed to the principles of Christianity, but struggle to make its contents personally meaningful. The particular version of Christianity that I am interested in exploring speaks specifically to the struggle for liberation, emancipation and social justice for Blacks and other marginalized peoples. This form of Christianity is similar to the tradition of Martin Luther King, who dedicated his life to the freedom, justice and emancipation of Blacks. One important similarity is that whereas many theologists espouse what Sharon Welch calls an “eschatological reservation,” which speaks against engaging in political work of contemporary Christians, I believe that religion must be linked to both an earthly material transformation as well as be linked to the proverbial “Promise Land,” articulated by King. From this perspective, I am very suspicious of practices of religion that fail to address earthly transformation and also that suggests in any minor way a form of hucksterism or commercialism. With regard to the hucksterism, growing up in religiously conservative household, I watched my mother
give a visiting American preacher her last $200, money that was meant for groceries, in order to help support his ministry of warding off the prophesized famine and drought in Barbados. This form of exploitation was and is very common and I am conscious and critical of religious practices with remnants of such religious hucksterism.

The second concern about the type of religion being offered on BET addresses the issue of BET as a commercialized space which can have an impact on what types of messages are produced, how they are represented and consumed, the identities they help to produce, and the way spiritual and cultural life becomes regulated. As noted previously, the bulk of BET’s programming is devoted to advertising. The 70 percent music video content may be classified as primarily advertisement tools used to sell records and CDs. In fact, many of the producers of these music videos have a background in advertisement. Hype Williams, for example, who directed both the number one and number two videos from BET’s Top 100 countdown which were described in chapter six, has a long list of commercials to his credit including: *Fubu “The Collection”* (1999), *Mastercard “Fairy Tale”* (2000), Mountain Dew (May, 2001) and Reebok “Sounds & Rhythm of Sport” featuring Allen Iverson and Jadakiss, (Feb, 2002) among many others. The commercial nature of these music videos is also summed up in the comments of video producer Simon Fields (1983) who says about music videos, “We have to remember that we are making sales tools. These are little commercials” (p. 61).

Advertising, argue Paul du Gay et al. (1997), serves a twofold function: it is an economic as well as a representational practice. In the first instance, the primary purpose of advertising is to sell a product, in the case of BET’s music videos, CDs and cassettes of the numerous artists appearing on the network. In order to do this, advertisers try to create an appeal for the product by engaging meanings and constructing an identification
between people and those meanings. Applying this argument to a reading of BET’s programming, it can be said that the music video producers and directors seek to construct an identity between us and the images shown on BET by appealing to our imagination vis-à-vis our idealized self-images and our unspoken desires (du Gay et al, p. 25). Similarly, this same argument can be extended to the religious programming, especially the religious sermon on BET. Employing this view of advertisements forces me to ponder the potential commercial reading of the programming, especially when I consider that tag lines offering the religious sermons for sale on VHS, CD and audiocassette serve as a dominant visual elements throughout the sermon. Furthermore, the music videos should also be considered as “sales tools” or “little commercials” which aim to sell records and CDs for the performers. As such, as much as I find the program pleasurable from my perspective as a Christian, I find it difficult to move beyond my concern that the religious programming on BET may ultimately be read as serving the primary function of selling VHS, CDS and audiocassettes by appealing to peoples desires for “spiritual uplift and salvation.” Therefore, this “spiritual uplift and salvation” which are normally considered to be “free gifts” become commodities to be exchanged for money. I am also concerned that this spiritual empowerment conforms exclusively to the myths of the “Promise Land” and that Black spirituality on BET, as much as it is supposed to address the needs of an oppressed group, fails to addresses issues of political consciousness within the sermons. I must hasten to add that while my focus here has been on binary logics of commercial hucksterism versus liberational spirituality linked to emancipation, social justice and freedom, these categories may in fact represent false dichotomies. From this perspective there may be both huckstering and liberation going
on simultaneously. These binaries may celebrate a false dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the good and the bad. As Nigel Boland (2001) has noted,

The sacred and profane are viewed in European religions and philosophy as mutually exclusive spheres, and they should be kept separate. If profane elements occur within sacred rituals, for instance, the ritual is believed to have become defiled. By contrast, when the sacred and profane are conceived as more organically interconnected and mutually constitutive, rituals may remind the participants of this relationship. (p. 3)

This may help to explain why dancing, stomping, clapping—long thought to be “profane” elements of Black spirituality by Europeans—are so important to Black religions. In essence, these things become counternarratives to white European religious practices. They are subversive to the extent that they do not conform to mainstream practices but engages in a form of cultural politics through its struggle for legitimacy.

On another critically related note, the presence of Black religious programming on BET may be read as a valorization of Black religious discursive practices and a subversion of Eurocentric/colonialist codes of representation. Even long after official bans on Black indigenous religions, Black religious signifying practices are still often portrayed and deemed as primitive and fanatical through the eyes of the mainstream critics. Within the racist/colonial imagination, Black religious services were long thought to be a reflection of the animalistic expressions of an uncultured people. Portia Maultsby (1996) explains, “Accounts of black religious services, for example, describe the singing as ‘boisterous,’ ‘noise,’ ‘uncouth,’ and ‘barbaric’ (p. 242). Projecting Black religious signifying practices in this manner relied heavily upon a colonial trope of animalization which was unleashed to portray the “colonized other” in terms of bestiality. The basic
The purpose of this trope is to distinguish the human from the animal, with Blacks and other such non-European peoples relegated to the positions of the animal. Through the use of this trope in colonialism the beast was thought to be aggravatingly loud and obnoxious. Thus, this performance of religion in terms of vigorous body movement—as is exemplified through dance, head bopping, etc.—the emotional singing and the dialogic nature of the call-and response, may be read as animalistic. Interestingly enough, some middle class Black churches also reject these performances of religion, often bastardizing them as hypocritical or overly “sanctified”\textsuperscript{16} Such performances of religion by Blacks are also often thought to be antithetical to the Greco-Roman profile with its emphasis on linearity. From the Greco-Roman perspective, which was taken to even more vulgar levels during the enlightenment period, such usage of the body or emotions or vocal intonation as is demonstrated in African American religions, was seen as disturbing the line. Thus the colonial subject was carefully constructed not to talk loudly which, from the perspective of my own upbringing, was perceived as being “brawling” or “blackguardish.” Furthermore, such linearity, which for Mikhail Bakhtin (1998) becomes the primary reason why the Carnivalesque is projected as vulgar within mainstream European cultures, may explain the profound announcement by a CNN reporter during a live broadcast of Princess Diana’s funeral on September 2, 1997, that the applause following her eulogy represented the first time in history that anyone clapped their hands in the Westminster Church. BET’s celebration of these Black religious traditions may be read, henceforth, as a subversion of the colonial animalizing trope as well as a challenge to the Eurocentric myth of linearity. However, while there

\textsuperscript{16} While the term sanctified is not normally a derogatory term, it is often negatively used by many Blacks to describe churches that use music extensively to incite
are obvious subversive elements on BET, there are still unresolved questions about whether or not religion is being commodified and marketed through a focus on Black style.

**ANALYSIS OF MUSICAL PROGRAMMING**

Several critical binaries and tropes emerge from the musical programming on BET. The mind/body and master slave binary codes, and the animalization trope were pervasive themes. The mind/body code manifests itself in both discourse on BET’s music program and in the multiple music video images. More specifically, *Cita’s World* provided some of the most interesting discourse on the body images found on BET and was successful in illuminating this mind/body code. Cita’s critique of the bodily images found in BET’s music videos highlighted a critical element that ran rampant throughout the various musical programs. Even to the uncritical eye, Black women in the music videos on BET are projected as mindless, sexual objects. From approximately 9:00 a.m. on any given day between Monday and Saturday, the average viewer is bombarded with a multiplicity of these images, characterized by superimposition on body parts, rhythmic gyrations and a stereotypical interest only in the sexual exploits of males. When these women appear as whole images, their primary function is to dance or to act lustfully over the male entertainers or performers in the video. In my hypothetical day, I did not include videos from BET’s *Uncut Uncensored* which takes these pornographic images to a grotesquely new level. I do not include any of the videos from *Uncut Uncensored* as part of my hypothetical BET day because the music video selections was based exclusively on music videos selected as part of BET’s top 100 countdown for 2001. The videos on the countdown represents what may be considered as videos shown within the
typical BET day. Since Uncut Uncensored is televised between 3:00 a.m. and 4:00 a.m., its content may not classify as typical texts on BET.

Nonetheless, the videos on this program are worth mentioning. On some critical levels, the name Uncut Uncensored speaks for itself. The show represents a televised version of a strip joint as several of the women, who are clad primarily in thongs at the very most, provide lap dances or caged or stage dances for their masculine audience. The club is the primary setting for many of the videos and Black women are projected primarily in terms of their sexual libidinousness. One video that comes to mind is “What that Thing Smell Like” by Black Jesus. The video begins with an elder gentleman entering the club and upon arrival is greeted by a train of females who pass their fingers under his nose so he can sniff them to see “what that thing smells like.” The video is a vulgar display of sexuality with women touching themselves, passing their hands over their genitalia, licking their fingers, and providing lap dances to the male club patrons. What is ironic is that as these women place their entire anatomical structure and their sexual organs up for inspection during the table dances, the men are portrayed beside their female dates, who look on in sheepish approval. Many of the images contained within the music videos also portray the female as the sexually starved predator and, conversely, males are projected in terms of innocent prey, who should be protected from scores of females. As such while the males are depicted as sexually repressed in a Victorian sense, Black women’s libidinousness is celebrated in exaggerated forms in the videos.

Such images can be found within the music videos by Lil’ Bow Wow, Jay Z, R. Kelley, and 122, for example. Within these music videos women are portrayed as being in “perpetual heat” and primarily driven by their feminine uncontrollable libido. For the
14-year-old, and innocent Lil Bow Wow, the challenge is to protect him from the sexually desperate adult cashier who appears to be about two times his senior in the music video “Puppy Love.” His youthfulness is not enough to contain her from trying to ravage him so she eventually has to be dragged away by her co-worker. Lil Bow Wow also has to be shielded from the numerous younger females who seem to want way more than “puppy love.” In 112’s “Peaches and Cream,” not much is needed to arouse the sexually insatiable Black females who are portrayed as continuously ready for penetration in the music video. And, in Jay Z’s “I.Z.Z.O,” a “flock” of women obsess over the superstar. But perhaps the video where this story of Black female sexuality comes most to light is in The Isley Brothers video, “Contagious,” which features R. Kelly. Isley’s wife is portrayed as being so sexually starved that she makes plans with her lover the moment she learns of her husband’s plan to go out of town. The instant he is out the door, she “creeps” in her lover and engages in heated intercourse. So intense is the encounter that she bellows, “You’re contagious, touch me baby, give me what you got.” Her lover R. Kelly, meanwhile, is projected as unwilling and coerced.

This predator/prey binary code used to inscribe meanings about female/male sexual relationships is very important given that one of the defining tropes of colonial discourse was a depiction of colonized women as sexually starved (Shohat and Stam, p. 139). Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1996) cite the colonial film, The Sheik (1921), as a pertinent example of this depiction of the female subject. In the film Arab women, many of whom were Black, “quite literally fight over their Arab man” (p. 157). Sadly on BET there is no evidence of a subversion of this colonial myth. In order for these images to be subversive, one would expect that the producers and directors of these images would somehow reverse these roles. However, given that a similar argument is made about
Black male libidinousness, it may be difficult to draw monolithic conclusions about the subversive nature of these images. Even more problematic is the fact that myth of the oversexed female is still very much alive within our culture.

In some critical sense, it may be perhaps possible to transact a subversive reading of these sexualized images. From one perspective, the fact that Black masculine sexuality is depicted as repressed may be read as a play with the stereotype of the Mandingo warrior. Conversely, because the dominant mainstream expectations is for a female to be asexual in terms of desire or activity, and for her body to be kept covered, the sexualized use of the body with regard to the gyrations and the exposure within these videos may be read as a challenge to mainstream codes of femininity. Such conclusions are often made about singer Madonna who is often thought to be playing with and challenging existing codes of feminine sexuality. It would be easy to draw this conclusion if women were in fact in charge of their own representations within these music videos. However, since males exclusively produced all of the videos in this study, a proposal that the focus on these images is done strictly in the name of subversion may be difficult for some to swallow. Unlike Madonna who may be perceived as liberated, subversive and “rewarded” for her sexuality, Black women in these videos are not empowered but merely perceived as “hoes.” It must be noted here that the concern over the sexuality in these music videos have concerned BET officials as well as those who produce them. In her website criticism of BET, for example, cultural critic Yemi Toure (2001) notes, “Johnson has often said that he does not make the product; that he merely distributes it, and he only sells what people will buy. ‘So what’s wrong with that?’” Toure counters, “You right, Bob Johnson; just like the drug dealer, you don’t create; you just perpetuate. You perpetuate light skin and long hair”
Johnson himself has pointed the blame to the record companies. Video producer Little X, who directed three of the videos described in chapter six, Ushers, “U Got It Bad,” R. Kelley’s, “Fiesta,” and “Peaches and Cream” by 112, admits to the exploitation of women in these videos. Many of the models in these videos aspire to be movie stars or professional models, but settle for these degrading roles in the meantime. It is like one “African American stripper” echoed in the movie, Players Club, “You gotta use what you got to get what you want.” Women in these videos appear to have no problem using what they have, their bodies, to get exposure and experience. My conclusion here is that such practices amount merely to a “prostitution of Blackness.” Little X argues, however, that the exploitation in Hip Hop videos merely reflects a practice common to contemporary culture. He notes,

I know that women would rather look at beautiful women and men would rather look at beautiful women. In the women’s magazines in the Vogues, the Elle’s and all the other fashion magazines that women buy, its all the same kind of shit…the skinny, the scrawny, inaccessible, unrealistic women. It’s big is what I’m trying to say. It’s much bigger than hip hop. It’s much bigger than R & B. We’re doing exactly what everyone else is doing. Is it right? That’s another discussion. (p. 3)

Here Little X raises some fundamental normative concerns about the female images in BET’s musical programs. For one he directs us to another troubling dynamic that was raised by Cita during the descriptions of the hypothetical day. Cita’s primary concern was for the apparent obsession with thinness that in her view is “making its way into our community.” In her typical use of Black vernacular, she queries,
Why is it that sistas is trying so hard to get that skinny Hollywood model shape going on. I mean what happen to be proud of your feminine back. Now e’rybody trying to be MS. Six O’clock, straight up and down.

Sadly, Cita was directly on cue in her assessment as many of the images found within the musical programming reflect this trend of, to use Little X’s words, “the skinny, the scrawny, inaccessible, unrealistic women.” A significant number of these models in the music videos seemed to fit a particular thin image and wore long hair. This beauty image, both in terms of slim body and long hair, was long thought by Black women as representative of ideal Eurocentric beauty but is somehow seemingly now being embraced and accepted by Black women. This is not say that this theme is a new one since struggles against Eurocentric beauty are important to many writers including Toni Morrison’s, ‘Bluest Eye.” It is these types of images that are of particular concern to Toure in her quotation cited above. Denouncing the monolithic focus on “light skin and long hair,” Toure quotes cultural critic and scholar bell hooks as saying these images, “Continue to be traits that define a female as beautiful and desirable in the racist white imagination and in the colonized Black mindset.”

In terms of the ideal body types or the obsessions with thinness, as Jeane Kilbourne (1997) rightly classifies it, research shows an alarming trend emerging among Black females. While traditionally researchers have “associated eating disorders with Caucasian upper-socioeconomic groups, with a ‘conspicuous absence of Negro patients’ (Bruch, 1966),” recent studies have found significant levels of anorexia nervosa among African Americans than were previously thought to exist and the number of such cases is rapidly increasing. Merry N. Miller and Andres Pumariega (1999) cites research which illustrate current levels of “abnormal eating attitudes and body dissatisfaction” among
African Americans “that were at least as high as a similar survey of Caucasian women” (p. 2). The authors conclude that an obsession with thinness may be gaining more currency among African American females. Since anorexia has been traditionally linked to Western cultural values, Merry and Pumariega conclude that Western cultural and aesthetic values may be becoming more widely accepted among African Americans (p. 6). This notion of adoption of the master’s codes of beauty draws heavily on the colonial master/slave binary code as well as the trope of mimicry. Because colonized had no sense of their own history, they were long thought to merely mimic their masters. In this contemporary discourse on BET, the suggestion is that in spite of efforts made to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct a Black aesthetic, a struggle for recognition in the entertainment industry is leading Black females to mimic their white counterparts. This insinuation raises several critical questions: What role does these music videos and the representations of female beauty on BET play in the construction of attitudes about ideal body types? Does BET texts promote eating disorders and a proclivity toward Western cultural values through the female images found within its musical programs?

The other beauty issue raised by Toure in her critique of BET’s representational practices speaks to the issue of hair politics. Taitt and Barber (1996) assert, “Music not only reflects the African American community’s political dispositions, it reflects creativity in fashion, hairstyles, choreography, and composing” (p. 190). A vast majority of the women in BET’s musical programming almost unanimously wear long, straight hair. It is portrayed as the ideal expression of Black female beauty in the music videos. In fact, with the exception of thinness and a willingness to be objectified, long hair appears to be the single most important criterion which influences the selection of women to appear within BET’s videos. One needs only to look at any of these music videos.
Almost always, these women represent this image of Blackness and even to the uncritical viewer these naturalized representations make it quite clear that long, straight “hair matters.” The insinuation here is in no way that it is unnatural for Black women to have long, straight hair, but merely that an excessive focus on such ideals projects a monolithic representation of what it means to be a beautiful Black woman in America. It promotes the troublesome idea to young girls that they should not be “Happy to be Nappy,” to borrow a phrase from bell hooks. This issue has verisimilitude with me as I reflect on my daughter’s nightly prayers, which began when she was about three years old. A central component every night in her prayer was for God to help her hair to grow long. This perplexed me and I was flabbergasted by her indoctrination into this need for long-hair ritual at such a tender age. How do these images of beauty on BET affect the identities of youth in contemporary society?

Notions about hair have been and continue to be a very potent issue within many Black communities. This issue came to light in 1998 when a white, New York City teacher at a predominantly Black school assigned her students to read Carolivia Herron’s (1997) text, *Nappy Hair*. According to Herron, the book was meant to trouble existing stereotypes by celebrating and valorizing “nappy hair.” But once a parent got wind of the inclusion of this book as part of her child’s readings, the controversy transcended way beyond the vicious school board meetings and was the subject of national headlines. Ingrid Banks (2000) opens her insightful book, *Hair Matters*, by recounting this story in an effort to shed light on the significance of hair to Black identities. Like Cornel West’s profound argument that, “Race Matters” in America, Banks brilliantly illustrates that “hair matters” within Black communities. Banks sheds light on the troubling reality that, “What is deemed desirable is measured against white standards of beauty, which include
long and straight hair (usually blonde), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy. Consequently, Black women’s hair, in general, fits outside of what is considered desirable in mainstream society” (p. 2).

In a similar argument, hooks (1992) has made the case that this obsession with long, straight hair merely represents a patriarchal, white-supremacist, “colonized” mindset that continues to constrain many Black people. Scholar hooks recalls the important efforts within the Black power struggle to redefine and reimagine Black beauty from an “authentic” Black perspective. She notes that the wearing of Afros, for instance, was a way of resisting mainstream, white encoded definitions of Black beauty. As we enter “new times,” it is interesting to see how such definitions of “good hair” and beauty still continue to influence the self-concept of many Blacks. But amidst this whole argument, Banks raises critical questions that are worth considering: What if the teacher had been Black? “Would her actions had been met with the same protests? Who is allowed to address issues that are particular to Black communities?” (p. 2). With relations to this project, should BET be ridiculed for selling a hegemonic and monolithic perspective on Black beauty?

The idea that Black females may be emulating white standards of beauty vis-à-vis hair and thinness may be further understood from a postcolonial perspective not only in terms of the master/slave binary code that is discussed above, but also in terms of the infantilization trope that posits colonized people in a child-like manner. From this perspective, as Shohat and Stam have shown, “Colonized or formerly colonized people [are] seen as Calibans suffering from what Octane Mannoni has called a ‘Prospero complex,’ that is, an inbred dependency on the leadership of White Europeans” (p. 140). As such, these contemporary Calibans are portrayed within this discourse as in need of
whites to set the standards for what constitutes as good hair or beauty. Because Black people and women in particular are thought to be childlike and mindless, they lack proper standards and therefore must look to their white elders for moral and aesthetic leadership.

In terms of the master/slave code, masters are seen as having the power to define the slave by mere virtue of their “ownership.” As such, the master can, therefore, control the slaves and tell them how to dress, what to eat and what is considered to be beautiful. Because the slaves lacked independence, they had no control over their own representation and must consequently look to the master through a form of mimicry. In postcolonial circles, it is generally accepted that one’s self-concept is “derived from other people—their view that one is beautiful or ugly, smart or stupid, human or bestial” (Patrick Colm Hogan, 2000, p. 46). As illustrated earlier in this project in chapters two and three, Blacks have been particularly vulnerable to these criticisms. Postcolonial scholar Horace Campbell (1987) ruefully notes that, “Blacks were forced to deny a decisive part of their social being: to detest their faces, their colour, the peculiarities of their culture, and their specific reactions in the face of life, love, death and art. All this was done so that they would idealize the colour, history, and culture of Europeans” (p. 39). Similarly, another postcolonial critic, Walter Rodney (1969) argues that, “The popular version of beauty…suggested that a Black person…was ugly and offensive…Some Black people, both men and women, went to great lengths to look European” (p. 33). Stereotypes such as these, according to Michel Foucault (1979), function in a way that fixes and stabilizes the body within historical moments as a means of disciplining and controlling subjects. These stereotypes promote a form of “passivity, receptivity and inactivity” or “docile bodies,” in Foucault’s words (1979, p. 195). The visual media, the cinema and television stations like BET in particular, no doubt play an
integral role in perpetuating these ideologies about Blackness. In this regard, the visual media through their perpetuation of racial stereotypes have been in part responsible for producing “docile bodies.” Again, rather than subvert these stereotypical representations of Black female beauty BET merely naturalizes and takes for granted these colonial constructions through its musical programming.

One potentially subversive element contained within the music videos, however, may be the excessive use of flashy jewelry, expensive cars and gigantic mansions. While this has been framed by some critics in chapter five as indicative of a certain level of passivity and mindlessness on the part of Blacks, I want to suggest here that these images may be potentially counter-hegemonic in the sense that they challenge the dominant expectations of the rich and the poor. The poor is expected to be deprived and unable to afford certain images, whereas the rich symbolizes the opposite. The visual display of this jewelry may be a way of challenging these mainstream codes. Conversely, they may be perceived as aesthetic statements which challenge mainstream codes of decency. It is critical to note here that “bling-bling” as is evidenced through the use of these jewelry symbols serve as important status markers which are totally acceptable within a capitalist society. Unfortunately, Black status symbols are still very much perceived as inferior or gaudy as they often take it to the extreme. The music videos are bombarded with such “gaudy, flossy images of excess,” huge mansions, and what is known in Hip Hop circle as other “bling-bling” images. It also surfaced in the comments by AJ and Free in the episode of 106 and Park when, in introducing one of their upcoming guests, AJ notes, “Still Fly. Still bling-bling, flossy, floss, doing their thing” and Free adds, “I’m telling you, I check the couch for diamonds every time they leave.” What is this fixation with flashy jewelry, expensive cars, huge houses and highlighting the material wealth of Black
America? Does this focus on materiality suggests that Blacks are passive, mindless dupes and “primarily consumer people” who “would rather buy some new sneaker than invest in starting a business” as was suggested in chapter five? More importantly, does BET’s image promote the contemporary enslavement of Blacks to material items as has also been suggested by the email in chapter five\textsuperscript{17}? Articulating these questions requires a critical understanding on recent theories of consumption which will be addressed later in the conclusions of this chapter.

Unraveling consumerism and materialism that runs rampant within BET music videos requires a brief overview and critique of the theoretical approaches that have been offered to understanding consumerism. Perhaps one of the most widely accepted views on consumerism comes to us by way of the Frankfort School, among whose chief spokespersons, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkeimer (2000), have often been credited with producing one of the earliest models on cultural studies (Douglas Kellner, 1995a). These Frankfort school thinkers observe that processes of standardization and mass production during the age of late-modern capitalism have effectuated a “cultural industry” which is underpinned by a commodification of culture. Fundamentally, they argue, this commercial imperative dictates all cultural productions and ultimately shifts the focus from aesthetic or substantive cultural value and leads to a depletion of art. Texts are thought to no longer have cultural value but merely to represent items manufactured strictly for profit. Applying this argument to BET, as part of a cultural industry, the texts on BET would be read as having no substantive value but generated merely as part of a profit motive.

\textsuperscript{17} The “white” author of this email made bold statements about the consumption habits of Blacks and concluded anyone can trick them into spending since they are mindless dupes.
Furthermore, for Adorno and Horkeimer the media play a critical role in promoting and producing these cultural industries and manipulating subjects into buying these products. Processes like advertising and marketing are seen as strategies that, “increased the capacity for ideological control or domination” by creating a sense of false needs (Hugh Mckay, p. 3), and popular culture, such as the programming found on BET, is then equated with “mass culture” and perceived as an object of capitalism. Characteristic of this position, Leo Lowenthal (1961) charges that a "product of popular culture has none of the features of genuine art, but in all its media popular culture proves to have its own genuine characteristics: standardization, stereotype, conservatism, mendacity, manipulated consumer goods" (p. 11). It is important to consider that the subject plays no part in this conception of consumerism since they remain mystified by media ideologies and duped into spending.

Perhaps influenced by but no doubt influencing many mass media theorists, the Frankfort school’s position was based on a hypodermic theory of media effects, which in a nutshell posits that the media have powerful effects on the way people think and behave. From this perspective, mass mediated messages such as those found on BET have the power to “inoculate” viewers and ultimately control their everyday actions. Consumption, from this vantage point, is seen as primarily serving the interests of the capitalists, whereas consumers are perceived as playing “a profoundly passive role, portraying them as manipulated mindless dupes, rather than as active creative beings” (McKay, p. 3). Although jettisoned by many critical scholars for their elitism and their pessimistic reductionism, many still accept the Frankfurt school theories on

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18 Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and John Fiske (1994) are among the many scholars who challenge the Frankfurt school of thought.
commodification as the gospel truth. As such, ideas about the consumption practices of humans and Blacks, in particular, still take for granted that people play no active role in the consumption process. Evidence of this can be found in public discourses over the media, especially with the recent domination of mediated messages by a few extremely large conglomerates and what has been characterized as a globalization of culture. With a meager five multimedia tycoons—Viacom, AOL Time Warner, Disney, News Corporation and Vivendi Universal—controlling the world’s “cultural industries,” there has been a tendency to accept that the media have become “merchants of cool,” who have perfected the “art” of selling representations of “coolness” or “hipness” to contemporary youth on a global scale, unprecedented to any other period in history. According to this model, BET would be classified as merely commodifying and objectifying Blackness and the stereotypes that are associated with it. Wherefore, while there may be some political or genuine spiritual intentions associated with “rapping,” “worshipping,” and “parodying” on BET, as these images become stylized and commodified for a mass audience, the intended politics and salvation may become masked from the general public. In other words, they may get watered down and lose their meanings in the name of style or rather “entertainment.” The critical question becomes, how can students and citizens be prepared to unmask the politics and ideologies that underpin the construction of meaning?

In spite of the pervasiveness of this commodification rhetoric, cultural studies, postmodern and other contemporary thinkers have often sought to modify the Frankfurt school position on consumption. Hugh McKay (1996), for instance, suggests that from a cultural studies perspective, “consumption is seen as an active process and often celebrated as pleasure, and the consumer even has become elevated (by some on both the
left and the right) to the status of citizen, the principal means whereby we participate in
the polity” (p. 3). Mckay speaks from an affiliation with the Open University in England
and with cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall, Paul du Gay, Kathryn Woodward,
among others. He argues that, “Rather than a passive, secondary, determined activity,
consumption (and its focus, the home) is seen increasingly as an activity with its own
practices, tempo, significance, and determination” (p.3-4). Identity construction is not
seen as a one-way process handed down by capitalists, but, on the contrary, individuals
are thought to play an important role in constructing their own subjectivities. Moreover,
postmodern scholars have often viewed cultural consumption as being the very material
out of which we construct identities. In their view, we become what we consume. When
we purchase products, postmodernists argue, the debate is not a matter over what use or
how much we need or don’t need them since all we are actually buying is signs and
symbols. Consumption is seen as a purchasing of signs, and since signs have no fixed
meanings, the meanings people receive from these commodities are never guaranteed.
The email text referenced in chapter five suggests that Blacks believe “having a
Mercedes, and a big house gives them ‘Status’ or that they have achieved the American
Dream.” Does the lavishness in BET videos represent a form of status hunting? How
does one explain the almost excessive focus on materiality in the music videos? Within
the next section of this paper, I attempt to explain the fascination with the material in
BET’s music videos and will illustrate how these images may be read as potentially
subversive.

The bling-bling trope has become one of the most pervasive elements in Hip Hop
culture today. The most dominant features of this “bling-bling” trope within the musical
programming are the long platinum chains, diamond rings, expensive cars and gigantic
homes, what I call mansions. Many Hip Hop icons, including rappers and athletes, have adopted this bling-bling trope. For instance, former Indiana Pacers basketball player Jalen Rose had about $250,000 in jewelry stolen during a game at the Bradley Center against the Milwaukee Bucks (February, 2001). In the music videos, these images have almost become part of the uniforms for male performers. How does one explain the fascination with these items? Does this confirm the assumption that Blacks are mindless and spend more money on material things than on education, activity? I come to understand the bling-bling trope as both a consumeristic statement of status, as well as a subversive strategy used to engender an important transition from the invisible to the visible. Invisibility has been a powerful metaphor within colonial discourse where the argument has been made that whiteness is light and, henceforth, visible whereas Blackness or darkness is portrayed as invisible. Because of this perceived and projected inferiority with regard to their white counterparts, the colonized has always struggled to gain recognition and to be seen and taken notice of by the colonizer and by their peers. Hence, Ralph Ellison’s influential text, *Invisible Man* (1952), becomes a vitally important metaphor for African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s. The bling-bling trope may be an important way of confronting these presence/absence, invisible/visible binaries in a way that subverts them by making it impossible to overlook the “Visible Man,” the rapper, the athlete, the “blinger.” Revolutionary rap artist, Mos Def, hints at this argument when he raps that through Hip Hop culture, “Invisible man, got the whole world watching.” This play with the invisible/visible binary may be evident in the gaudiness and the floss that has become a major part of the “bling-bling” reality of Hip Hop and contemporary youth identities. Hence, the flashy jewelry, including the gold and platinum teeth, long thought to represent mindless spending, may be read as a
strategic way to gain visibility, recognition and status. A flaunting of these materials becomes the primary way of gaining status and makes statements about taste and income. As such, such gaudiness may be somewhat empowering. On a personal note, I cannot count the number of times I have been queried by students in inner city classrooms about the authenticity of my ring or my watch. “Is that real diamonds,” they would often ask. The jewelry becomes critical visual signifiers, and despite being classified as vulgar materialism, may be a way for the invisible Black person to become visible. Hence, the flashy cars such as the Escalades, Lexus, Mercedes or BMW’s with the chrome rims and blaring stereos, the jewelry, huge mansions, and even the tennis shoes and the brand name “gear” they wear may be read as part of the colonized effort to gain visibility. It is also a way of challenging the rich/poor and the have/_have-not binaries, albeit in highly vulgarized and excessive ways. As historically deprived subjects, the video imagery affords these artists an opportunity to re-imagined Blackness, albeit too often in problematical terms of excess. Conversely, this “bling bling” ideology may also be read as participating in Western materialism in problematical ways. As a result, they may very well be perpetuating the dominant definition of “success” and the way we are defined as what we “own” as opposed to what we “know.” As such, Blackness becomes affiliated with what we own rather than what we know.

Another critical element in the representation of Blackness within the musical programming speaks directly to the idea of authority. In colonial texts, by the sheer nature of their perceived “animality,” Blacks were projected as passive objects and what becomes known to them is handed down by the knowing master. However, with Hip Hop cultural narratives, the rappers become active subjects who know and clearly understand their plight as oppressed, marginalized people. This again represents a
subversion of the subject/object, passive/active knower/known binaries with Blacks now afforded an opportunity to represent themselves as commentators on culture within the music videos. Also related to this is as the knowing subject, Blacks are represented in these videos in terms of the cool versus the uncool. Coolness and “hipness” become critical identity markers and is represented in terms of certain stylized performances demonstrated through fashion, usages of the body, play and awareness of the popular trends, among other signifiers. Blackness as cool is also related to the idea of Blackness as soul. Through the “souls of Black folks,” whites are taught rhythm and appropriate style.

The final set of images contained within the music videos that I want to highlight stems from the apparent fixation with prison cell imagery. The jail or the prison is an important trope used in BET’s musical programming. It was glamorized in at least three of the top 15 videos employed as part of my description of hypothetical BET day. Most strikingly, such images surfaced in videos by DMX, “Who we be,” Alicia Keys, “Fallin’,” and Ja Rule’s “Put It On Me.” What was particularly interesting about the employment of jailhouse images in these videos is that with the exception of DMX’s song, none of the lyrics make direct or indirect references to incarceration. The commercialization of this jailhouse image in music videos is complex and may be read from multiple perspectives. In one sense, it can be argued that the music videos, like many of the major programming shown on BET represents a packaging and marketing of stereotypes of Blackness as the “criminal” verses the “responsible citizen.” Again as a function of their “animality,” Blacks are often projected as being more violent and in terms of negativity along the good/bad, moral/immoral binaries. In some ways the prison icon in these videos reinforces this stereotype, but may also affirm this identity in a more
politici zed way. From this perspective this play on identity may be seen as similar to Elvis Presley’s, “Jailhouse Rock,” in terms of an affirmation of a “bad,” “delinquent,” and “resistant” identity.

Another way of thinking about these jailhouse representations is as a function of realism. Many critics contend that Black music serves the important function of telling the truth about the Black experience. For example, Venise Berry and Harry Looney, JR. (1996) assert, “Rappers, particularly these male rappers, often reflect their cultural reality with the police within their music’s lyrics. Through rap music, they are able to bring that experience to the public and, in their own way, challenge what they see as unfair authoritative practices” (p. 274). From this vantage point, BET videos may be seen as merely telling or not telling the truth about the life of a particular segment of Black males’ realities as opposed to being mere “constructions.” Ja Rule’s video, “Put It On Me,” hence, would not be read simply as selling stereotypical notions of Black males as criminals, it could be seen as a subversive act as portraying a “true” and “real life” representation of Black males, particularly those living within inner cities. However, this realism position has been vehemently rejected by bell hooks (1996) who argues, in another context, that contrary to the commonly held belief that the media simply show what is real, the situation could be no further than the truth. Instead, hooks argues, “They give the reimagined, reinvented version of the real. It may look like something familiar, but in actuality it is a different universe from the world of the real” (p. 1).

This realism argument is worth considering when one examines statistics concerning the incarceration of Blacks. According to a 1995 report by Marc Mauer and Tracy Huling of the Washington-based Sentencing Project, almost one in every three Black men in their twenties is either incarcerated, on parole, or under some other form of
correctional supervision. This figure amounts to the fact that more Black males are in jails or prisons than in college. Yet even a more perplexing finding in the Sentencing Project report, is the alarming increase of Black females who are incarcerated. The report finds that between 1989 and 1991, the rate of correctional supervision for Black women rose 78%. Illuminating this troublesome experience for Blacks within music videos maybe a strategic way of addressing and presenting viewers with a problematic element of the Black experience.

Furthermore, the play with this jailhouse imagery may even be extended further and be understood as a metaphor representing the bondage that Black people have struggled laboriously to overcome ever since they were “kidnapped” and brought to the “New World.” It may also represent a more contemporary metaphor for understanding Black life in the inner city. From the first perspective, slavery could, henceforth, be seen as a colonial penal system whose primary function was to control, discipline, punish and exploit Black bodies. The jailhouse images in these videos may thus be read as portraying jails and prisons as colonies and the police and correctional officers as colonial rulers whose primary function is to keep Blackness in check. Similarly, one can interpret the inner city as a perpetual jail, where Blacks are disciplined and controlled, and constantly under surveillance in a panoptic sense by the police.

Jail is often depicted in resistance narratives as a site of transformation. It is where Jesus was taken as a necessary part of his transcendence to “heaven.” Socrates, with his commitment to speaking the “truth” was also imprisoned and ultimately died in jail. Interestingly enough, it was from jail that Antonio Gramsci wrote his influential text

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whose primary concept on hegemony and counter-hegemony grounds the struggle over
counternarratives in this project. More recently, several of the most influential Black
leaders of the 20th century have faced similar incarceration. This includes Marcus
Garvey, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, and most
recently, Al Sharpton (May, 2001), who was imprisoned for his stance against the United
States’ use of Vieques Island, Puerto Rico as a site for US war games at the peril of
locals. As a site for transformation, and as a powerful metaphor depicting an attempt to
contain or silence the truth, jail is depicted as just another aspect of the struggle to
overcome. Conversely, it must be duly noted here that the incarceration associated with
resistance and an ideological and political commitment to telling the truth at all costs can
be read in many ways as different from the institutionalization that is associated with
criminal activity such as selling drugs, stealing or committing murder. How do these
jailhouse images get read? Do they serve to subvert ideologies of Blackness as criminal?
Or do they merely normalize the jailhouse experience and naturalizing as part of the
Black identity?

**ANALYSIS OF COMEDY**

Comedy shows on BET represent some of the most contradictory and ambiguous
programs on the network. On the one hand, comedy is visualized as a necessary and
strategic practice which helps to quell or escape the pressures of daily oppression. Such a
sentiment is summed up in the age-old adage that “sometimes Black people have to laugh
to keep from crying.” On the other hand, comedy can serve to naturalize stereotypical
representations of Blackness. The ambiguity, henceforth, stems from the fact that one
can never be sure exactly how to read comedy. Stuart Hall (1995) asserts that stand-up
and other comedy, such as that found on BET’s ComicView and The Way We Do It! is the purest form of pleasure on entertainment television (p. 165). It is perceived as a privileged zone, counter-posed against the serious. Hence the laugh/cry, joking/serious binaries are two of the most significant oppositions used in the articulation of comedy and Blackness. The trouble with this form of entertainment, Hall contends, is that “it is never clear whether we are laughing with or at this figure: admiring the physical and rhythmic grace, the open expressivity and emotionality of the ‘entertainer,’ or put off by the ‘clown’s’ stupidity (p. 164). In this section, I want to consider a “serious” reading of comedy and suggest that comedy, like other forms of texts found on BET, is laden with ambiguous and contradictory ideologies that beg for critical interrogation.

As Hall rightly concludes, comedy is often perceived as a privileged space where actors can state the normally mutable unspoken stories of our everyday lives. Such comedy has the power to constrain us or can serve to subvert meanings that are taken for granted in our everyday lives. Hall sites two overarching problems with the clown image as a representation of Blackness. In the first place, the idea of a “clown” or the entertainer is among the controversial base images of African American culture that are used to essentialize Blackness. These images are often constructed on what Hall calls an “ancient grammar” on race. At the root of this grammar is the stereotype of Blacks performing or entertaining whites. From this perspective Blacks are restricted to the role of making white people happy, even if this means suppressing their own desires. It may be read as a product of the master/slave myth. For example, it is commonly known that white slave owners insisted that the slaves sing while working. What is also commonly known is that these performances were often coded with double meanings, a practice commonly known as double entendre, which communicated secret messages to fellow
slaves that were unintelligible to the “master.” Given the complex nature of comedy it may be fitting to ask, could the contents of BET’s comedy be read similarly as containing double meanings?

The second concern that Hall has with comedy, especially stand-up comedy, is that it is often saturated with racist and sexist jokes. He asserts,

Telling racist jokes across the racial line, in conditions where relations of racial inferiority and superiority prevail, reinforces the difference and reproduces the unequal relations because, in those situations, the point of the joke depends on the existence of racism. Thus they reproduce the categories and relations of racism even while normalizing them through laughter. (p. 166)

This conception is critical given the multicultural identities that are associated with BET’s programming. Writing in 1996, Taitt and Barber note that just as many whites (25 percent) watch BET as do Blacks. Many of the jokes on BET often mark Blackness in opposition to whiteness, sometimes in ways that playfully problematize Blackness but yet may privilege whiteness. The comedy analyzed in the segments on BET, for example, especially with regard to The Way We Do It!, parodies Blackness in stereotypical ways. The numerous segments highlighted and placed for consumption ideas of Black women as constantly engaging in meaningless gossip, whether this takes place on the telephone as in “Cell Phone Friends,” or on more official media programs such as the radio program with Mad Maggie and Irritated Irene, the soap opera gossip show, “Soap Dish,” or the television magazine segment, Word on the Street. Certainly the commitment to confront issues may lead some to dismiss Cita as gossiping and the segment of How I’M Living! with Wendy Williams all serve to project this stereotype of Black women as constantly engaging in gossip. Similarly, the collage format on ComicView serves mainly to
highlight a monolithic valorization of Clinton’s intimate affair with Monica Lewinski. This almost unanimous agreement given to Clinton’s behavior by the comedians may be read as a challenge to mainstream codes of morality/immorality. Many of the comedians were explicit in their jokes that Clinton did nothing wrong and, gaining a form of agreement through the boisterous laughter of the audience, such jokes ultimately make normative statements about the moral positionalities of Blacks. Moreover, because these comedians often use essentializing strategies in their references to Black people as a homogeneous group, the comedy on this program may be guilty of essentializing Blackness.

Another critical trope used within this comedy programming from which the grammar on race may be drawn is the myth of Blackness in terms of infantalization, mentioned earlier. Shohat and Stam assert, “The trope of infantilization…projects the colonized as embodying an earlier stage in individual human or broad cultural development” (p. 139). In *Black skins, White Masks*, Franz Fanon (1967) illuminates this trope in arguing that whites always address Black adults as though they are addressing children. Shohat and Stam also find, “Scientific racists tried to ‘prove’ that Black adults were anatomically and intellectually identical to White children” (p. 139). This infantilization trope seeks to conflate Blackness in terms of an “everlasting infancy” and Blackness is thought to be characterized by childlike behaviors such as playing and joking. The clown or comedian image on BET as is demonstrated not only in the two aforementioned programs, but also in the music video program, *Hits from the Street*, may be perpetuating these infantilization ideologies though their focus on playfulness and “making sport.” At the same time, the argument suggested in the adage above about the subversive use of comedy should not be totally ignored. Of concern here is the
perplexing question. Given that whites often accepted the “blackface” depiction of Blacks by whites during minstrelsy as “authentic” and “genuine,” how then do white audiences come to understand these representations of Blackness now that “real” Blacks are performing them?

In her book entitled, *Laughing in the Dark: A Decade of Subversive Comedy*, Laurie Stone (1997) illuminates the truth imbedded in comedy performances. For Stone, “The goals inspiring the richest comedy are the same steering all art: to say what is usually suppressed and also speak truthfully. The words that are usually muzzled are those that defy established values and undermine bases of power (p. xv). From that perspective, comedy comes to represent a play with the unspoken elements of our everyday lives. It is the subversive elements of this comedy, the daring to tell the truth even when that truth is considered to be taboo and the frankness of the comedians that make us laugh. In Stone’s words, “Laughter, like a sneeze, isn’t deliberated but bursts forth, almost always from a sense of wickedness. Laughing, we trip over our own muffled desires and aggressions (p. xiv). In comedy, one may argue that the deviant or the “rebel” is legitimated and given authority to humor us. Several of the jokes on BET’s comedy program may be viewed as confronting issues relating to racial differences on a daily basis. Stone argues that the vast majority of such comedy, actually “reassures rather than frightens or arouses—and has no other ambition (p. xiii). From this perspective, race and racial issues are thought of as merely becoming normalized within these comedic zones. This is somewhat similar to the conception by Hall, who notes that while many claim that the prevalence of racialized jokes suggests that Blacks are more acceptable of the content, it could be that racism has become more “normal.” While these arguments would seem to suggest a more hegemonic function of comedy, I want to
suggest the possibility of a subversive reading of comedy. Because the subject of comedy is often the political, problematic relations of everyday life, comedy may serve certain counter-hegemonic functions under certain circumstances. Because meaning is never guaranteed, it is indeed possible that comedy does more to reinforce than to subvert, but this does not dismiss the ideological significance of comedy. It may be for this exact purpose that classroom pedagogy should be focused on, to borrow from bell hooks, “Teaching to Transgress” the taken for granted and privileged narratives of everyday life such as comedy. Does this comedy programming on BET merely reinforce or subvert stereotypes about race and race relations in America?

ANALYSIS OF HUMAN INTERESTS PROGRAMMING

Much of the critical conclusions drawn about BET’s music and religious program are also applicable to the human interest programming represented on BET’s hypothetical day in chapter six. More particularly, Oh Drama! with its focus on the “Saint versus Sinner,” raises several critical questions that are addressed in the above discussion about spirituality, while How I’m Living! again called to question the excessive focus on materiality, “gaudiness” and celebrities that was especially evident within BET’s musical programming. Unlike the traditional religious programming highlighted earlier, however, Oh Drama! took on a more direct approach to issues of Black spirituality on its talk show. In some ways, by having the atheists on this program represented by two white women, BET may have been consciously or unconsciously seeking to challenge and or subvert the binaries of the good and the bad or the moral and the immoral. If one were making comparisons between the two ethnic groups on this talk show, it would become clear that Blackness was upheld in terms of moral superiority over whiteness. Even
among the non-Christian, African American guests, their willingness to deny Jesus as God’s son but still accept the existence of a God was read as fundamentally different from the two atheists, one of whom asks the question, “How could you worship a man that would murder his own son?” Despite the fact that several critical elements on the show were difficult to decipher because of the frequent interruptions between guests and the multiple conversations being conducted simultaneously, this program had potential subversive elements. This talk show also allots significant portions of its time to interviewing African American celebrities, namely entertainers. This excessive focus on celebrities may raise concerns regarding the counter-hegemonic potential of this program.

Moreover, the focus on celebrities is taken to even more vulgar levels in *How I’m Living!* This show may be classified as a Black version of *Lifestyle’s of the Rich and Famous.* It may be read as a part of that “bling-bling” trope that has come to characterize popular culture and as such would be subjected to similar discussions of the invisible/visible. Therefore, while this show is classified by BET officials as an attempt to make Black America’s “rich and flossin’” more visible, its focus on excess and gaudiness may be read as taking these images to extreme levels. The fact that this show comes on during prime time (8:00 p.m.) may suggests that BET’s priorities are more about “entertainment” than socially enriching programming. This conclusion is drawn against the background that BET news programming is reserved for late night when Blacks watch the fewest hours of television.

**NEWS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS ANALYSIS**

Content for the news and public affairs programming on BET represents a systematic attempt to project information of importance to African Americans. As such,
BET news and public affairs programming may be classified as a counter-hegemonic space. In addition to the fact that all of the items on Lead Story highlighted various issues that may be of particular concern to Blacks, for instance, news items on BET Nightly News focuses mainly on stories including Blacks or were of national interest but could be seen as important to Blacks. Unlike typical mainstream network news programs, Blacks were projected in a “positive” light in these news and public affairs programs on BET. That is to say that Blacks were not portrayed as criminal or deviant as is often the case with mainstream television networks. In fact, the only crime story or rather news item involving the police on these shows involved the victimization of a Black man by the police. The Black man was beaten and sodomized with a broomstick by several NYPD police officers. The story focused on a $1 million bail being granted to one of the officers, but the overall slant projected the police and the judicial system as unfair and immoral, while the Black man was portrayed as oppressed, victimized and the good citizen. The reporter interviewed three African Americans who echoed the same sentiments about a lack of justice and fair punishment for injustices committed by white police against Black citizens. However, the single news item that did not conform to this positive projection of Blacks, addressed the presidential election in Zimbabwe. This BET Nightly News item focused on scandals of election fraud being conducted by incumbent Presidential candidate, Robert Mugabe. In light of multiple narratives and counternarratives surrounding these allegations of fraud and the potential ramifications such accusations could have on the Blacks living in Zimbabwe, I was somewhat surprised by BET’s simplistic coverage of this news item which reflected the exact spin taken by mainstream news programs. But other than the controversial spin in this news item, almost all of the news items reflected Blackness in a “positive” light.
BET’s *Lead Story* also went out the way to make sure that various issues were addressed in terms of relevance to African Americans. Evidence of this was found in the interview with New Orleans’ Mayor and president of the National Conference of Mayors, Marc Morial. Regarding a plan to meet with President Bush, Morial was queried, “What issues do you plan to ask the president that are of interest to African Americans?” The other two programs, *BET Tonight* and *Teen Summit* not only afforded viewers a unique opportunity to see African Americans in leadership roles on television but also portrayed them as the knower. Blacks were projected as scholars, commentators, winners and informants of cultural practices going on within Black communities. Also of importance, what these programs classified as news could be classified as more human interest news or “soft news” items which feature items of particular interest as opposed to the general hard news focus which deal with crime and other such issues and tend to be more dramatic in scope. *BET Tonight*’s exclusive feature with newly crowned Miss USA, Shantay Hinton, represented this human interest perspective. Interviewing Hinton represents a seemingly emerging trend of presenting more entertainment-oriented guests as opposed to engaging political issues as has been common to the program in the past. Similarly, *Teen Summit*’s in-depth focus on illuminating the practice of high-school cliques was an important item that has more relevance to contemporary youth. The fact that the hosts of this show go out of the way to distance the show from “regular music shows,” speaks to the counter-hegemonic potential of this program. In conclusion, my major concern about this news and public affairs programming, however, stems from the inconvenient time it is positioned with BET’s schedule. While many of the narratives on these programs were politicized and counter-hegemonic, my concern is that these programs reach relatively few African Americans because there are mainly showcased on
late night, when many Blacks may be asleep, or on Sundays, when many Blacks may be in church. Having critically analyzed BET’s program categories, I now conclude this chapter my drawing critical conclusions about BET’s texts.

**CRITICAL CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this textual analysis was to interrogate BET’s texts in order to draw conclusions about the network as a significant source of counternarratives on Blackness. As such several crucial questions were constructed which would speak to the production of counternarratives from a postcolonial perspective. Among them, I was interested in ascertaining: How does BET represent Blackness? What particular codes and rhetorical devices are used to give meaning to Blackness? Is there evidence of a Creole or hybrid identity being celebrated on BET? Is BET a source of counternarratives of Blackness? I will attempt to address these questions in the next section of this paper.

**HOW DOES BET REPRESENT BLACKNESS?**

With regards to the first question, BET represents Blackness, Valerie Smith posits a theory on Black representations that may be useful for drawing conclusions about BET. Smith detects two common trends used by Black media practitioners in their struggle to produce Black visual counternarratives. She traces these two approaches back to heated debates that took place during the Harlem Renaissance concerning the portrayal of Blackness. The first of these trends is an “impulse [which] reads ‘authentic’ as synonymous with ‘positive’ and seeks to supplant representations of Black lasciviousness and irresponsibility with ‘respectable’ ones” (pp.1 –2). From this perspective, “the
Black subject is shown to be at least diligent and morally upright if not also refined and prosperous” (p. 2). In order to replace what they characterize as negative images of Blackness within mainstream media, Black directors often seek to offer up more “positive” images of Blackness. And as Phylis Klotman and Cutler have argued, the very nature of their existence has been devoted to challenging problematic, and stereotypical images of Blackness. According to Smith, this approach wrongfully takes for granted that works produced by Blacks would be “positive” and potentially counterhegemonic. While BET does not produce much of its own programming there are some traces of this approach in its programming. In particular, the news and public affairs programming, and the human relations program, Oh Drama! epitomize this approach. On BET Nightly News, BET Tonight, and Lead Story, in particular, it is apparent that conscious efforts are made to replace negative representations of Blacks within in mainstream news with more positive ones. The spin of these news items could be read as an effort to subvert the dominant constructions of Blackness by reversing the role and project whites as “criminal,” as in the story on the police brutality, or as atheists on Oh Drama!

Moreover, the second approach that Smith finds common to many African American directors’ response to dominant representations of Blackness is a use of resistance techniques that refuse to accept white-determined, “class-coded notions of respectability.” To do this, Black directors often either re-appropriate stereotypical performances of Blackness that once fed the diet of mainstream representations and inscribe them with new ideological meanings, or illuminate “cultural practices rooted in Black vernacular experience (jazz, gospel, rootworking, religion, and so on)” (p. 2). Both of these impulses are employed to construct meaning on BET. BET employs this strategy in two particular ways. In the first place, many of the texts on BET are loaded
with stereotypical images of Blackness that could be said to resist “white-determined, class-coded notions of respectability” (Smith, p. 2). The music videos, *The Way We Do It!*, and *Comic View* are a few of the programs that directly employs this approach. *Comic view*, for instance, portrays Blackness as comical and calls to mind days gone by when stereotypical Zip Coon and Jim Crow type characters were commonplace and used to make a mockery of Blacks, often portraying them as shiftless, contented, water-melon eating darkies. In addition, in several of the music videos, the skimpily-clad females and the explicit sexual overtones could be read as a play with the colonial animalization trope which positioned Blacks as promiscuous creatures with insatiable sexual appetites.

Whether these representations actually re-appropriate existing stereotypes or meanings about Blackness or merely perpetuate them as a “truth” about Blackness becomes moot. This point is worth considering even further when one considers the historical ways in which whites have read these performances of Blackness. In particular, the fundamental question becomes: if whites have accepted the “Blackface” representations of Blackness in minstrelsy as the truth, what then might they think about these performances if they are performed by Blacks themselves? Does appropriating these stereotypes give them new meaning or simply confirm the taken for granted “Truth” about Blackness?

Secondly, BET relies heavily on Black vernacular traditions for its programming content. Hip hop, by far the most pervasive popular cultural form today, is grounded in African American vernacular traditions and is the primary focus of BET’s content. In addition, as noted earlier, the “call-and-response,” uses of the body, and musical performances during BET’s religious programs rely on Black vernacular traditions. Given their focus on this particular representation of Blackness one must ask, does BET essentialize Blackness? This poses serious concerns for many Black scholars who are
concerned with the complexity of Blackness. Martin Favor (1999), for instance, argues that “…it is not enough to posit Blackness as a function of the rural South or urban North, or to say that the Black bourgeoisie is simply as ‘authentic’ as folk. Further, authentic Black identity … cannot be reduced simply to tropes such as ‘passing’ or the ‘tragic mulatto/a’” (Favor, p. 91). Because the vast majority of its content is based on vernacular traditions, BET may be guilty of essentializing Blackness. This essential representation makes it difficult to recognize the existence of a hybrid or Creole identity being celebrated on BET. Moreover, despite the fact that tropes of cultural hybridity were not visible on BET, several colonial tropes, binary codes and oppositions are employed to give meaning to Blackness.

Some of these tropes include, the infantilization and the animalization tropes, which are played with in ways that address Blackness in complex and contradictory ways. Some binaries are not easily placed in either of these two categories. For example, the cool/uncool binary seems to perpetuate colonialist representations of Blackness as body, since “coolness” values a certain stylized presentation of the body in Black identity formation. As a consequence, the mental or the intellect gets de-emphasized in the “cool-pose,” as C. P. Gauze (2001) has argued. “Coolness,” especially as is highlighted through the “bling-bling” trope, also gets associated with a commodification of desires for freedom and self-affirmation, and a desire to become visible so that fancy clothes, an expensive car with “tight” chrome rims, lots of “sexy” women, a big “mansion” for a crib serve as signifiers of empowerment and liberation. At the same time, cool is a “stylized” performance of Blackness that is always changing and that recognizes that Blackness has no essential meaning. Its meaning, therefore, must be re-imagined, re-invented, and re-performed. The Hip Hop focus on “cool” also places contemporary Black youth in the
position of being the “knower,” the one who knows what is cool, what is not. The one who is in charge of fashion and identity, who turns the table on members of the hegemonic, mainstream culture by viewing their body as deficient and uncool. This in some ways may subvert the infantalization trope which likens childishness with mindlessness and portray them primarily as modern Calibans.

Despite the ambiguous reading of “coolness,” some of the other oppositions clearly serve to buttress the hegemonic discourses. Many of these binaries still project Blackness as body, slave, child-like and as object. These hegemonic constructions were especially clear in representations of femininity where the Black female is still overwhelmingly objectified as an object of sexuality. Conversely, Black males are projected as primarily “compassionate thugs” as was demonstrate through lyrics and imagery of songs by Ja Rule, “Every thug needs a lady,” or when he is portrayed crying in a video. Interestingly enough, images of Black males also portray them as good citizens who can make moral decisions in light of pain and lost. Ja Rules restraint in confronting the guy who murders his best friend (I Cry), and Isley’s decision to stand down when he discovers his wife in bed with R. Kelley represent portrayals of Blacks as moral, rational and upright citizens.

**IS BET A SIGNIFICANT SOURCE OF BLACK COUNTERNARRATIVES?**

However, while there are subversive moments on BET, it may be too simplistic to refer to this network as a significant source of counternarratives. While there are certainly moments of subversion ultimately it boils down to how sophisticated the reader is in terms of locating and exposing various tropes and ideologies. BET’s texts do not lend themselves to a monolithic reading but are subject to interpretation like any
other visual signs. And, because of the polysemic nature of these signs the meanings can never be guaranteed in any concrete sense. What this points to is the fact that BET is a site of contestation and its texts are subject to interpretation and re-appropriation.

Blackness in the sense that it provides a double consciousness, does not guarantee an “oppositional gauge.” Ultimately, what it amounts to is the reality that readers must be “primed” to read texts in aberrant, resistant, or oppositional ways. How can multicultural education “prime” these students to help engender more “aberrant” or “resistant” or oppositional readings of texts? What are the pedagogical implications from this interrogation of BET? These questions will be addressed in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.
CHAPTER EIGHT:

REARTICULATING MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: TOWARDS A SYNCRETIC PEDAGODY

He who controls images controls minds, and he who controls minds has little or nothing to fear from bodies. This is the reason why Black people are not educated or are miseducated in America…An educator in a system of oppression is either a revolutionary or an oppressor…The question of education for Black people in America is a question of life and death. It is a political question, a question of power. – Lerone Bennett.

Remarking on the state of education in 1972, who would have thought that Lerone Bennett’s words would bear such glaring significance to this dissertation project three decades later? Bennett’s chilling conclusions about education’s moral and indispensable role in “decolonizing the minds,” and bodies of Blacks synchronize with my own thinking about multicultural education. However, his characterization of education as serving one of two absolute purposes —the classic domestication versus liberation binary—relies too heavily on a form of dualistic logic and leaves no room for the form of syncretism that I believe is necessary for effective transformative education. However, in spite of his over-reliance on either/or rhetoric, Bennett’s forthrightness in treating education as a political practice illuminates several critical dynamics about education “in a system of oppression” where colonial representations of Blackness and whiteness still pervade the mass media and promote hegemonic control over Blacks and other formerly colonized people. Decades after the institution of multicultural education in the United States, “the notion of the teacher as liberator and the classroom as an egalitarian

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20 Though I recognize the language of “decolonizing minds” may appear to be setting up a mind/body binary, I appropriate it because this language is still important for an emancipatory discourse.
community are still (perhaps unavoidingly) a long way from realization” (David Buckingham, 1998, p. 2). It should be noted here that Bennett’s pedagogical politicization is not a novel practice. In fact, in many critical ways he appears to be echoing rhetoric espoused by many prominent Black intellectuals before him concerning the hegemonic control of Black minds. For example, writing in 1933, Carter G. Woodson, who is considered to be the father on Black history, makes the following argument:

If you can control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you don’t have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the backdoor. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door; his very nature will demand one. (pp. 84-85)

These writers rightly critique the systems of representation that have been employed to engender hegemonic control and severely constrain the Black liberation struggle. In this regard, they have participated in a discourse on emancipating the minds of Blacks from mental enslavement, a discourse that has relevance for contemporary race relations in light of the ideological/covert turn of racism. In keeping with this important tradition, this project addresses the perplexing battle over representation and cultural hegemony and locates schooling within the center of this struggle.

In the introduction to this project, I examined the idea of a revolutionary pedagogy by asking several critical questions related to the radical potential of multicultural education. Given a particular concern that the mainstream cooptation of
multicultural education may have limited potential for any fundamental educational and social transformation, I queried whether or not commercialized popular culture could be an alternative site of counternarratives of Blackness. Pointing specifically to a space where Blacks have controlled and still have relative control over their own visual self-production, I questioned: How have Black visual media practitioners responded to colonial representations of Blackness? Is Black Entertainment Television a source of counter-hegemonic narratives of Blackness? With particular regards to multicultural education, can postcolonial theory and cultural studies’ approaches to multicultural education as the study of student identity formation help engender a form of transformation that speaks to the troubling of student identities and, subsequently, the emancipation of students? Having probed BET, I now return to these profound questions. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the major findings of this dissertation and to articulate their critical implications for an emancipatory education. In section one I summarize the major findings of this project, placing specific emphasis on themes that emerged from the engagement with BET. Following this, I address the findings in terms of their implications for education and I conclude this project by articulating a “syncretic pedagogy” which I believe would speak to the emancipation of students as well as quelling some of the flames between scholars who articulate multicultural education from multiple sides of the educational spectrum.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

As was highlighted in chapter one, Blacks in the United States watch television at astronomical rates unparalleled to other demographic groups and to national averages. Research also shows that Blacks overwhelmingly prefer to watch programs which have
Black characters and actors and draw from themes which they can relate to in terms of having similar experiences living and working within their Black communities. These important findings no doubt have ramifications for the field of education, especially in light of the fact that traditional educational spaces have historically excluded students’ out of school learning experiences and the meanings they (students) derive from popular culture. As such, schooling has for the most part been juxtaposed against home, and the pleasurable against the intellectual. Given the historical problems that Blacks have had with visual representations in the mass media and conversely with traditional institutions like schooling, my fundamental interests in this project was to gain a critical understanding of how Blacks have been responding to media hegemony once they gain control over their own representation and to develop an educational response that would address media hegemony. The struggle over the image has been and continues to be a profoundly important historical one for Blacks. As has been highlighted throughout this project, Blacks have made very little progress in combating the racist and stereotypical images that are pervasive within the mainstream mass media. This sentiment is ruefully summed up in comments by Samia Nehez in the preface to cultural critic bell hooks’ *Black Looks* (1992).

Decolonization…continues to be an act of confrontation with a hegemonic system of thought; it is hence a process of considerable historical and cultural liberation. As such decolonization becomes the contestation of all dominant forms and structures, whether they be linguistic, discursive, or ideological. Moreover, decolonization comes to be understood as an act of exorcism for both the colonized and the colonizer. For both parties it must be a process of liberation: from dependency, in the case of the colonized, and from imperialist, racist
perceptions, representations, and institutions which, unfortunately, remain with us to this day, in the case of the colonizer…Decolonization can only be understood as a complex process that involves both the colonizer and the colonized. (p. 1)

What Nehez locates as part of the decolonization movement, I argue must be an integral aspect of postcolonial theorizing. In chapters two and three of this project I argue that the project of postcolonial research has been influenced by and must also embrace the struggles to “decolonize the minds” of postcolonial subjects living in the US. It must be clearly noted, as Nehez succinctly points out, that pedagogy which seeks to decolonize minds and bodies must address both whites and Blacks simultaneously. Furthermore, “decolonizing the minds” of these subjects must be seen as a process which assists members of these marginalized groups to “unthink” both colonialism and Eurocentrism, and helps them to see themselves in ways other than through the master’s eyes. This is a moral and political exercise which can only be brought about through a multicultural education project which is grounded in a fundamental rethinking and reshaping of student identities.

In order to integrate the contemporary representations of Blackness in the visual media, BET is selected as a site for critical engagement in this project. BET is strategically chosen because it is the dominant site where narratives of Blackness are distributed and where Black subjectivities are contested, invented and worked upon. The theoretical frame for studying BET is based mainly on a Gramscian approach to postcolonial theory and cultural studies, which suggests that once formerly colonized people gain control over their own self-production, they would challenge and or subvert the dominant hegemonic constructions. This approach addresses profound questions of representation that have preoccupied postcolonial scholars in recent times. Chiefly, who
can speak, for whom, about whom? Since whites have maintained hegemonic control over the representational process, postcolonial theorists like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said suggest that whites have constructed images, ideologies and discourses that project the “Other” in a negative light. Because BET represents the premiere space where self-representation is engendered, many Blacks have looked to the network as a sort of representational “Mecca” with inflamed expectations that the network would somehow set new standards for representing Blackness by producing “positive” images flattering to the Black imagination. While a previous study of BET by Alice Taitt and Ron Barber (1996) has concluded that BET is both Afrocentric and liberational, my study yields a different set of conclusions. But before I highlight my major findings, it is important that I provide some brief details about the study.

My case study of BET employs many sources of information in order to capture the multiple and complex levels of signification from which BET’s texts are grounded. From the perspective of consumption, an analysis is conducted of mass mediated texts which circulates about the network following the announcement that the station was being sold to media behemoth, Viacom. These texts provide interesting insights about BET in terms of highlighting its role in the struggle against hegemonic constructions and oppression within the broader society. Moreover, an engagement with these popular narratives, which range from newspaper and magazine articles to popular emails, illuminate several important tropes, and binary codes and oppositions that have been used in the description of BET, it’s texts, Chairman and founder, Robert Johnson, and in the responses to Johnson’s “selling out” BET to Viacom. In terms of representation, a hypothetical day’s programming was constructed by putting together a broad spectrum of BET programs available to viewers during the week. The programs were first classified
in terms of five emergent program categories: religious, comedy, news and public affairs, human relations, and music. A narrative approach was then used to describe the various programs in terms of production and to provide the reader with a sense of some of the critical highlights of each program. Following this, I organized the programs into six categories. I then interrogated the individual program categories using deconstructionism and textual analysis as well as highlighted several binary codes, oppositions, and tropes used to give meaning to the struggle over representation of Blackness on BET. The critical assumption is that BET serve as a neo-colonial text which, subjected to a postcolonial critique, could yield critical knowledge about the way Blackness is being constructed.

The most significant finding from this study is that in spite of the expectation by many that BET may be a “significant source” of counterhegemonic narratives, it may be unrealistic to draw such conclusions given that the network is in the business of marketing and selling commodified narratives of Blackness for a profit. Given that the emphasis of this study was on determining whether or not BET is a “significant source of counternarratives,” that is to say a site where the majority of its narratives challenge or subvert dominant constructions of Blackness, a critical conclusion has been drawn that refutes claims by scholars like Taitt and Barber who argue that BET is both Afrocentric and liberational. However, this is not to suggest that there are no counter-hegemonic moments on BET. In fact, the reality is that many narratives of Blackness such as religious practices and the stylized performances were valorized on the network. As such, BET in some ways projects Blacks as the “knowers,” who understand their own oppression and who are engulfed in an intense and “real” cultural struggle over the master/slave myth. Blacks as the “knowers” on BET can articulate their own oppression
through original narratives and signifying practices. They are also empowered to set the trends in terms of style. However, these stylized performances were almost always linked to the mind/body code, with Blackness continually associated with the body. Such conclusions could easily be drawn from the hypersexualized display of females, which draws heavily upon colonial tropes of animalization and reinforces existing stereotypes about the Black Jezebel’s unpressed sexuality. Fundamentally, the myth of the oversexed Black female is still very much alive on BET. Moreover, the excessive focus on jewelry, nice cars and huge mansions may also be understood as the “Black man’s” struggle for recognition of his body, vis-à-vis a struggle to become visible in the eyes of the world. What one can conclude from BET is that regardless of the fact that there are very few counternarratives of Blackness on the network, it may be too simplistic to define the network according to any simplistic totalizing binary category such as “negative/positive” or even “authentic/inauthentic.” This position is consistent with the argument by Stuart Hall (1997) who asserts that neither side can claim popular culture in terms of absolute victory or defeat. Hall explains,

"By definition, Black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a sight of strategic contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out: high versus low; resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus inauthentic; experiential versus formal; opposition versus homogenization. There are always positions to be won in popular culture, but no struggle can capture popular culture itself for our side or theirs. (p. 197)"

This position is useful for diffusing some of the vexing critiques meted out against BET by various critics in Black communities who want to understand BET in totalizing ways
as a “pure” Black space, immune from external influences. What is evident from this study is that there are moments of both hegemony and counter-hegemony on BET and that the network is engaged in a serious battle over the representation of Blackness. This is not to suggest that an overwhelming number of the images on BET may not be conflicting and problematic from the standpoint of identity construction of Blacks and other youth. The issues with defining Black female beauty on BET, for example, testify to the fact that BET is not a “pure space” exempt from the influences of mainstream discourses. These images also point to the fact that BET, and Hip Hop culture in general often draw from codes that reflect and reinforce white supremacy. By virtue of its necessary contradictory nature, as Hall suggests, it may be counterproductive to conclude that because BET cannot be claimed as a significant site of Black counternarratives, “we haven’t fought the battle hard enough” (p. 197).

One problematic dynamic concerning BET results from the meanings people may be engaging from BET’s stance as the “official site” for Blackness. The concern here is that people may look to BET as a source of “authentic” Blackness and, as such, may come to embrace its monolithic representations as the “essence” of Blackness. The focus on the body, on orality, and on entertainment as central aspects of Blackness, as has been illustrated as primary representations on BET, can thus be viewed problematically if removed from a historical context of signifying Blackness as a struggle against the background of white supremacy. For example, to the uncritical viewer the oral, body, and entertainment representations on BET may lead to a problematical essentialization of Blackness as only body and oral when compared to the logocentric, read more cultural, cultural modes of writing. This conclusion could further serve to confirm the dominant myths of Blackness as associated with “dumbness” and, conversely, whiteness, since it is
affiliated with more logocentric cultural modes, becomes fixed with intelligence.

Reading BET texts, therefore, requires historicizing the development of Black popular
culture with a specific view toward placing its development into broader context. Hall
discusses this notion in terms of a strategic employment of the body within African
Diasporic cultures as a critical response to specific historical conditions. “Think,” Hall
notes, of how these cultures have used the body—as if it was, and it often was, the only
cultural capital we had. We have worked upon ourselves as the canvases of
representation” (pp. 128-129). This point is of fundamental importance when
considering the representations of Blackness on BET. First, it suggests that Black bodies
have been used within a process of bricolage as a strategic response to cultural conditions
engendered through the global displacement of the African peoples. While Hall admits
that the origins of bodily and oral forms of signification may be traced to Africa, the
critical factor to consider is while, “they were partly determined from their inheritances,
they were also determined from the Diasporic conditions in which the connections were
forged” (p. 129). Paraphrasing Cornel West’s genealogy of Black popular culture, Hall
further explains:

Selective appropriation, incorporation, and rearticulation of European ideologies,
cultures and institutions, alongside an African heritage…led to linguistic
innovations in rhetorical stylization of the body, forms of occupying an alien
social space, heightened expressions, hairstyles, ways of walking, standing, and
talking, and a means of constituting and sustaining camaraderie and community.

(p. 129)
Here, Hall argues that Black popular culture, and with regards to this project what is being portrayed on BET, cannot be read as emerging from a “Black” essence which has its unfettered origins in Africa, but must be understood as part of a historical struggle.

Another related dynamic that is worth referencing here speaks to the denial of logocentric literacy to Blacks within the American context. As has been illustrated earlier in chapter three, access to formal literacy for Blacks was specifically outlawed by a large number of states. This denial no doubt had a profound influence on the way Blacks came to signify themselves in terms of their uses of language, their bodies, their focus on orality, and in the strategies they employed to represent their own realities. Henceforth, the focus on the body on BET does not suggest a universal conflation of Blackness as body and whiteness as mind, but merely points to a specific aspect of Black culture that emerged due to specific historical conditions. On that note, an argument can be made that given the uncritical approach to presenting BET narratives today, the network may be guilty of promoting ethnic absolutism and of essentializing Blackness in ways that also engender the continual entrenchment between Blackness and whiteness. It is my contention in this project that unless viewers are equipped with critical tools to deconstruct and historicize mass media sites such as BET, they may continue to be ideologized into accepting Blackness and whiteness as entrenched, God-given categories of difference. The critical strategy, therefore, is to empower all readers/viewers—Blacks, whites among the many others—by helping them to deconstruct media ideologies and representations and to provide them with sufficient background knowledge to break the psychic power of racist stereotypes and colonial tropes. It is only through such efforts that we can move beyond the ethnic absolutist ideologies that essentialize and fix Blackness and whiteness as entrenched hierarchical binary opposites.
In developing such a critical strategy that speaks to a more subversive reading of texts such as those found on BET, two important factors must be considered. First, there is no single way to read BET’s texts and therefore there are no guarantees that a particular meaning could ever be engendered. Second, given the likelihood that BET will continue to produce programs that it deems as serving its financial interests as opposed to the emancipation of its audiences, the critical goal is to develop educational strategies that would speak to a resistance, aberrant or oppositional reading and interrogation of all texts. What are the educational implications of this study? Can there be a curricular response to reading and interrogating the visual media and yet still absolve the pleasures they offer? Can schools be sites where critical counternarratives of Blackness are produced, troubled and worked upon? What are the implications of this study for multicultural school transformation? These questions will be explored in the following section.

**TOWARD A CURRICULAR RESPONSE TO MEDIA HEGEMONY**

Popular responses to hegemonic constructions in the mass media have relied almost exclusively on various forms of censorship that have in my view proven unrealistic and inadequate for addressing the impact of mass media on youth identity formation. For the most part, these approaches almost always manifest themselves in terms of direct efforts to limit youth exposure to mass media cultural products through censorship, threats of censorship, or an encouragement of self-censorship by the entertainment industry itself. Examples of these approaches are evident within contemporary discourse of the media and representation. Recently in Indianapolis, for example, Mayor Bart Peterson signed into legislation a controversial citywide violent
video game law which required video games which contained “graphic violent or sexual content to have warning labels and be kept at least 10 feet from nonviolent game machines. They must also be separated by a curtain or wall so minors cannot view them. The law bars people under age 18 from such games unless accompanied by a parent or guardian” (CNN.Com, 2000, p. 1). However, the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals subsequently found this ordinance unconstitutional. Similarly, political sparks flared when the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) unveiled a report on the entertainment industry entitled, “Marketing Violent Entertainment To Children: A Review Of Self-Regulation And Industry Practices In The Motion Picture, Music Recording & Electronic Game Industries: A Report Of The Federal Trade Commission” (September 2000). In a nutshell, the report found that the entertainment industry engages in deceptive marketing practices by deliberately and routinely targeting underage children for programs that the industry rated inappropriate, thereby, undermining its own rating system. Within days of the report various committees and subcommittees held hearings on Capitol Hill, and talks about enacting some form of censorship gained widespread bi-partisan support among the various politicians. My contention here is that despite these regulatory approaches, the harsh reality is that children will be exposed to these images in spite of the cleverest of efforts to deny them access. Therefore, rather than waste time addressing media images in self-defeating ways such as censorship, it may be much more worthwhile to consider a curricular response to constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing mass mediated images and other such text. A critical point that must be mentioned here is that the content that has motivated such censorship of the mass media has mainly been the overt sexual or violent content. Notwithstanding, very little attention has been given to the
pervasiveness of racist ideologies which continue to ideologize subjects and construct various subject positions for them.

At issue here is the production, distribution and exchange of mass mediated cultural products and meanings about race and other markers of difference and how they ultimately are ‘read’ by and affect youth in contemporary society. Many argue that these cultural products, television in particular, are extremely harmful to vulnerable audiences such as children. This argument has particular implications for Black children who watch more television than any other demographic or cultural group in the US. As a consequence of this belief in the mythic power of the mass media, it has become commonplace for groups to lobby the FCC to exert greater controls over what content reaches children. Some of the proposals reaching the FCC include: limiting the number of advertising minutes during children’s shows, expanding the hours of children’s shows, and having program-commercial separators (Marie Winn, 1987).

For example, in her thought-provoking critique of education, Marie Winn (1987) cites several ways in which television is consumed as well as how such consumption may be harmful to children. Among the many usages of television, Winn cites the following: As a time-filler (‘You have nothing to do? Go watch TV”), a tranquillizer (“When the kids come home from school they’re so keyed up that they need to watch for a while to simmer down”), a problem solver (“Kids, stop fighting. It’s time for your program”), a procrastination device (“I’ll just watch one more program before I do my homework), a punishment (“If you don’t stop teasing your little sister, no TV for a week”), and a reward (“If you get an A on your composition you can watch an extra hour of TV.”) (p. 34)
As the findings in this dissertation illustrate, mass mediated messages are complex, contradictory and subject to interpretation. Stuart Hall, Paddy Whannel, John Fiske, Douglas Kellner, etc. are among the many scholars who have illuminated the reality that there is always the possibility for oppositional readings of mediated texts. Fiske, for example notes that this resistance tendency is what enables subordinated groups to subvert any attempts to dominate their lives (Donna Alverman and Margaret Hagood, 2000, p. 193). Because I believe that efforts to censor the media or even to reduce the number of hours children watch television are ineffective, I am interested in developing strategies that promote a critical reading of texts. It is for this reason that I suggest a cultural studies approach to critical media literacy may offer important ways of reading mass mediated texts such as those found on BET.

The discourse on critical media literacy is still a relatively new one. Though somewhat related, critical media literacy is different from media literacy in that the latter is often based on an anachronistic model of media effects which suggest that the media create messages and impose meanings on an audience. This simplistic approach, which appropriates a Frankfurt School position on media consumption, often limits any agency on the part of subjects. On the other hand, critical media literacy assumes the likelihood of an “aberrant,” “resistant” or “oppositional” reading of texts. Furthermore, critical media literacy is often characterized as an amalgamation between critical theory, media studies and critical pedagogy (David Sholle and Denski, 1993). In terms of critical theory, one of the central tenets of the critical discourse is to challenge students to think about their own lives. Such approaches to critical media literacy are visible in research of audience analysis where students critically analyze texts in terms of their own historical locations. This approach grows out of the British media studies in the 1990s. Scholars
who approach education from this perspective argue that there must be a clear linkage between literacy and the outside world. They also conclude that any approach to literacy must have as one of its central tenets, the goal of deconstructing all texts that have the potential to reproduce social inequalities and injustices. A rationale for critical media literacy, then, draws from the fact that students, “need to develop a critical understanding of how all texts (both print and nonprint) position them as readers and viewers within different social, cultural, and historical contexts” (Donna Alverman and Margaret Hagood, 2000, p. 193).

Donna Alverman and Margaret Hagood, (2000) provide one of the most useful definitions of critical media literacy. Recognizing the plurality of definitions which have been offered for the term, they note that a common thread amongst those who use the term is that it promotes “an ability to reflect on the pleasures derived from mass media and popular culture practices (e.g. radio, TV, video, movies, CDs, the Internet, gang graffiti, and cyberpunk culture); the ability to choose selectively among popular culture icons; or the ability to produce one’s multimedia texts” (p. 93). There are several important aspects of this definition I find very useful to my study. In the first place, media literacy recognizes that any approaches to deconstructing the media must acknowledge the pleasures that youth derived from them. In this capacity, the goal is neither to deny these pleasures nor to try to prove to children that the media is inherently bad, but to “reflect” on these pleasures in critical ways that point to the various ideologies from which these messages are drawn upon. From this reflexive process, students may recognize the various ideologies imbedded within the media and, as such, would make conscious decisions and “choose selectively among popular culture icons” (p. 193). The
fact that students are now empowered to make their own mass media choices is in my view a much more effective strategy than the various attempts to censor these images.

A third critical aspect of this definition that I find extremely useful to my project stems from my fundamental belief that in order for any conception of critical media literacy to be useful, it must be underpinned in a proper theorization of praxis. Alverman and Hagood assert that a critical aspect of critical media literacy must be for students to produce their own mass mediated texts. Praxis, from this perspective, must culminate in the actual production of texts by students. From the perspective of this project, this definition of critical media literacy has usefulness for deconstructing the images and ideologies encoded within BET and other television texts. Given the sheer nature of their widespread consumption of the mass media any strategies which help to deconstruct the taken for granted meanings of the mass media from the perspective of the viewer is worth exploring. Also, because the narratives found on BET and other such television stations were found to be so problematic, schools could employ critical media literacy not only as a deconstructionist strategy, but also to encourage children to become their own producers of counternarratives that challenge mainstream and dominant representations. This is a special democratic function of schooling and may be vital in light of the reality that commercialized popular culture, due to its very commodified nature, cannot be relied upon to produce counternarratives. These counternarratives that students produce could come in the form of documentary film, video, photo productions, drama, poetry, rap, calypso or reggae music or other forms of narratives which are not currently part of the status quo of schooling.

The issue of ownership becomes critical from two perspectives. Not only would a goal of critical media literacy be for students to gain control over their own
representation, it must also be grounded in praxis that promotes more formal business ownership and leadership strategies. A colleague frames this issue in a unique way. She recounts on conversations with students who tell her “don’t hate the player, hate the game.” In response, she queries, “Why do you have to be a player, why not be the owner of the team.” Ownership of the means of production must be a critical goal for marginalized students who are provided with tools to start their own media corporations with the view toward distributing their own counternarratives. Schools, therefore, become sites of engendering such ownership by galvanizing community organizations and building coalitions with various groups and individuals.

I am interested in exploring critical media literacy as an intervention strategy that could help all students become more savvy readers of the media and owners and producers of their own counternarratives. My focus on all cultural groups represents my rejection of the idea that phenotype, social class, gender, sexuality or others such markers of difference are by themselves sufficient to engender a particular resistance reading of a text. This position may appear somewhat controversial as it rejects a popular argument which implies that by virtue of their marginalized status, aptly referred to as “double consciousness” by W.E.B. Dubois. Blacks view the media through privileged lenses that allow them to detect the ideologies that underpin texts. My reading of W.E.B. Dubois’ double consciousness suggests that such double awareness is not natural in the sense that skin color alone could engender an oppositional gaze to mediated texts. As such, double consciousness does not provide a privileged scope from which to view ideology, but results from a reflexive process when Blacks look inward on their contradictory position in relation to their race and their nation. The very nature of ideologies as hidden and naturalized does not support the idea of an automatic gaze guaranteed to any ethnic or
cultural group. Shohat and Stam provide a useful explanation for why these categories of identity do not engender a particular reading. They note that in the first place these categories have no precise meaning, “suggesting the heteroglossia characteristic of all communities” (p. 350). Second, and related to the first point, individual spectators have multiple identities including race, class, gender, and sexuality. An important question would be, which one becomes the dominant marker used within the process of identification? And “Third, socially imposed epidermic identities do not strictly determine personal identifications and political allegiances” (p. 350). What it boils down to is how the individuals are primed or positioned to detect multiple ideologies that may be working at the same time. Therefore, rather than a natural progression to critical media literacy brought about by virtue of one’s race, class, gender or other such marker, critical media literacy recognizes that youth must be primed to read the media in certain critical ways. Education, therefore, becomes the key to such priming.

It should be noted that from a critical perspective there are numerous ways of thinking about critical media literacy. While all of these approaches have a similar desire to help students identify dominant ideologies embedded within mediated text, they each have different perspectives on what should be the goals of critical media literacy. One such approach borrows from the Frankfurt School and addresses critical media literacy from the standpoint of a need to provide students with critical tools of “crap-detection” so they can find the hidden “truth” behind all texts. Such an approach assumes that students are mystified by media ideologies and that they must be taught the truth about all texts. Postmodern approaches dismiss this modernist focus on an “essential truth” and instead insist that critical media literacy “pertains to how individuals take up cultural
texts differently, depending on their interests and positioning in various social and historical contexts” (Alverman and Hagood, p. 194). Conversely, a cultural studies approach seeks to understand how broader sociocultural, political, and historical dynamics collide in the production of certain texts and how these texts are ultimately employed and influence the construction of subjectivities. Central to all of these issues is the impact of ideologies on the identities of students within contemporary society. Student identity formation, therefore, becomes the central focus of a multicultural education influenced by cultural studies and postcolonial theory. What are the pedagogical implications for multicultural education?

Pedagogy based on critical media literacy stems from a firm commitment to the idea that sites like BET can both “otherize” cultures as well as promote “multicultural coalitions.” As Shohat and Stam have argued, such sites have “the power not only to offer countervailing representations, but also to open up parallel spaces for symbiotic multicultural transformation” (p. 7). I call such pedagogy a “syncretic pedagogy,” due in part to my fundamental belief that this poststructural/postcolonial moment with its focus on inclusivity is crucial for developing pedagogical approaches that speak against the us/them separatist ideologies that have characterized progressive education. In addition to its focus on highlighting the multiple and complex categories of difference, such pedagogy is political and linked to social, political, and economic relations of youth with a particular view towards “decolonizing the minds” of all students regardless of their cultural background. A syncretic pedagogy that I am interested in advancing is similar to that described by Alverman and Hagood and stems from my interests in “the pedagogical implications of helping students experience the pleasures of popular culture while simultaneously uncovering the codes and practices that work to silence or disempower
them as readers, viewers, and learners in general” (p. 195). While the goal is toward
deconstructing media ideologies, Ladi Semali and Roberta Hammett’s (1999)
appropriation of Douglas Kellner’s argument offers a cautionary note on ideological
deconstruction. In their paraphrase of Kellner they assert, “In general, a hegemonic
ideology is not a system of rigid ideological indoctrination that induces consent of
existent capitalist societies, but instead, ‘it is the use of the pleasures of the media and
sound, and the spectacle to seduce audiences into identifying with certain views,
attitudes, feelings, and positions’” (p. 374).

Curriculum from the perspective of a syncretic pedagogy rejects the notion of
preserving and maintaining sacred canonical texts and opens up a space for popular
cultural texts constructed by the “other.” As mentioned earlier, the curriculum must
valorize the out of school experiences of students. As noted by Paul Willis,

In so far as educational practices are still predicated on traditional liberal
humanist lines and on the assumed superiority of high art, they will become
almost totally irrelevant to the real energies and interests of most young people
and have no part of their identity formation. Common (popular) culture will
increasingly undertake its own ways, the roles that education has vacated. (p. 3)

In terms of my interest in a syncretic pedagogy that speaks against dualistic logic, critical
media literacy may be able to ease some of the tensions that arise from the binaries by
“bringing together in literacy education the extremities forged between popular and
canonical texts, out-of-school and in-school literacies, body and mind, pleasure and work
more fully” (Alverman and Hagood, p. 200). In order for this type of pedagogy to
emerge, it will take a fundamental rethinking of the way we organize schooling.
Unfortunately, the way our schools are currently organized with their focus on the
discursive practices that center around the “official curriculum” leaves little to no room for students’ lived experiences” (Giroux, 1994, p.11). Students’ interest in popular culture become de-legitimized and marginalized. In the remainder of this chapter, I will address more specifically the idea of a syncretic pedagogy and explore its usefulness for multicultural school transformation.

From a post-colonial and cultural studies perspective, multicultural education is about understanding, reaffirming, and “troubling” identities. It is also about understanding how identities are discursively produced, represented, and performed in society. A number of education scholars in the United States and elsewhere have already begun reconceptualizing multicultural education around cultural studies (McCarthy, 1994; Giroux & Peter McLaren, 1994; Dennis Carlson, 1998). In perhaps one of the most comprehensive critiques of multicultural education in the United States to date, Ram Mahalingham and Cameron McCarthy (2000) argue that the discourse is in dire need of a fundamental paradigmatic overhaul. They draw upon criticisms that portray an overall climate of apprehension and ambivalence to bolster their argument for an elaborate “reconceptualization” of the field. I employ their critique here to support my position that mainstream approaches to multicultural education are anachronistic and have been relatively unsuccessful in bringing about any major transformational shifts in social policy and practices. My research emerges as a direct response to these criticisms by Mahalingam and McCarthy and a slew of others who are similarly concerned that multicultural education has been relatively ineffective for engendering any major changes in the nation's public schools, and ultimately within society.

The appropriation of multicultural education within mainstream education has helped to engender some recognition that the “Other” does exist, but beyond that, the
contributions of this “other” to the cultural development of the United States have been undermined by the conservative rhetoric of a “common culture.” There is also concern that what is being offered as multicultural education today merely represents neoconservative attempts to center “Europe as the Alpha and Omega of human civilization” (Ngugi Wa Thiong’o), a mere “white-washing” of the curriculum. Critics Mahalingham and McCarthy (2000) aptly claim that in many circles multiculturalism is perceived as being “as capricious and as ephemeral as the wind, a passing fad, a mere peripheral influence of various cultures on the core identity of ‘the’ group or ‘the’ nation…” Consequently, critical educationalists have been either fleeing multicultural education altogether, preferring address issues of cultural identity from within other discourses such as “Afrocentrism,” “Gender Studies,” “Critical Pedagogy,” “Culturally-Relevant Pedagogy,” to name a few.

Barry Kanpol and Peter McLaren (1995) write,

While the educational Left can no longer be described as simply an amalgam of subterranean arguments and self-justifying manifestos, having recently reached a respectable level of transdisciplinary theoretical sophistication, it remains the case that the brute facts of mass poverty and exploitation still haunt its emergence as a voice of mature expression and shape the contours of the struggle that needs to be waged. Faced with this all-too-familiar reality, critical educationalists (those who have been identified as ‘resistance postmodernists’) suggest not the abandonment of this struggle but rather its configuration and revitalization in new terms. (p. 6)

I agree with Kanpol here that rather than totally abandon the multicultural education project, I believe that it is crucial to trouble mainstream approaches to multicultural education, which, in the view of many scholars, (1) procure a mere condescending
treatment of the concept of cultural identity (2) seek to naturalize the European roots of American identity, and (3) are grounded in essentialized representations of minority cultures (Mahalingham & McCarthy, 2000, p.5). It is the position of this project that these mainstream approaches are both anachronistic and problematic for the construction of a viable multicultural education project. One way of engendering this multicultural transformation may be through a focus on a syncretic pedagogy.

The idea of a syncretic pedagogy stems from my interest in thinking about multicultural education, from a postcolonial and cultural studies perspective, as the study of student identity formation. The poststructuralist influence on contemporary discourses has illuminated the need for cultural admixture as opposed to purist notions of ethnic absolutism that owe their roots to colonialism. Thus among the various models offered to explain this admixture syncretism with variants such as cultural hybrity, creolization, mestizaje, mongrelization, among others, may be useful for rearticulating multicultural education. Whereas Western epistemological approaches have been framed in terms of dualism, binarism or in terms of a dialecticism, I believe syncretism offers a much more useful model of cultural mixing. As noted in chapter one, Vassilis Lambropoulos (2001) defines syncretism as “the agonistic yet symbiotic coexistence of incompatible elements of diverse traditions” (p. 221). He is indebted to his counterpart Dimitris Tziovas (1996) who announces that syncretism is not grounded in the idea that

homeginization, fusion, or flattening of oppositions as much as accepting and highlighting them. Such an approach does not aim at organic synthesis as much as at multifarious mixture where constitutive elements remain distinct and visible, functioning in a coordinated, interrelated, and above all dialogic manner. Therefore, it consists not in a static or linear by a dynamically flexible view with
antithetical factors which tries to avoid as much as possible a polar or dialectical understanding of identity. (p. 8)

Tziovas’ suggestion for movement beyond binarism and dialecticism is precisely what I believe is necessary for engendering multicultural education in the United States. For one, it allows for scholars to move beyond their fixed binary oppositional thinking that has come to characterize education in the US. I am talking about the reductionistic and dogmatic arguments that frame multicultural education solely in terms of Black/white, liberation/domestication, common culture/balkanization, Eurocentrism/Afrocentrism, high/low culture, among others. While I by no means want to suggest that these binaries are meaningless, my position in this project is that students may be better served if those of us who theorize about education can embrace a syncretic pedagogy which is grounded in a form of “strategic essentialism” and which allows scholars from multiple sides of the education equation to maintain their differences while at the same time “function in a coordinated, interrelated, and dialogic way.” Such a pedagogy, as Tziovas suggests, does not rely on a collapsing of difference which would be impossible in light of the fundamental commitment that scholars give to the symbols, rituals and language that define their various identities. However, a syncretic pedagogy promotes a form of border crossing similar to the hybrid identities that I celebrate in chapter two of this project. Conservative, progressives and Afrocentric scholars are encouraged to engage in a meaningful dialogue around the common interest in student academic achievement. It is my belief that such an approach to pedagogy would trickle down to students and the community and multicultural school alliances and ultimately more meaningful school community and student relations will be engendered. I believe that through a process of reflexivity, scholars may become aware of their role in constructing and promoting
“otherness” when they construct elaborate theories that serve their self-righteous interests. I conclude this project with a quote by Peter Trifonas (2001) which speaks to the need to move beyond oppositional thinking that has crippled the discourse of multicultural education.

No matter what the ethico-ideological impetus behind such a stance may be, there is no fruitfulness in taking an either or defensive posture for sake of simply protecting the lineage, direction, and territory of a disciplinary ground from the contaminating effects of its Others. For in choosing sides, one reinstitutes the ideological errors of those familiar divisions, epistemic and methodological, that do nothing more than promote and entrench the institutional conflicts (skirmishes and wars) between otherwise interrelated and complementary faculties and induce artificial distinctions…(p. 3).

An embracement of a syncretic pedagogy may perhaps lead us in this direction.

This dissertation also has important implications for research. One of the major limitations of this project stems from its failure to address the way how BET is consumed by its viewers. Since my fundamental interest is in how these mass mediated images become appropriated by youth within complex processes of identity formation, some form of critical research illuminating the “readership” of BET’s texts would make a serious contribution to the relative dearth of research on Black consumption. One interesting approach may be to examine the connection between the images shown on BET and their representations in classroom or the various experiences at school.

However, in spite of its obvious limitations, this project highlights important scholarship.
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