



Entrepreneurs in Brown Skins? Performing Matter into Contemporary Black Lives

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Abstract

COVID-19 aside, the year 2020 was characterized by further challenges to the black identity. The gruesome murder of George Floyd and other low moments of racial discrimination triggered a wave of protests across the USA and beyond. The year saw the convictions of the proponents of the Black Lives Matter being tested to the limits. Whereas popular music has constituted a vehicle for conveying the concerns of the movement since its conception, I argue that the events of the year 2020 and the attendant looting and destruction in the guise of protests, have propelled an impetus in African American creatives to speak matter into black lives. Drawing from the texts (2019) and video (2020) of Beyoncé Knowles’s “Brown Skin Girl,” the article discusses artists’ attempt to deploy chromatism in debunking negative connotations associated with “black.” Further, the audio-visual constructs in Pharrell Williams’s “Entrepreneur” (2020) is assessed as a deliberate creation to sustain a positive narrative at a critical moment of African American history.

Keywords Brown skin · Black Lives Matter · Black Arts Movement · Chromatism/colorism · Popular music · Hip-hop

Introduction

We didn’t want the white critics in there. I think the object was for black people to find out who they were without someone overlooking their shoulder. Black people had a feeling of always being on stage for white folks. It was time, some of us thought, to be in certain contexts socially, unashamedly on

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our own, and to define ourselves on our own terms without someone else intervening in the definition (Neal, 1987: 22).

¹African American popular culture is at a crossroads. So too are the lived experiences of African Americans. Not since the Black Arts Movement of 1960s America where black art was required to speak directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America (Neal, 1968) has there been what seems to be an equivalence in the nature of the art forms that have been accompanying the Black Lives Matter project. Amidst all of this, the events of the year 2020 have led to questions with regard to what constitutes the black aesthetic in the contemporary space. There appears to be a mismatch of several motifs in current forms ranging from pandering, abuse of privileges, insensitivity, and a striving to impress, among others. Unlike Larry Neal's projections with regard to the motivations behind the 1960s black aesthetic, contemporary black aesthetic is in competition to align with the white thing, to align with white ideas and white ways of looking at the world, while doing all it can to also earn white approval. Perhaps in a bid to undo the "crude, strident forms of nationalism" (Smith, 1991: 93) that characterized 1960s black arts writing, contemporary black writers in popular culture are suddenly writing for white approval, eager to be judged by white folk. Self-celebration remains, but it is at the mercy of validation from white watchers.

This paper argues that the events of the year 2020 in the USA in which African Americans were televised in various acts of looting and destruction of properties, have impacted on the creative slant of African American cultural producers and resulted in calculated performances of matter into contemporary black lives. In illustrating this observation, the paper engages with the audio, textual, and video components of two singles by African American icons. Beyoncé Knowles's "Brown Skin Girl" and Pharrell Williams's "Entrepreneur" are two musical videos in which several other African American performers are incorporated and featured at several levels, from the writing, to the composing, to the singing/rapping, and to the directing. The analysis of these two productions reveals the deliberateness at the core of the videos' plots, the choice of collaborators and the import of the textual make-up of both singles. The confusion at the heart of the adoption of "brown" by certain cultural leaders of the black race in a world that recognizes a brown race is historicized and placed in perspective. The paper is divided into four subsequent sections. The next offers an unpacking of the matter in Black Lives Matter along with a review of relevant literature. The third section delves into the misconstructions surrounding "Brown Skin Girl," while the fourth is focused on "Entrepreneur." The fifth and final section concludes the paper.

¹ In the UK, the statue of a black woman's protest salute took a position long occupied by the statue of a slave trader in Bristol, albeit for about 24 h.

Unpacking “Matter” in Black Lives Matter

Recent scholarship on the Black Lives Matter movement has sought to engage with the roles played by youth of color on social media in the aftermath of the non-indictment of the officers in the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner (Carney, 2016) as well as undertake a comparative analysis between the movement, which began with the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s killer, and the civil rights movement of 1954–1965 (Clayton, 2018). This article adds to the growing body of knowledge (e.g., Radebe, 2020; Stewart, 2017) associated with the number of black lives taken at the hands of police officers or other non-black authority figures. However, the primary contribution of the article lies in its portrayal of a certain metamorphosis within hip-hop, namely that whereas the culture grew renown for playing to white audience consumption through its depiction of criminality among black youth and the degeneration of black women (Henderson, 1996), the acts/songs assessed here have played to a similar audience, but through the depiction of blacks as entrepreneurs and of beautiful-skinned black women. Yet, in an analysis of newspaper reporting of the Black Lives Matter movement and of the controversial trial of Trayvon Martin’s murder, Lane et al. (2020) observe an anti-black tendency that reinforces the single story of African Americans as “inadequate, lawless, criminal [and] threatening” (Lane et al., 2020: 790). This framing of African Americans in national newspapers in the United States is fundamental to the reactionary slant of African American creatives most recently with which this paper is preoccupied.

Since its conception, popular music has constituted a site for expressing the mission of the Black Lives Matter movement. More recently, the protest songs of Kendrick Lamar and Donald Glover resonate (Limbong, 2019; Osiebe, 2018; Rolli, 2020). Yet, these sites have hardly conveyed a vision beyond a psychological engineering to soothe African Americans whose existence—from the church to work and back home—centers largely around music. With the events of the year 2020, however, there appears to be a shift in the mindset of African American creative leaders towards the necessity of a more tangible vision. In moving from the sloganeering of “we gonna be alright,” these creative leaders have sought to set an agenda with the potential to influence general optics upon the African American people, but more so to instill an ethos of work and can do, as against mere wishes. At such a critical moment of African American history, the unfolding scenario is neither unexpected nor farfetched. Amidst the barrage of un-abating debates over which lives matter more or whether all lives do not matter, this article engages the subject by deploying some nuance.

For the sake of group survival and liberation, African Americans...must incorporate into the curriculum of the schools their children attend, the writings, dances, humor, and music that praise their group, honor their heroes and heroines, and proclaim the greatness of their deeds. In this way we will also be able to preserve our group’s culture, values, and customs by passing them down through the generations. This knowledge of, and respect for, the art forms of African Americans will enhance the self-esteem of our youngsters and thus

contribute not only to our survival but beyond to our true liberation (Arnez, 1980: 3).

The foregoing sets the tone for the ensuing discussion and analysis bordering on the realities of being African American in the age of the Black Lives Matter movement and the attendant production by artistic creatives in the contemporary space. It is appropriate to begin with the following piece which is informed by the nomenclature “Black Lives Matter” and the challenges of being black in today’s world:

The matter wouldn’t stop mattering to me
 No matter how hard I try to batter thoughts on the matter
 Now the matter has elevated to my primary matter

In this letter to matter
 I confront the matter of matter before matter
 And insist that this matter is of crucial matter to me

For one, none has ever been of such matter-ic proportions
 At least, not of matter enough to matter to me
 So matter, here’s the crux of the matter;

It matters to me that matter finds me her matter
 For now, and for always, I care to be matter’s matter
 And in case you didn’t know, my dear matter
 My matter is a matter of mattering significance...

(Osiebe, 2019)

The opening stanza laments the fact of the author’s “condemnation” to melanin and how this “curse” makes its bearers easy prey and target for the socio-political injustices of contemporary life. Short of outlets and choices, the second stanza reveals the author’s resolve to *take the bull by the horn* through “a love letter” (Mitchell, 2019). The third stanza serves as an all-important bridge between the opening two verses and the fourth stanza. What is unmistakably communicated through the third stanza is the author’s discovery, however belated, that the melanin that characterizes the outer skin layer is of paramount importance to existence as with self as with interacting with other people. In the fourth and final stanza, the author is preoccupied with the full acceptance and embrace of this melanin as a “popping” characteristic after all, which must be cared for by its bearer. The last line conveys the charter of the two songs assessed through this article.

“Brown Skin”: Beyond Feminist Constructions of the Black Woman/Girl

Recent literature on the music videos of Beyoncé Knowles have focused on the singer’s body and her depictions of black femininities (Durham, 2012; Olutola, 2019), just as they have identified with “the difficulties of maintaining a coherent message of black female empowerment” (Olutola, 2019: 112). Fittingly, in the opening

chapter of *Brown Beauty: Color, Sex, and Race from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II* (2018) — “Brown Beginnings” — Laila Haidarali sketches theorizations of the New Negro woman of the 1920s and the freshness in the public imagination that attended these theorizations and even more so the subject. Following mass migrations of African American women from their hitherto southern bases to the urban North, they tended to self-appropriate a politics of respectability in a bid to shift perceptions away from the crude, sex object references that were associated with the black woman as a consequence of slavery. With increased visibility and the need to be seen as modern and progressive, the phrase “brown skin” was introduced as a demonstration of how “beauty [had] eclipsed chastity and demure self-presentation as central tenets in cultivating the image of respectable middle-class African American womanhood” (Haidarali, 2018: 28). The attempts to change the meanings of brownness drew from discourses that connected race, color, gender, class, and modernity. The average African American woman was bent on denouncing dominant representations associated with her, like domesticity and sexual purity. She chose instead to emulate the classy and upwardly mobile European American woman through equivalent tools such as the mass consumerism of the era, the sexual liberation, and individual self-expression (Haidarali, 2018; Wilson, 2019).

It is given, therefore, that this generation of women invariably raised daughters whom they fed with praises of being “brown skin girls.” In spite of these realities, the problematic nature of the appropriation of the “brown skin” to depict otherwise “black” African Americans remains. This is so primarily because certain geographical locations including Latin America, the far East and beyond are inhabited by peoples who identify as Brown. Despite attempts to exploit the “new racism” targeted at both black and brown people through commonly poor educational, socioeconomic, and political conditions (Orelus, 2012), the appellation of “brown skin” aimed at depicting the “glow” of beautiful African American women is unlikely to resonate outside of feel-good African American circles and pretentious multicultural spaces. Yet, Beyoncé Knowles’s “Brown Skin Girl” (2019) managed to make it past the traditional gatekeepers of record executives, lawyers, accountants, publicists, radio programmers, and music journalists all the way to global audiences due to the circumstances of the times. It is safe to state that the “black” identity is thoroughly troubled and perhaps at a crossroads. It thus requires all of the public relations it can get.

“The lyrics encourage young girls to love their skin – particularly in a culture that often upholds lighter skin as a standard of beauty” (Mitchell, 2019: np) is how Amanda Mitchell conveys her interpretation of the textual components of Knowles’s, Saint Jhn’s, Blue Ivy Carter’s, and Wizkid’s “Brown Skin Girl” (2019). Whereas the actual songwriting is credited to the former three and a number of others including Sean Carter, Mitchell’s wont in her pro-feminist critique in *The Oprah Magazine* is to have the reader believe that the song is written in its entirety by Blue Ivy Carter. As with several other cues betraying Mitchell’s mindset of pandering, the article opens with the declaration: “It’s official. Blue Ivy Carter is the hardest working kid in show business...” (Mitchell, 2019: np). However, by the first sentence of the third paragraph, reality dawns and Mitchell’s pretensions temporarily give way to the main concerns that the lyrics scream: ““Brown Skin Girl” is unapologetically and fearlessly Black, hitting on

a topic that society still hesitates to approach because of how...complicated the topic is” (Mitchell, 2019: np). Surely, it is a stretch, as the writer should know, to suggest that such “unapologetic” and “fearless” lyrics were penned by a 7-year-old. Mitchell proceeds to delve rather uncritically into colorism and the memories of slavery that abide in black communities, before returning to first base of pandering to her remainder target demographic, namely Oprah Winfrey whose joy-slanted social media comment on the song while it trended is quoted in its entirety. Mitchell is all too aware of the shallowness of her piece such that she concludes abruptly: “We know. We *know*. Too much! So when you’re done crying over how wonderful it is to see women embracing their beautiful black skin, give “Brown Skin Girl” a listen” (Mitchell, 2019). A fundamental question is why Mitchell ought to expect her readers to cry? As rhetorical as the question is, it is necessary to have a grasp of Mitchell as only but an audience participant in the song. Other than her access to *The Oprah Magazine* where the piece is published, Mitchell is just like any of the millions who are in permanent submission to their leading cultural producers of which Knowles is prime.

Another reviewer, Brea Cubit, while waxing nostalgic wrote: “I was taken back to thinking that maybe if my skin was lighter, I’d be prettier” (Cubit, 2019: np). Yet, this is precisely the sin of “Brown Skin Girl” (2019) considering its choice of “brown” over the darker variant of “black.” It is also unclear how helpful the line “never trade you for anybody else” from the song’s chorus is. The expectation of the average human being ought not to be getting traded. In which case, the listener, irrespective of race, is likely to entertain an imaginary bordering on the era of the transatlantic slave trade at this point. This is further accentuated by the emphasis on the song’s subject possessing a “back against the world” or “same skin that was broken be the same skin taking over.” It becomes necessary to ask precisely what is being taken over, and from whom. Nor is the line “can’t let anyone come control me” to be considered useful in a world already populated by a quite unruly generation.

In proceeding to remark on the rest of the textual constitution of “Brown Skin Girl” (2019), it is observed that much of the motivating hollowness is captured above. Therefore, only a few select lines constituting personality-driven material and the choice of casting for one of the song’s performers is engaged with. On the latter, it is no accident that Wizkid, who is considered to be the greatest Nigerian pop act of his generation (Pulse, 2020) is the one tapped up to perform the song’s opening verse and chorus. Nigeria is after all the most populated country in Africa and across the black world. It is also the hub of the wave of Afrobeats which is currently enjoying some good measure of global attention (Osiebe, 2020; Pulse, 2020). Consequently, the otherwise black continent is equally caught in the frenzy of celebrating their mutually acquired brown skins. The casting of the Guyanese Saint Jhn alongside Blue Ivy Carter in the song’s intro is also strategic although he is listed as one of the songwriters.

In the song, Knowles opens her contribution in verse two with the following lines considered to be tributes to three famous black women (a model, an actress, and a singer) with varying melanin pigmentations:

Pose like a trophy when Naomis walk in
 She need an Oscar for that pretty dark skin
 Pretty like Lupita when the cameras close in
 Drip broke the levee when my Kellys roll in

Without doubt, the choices of the selected women are well thought out, particularly with their eventual appearance on the video shedding light on the many shades of the black skin, all making for the “brown skin girl.” Yet, the singer’s “tribute” to Naomi Campbell as deserving an Oscar on account of her skin is the sort of hogwash behind the entitled mindset of many females in the present world. Why would anyone wish to work hard toward achieving while nature can simply hand achievement with little or no effort? Lines such as the Naomi tribute informs much of the unruliness in the contemporary world. Indeed, it is reminiscent of the events of July 2020 in Bristol, England where in the course of *Black Lives Matter* protests, Jen Reid, a black so-called female activist posed at a plinth where the statue of Edward Colston, a seventeenth century slave merchant, had just been displaced, only to have a sculpture of her black power salute materialize on the very same spot a few weeks later (Bland, 2020b). Wanting a statue must be one thing but the effrontery to erect it precisely where a one-time “white hero” stood led to suggestions that perhaps black lives had begun to matter a little too much. Naturally, questions arose as to what precisely she had done to warrant a statue let alone erecting it publicly. Surely, being a feminist or an activist who is able to salute amidst protests is by itself an insufficient basis to create one’s statue. Yet, this is the sort of empty pride and dangerous entitlement being promoted by the texts of “Brown Skin Girl,” both intentionally and inadvertently. The Bristol city council’s removal of the sculpture a day later (Bland, 2020a) embedded ridicule that was barely close to the rebuke Reid and her sculptor’s action deserved. Yet, in a world of unbridled emotions and sensitivities, political correctness took center stage and all that was communicated was that the sculpture had been taken to the museum for Marc Quinn, the sculptor, to collect. While Reid got her highly sought *15 min of fame* stretched extensively to over 24 h, Quinn’s action demonstrated that the more astute entrepreneurs in all of this face no difficulties or backlash with respect to the appreciation of their skins as being black or being brown (Emelife, 2020). Allusions have been made, meanwhile, of a more prevalent racial group consciousness among American blacks than among British blacks (Laniyonu, 2019).

Irrespective of how it is framed, the truth behind the appropriation of “brown skins” by African American (or black) women of any era—be it of the early twentieth century as explored by Haidarali (Haidarali, 2018) or of the early twenty-first century as Knowles and her army of feel-good followers are wont to indulge—is the need to lose a component of their historical fact which either causes pain or strips dignity. More particularly, the brown skinned of the 1920s opted for the consumerist ways to be a little more like their “white” superiors. Clearly, the brown skinned of the 2020s have learnt lessons in ways best known to the diffusion of globalization and prefer once again to be a little more like their “white” and “not-so-white”/brown “equals.” At any rate, the nudge to distance themselves from being “black” remains constant.

In her book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), Avta Brah through a chapter and section on “Difference, diversity, differentiation: What’s in a name? What’s in a color?,” offers a discussion of the road to black identity, globally. Having essentially chronicled the politics of domination and subordination that characterized the relations between the colonizer and the colonized in the age of colonialism, Brah shows how the reference to “colored people” was ultimately replaced by “black” in the late 1960s and 1970s. This, according to Brah, was the result of influences derived from the Black Power Movement in America which had “turned the concept of black on its head, divested it of its pejorative connotations in racialized discourses, and transformed it into a confident expression of an assertive group identity” (Brah, 1996: 97). Brah proceeds to highlight how “black” became a political color to be claimed with pride against color-based racisms and how this formed the bedrock for eschewing chromatism—the basis of differentiation amongst blacks according to the lighter or darker tone of skin. It has clearly been a long way since then with Knowles’s attempt to equate the varying tones of three celebrity black women and christen each “brown.” On this matter, words cannot be minced.

“Brown Skin Girl” is a musical success. It is sonorous and a truly joyful listen as Oprah put it (Mitchell, 2019). At the same time, however, it harbors within its texts and propagation a potential to confuse persons, particularly budding blacks across the world who have grown into rhetoric about a non-racial world. It must be confounding to be the subject and recipient of tireless advocacies for a non-racial world on the one hand, while being told to celebrate one’s brown skin which is the “most beautiful thing in the world” because one is black, on the other. Simply put, Knowles and her millions of endorsers must outgrow their *Black is King*, brown skin moment—unduly overextended already—and embrace the reality that you are either black or brown, never both. It has got to be stated that while the phrase *Black Lives Matter* does not necessarily imply that non-black lives do not or matter less, the title *Black is King* certainly connotes racist insinuations. After all, anyone who dared put out a piece of creative production titled “White is King,” for example, would automatically earn the white supremacist label. Undeniably, the history of African Americans and of the entire black race is a grippingly painful one, yet, in the attempts to ease these pains and approach equality, utmost care must be taken in order not to fashion renewed hate and discord between the races of a still very racial planet.

In the end, “Brown Skin Girl” (2019) achieves the umpteenth distinction of exploiting audiences, particularly those of African ancestry. The “old color hierarchy within the African American community, where light, medium, and dark-skinned complexions reflected elite, middle, and working-class socioeconomic statuses” (Wilson, 2019: 4), constitutes sufficient grounds to rest the brown skin color appropriation by black women, once and for all. Instead, the creators of the audiovisual have paid lip service by feigning solidarity with the issues of the *Black Lives Matter* movement in a bid to boost their own popularity and secure their financial standing. In a century plagued by skin lightening obsessions and the attendant challenges of racist beauty ideals, *Brown Skin Girl*’s overall deployment of “language promotes a narrow and anti-black vision of beauty by presenting pale complexions as the ideal” (Thomas, 2020: np). An introspective line from the final verse of Nasir

Jones' record "Ultra Black" (2020) reads: "No matter your race, to me, we all are black" (Jones, 2020a). This should guide the brown-skinners more appropriately.

"Entrepreneur" (2020): Black Inspiration or an Entreaty of Capacity?

It is time to expand the traditional conversations that we have been having about identity in hip-hop. Moving beyond pathology means artists moving beyond glorifying one-dimensional and often fake identities in their music and lyrics. First, artists need to see themselves fully. I am suggesting that artists need to love and appreciate their minds and see themselves as more than the kid that made it out, more than the guy that used hip-hop as a hustle, and more than the wind-up doll playing whatever role society demands for a dollar (Jenkins, 2011: 1248).

In his Pitchfork review of Nasir Jones' body of work, Pete Tosiello writes that "*King's Disease* unfolds with a thematic scope suitable for reminiscence and self-coronation, with a bit of the Marcus Garvey-inspired liberation theory" (Tosiello, 2020: np). This brief passage underscores the reviewer's obsession with the rapper's personal life and immediately preceding works which in turn rob the review of holistic balance and fairness. It is true that "*King's Disease* makes overtures of applauding women in a manner that feels defensive in light of the 2018 allegations [of domestic abuse by his ex-wife]" (Tosiello, 2020: np). Yet, these overtures do not define the album in its entirety such that but for Tosiello's obsession with the subject, he may have listened better and been more conscious of the imperative for a more constructive contextualization of *King's Disease* with respect to the circumstances surrounding its release. Had this been the case, Tosiello would have heard Jones' version of expressing the "black entrepreneurial" bug that has caught African American creatives in recent times. Indeed, apart from "Ultra Black," *King's Disease* houses at least three tracks which speak to the notions of black excellence and the invariable mattering of contemporary black lives. The tracks "Spicy," "10 Points," and "24 Summers" (where Jones sings in the chorus: "black cars, black Rolls, more black CEOs" (Jones, 2020b)) are examples of this. Yet, none of the tracks nor videos from Jones' *King's Disease* offers as strong a depiction of the ongoing "black lives matter arts movement" as the single assessed in this section.

For this depiction, a selection of "Entrepreneur" (2020) is made. It is a song by Pharrell Williams with a video that stars several "black CEOs" and is directed by Los Angeles-based filmmaker Calmatic. The ensuing analysis aims to properly situate the points at which the audio-visual representations in "Entrepreneur" (2020) fall short in its propaganda of black inspiration and increasingly resembles an entreaty to non-blacks to acknowledge black capacity.

In the book *Black Skin White Mask*, Frantz Fanon writes in a chapter titled "The Fact of Blackness" that "in the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty" (Fanon, 1952: 83). This excerpt speaks to the

second concern of this article which is to do with contemporary black art's characteristic of pandering to white validation. This contrasts sharply with the fundamental instruction of the black arts movement of the 1960s–1970s which insisted that the black artist ought to be so preoccupied with black audiences as to be effectively oblivious of white existence in the expression of his/her art (Neal, 1968). Williams's 2020 single "Entrepreneur" features Shawn Carter, better known by his moniker, Jay-Z. Carter happens to be Knowles's husband. "Entrepreneur" (2020) presents the artists in a third person consciousness in the mold of "hello white folk, take a look at these successful black people. They are of my race you know. They are black, just like me" (hypothetical construct). Besides this, the single is not groundbreaking to the extent that there have been numerous attempts to highlight the resilient spirit of the black man and or to motivate a can do outlook for the African American population since the dawn of hip-hop and other genres. Tupac Shakur's "Trapped" (1991): "...Can't keep a black man down" resonates for the average hip-hop head.

Similar examples abound, yet, quite recently on the celebrated Beyoncé Knowles album, *Lemonade*, one of its major singles, "Formation" (2016) had Knowles utter "*You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making; I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making*" (Knowles, 2016), in reference to her husband and to herself. Not only did her immediate African American base sing aloud, but so did much of her audiences across the world. No one appeared to take issue with it, rather it was considered to be part and parcel of musical license where positivity, optimism, praise and the referencing of black culture (Rosenfeld, 2016) were the only variables at play. After all, the line was complementary to Bill Gates for whom, as one of the planet's wealthiest human beings, it came across redundant. Still, for the singer and her listeners, it was an association with progressiveness. Consequently, singing along was all that was required of everyone. At this juncture of critical implications in the African American experience, therefore, it is necessary to voice out certain reservations and to focus attention on the possible dangers lines such as "*You'll just might be a black Bill Gates in the making*" (Knowles, 2016), constitutes to the average black man and woman's psyche. It is true that Bill Gates is an extraordinarily wealthy individual. It is also true that his source of wealth is traceable to legitimate endeavors that are detached from historical injustices against the black race. These are facts that are probably impossible to undermine let alone undo. Having said this, there must be something peculiarly subservient about the need to be reminded of the racial tensions that exist in the submission: "*You'll just might be a black Bill Gates in the making*" (Knowles, 2016). While the Left is prone to the notion of a non-racial world, however pretentious, it is nothing short of racism for a leading cultural producer to prefix the ownership of wealth by deploying race. If it constitutes racism to associate destitution with anyone's race, it must constitute same to associate wealth with a person's race; and doubly so to then suggest that one could in fact be another race's equivalent of such person. Larry Neal's advocacy for the black aesthetic was precisely for the undoing of the white thing, the undoing of white ideas, and the undoing of white ways of depicting the world. For Neal, it was an ethical imperative for the black artist to consider the black vision more meaningful than any other, and to commit solely to expressing the black truth. The "Gates" view of wealth/status in "Formation" as with several productions by black artists over the past two decades

largely negate Neal's invocations as well as the very fabric of the Black Arts Movement. Black art in the age of the *Black Lives Matter* appears to be necessarily for drawing white attention.

It is against this backdrop that this paper engages with Williams's "Entrepreneur" (2020) owing to the measures against White standards that transpire through parts of the lyrics and the video. In a review of the "Entrepreneur," Jenkins (2020) admonishes Shawn Carter for the thrust of his verse:

[Carter] rebukes Black Twitter for elevating a platform that doesn't compensate users and restates the 4:44-era case that says change is best achieved through securing a seat at the corporate table: "Sitting around waiting for folks to throw you a bone / If you can't buy the building, at least stock the shelf / Then keep on stacking 'til you stocking for yourself." It's bootstraps logic, a capitalist fairy tale. History tells another story [...] Drive doesn't necessarily pan out in riches. Wealth isn't necessarily insulating. The achievements of Black billionaires don't necessarily trickle down and set us all free (Jenkins, 2020: np).

"Entrepreneur" is "a celebration of black ambition" (Aubrey, 2020: np) strategically released in accompaniment to "The New American Revolution," the title of a cover package Williams worked on with *TIME* magazine which collects essays and dialogues by prominent black creators and thinkers. Crucially, parallels are drawn between the video director's vision and Williams' as "a celebration of Black business acumen at every level" (Jenkins, 2020: np). While "black ambition" and "black business acumen at every level" are indeed laudable, the manner of the audio-visual delivery in "Entrepreneur" comes across as somewhat superficial and forced. The performance gives itself away too easily as a *Black Lives Matter* promotional stunt rather than art. It is against the backdrop of this observation that the remainder of this critique will unpack the Calmatic-directed video of a song whose repetitive hook of "*Black man/Black man/...*" makes for substantial discomfort. In this respect, it is fitting to begin with the last of the several "black heroes" profiled through the course of the video's socio-political realism. The honor falls to Broadway star Robert Hartwell who paid "\$400,000 cash" for "the house behind him [which] was once a plantation where his ancestors were enslaved" (Calmatic, 2020). The overall import of the gist is not lost and it does make for a genuinely inspirational tale of the ultimate triumph of latter-day descendants of black slaves. However, there is little with regards to additional contextualization. Questions arise such as: to what end has Hartwell purchased the house which went up for sale? Does the fact that the property was put up for sale by its owners before Hartwell could express his purchasing power over it not negate the show-off? And what precisely does the phrasing "plantation where his ancestors were enslaved" connote? His ancestors to what extent? Could it in fact be his ancestors to the extent of being African Americans who once resided in a plantation that has now been put up for sale, and for which he is egotistical enough to make the purchase? Or is there some more directness in his connection to the lineage of these unnamed ancestors? The pandering for meaning by any means in the Hartwell scene of the "Entrepreneur" video certainly makes for a stretch.

Just preceding Hartwell in the video is Nicholas Johnson, the “first black valedictorian of Princeton” who gestures in his scene as if to say “contrary to popular belief, a black man could have a functional brain.” The need to highlight a cerebral African American who happened to be top of his class at the prestigious Princeton University does not come across entirely in positive light. Apart from reinforcing the perceived superiority of Princeton over each and every black institution in America, it does an excellent job of presenting Mr. Johnson as the exception rather than the rule of black excellence. It is needless to embark on a rehash of the mediocrity behind the scenes portraying the CEOs of Miss Bennett Fitness, of Black & Mobile, of Trill Paws Dog Accessories, and of Third Vault Yarns, London. There are, after all, all shades of humans who are firm CEOs in various walks of life, and there is nothing extraordinary in folks of black origin doing same as Williams and Calmatic would like their audience to believe, apparently. The inevitable message thereof is that it makes for extraordinariness among black folk to be a business owner. The portrayal of Debbie Allen as the CEO of Tribe Midwifery is doubly problematic. The text that accompanies the scene of her appearance reads: “Black women are 3–4 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white women. Debbie Allen’s childbirth experience in a hospital led her to question the whole process. So she created a safe space for women to give birth in the comfort of their own homes. As CEO of Tribe Midwifery” (Calmatic, 2020). This is not only wrong on several levels but also misleading and certainly reaching. Of the first sentence, one must ask: Where precisely are black women 3–4 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white women? In the USA, or across the globe? Providing contexts to such grandiose claims is an incontrovertible necessity. Furthermore, what impact has the founding of Tribe Midwifery had on the statistic? Has there been a reduction, increase or parity in mortality among pregnant black and white women? And what exactly is meant by “creating a safe space for women to give birth in the comfort of their own home”? Considering the laudable objectives projected by the video, are Tribe Midwifery and CEO Debbie Allen capable of going the distance by themselves without recourse to some form of institutional/governmental collaboration? Calmatic’s representations come across as too easy in several places.

At the risk of sounding like a kill joy, one must offer a retort of “so what?” to each of the following: “Angela Richardson turned her homemade cleaning goods into a full retail line”; “Arthell and Darnell Isom created the first Black-owned anime studio in Japan”; “Issa Rae began her career filming low budget web series all over South L.A. Now, she’s literally building her empire on those same blocks”; “There were no skate shops in the hood...until Neighbors Skateshop moved in”; “Chace Infinite took money he made in the music industry and brought Harun Coffee Shop to his community”; “At 23, Iddris Sandu has already written algorithms for Snapchat, Uber, and Instagram”; and “Beatrice Dixon faced backlash after connecting her all natural feminine product line Honey Pot’s success to the success of other black girls. Critics should try her products. *They’re* non-toxic” (Calmatic, 2020). “Chef Alisa’s vegan soul food at My Two Cents is the best. Just ask Obama” is cheesy and feeds needlessly into the hackneyed obsession of certain black folk in the USA of how ex-president Barack Obama is some kind of celestial equivalence

through whose measure one can do no wrong. The visuals of “Entrepreneur” (2020) get uncomfortably patronizing as Jay-Z’s verse takes over the audio, particularly at the point where the textual accompaniment reads “86 investors told Denise Woodard of Partake Cookies, “No.” Except Jay-Z” (Calmatic, 2020). Again, one must retort: so what. There are certainly hundreds of thousands of businesses around the world with a history of countless rejections from investors before eventually finding a suitor who took a chance and offer succor. Williams’s, Carter’s, and Calmatic’s need to invoke matter into contemporary black lives is well understood. On the surface, they are in fact heroes deploying their art very consciously. The lyrics and spectacle of “Entrepreneur” (2020) have the capacity to instill a feel-good factor into many an African American home and mind. However, close scrutiny reveals its optical failure outside of the black community.

Perhaps one would have to look beyond African American creatives to find audio-visual expressions that speak more accurately to the black experience in the current world. Burna Boy’s “Monsters You Made” (2020) featuring Coldplay’s Chris Martin is one of such productions. It is striking that the conveying album *Twice as Tall* (2020) has executive production credited to Sean “P Diddy” Combs. The well thought-out and carefully selected intro and outro on “Monsters You Made” make for a better and more democratic reflection of African American lives. The import of the use of the word “fake” in the chorus and the burning of wads of American dollar bills at the end of the video are not lost on audiences. “Monsters You Made” offers a global perspective to the disadvantages of the black race and speaks matter into black lives better than either the “Brown Skin Girl” or “Entrepreneur” projects did. The communication from much of the 2020 protests in the United States revealed a people fed up with the status quo in which successive governments “have refused to develop [black communities] and continue the marginalization and injustice” (Ogulu, 2020). The whitewashing at the core of the two singles assessed here misrepresents reality. “Brown Skin Girl” (2019) and “Entrepreneur” (2020) are a disservice to the memories of George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and the several others who have been murdered for reasons barely bordering on entrepreneurial ineptness. In the end, it holds true that “sometimes in an attempt to rewrite one’s story, while invoking a painful history, African Americans struggle to positively see themselves under the gaze of white supremacy...Thus...it is difficult to decipher what is real and what is merely a performance instigated by a white gaze” (Belle, 2014: 289).

Conclusion

“[The] insistence of Black Lives Matter on the value of all black lives, especially the most marginalized and oppressed, is nothing less than a challenge to all of us to rethink, reimagine, and reconstruct the entire society we live in. And what a daunting and beautiful challenge that is” (Ransby, 2015: 34). This article has appraised the audio-visual and textual components of two music videos: Beyoncé Knowles’s “Brown Skin Girl” released in 2019 with a video in 2020 and Pharrell Williams’s “Entrepreneur” (2020) featuring Shawn Carter. The analysis highlights the

compulsive links in both performances to the political and socio-cultural milieu of the times, in particular, the *Black Lives Matter* movement. An informal juxtaposition of the movement is attempted with the Black Arts Movement which was prevalent half a century ago. In doing so, a novel pandering to white sensibilities and white approval is identified as a core feature of the current movement as contrasting from the Black Arts Movement. An engagement with the “Matter” in *Black Lives Matter* reveals contemporary artists’ obsession with the optics coming from the black race on the one hand (to the extent of being brown skinned diamonds), and from African Americans on the other (to the extent of necessarily constituting entrepreneurs however flimsily). This engagement revealed several redundancies that are fundamental to the present-day black experience in America, Europe and in motherland Africa. The arbitrary appropriation of both “black” and “brown” appellations by African American creatives under the guise of constituting a people of color who were once enslaved and are presently liberated uncovers more confusion than it addresses. In a world endowed with an endless supply of rhetoric bordering mainly on meaningless, it is about time these are either dropped or deployed fully, particularly if a “non-racial society” is the goal of humankind. Such a goal is grossly negated with the color emphasis emanating from the arts of African Americans. Whereas the impact of these arts outside of the United States is yet to be accurately measured, there is need for caution. As Michelle Wright draws our attention to in an interview: “ninety-five percent of enslaved Africans were transported to South America and the Caribbean, not the US; not to mention the millions of slaves who were transported east to places like Turkey and India” (Phiri & Wright, 2020: np).

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