

## **"White Men and the Commodity of Blackness"**

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"The black male outlaw identity is a commodifiable character open to all who would like to perform it". So writes Carl Hancock Rux in his essay "Eminem: The New White Negro" (23). "Black masculinity, as fantasized in the white racist imagination, is the quintessential embodiment of man as "outsider and rebel" (96). So observes the renowned cultural critic bell hooks in her work *Black Looks*.

What Rux and hooks point to is, for this black male, a troubling phenomenon, as their words suggest that, even in this new millennium, black men have been relegated to the plantation, albeit a cultural one. Moreover, the nature of this plantation is that black men are yet "breeders," while white men have free (and seemingly irresponsible) access to the (cultural) offspring of these black male breeders in a way not unlike how white men benefited from black men's progeny during slavery.

This appropriation by white men of the style of black men makes a loud and clear statement: that which we (black men) breed can *still* be bought and sold by you (white men).

In his essay Rux points to the actions of figures as diverse as Eminem and Bill Clinton, white men who become, in the words of Norman Mailer, the "White Negro," to quote Mailer's famous phrase. From the viewpoint of the White Negro, the black man's cool detachment, poise, and existential alienation are more visible than the historical racism that helps produce these qualities.

Witness Mailer's words, "Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro . . . kept for his survival the art of the primitive, . . . relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm."

Mailer wrote this in the 1950s, yet these words still ring true from the viewpoint of the white men who "perform" or adopt blackness. From such a

viewpoint, the burdens of blackness are rendered almost invisible and replaced with highly visible romantic notions of suffering and rage.

Thus, in looking at the phenomenon of the White Negro and his appreciation of and penchant for the appropriation of blackness, there are crucial questions that must be addressed.

One, what are (or, what should be) the responsibilities of this assumption of "blackness" on the part of the white men who are appropriating the style of black men? And two, as one examines the adoption of black culture by white men, one must ask another question: What is in it for the brothers? Or, to ask another way, when (if ever) will this appropriation of the style of black men lead to tangible benefits in the lives of those who are being emulated?

In addressing the above, {Dobson focuses] on the work of another white male whose words and works suggest that he fits the category of the White Negro, the renowned actor and director Clint Eastwood. Eastwood, like Eminem, according to Dobson, uses black cultural expression "black music" as one of the primary vehicles by which to "become" black. Eastwood, unlike the white rapper, has been at this business a long time, building a body of work that invariably touches on issues of race and masculinity.

In *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production*, Paul Smith discusses Eastwood's directing of the movie *Bird*, particularly Eastwood's filming of Forest Whitaker's body: "To understand what is happening here with Eastwood's forming of Whitaker's body, it might be informative to refer back to a comment Eastwood makes during the promotion of *Bird*.

Recounting his enthusiasm for jazz while he was growing up, he says, "I think I was really a black guy in a white body." Further, Smith continues, "This . . . is strongly reminiscent of what Homi Bhabha says of the colonialist's relation to the body of the subaltern other. The white man both desires to and fears to resemble the black body, and it is this ambivalence that is a primary component of the racist gaze."

Eastwood's statement is equally troubling. Statements such as it,

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which suggest an attraction to or fascination with blackness, seems to suggest the possibility of alliance and true fraternity. However, it also brings to mind notions of the white male as interloper, freely partaking of "blackness," whatever it means to him, without compulsion and with no real sense of responsibility.

Dobson believes that Eastwood's statement points to a persistent problem and to the resultant need for a set of standards by which one can interrogate the "performances" and stances of white men who either audibly or by their actions state, "I was [or am] really a black guy in a white body."

This suggests not only the problem inherent in black men breeding a commodity that white men feel free to co-opt, but also that there is a need to evaluate this phenomenon beyond mere critique.