

The Boondocks, Black History, and Black Lives Matter: Or, Why Black Popular Culture Matters for Black Millennials

A. J. RICE AND KYLE T. MAYS

We are living in times of great disruption. Black Millennials throughout the United States from Ferguson, Missouri to Baltimore, Maryland, have protested the killing of Black women, men, and transgender individuals at the hands of law enforcement. These protests have illustrated to the world that young, poor working-class Black Americans are increasingly exposing and challenging the contradictions of U.S. democracy: that institutional racism is endemic to this society and that Blacks often bear the brunt of white supremacy's harsh whip (Carmichael and Hamilton 4). The following questions inform this essay: How does Black popular culture serve as an example of "living Black history"? How can Black popular culture be used to foster and deepen Black Millennials' critical engagement with Black history? We contend that *The Boondocks* can be read as a historical text if we expand our understanding of the role popular culture plays in reproducing historical information and take seriously the meaning of these reproductions in the lives of Black people. We use the framework of Living Black History (LBH) as developed by the late Manning Marable to show how *The Boondocks*' episode, "The Return of the King," can be used to help raise the historical consciousness of Black youth. But, first, who are the Black youth that we speak of?

Black Millennials Rising

A. J. RICE is a President's Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Los Angeles. Dr. Rice is an interdisciplinary scholar of Black politics, global urban studies, critical political economy, and Black Studies. His current research examines how resistance to urban dispossession develops in Black cities and traces the contributions institutional restructuring have made to the neo-liberalization of racial capitalism. He can be reached at ricealbe@msu.edu.

KYLE T. MAYS, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of African American Studies and the American Indian Studies Center at UCLA. He is the author of *Hip Hop Beats, Indigenous Rhymes: Modernity and Hip Hop in Indigenous North America* (SUNY Press, 2018). He is currently writing a book on Afro-Indigenous history in the United States with Beacon Press. He can be reached at mayskyle@ucla.edu.

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 8, No. 2
Copyright © 2020

In mainstream discourse, the discussion of Millennials is often centered on European Americans, their obsession with avocado toast and craft beer, and the substantial burden of student loans. However, as cultural critic Sean Scott notes, “far too much writing about Millennials erases people of color and immigrants” (7). Indeed, Millennials in general have endured “unprecedented wealth stratification; the exacerbation of already-existing divides of race and sex; and America’s continuing militaristic endeavors abroad. The product of both landmark mid-20th century Naturalization Act of 1965 and the arrival of Reagonomics in the 1980s, Millennials are simultaneously the most diverse and most disprivileged generation ever” (Scott 4). This erasure of Black youth from conversations about Millennials reflects a broader reality about the “uncertain place of young black people in our political communities” (Cohen 3). To better understand how Black popular culture can foster critical engagement with and among Black Millennials, we must reflect on some of the historical and structural forces that have shaped the lives of this generation.

We use the term Black Millennials to differentiate between blacks from the Hip Hop Generation as outlined by Bakari Kitwana (3) and those born during the last two decades of the twentieth century. While there is difficulty in and inherent limits to defining a beginning and end date for a particular generation, Black folk born between 1980 and 2000 are shaped by distinct life experiences and events (Boyd 52). First, Black Millennials are the first generation of Blacks to witness the election of the nation’s first Black President, Barack Obama. They are also baptized in the rhetoric of a post-racialism. Yet, economic and social indicators for Blacks across the nation indicate a rise in racial inequality during their lifetime (Acevedo; Shapiro).

Second, Black Millennials were raised during the age of social media, placing them among the first “digital natives” (Taylor et al. 5). Social media and new media have been instrumental in helping Black Millennials share information. Perhaps one of the best examples has been Black Twitter, which has been instrumental in spreading awareness about the violent murders of Black youth through Twitter (Freelong et al.). Social media, according to Black feminist new media scholars, is also a site of “counterpower,” through which Black Millennials have organized social movements, harnessing the power of technology to challenge state power and other forms of oppression (Tynes and Noble 3).

Third, this group is not rigidly defined by age, but by the particular historical epoch in which they have lived. The events of September 11, 2001, and the

subsequent War on Terror are crucial moments in the lives of Black Millennials. Not only have these conflicts led to one of the longest and most costly wars in U.S. history, but it was a key factor in the emergence of the surveillance state (Babu-Kurra). Finally, the life prospects of Black Millennials seem to be worse than their parents, with this current generation experiencing higher levels of joblessness, poverty and incarceration than their parents did (Dalaker and Proctor ix; Alexander 98), a distinct consequence of fundamental changes in the U.S. political-economic system (Dawson and Francis 53).

By the 1980s, intra-racial political tensions that had once been held in check by a general commitment towards Civil Rights exploded within the Black community exposing serious differences along the lines of race, class, and gender (Dawson 142-3; Reed 4). These challenges were compounded by changes in the labor market, linked to the broader restructuring of the U.S. economy. All of these developments, including the intensification of state repression, state abandonment, and urban restructuring all contributed to the erosion of significant institutional basis for, and memory of, Black radicalism (Dawson 37). Nevertheless, it is clear from movements like Black Lives Matter, that the enduring reality of Black oppression continues to occupy the minds of Black Millennials (Taylor 10), and we should seize that opportunity to engage in constructive, intergenerational dialogues.

Living Black History: A Method of Transformational Education

“Living Black History” (LBH) as theorized by the influential historian and Black studies scholar Manning Marable, is a pedagogical “approach that embraces the political nature of history,” with a goal “not just to educate and inform, but to transform the objective material, cultural conditions, and subordinate status of marginalized groups through informed civic engagement” (29). This goal is easier to achieve when, as the epigraph above suggests, history feels less distant; when the past feels more present, more personal. In seeking to direct education in the service of liberation, the fundamental concerns and objectives of LBH are remarkably similar to those of critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire, whose work on critical pedagogy is foundational, wrote: “To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller

humanity” (qtd. in Marable 47). Despite these similarities, LBH as a method of teaching and scholarship is deeply rooted in the Black Intellectual Tradition (BIT).

Marable asserts that the BIT has been descriptive, corrective, and prescriptive. The BIT has been descriptive by presenting “the reality of black life and experience from the point of view of black people themselves” (Marable 58). The tradition’s corrective character is evident through its challenging of racist and stereotypical narratives that have been, and continue to be, reproduced by mainstream American institutions. Finally, the Tradition’s prescriptions represent “an intellectual orientation which consistently connected scholarship with collective struggle, social analysis with social transformation” (Marable 58). Both the BIT, and the LBH method which emerges from it, is concerned with creating knowledge and learning practices relevant to the myriad challenges Black communities face.

Central to this pedagogy of liberation is *reimagining* the Black past. While using factual and accurate evidence to understand the significance of the past is important, “another productive and illuminating approach to understanding past events is the critical reconstruction of the ‘past’ with realistic ‘alternative pasts’ that were possible” (Marable 33). These realistic alternative pasts are often based on “what if” scenarios, which play with the consequences of reimagining key historical events, raising issues or placing events and people in conversations that force us to think differently about the past, present, and future. We assert that reimagining the Black past through satire like *The Boondocks* can deepen Black Millennial’s appreciation of and critical engagement with the legacy of Dr. King while also raising new questions and perspectives about contemporary Black political and social problems.

The Boondocks and the Legacy of the Black Freedom Movement

The Black popular culture product under examination here is Aaron McGruder’s critically acclaimed animated series, *The Boondocks*. *The Boondocks* was first published on December 3, 1996, at the University of Maryland as a comic strip. Conceived of as a “racial, social, political satire,” McGruder’s comic strip would eventually gain national syndication in 1999 and is noted for having the second largest comic strip launches ever, released in over 150 newspapers (Rose). At its peak, *Boondocks* appeared in over 300 hundred newspapers nationally (Younge). In 2004, McGruder converted the comic strip into an animated television series. This animated series has been equally praised and criticized for its raw language,

outrageous characters, and embrace of controversial topics. The *Times* rated the show and comic strip as one of the most controversial cartoons of all time (Fitzpatrick). Despite this controversial image, in January 2006 the show was nominated for an NAACP Image Award for Best Comedy Series. The show offers critical insights and commentary not only on contemporary African American life but also Black history. *The Boondocks* is set in the virtually all-white suburb of Woodcrest, where the Freeman family lives.

The Boondocks, through its characters, produces an example of LBH, inviting viewers to critically engage in both history and the present. At least two of the characters bridge the gap between the Civil Rights Movement and contemporary Black life. For example, the character Robert “Granddad” Freeman, voiced by actor John Witherspoon, represents the mainstream Civil Rights legacy—those who lived through the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Granddad often tries to remind his grandchildren, Huey and Riley, about the struggles that he and his generation went through just for them to have basic civil and human rights. He was (allegedly) involved in the Civil Rights Movement and often reminds his grandsons of his contributions to the betterment of their lives today. However, he has difficulty living in a world of social media and contemporary Hip Hop culture.

Huey Freeman’s character, which pays homage to Black Panther Party co-founder Huey P. Newton, voiced by Regina King, represents a present-day manifestation of the radical element of the Black Power Movement and he is often engaged in activist struggles within the Black community (Rhodes). Although informed by the Black (mostly male) radicals of the past, Huey has a sophisticated understanding of factors that currently impact Black Millennials, including the Prison Industrial Complex and the relevance of Black history in contemporary struggles.

Riley, on the other hand, also voiced by Regina King, represents the contemporary Black youth who knows little to nothing about Black history and is more interested in Hip Hop (gangsta) culture and capitalist enterprises than being socially consciousness. Riley’s lack of historical consciousness causes him to tell Huey: “See, that’s yo problem, you be believin’ anything somebody tells you, or put in a book. See, I keep my mental mind extra secure—nuttin’ gets in” (“The Return of the King”). Riley’s comment suggests two things. First, Riley lacks any historical consciousness. Second, he learns a lot of his information from African American popular culture. In fact, through Riley and Huey, two brothers, McGruder

captures two distinct, if extreme, positions that have long existed within the Black community. This, no doubt, captures some of the complexity of the political outlook of Black Millennials as they spend more time watching television and consuming and creating various social media products online. This does not mean that Black Millennials do not know any history; however, popular culture can help expand their knowledge base in productive ways. All three characters represent certain views present among the Civil Rights Generation, the Black Power Generation, the Hip Hop Generation, and Black Millennials, in particular their relationship to Civil Rights history.

Black Millennials and the Meaning of Dr. King

Every year thousands of Black youth celebrate the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, especially in February during Black History Month. Indeed, a study conducted by Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte-Sano (2008) showed that for a group of 2,000 high school students across the country, Martin Luther King, Jr., was the most well-known figure in U.S. history. This should not be overlooked. What makes King so popular? Historian Clayborne Carson observed that while King played only a minor role in local movements, his intellectual prowess and leadership qualities made him a heroic figure.

In the wake of Black rebellions following the deaths of Mike Brown and Freddie Gray, both white Americans and segments of the Black community had invoked King's legacy as a way of chastising Black Millennials for their responses to the not guilty pleas rendered in each case of police brutality. President Obama, while calling some activists and protesters "thugs," has been checked by Black activists who have been quick to point out that these are responses to contemporary social conditions of racial inequality and exploitation. *The Boondocks'* episode on King is even more relevant today as his image and legacy have been re-appropriated and re-contextualized to criticize activists. This narrative ignores the fact that King, while a staunch advocate of non-violence, also understood *why* some individuals may begin to resort to the destruction of property: a sharp response to the intractability of exploitation and domination under racialized capitalism and an ever-expanding police state whose tactics have become more brutal over time.

This certainly applies to Black Millennials. Another factor that makes King popular—in conservative, liberal, and some radical circles—is his stance against oppression and how those constituents might interpret it. Even conservatives have

co-opted his legacy for their own purposes. Thus, *The Boondocks*' use of King as a historical case study and his meaning and legacy for Black Millennials is relevant, for it not only challenges conservative and liberal discourses surrounding King but also portrays his more radical beliefs.

"The Return of the King" is a fictional account of King's life. The story begins with the assassination attempt on King on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. Yet, instead of King dying, we are told by Huey that he was "critically injured." After a 32-year coma, King awakens on October 27, 2000, and slowly begins adjusting to a new society now inhabited by Black Millennials. To say this least, King struggles to adjust.

Huey's narration suggests that, since King had awakened from his coma, interest in him and his legacy spiked. He travels across the country making appearances; Oliver Stone is tapped to direct a movie about him titled *King*, starring Cuba Gooding, Jr. Comically, our narrator informs us that Spike Lee was "pissed" about Stone being selected as the movie's director. Noticing that the social ills he fought against, including capitalism, racism and militarism, have only continued to grow, King decides to write an autobiography titled a "Dream Deferred," a reference to Langston Hughes' poem, "A Dream Deferred." While we do not know the fictional book's argument, the episode implies that it challenges mainstream society's views about what King's legacy is *supposed* to be: non-violent and struggling *only* against Jim Crow segregation. We know that King, later in his life, spoke out against other social issues, including Vietnam, which made him very unpopular (Garrow 429). In the episode, King would, in another scene, proclaim on national television that he did not agree with the U.S. War on Terror. This shocked everyone. As a result, King's face was plastered on the front cover of *Time* magazine with the word "Traitor" prominently displayed below his image and he experienced a severe public backlash and was shunned as un-American. This scene mirrors how King was actually treated in his later years and offers what his views might be on U.S. military aggression today. It may be safe to assume that King's consistent and trenchant criticism of U.S. imperialism may have remained unchanged.

By the time King's book came out, he has been successfully branded unpatriotic and the seven-figure deal for King's book was rescinded, leading him to release a separate autobiography titled, *A Dream Deterred*, which was deemed "unimpressive" by local critics. King holds a book signing at a local bookstore and Huey, ever the historically conscious Black Millennial, along with his grandfather

and younger brother Riley, go to the store to have his book signed. As they approach King's table, no one is there and King wakes up, wiping drool from his mouth. He begins to sign Huey's book. Granddad, trailing Huey, is visibly upset about someone taking his parking spot. King immediately recognizes Granddad and states, "Robert Freeman?!" Granddad replies, "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." They exchange pleasantries, and Granddad invites King to his house for dinner. Though the bookstore is virtually empty, King looks around and says he is still supposed to sign books for a few more hours. Overhearing their conversation, a young, white store employee turns to King and says, "Dude, just go." As they exit the bookstore, Granddad and King are walking side-by-side when Uncle Ruckus throws a brick at them which misses by quite a distance.

At dinner, Granddad, Huey, Riley, and King are joined by Tom DuBois, a district attorney in Woodcrest, along with his wife, Sarah, who is white, and their mixed-race daughter, Jasmine. During dinner, King confronts Granddad as to why he had been prank calling Rosa Parks. Though Granddad denies it, King, showing his increasing aptitude for modern technology, emphatically affirms, "She had the caller ID Robert." Granddad angrily snaps back, "She stole my thunder." Tom intervenes dismissively and says, "Robert!" But King affirms that Granddad was at the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The scene then shifts to a recollection of that now infamous moment on December 1, 1955.

In the scene, Granddad, Rosa Parks, and two other Black men are on the bus and tell each other to hold strong and not move from their seats. This scene is generally familiar to any young person who has learned something about Civil Rights history. Harnessing his dramatic license, McGruder presents Granddad sitting right next to Rosa. Upon being asked to move to the back of the bus by a white officer, the two Black men rush to the back, dancing and saying, "we's movin for ya, boss!" Granddad and Parks refuse to give up their seats. The officer appears to be talking only to Rosa and instructs her to leave. She does not, and this is repeated twice more. Granddad tries to place himself within the conversation but is ignored. The scene then fades back into the present.

This scene with Granddad and Parks is instructive on a number of levels in ways that could be useful for teaching Black youth. First, there were at least a few people before Rosa Parks who did, in fact, resist the humiliation of Jim Crow racism by not giving up their seat on a public bus. We can go back to Homer Plessy (whose case sparked the Supreme Court Decision *Plessy V. Ferguson* in 1896) and even Ida B. Wells, the Black anti-lynching activist in the late 19th century. There was

also a young Black woman who, only weeks prior to Parks, refused to give up her seat. Yet, we are often unaware of these preceding events. Destabilizing the idea of exceptional heroism reveals to Black Millennials that it was not a select few people who influenced historical change, although history is often taught that way. It also suggests something more: that there are many figures who remain on the margins of history, including Black women, simply for the fact of not being given the recognition that they deserve. In other words, this scene suggests that while we can all participate in social change, history usually only captures the actions of few.

During the episode, Tom DuBois is in awe of King, expressing his gratitude to be dining with the Reverend. Riley, however, is not amused. He does not believe that King is, in fact, THE Dr. King. He tells him, “You don’t look famous. What are you, an actor? Is you Morgan Freeman?” Granddad yells at him and tells him that it is indeed Martin Luther King, Jr. This scene highlights a segment of Black Millennials and their lack of knowledge about Black history. On the one hand, we cannot be too upset with Riley, even in the fictional sense. After all, why would he believe that King was who he said he was? On the other hand, it suggests that there is more that can be done to bring to light the varied meanings of King and wrest his legacy away from the narrow confines in which it exists today. In addition to teaching youth about King’s non-violent philosophy in opposition to Jim Crow, it would be useful to mention that he was an ardent supporter of the Anti-War Movement; he also opposed capitalism in the hands of a few. For King, racism was not a separate issue from class and the military industrial complex; they were intertwined. If youth were taught this version of King, perhaps we could further their developing notion of activism, which they are currently doing throughout the country.

Nonviolence vs. Armed Self-Defense

A major point of contention following the rebellions in Ferguson and Baltimore that emerged was the issue of non-violent protest and how protesters should resist. Should it be non-violent protest or should they use more “radical” means? The Black condition in the U.S. has never been one of non-violence *or* self-defense; both have existed side-by-side. “The Return of the King” offers a complex picture of this relationship. It shuns the often-portrayed non-violent versus violent binary. This allows for engagement regarding resistance methods used during the Civil

Rights Movement. This episode, then, is in line with recent scholarship that attempts to avoid the dichotomy between non-violence and armed self-defense (Hill; Jeffries; Tyson *Radio Free Dixie*; Wendt). It attempts to show how these political tactics worked in tandem.

The first mention of non-violence appears in the fictional television show *Politically Incorrect*. This show is aired October 15, 2001, a month and four days after the tragic events of 9/11. The host asks King, “You’re an advocate of non-violence, but guess what, how do you think the United States should respond to the terrorist attacks of 9/11?” King, uncompromising in his stance for non-violence states, “Well, as a Christian, we are taught that you should love thy enemy and if attacked, you should turn the other cheek.” The audience gasps in surprise. The following scenes show King being labeled a traitor on the front of *Time Magazine*, called an “ex-Civil Rights leader” by a White House aide, and, finally, criticized by people on the street. The book contract that King had, his movie, and his reputation were all ruined. Nonetheless, King and Huey remain loyal to the Civil Rights Movement.

The second scene of non-violence presents King on another television show which seems to mock the conservative news station Fox News’ *Bill O’Reilly Show*. When King begins discussing his creation of a new leftist, revolutionary party, he is interrupted with shouting by the show’s host. The host asks King a leading question, seeking to demonstrate his lack of patriotism:

Host: Do you love America?

King: I’m sorry?

Host: You sure as hell are, buddy. Why can’t liberals ever answer that question with a simple yes. If you ask me, if I love America, I say yes. Why can’t you say yes? Say you love America right now! Say it!

King: I will not be...

Host: Say it or shut up!

Host: We’ll be right back with more [interrupted mid-sentence as Huey threw a chair on stage]... (“The Return of the King”)

In the following scene, King and Huey are in the car. While Huey thought the interviewee went well, King attempts to show Huey the waywardness of his “violent” actions, stating, “You know, Huey, those of us who do adhere to the philosophy of non-violence frown upon the throwing of furniture to resolve our political differences.” King acknowledges the existence of armed resistance as a political tactic but disagrees with its use. To be sure, King clearly acknowledges

that there are different ways to resist oppression whether he abides by them or not. Huey does not acknowledge this point, though.

King's position toward armed self-defense was nuanced. "The question was not whether one should use his gun when his home was attacked," King says. The issue, rather, was "whether it was tactically wise to use a gun while participating in an organized demonstration" (King 31-2). King, then, was not so dedicated to non-violence that he was unwilling to protect his family and property. These scenes and dialogue offer an entry point to discuss movement tactics and related goals, objectives, and intellectual aspects of the Civil Rights Movement.

While mainstream press would like to characterize King as the epitome of what resistance should be, this episode allows for a different portrayal of King and the limits of his political philosophy of non-violence. While King was a great leader, his philosophy of non-violence was not the norm for Blacks at the local level. African Americans have always considered both non-violence and armed self-defense as possible tools of resistance. In Huey Newton's essay "In Defense of Self-Defense," he makes this point clear: "There has always existed in the Black colony of Afro-America a fundamental difference over which tactics...Black people should employ in their struggle for national liberation" (138-42).

These scenes present, for Black Millennials, an opportunity to critically engage in the meaning of non-violence versus armed self-defense. The episode attempts to complicate this dichotomy, placing both side by side and suggesting that, even as Huey was a supporter of revolutionary violence, he also supported non-violent tactics of resistance. This is certainly not surprising, as the Black Panther Party had a host of social programs. Moreover, historian Timothy B. Tyson has argued that some Black activists found no contradiction between non-violent protest and armed self-defense. "The story of Robert F. Williams reveals that... 'armed self-reliance' operated in the South in tension and in tandem with legal efforts and non-violent protest" (Tyson "Robert F. Williams," 541). The episode points out that just because Civil Rights activists did not fundamentally agree on methods of resistance, it did not mean they did not work side by side, for the same goal: Black liberation. This critical engagement with intra-Black coalitions has been another important issue facing those committed to Black Liberation (Carmichael and Hamilton 60-1).

The Civil Rights Movement's Legacy

What meaning does the Civil Rights Movement have for Black Millennials? Two scenes with Riley and Huey capture aspects of the generational divide and connection between the Civil Rights Movement and Black Millennials. The opening scene of the episode suggests a major generational gap. This scene consists of two separate quotes, which McGruder puts in conversation with one another. The first, is a quote McGruder offers from King: "I want young men and young women who are not alive today...to know and see that these new privileges and opportunities did not come without somebody suffering and sacrificing for them." The seeming lack of historical consciousness among Black Millennials is illustrated in the immediate response to King's quote in the very next frame with this second quote: "Whatever, nigga," signed, "Anonymous."

Whereas the Civil Rights generation had Jim Crow racism as public policy and were pretty much excluded from participating in American democracy, both politically and socially, Black Millennials do not experience the same type or degree of disfranchisement as did the Civil Rights generation, although some would argue—quite convincingly—that the emergence and consequences of mass incarceration is a new form of Jim Crow (Alexander 13), which also includes unprecedented inequality.

Scholars should help Black Millennials understand the types of racism they deal with in an age marked by post-racial discourse. Indeed, the same three evils King criticized years ago—capitalism, militarism, and racism—is alive and not only well, but unfortunately thriving. We have a lot to learn from those working on the ground as well. Because social media can serve as a useful tool for activism, we should carefully analyze how Black Millennials use it to share information and to learn, albeit, in a critical manner. We should participate with them by disseminating Black historical information rooted in sound research through mediums and pedagogies that resonate with Black Millennials.

In the *Boondocks* episode, the generational divide between Black Millennials and King is complex. While watching late night television alone on the couch, with Huey joining him, King flips through the channels to see what his people were being exposed to. He is utterly disappointed. He turns slowly to Huey, asking, "What happened, Huey? What happened to our people?" Huey slowly states, "I think," pausing, "everyone was waiting for Martin Luther King to comeback." King, depressingly states, "The Martin Luther King they're waiting for, Huey, is gone forever."

Initially, King seeks to reach out to Black youth, but he finds them politically disinterested and does not relate to them very well. Indeed, while walking around a shopping center with Huey, King becomes overwhelmed with the new technologies that have emerged since his coma: “Huey, I just don’t think I belong in this new world. I don’t know if I need the 20-gig iPod or the 40-gig. I tried to download some Mahalia Jackson, but I lost my iTunes password.” While King struggles to adjust to modern technologies, Black Millennials use these technologies at will (although not all equally).

Later, Huey suggests that they found a political party to respond to the crisis in the Black community. When King asks about the political party, Huey affirms, “not just any political party—a black, *revolutionary* political party.” King, believing he did not connect well with young people, states, “You should ask Oprah to do it. She’s more popular and if you ask me, a darn pretty lady.” King’s statement is interesting and obviously out of touch, given Oprah’s main demographic has long been middle class white women. King, though, takes on this challenge, and attempts to start the political organizing.

Trying to be relevant, King hires an urban promotions firm to spread the word about an upcoming political event. This is a major mistake. When Huey hears about the first meeting of their Black, revolutionary party on the radio, he asks, “Dr. King, why are they giving away tickets to our emergency action planning meeting on 95.5 WFRK, The ‘Freak’?” King responds, showing his ignorance of media and this generation’s ways for disseminating information, “Well, Huey, I thought about what you said about not having enough experience with modern media, so, I hired an urban promotions firm to help get the word out...Uh oh; was that bad?”

When they arrive at the emergency action planning meeting, it looks more like a bangin’ club than an organizing event. In fact, when they try to enter, a bouncer stops Huey and King, stating, “I’ll tell you right now, you ain gittin in with them shoes on.” Huey responds, “what’s wrong wit’ my shoes?” Huey then states, “This is Dr. Martin Luther King.” The doorman, more interested in making sure the party is properly secured and poppin’, ironically responds, “So what, nigga, I’m Malcolm X.”

When Huey and King finally walk into the room where the political party is taking place, they witness people who seemingly have no historical consciousness and no desire for constructive political action. In fact, Huey describes the event in this way, “The first black political party was everything you expected it to be. There was the preacher; the rapper truce, and, oh yea, there was also the inevitable fight.”

McGruder presents a picture of a people who are not “woke” (social consciousness) to what is going on around them.

When King stands to speak, he tentatively says, “Excuse me, brothers and sisters, please. Someone turn it [the radio] off.” When no one listens, King is forced to speak with a tone that will attract Black Millennials’ attention: the *truth*. His tone becomes agitated and more aggressive. While King made one of the most powerful speeches in the summer of 1963, perhaps this fictional speech is more relevant for the Black Millennials. “Will you ignorant niggas please shut the hell up,” King angrily shouts. “Is this it? This is what I got all those ass whoopins for. I had a dream once,” King bemoans. “It was a dream that little black girls and little black boys would drink from the river of prosperity, free from the thirst of oppression.” King continues, critiquing every negative aspect of Black Millennials:

But lo and behold some four decades later, what have I found, but a bunch of trifling, shiftless, good for nothing niggas. And I know some of you don’t want to hear me say that word. It’s the ugliest word in the English language. But that’s what I see now, niggas. And you don’t want to be a nigga cause niggas are living contradictions. Niggas are full of unfulfilled ambitions. Niggas watch and wane, niggas love to complain. Niggas love to hear themselves talk but hate to explain. Niggas love bein another man’s judge and jury. Niggas procrastinate until it’s time to worry. Niggas love to be late, niggas hate to hurry. Black Entertainment Television is the worst thing I’ve ever seen in my life. Usher, Michael Jackson is not a genre of music. And now I’d like to talk about *Soul Plane*. I’ve seen what’s around the corner, I’ve seen what’s over the horizon, and I promise ya, you niggas have nothing to celebrate. And no I won’t get there with you, I’m going to Canada. (“The Return of the King”)

After his exhortation, King quietly walks off the stage, looking relieved. He then slowly looks down to Huey, and says, “Thank you, Huey. Do what you can.” This powerful speech, while fictional, makes an important call for action. It was not the “I Have a Dream” King that the mainstream media presents every January. On the surface, it might seem that the fictional King was engaging in a sort of respectability politics, blaming poor and working class blacks for their situations—similar to that which Bill Cosby did to Black folks at the NAACP Awards in 2004 (Dyson). However, on a deeper level, we read it as a call to action, as a way for people to stop indulging in capitalist consumption, and as a way to more carefully engage in a radical critique of society at large, or, to put it another way, become angry, as

queer Black feminist Audre Lorde instructs us. It also provides an opportunity to think about the role of history in our current efforts at liberation.

If this speech were to be given alongside the more “radical” speeches and exhortations of King, it has potential to be a “living black history” text and could lead young people to more critically engage King’s intellectual trajectories beyond “I have a dream.” Ironically, this critical exhortation did lead to action—although in a fictional world. Yet, even King knew that there was an urgent need for change in the Black community, stating, “We are faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now” (22). King believed that if action were to take place, it must be now.

After King’s exhortation and critique of Black Millennials, Huey narrates the people’s subsequent reactions. Huey states, “King’s speech was replayed the entire next day on the cable news channels. Then, something unexpected happened; people got angry.” Subsequently, King’s exhortation first led to non-violent methods of resistance. One newscaster says, “Nobody knows exactly what to attribute to the sharp decline in African American dropout rates.” Another narrator states, “that is, every African American player in the NBA refuses to play until there is a full troop withdrawal.” The next news anchor states, “billionaire Bob Johnson apologizing to Black America for the network he founded.” And, finally, a newscaster states, the “White House and Congress are receiving an unprecedented amount of calls from irate African Americans.” This scene continues by showing angry Black Americans at the White House gates ready to revolt. It also shows the armed wing of the U.S. government—the police—preparing to respond. Sure enough, the police officers shoot tear gas into the crowd, fire rounds of ammunition, and the crowd scatters seeking cover. Huey then states, “and the revolution finally came.” As the crowd is under attack, Huey states, “it’s fun to dream.”

Unfortunately, while the last scene illustrates potential methods of challenging structural racism in the U.S., it also plausibly captures the potential responses by the federal government. It shows that when African Americans become angry and challenge the status quo, the U.S. government suppresses their efforts with violence. This has historically been the case. What messages does this episode convey to Black Millennials? It says that both non-violent and revolutionary violence are possible avenues for freedom and that they can work in tandem. And Black Lives Matter activists are showing that both forms of action, including, now,

social media, can exist to help alter the conditions that are harming Black Millennials.

Conclusion

Black Millennial scholars may be uniquely situated to help guide Black youth in exploring the meanings and relevance Black history has in their lives particularly through its manifestations in popular culture. As popular culture is without a doubt a major part of Black youth cultures and identities, we as Black Millennial scholars have a responsibility—which we will either fulfill or betray—to make our work relevant, examining and interpreting Black popular culture as an integral part of our research and scholarship. We must find new ways to disseminate Black histories and popular culture, for postmodern Black youth, in ways that appeal to their global sense of self. To be sure, cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal states it best when he argues that intelligentsia should “rearticulate these highly theoretical ideas into language accessible to the very masses, black or otherwise, to which black popular culture is so crucial” (130).

Non-traditional Black popular culture texts such as Black Twitter will not supplant books; it would be foolish to suggest such a thing. However, if Black popular culture is critically shared with Black Millennials, with some enlightened guidance, it will prove to be a powerful tool for disseminating information and facilitating critical inter-generational conversations.

We end this essay by reaffirming that Black Lives, do in fact, Matter. Specific to this essay, Black popular culture and Black history also matters. They matter for the future of our people, the youth we want to educate, and ourselves. When textbooks in the United States omit the important (exploited) labor that early African Americans expended to help build this country and that represents, along with indigenous dispossession, the great and ongoing sin of this nation, it is important now more than ever that we place extra emphasis on the continued struggle to educate our youth, in and out of schools.

Works Cited

Acevedo, Nicole. “As Millennials, Especially Latinos and Blacks, Own Fewer Homes, Wealth Gap Will Grow.” *NBC News*, 11 July 2018,

- www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/millennials-especially-latinos-blacks-own-fewer-homes-wealth-gap-will-n890476.
- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2010.
- Babu-Kurra. "How 9/11 Completely Changed Surveillance in U.S." *Wired*, Sept 2011, www.wired.com/2011/09/911-surveillance.
- Boyd, Todd. "Intergenerational Culture Wars: Civil Rights vs Hip Hop." *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2004, pp. 51-69.
- Carmichael, Stokely and Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. Vintage, 1992.
- Cohen, Cathy J. *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics*. Oxford UP, 2012.
- Dalaker, Joseph and Bernadette D. Proctor. U.S. Census Bureau. *Poverty in the United States: 1999*. Government Printing Office, 2000.
- Dawson, Michael C. *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies*. U Chicago P, 2001.
- Dawson, Michael C., and Megan Ming Francis. "Black Politics and the Neoliberal Racial Order." *Public Culture*, vol. 28, no. 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 23-62.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. *Is Bill Cosby Right?: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* Civitas Books, 2006.
- Fitzpatrick, Laura. "Top 10 Controversial Cartoons." *The Times Online*, Apr 2010, entertainment.time.com/2010/04/27/top-10-controversial-cartoons/slide/the-boondocks.
- Freelong, Deen, et al. *Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice*. Center for Media and Social Impact, Feb 2016, cmsimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/beyond_the_hashtags_2016.pdf.
- Garrow, David. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. Quill, William Morrow, 1986.
- Hill, Lance. *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement*. U North Carolina P, 2006.
- Jeffries, Hasan Kwame. *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*. NYU Press, 2010.
- King, Jr., Dr. Martin Luther. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Bantam Books, 1968.

- Kitwana, Bakari. *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture*. Civitas Books, 2003.
- Marable, Manning. *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America's Racial Future*. 1st ed., Civitas Books, 2006.
- Newton, Huey P. "In Defense of Self-Defense II." *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, edited by David Hilliard and Donald Weise, Seven Stories Press, 2002.
- Reed, Adolph. *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*. U Minnesota P, 1999.
- Rhodes, Jane. *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*. The New Press, 2007.
- Rose, Charlie. "Interview with Aaron McGruder." *Charlie Rose*, PBS, 15 July 1999, charlierose.com/videos/2474.
- Scott, Shaun. *Millennials and the Moments That Made Us: A Cultural History of the U.S. from 1982-Present*. Zero Books, 2018.
- Shapiro, Thomas M. *Toxic Inequality: How America's Wealth Gap Destroys Mobility, Deepens the Racial Divide, and Threatens Our Future*. Basic Books, 2017.
- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. Haymarket Books, 2016.
- Taylor, Paul, et al. *Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends*. Pew Research Center, 7 Mar 2014, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood.
- The Boondocks: The Return of the King*. peabodyawards.com/award-profile/the-boondocks-the-return-of-the-king.
- "The Return of the King." *The Boondocks*, written by Aaron McGruder, directed by Calvin Lee, Sony Pictures, 2006.
- Tynes, Brendesha M., and Safiya Umoja Noble, editors. *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online*. Peter Lang Inc., 2016.
- Tyson, Timothy B. "Robert F. Williams, 'Black Power,' and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle." *Journal of American History*, vol. 85, no. 2, 1998, pp. 540-70.
- . *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*. U North Carolina P, 2001.
- Wendt, Simon. *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. UP of Florida, 2007.

Younge, Gary. "Strip Tease." *The Guardian*, 21 Dec 2005,
www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2005/dec/22/art.usa.