Commodifying People, Commodifying Narratives: Toward a Critical Race Media Literacy

Brian Lozenski
Ph.D.; Educational Studies, Macalester College
blozensk@macalester.edu

Guy Chinang
American Studies, Macalester College

Abstract

In this article the authors make an argument for a critical race media literacy that is attuned to the ways in which popular media are used to adhere media consumers to a taken for granted US national identity. Using the concept of “black narrative commodities”, the article suggests that black pain and/or black visibility become filters through which black lives are brought into a nationalist framing. The article uses three popular media commodities to illustrate how how pain and visibility mask a nationalist agenda, including: (1) the videotaped killing of Eric Garner, (2) the book *The New Jim Crow* and the film *13th: An Original Netflix Documentary*, and (3) the movie *Black Panther*. The authors suggest that critical media literacy absent a cogent and principled interrogation of the interplay between race, class, and the nation-State is incomplete.

Keywords
black narrative commodity – critical media literacy – media consolidation – nationalism – racial capitalism

As scholars, educators, and organizers continue to make claims to the ubiquitous nature of media, it remains central to the goal of liberatory projects that we interrogate any and all forms of media production. As Ball (2014) notes in his depiction of a new “media apartheid” regarding media ownership along race and class lines, despite the proliferation of social media, consolidation...
among a cabal of media conglomerates is at an all time high. Rapp and Jenkins (2018) report that AT&T, Comcast, Disney, 21st Century Fox, Viacom, and CBS own the vast majority of all media consumed in the US. Ball writes, “Today, concentration in media ownership is rivaled only by the penetrative power of that media or the societal influence they offer those who own them” (p. 47). Our efforts to critically examine these consolidations and productions of various media environments must match the fervor with which we are force-fed dehumanizing propaganda about the worlds we inhabit and the people with which we share them. If we are to envision critical media literacy as having any liberatory potential, it must impact the material realities of people who have been dispossessed of land, labor, and capacities for self-determination. Our work is, thus, situated in trying to provide functional and useful processes to expose and struggle against the taken for granted nature of media production and consumption.

In this essay, we develop a critical race media literacy argument that examines the complex production of “black narrative commodities" and how they become necessary for the perpetuation of social stratification amidst a broader project of dehumanization, even for those who are not negatively racialized. Our analysis is predominantly situated in the context of the United States, where nationalism assumes a social order delimited through race and class. More broadly, we illustrate the ways in which media are commodified to uphold nationalist ideologies that extend beyond US borders. Media, and popular media more specifically, gather up these assumptions and repackage them for consumption. Hall (2006) argues, “as popular culture has historically become the dominant form of global culture, so it is at the same time the scene, par excellence, of commodification, of the industries where culture enters directly into the circuits of a dominant technology—the circuits of power and capital” (p. 469). This analysis illuminates how racialized narratives, when commodified, effectively catalyze the biopolitical character of race, turning lived experiences into profit. We argue that critical media literacy absent cogent, intersectional race and class analyses are incomplete. This absence opens space for the creation of false binaries (e.g. Democrat/Republican, black/white, guilty/innocent), which serve as argumentative backdrops that distract media consumers from the industry of media production and its adherence to the nation-State.

Through the commodification of black narratives, in particular, media become a partner in the simultaneous subjugation and illumination of marginalized identities, where pain and visibility become objects of control. In this social arrangement, pain and visibility are dependent variables—produced and consumed—with the maintenance of national identity and the need for
spectacle being the constants. Nationalism requires imagined connections across distance (Anderson, 2006). Media become the atmospheric glue that binds collective imagination. This plays out in the US in such a way that notions of national identity have moved from the maintenance of an explicitly white, patriarchal norm to that of a cross-racial formation that implicitly continues to adhere to a raced and classed social hierarchy. Media encourage this cross-racial formation to believe that this is the natural state of human relationships.

1 Two Layers of Media Commodity

For all of the critiques of Donald Trump—including, but not limited to, his racial animus toward black and brown transnational communities, violent rhetoric and threats of military mobilization, extreme dedication to economic structures that depend on labor exploitation, and general lack of knowledge about current geopolitics and world history—it can also be said that he deeply understands spectacle and media commoditization. He is attuned to the business of media in its many forms (social media, news outlets, sports, television and movie entertainment, etc.), and he harnesses the dual nature of media commodity. He knows that his late night tweets are a commodity that will be consumed by millions each morning. Those millions of consumers are then turned into human commodities for Twitter to sell to its advertisers. It is this duality that is the driving force for the production of media today. Regardless of the media content, the business of media is about (1) the production of media commodities (YouTube videos, mega blockbuster movies, tweets, Facebook posts, or videos of police shooting black people on twenty-four hour cable news outlets) or (2) the constant transmogrification of people into alienated consumptive units to be sold to advertisers. The mathematics of media profit resides in the calculus that dictates the correlation between views of [insert commodity here] and profits from sales of said commodity.

2 Black Narrative Commodities

Drawing from Kellner and Share (2005), who outline five core concepts of critical media literacy, our assertion is that critical race media literacy must always be attuned to the business of media, while also recognizing the derivative cultural politics that place race, class, and nationalism into this media production machinery. We turn our attention to the production of media commodities through a racialized lens. In order to saturate the political, cultural, and most
importantly, economic aspects of social life, media producers must be savvy enough to create a diverse representation of media products. Lozenski (2016) argues that “black degradation” as a media commodity serves multiple purposes. First, media products portraying stereotypical or subhuman depictions of black people appeal to audiences who gain a psychological satisfaction from seeing these representations. These narratives accumulate within the psychological “wages of whiteness” (Roediger, 1999) that provide a false sense of superiority for those who have been socially positioned as white.

Conversely, even when marketed to well-intentioned liberals and leftists, degradation abides the perpetuation of brokenness and crisis narratives, diluting the depths of its origins to rationalize the humanity of consumers, and appeal to their sense of moral outrage and righteous sentimentality. For instance, recent memoirs of highly visible black figures, such as the Obamas, have taken the task of explaining the monopolized “black experience” without situating the political economy of blackness or offering any viable political alternative, instead producing pliable narratives suitable for any environment or audience. Regardless of their uses for consumers, black media commodities are extracted from black communities, often from the labor of black artists, to be profited from, with little to no economic return for the black communities that produced them, thereby degrading either black imagery or black labor (Ball, 2011).

We situate these media commodities that are either portraying black people and/or mined from the labor/experiences of black people as “black narrative commodities”. Describing them as commodities refuses to allow for the obfuscation of the business of media. These commodities are not necessarily negative in nature. For instance, music and art produced by black artists are often incredibly inventive, brilliant, and provide deep insight into the nature of the worlds we inhabit. Still, they become commodities once they enter into the sphere of the media industry for consumption and for profit, typically benefiting small groups of media owners.

3 Analyzing Three Black Narrative Commodities

Analyzing the production and circulation of black narrative commodities exposes the relative ease through which storylines, once popularized, become rationales for certain political projects. Typically, the exploitative nature through which stories about black life are commodified and refined serve anyone other than black communities. Rather than engage with obviously dehumanizing black narrative commodities, we propose a critical race media literacy that challenges “well intentioned” narratives and narratives that are largely
received as being for the public good, arguing for a broadening of political imagination that accounts for not only the reality of racialization, but the role of the nation-State in structuring such limited political possibilities.

We use three illustrations of black narrative commodities to frame our analysis: (1) the videotaped killing of Eric Garner; (2) the bestselling book, *The New Jim Crow*, and the film *13th: A Netflix Original Documentary*; and the blockbuster film, *Black Panther*. Though distinct, and marketed to audiences in disparate ways, these commodities contain a connective character in their uses of black pain and/or visibility. We show how each of these narratives take up black pain and/or black visibility to maintain national identity and its need for spectacle to uphold the myths that nationalism relies upon (Barthes, 1972). With Garner’s narrative, we assess the limitations of a liberal reactionary politics, wherein the terms of the debate over justice are dictated by narrow binaries of guilt and innocence, an analysis that extends beyond the demand for the recognition of humanity (e.g. “I am a man”, “Ain’t I a woman”) to include a class analysis that considers the (il)legitimation of labor. In our analysis of mass incarceration (*The New Jim Crow* and *13th: A Netflix Original Documentary*), we highlight the shortcomings of the “well-intentioned” liberal narrative that, at times, distorts the reality of the carceral state (Meiners, 2015) with its narrow focus on racial equity. Finally, we highlight the campaign that branded *Black Panther* as a cultural moment, appealing to black consumers in an attempt to affect a depoliticized racial pride.

All of these narratives engage with the depth of violence heaped on black people by the nation-State. As such, our intent is to demonstrate that the defining feature of the nation-State is the grandeur of its violence. Our analysis is applicable to any popular media commodity concerning black life whether or not they are aimed at black consumers. Our analysis of Eric Garner, unfortunately, could have been replaced with Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, or uncountable other victims of State-sanctioned violence. While we focused on mass incarceration, we could have offered similar critique toward the narrative around police brutality. Similarly, our *Black Panther* exploration, on a smaller scale, could be applied to most contemporary black films and television series.

3.1 *The Killing of Eric Garner*

Media commodities do some form of psychological work. At their highest intensity they produce ontological confusion, blending our notions of reality and art. Think of the scene in Spike Lee’s (1989) *Do the Right Thing*, when the police place one of the film’s most popular characters, Radio Raheem, in a choke hold during an altercation with a local white business owner in Brooklyn, New York.
As an audience, our collective hearts sank when Raheem’s feet lifted off the ground and his large frame was reduced to a lifeless mass on the street. We felt the righteous anger of the onlookers as they began an immediate rebellion against this gratuitous police violence, which had been building throughout the film. Juxtapose this media commodity with that of the real-life 2014 filming of the killing of Eric Garner by police officer Daniel Pantaleo in Staten Island, New York. The video of Garner’s death, filmed by his friend with a cell phone, was rebroadcast across multiple media platforms, including YouTube, CNN, Twitter, Fox News, Facebook, and most other major news outlets. It was as if there was a collective viewing of a snippet of Do the Right Thing, absent the context of the rest of the film.

There were immediate uprisings and skirmishes with police as a result of the video. There was also the production of derivative media commodities based on the video. These came in such forms as social media algorithms that predict viewing and spending habits of consumers (human commodities) who share these videos on FaceBook and Twitter, as well as television pundits arguing over the legitimacy of the killing. Garner’s gendered racial identity as a black man became the central focus of the argument, and quickly sides retreated to the dualism of “black guilt” or “black innocence.” The black guilt side argued that he was committing a crime (selling loose cigarettes, or “loosies”) and resisting arrest, which warranted police action, effectively blaming Garner for his own death. The narrative of black guilt used blackness to suggest inherent criminality. The black innocence side argued that he was targeted due to his racial identity, and thus did not deserve to be arrested. This narrative, even in its accuracy of racial discrimination in policing, masks the reality that within the inherent violence of the carceral state, arrest can lead to death. Regardless of ideological positioning, each side relied on the production of the commodity of Garner’s death to say, “See! This video proves my point.” The work of the black narrative commodity as produced by media outlets relied on the binary of guilt/innocence as the pivot point for justice, completely ignoring the surrounding context of State violence, both intimate and structural.

This industry of reactions to narratives of black pain continue to mask the work of race, class, and nationalism. One of the questions largely absent in the commodification of Garner’s death was, “why did Eric Garner need to sell ‘loosies’ outside of a bodega?”. As Hill (2016) traces, after periods of working seasonal jobs, “Garner’s asthma, diabetes, and sleep apnea made it impossible for him to work a traditional job…. For money, the father of six occasionally sold loose cigarettes on the streets of Staten Island, where he lived”1 (p. 31).

1 Ironically, Garner was also blamed for his own death by some, referring to his obesity and medical condition (Khazan, 2014).
Along with not having access to quality healthcare, Hill goes on to document how Garner had been “pushed out of formal labor markets”, and into sub-economies, such as the “loosie market” where people smuggle cases of cigarettes from states with low cigarette taxes to states with higher taxes like New York. These cigarettes were then sold independently at bodegas (out of plain sight), or on the street by Garner and others.

The media commodity of Garner’s death completely masks the larger context of the State-manufactured violence suffered by Garner in the form of poor healthcare, high unemployment, and the creation of conditions for a sub-economy through state-based tax regulations. The black narrative commodity further exploits this suffering by taking the consequence of structural State violence and transforming it into a product for consumption. The product is the intimate State violence of the police killing an individual. And yet, in the production of the black narrative commodity, the notion of State violence, both intimate and structural, is erased. What we are left with are the narratives of the guilt or innocence of an individual. Allegiance to the State and its inherent violence that created the altercation is not questioned. Garner’s death has been consumed tens of millions of times across media outlets, creating a legal media sub-economy with large amounts of revenue. Yet, the high unemployment, poor healthcare, and “loosie market” remain unchanged. The police were never held accountable. And so, like the killing of Radio Raheem, the commodification of Garner’s death becomes imagery, blending into the catacombs of all of the other imagery of black pain. We are not arguing that Garner’s actual death was meaningless—quite the opposite. The perversion of his death into a commodity does nothing to transform the material realities faced by those in Garner’s community. Rather the commodity distracts us into meaningless arguments of guilt vs innocence, rather than substantive political action to address the structural conditions Garner faced.

3.2 Reframing Mass Incarceration

Even in black narrative commodities that aim to redeem misconceptions and challenge myths about black life, the treatment of black life as a social spectacle is persistent. In place of the acceptance of humanity, facts and data are used to inscribe the existence of black pain or black dehumanization, ironically transforming it into some form of visibility. Black narratives are not only associated with the language of marginalization, political, economic, and social phenomena are also filtered through the rhetoric of quantitative data that defends and makes claims on its state of deterioration. As such, injustice becomes reframed from a structural and long-standing constitutive aspect of the State to independent evidences of racism that are argued to be malleable and fixable “if only...”. This logic rationalizes the nation-State as being just, and
wholly adequate, save for the additive problem of race. In this mode of thinking, race can be a problem that is solved within the confines of US nationalism. Inequalities swiftly become interpreted through a racial binary that dictates that the object of our concern should be the uneven distribution of pain across racial lines, as opposed to the mere existence of human suffering due to State violence and the maintenance of a carceral state (Meiners, 2015).

Accordingly, Michelle Alexander’s (2012) landmark book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, in its mainstream reframing of the mass incarceration discourse, has operated on a similar plane, recentering the binary, in this case, racial disparities in incarceration, as its focal point. *The New Jim Crow* has unsettled the discourses around mass incarceration with its argument that America’s justice system operates as a racial caste system, a redesigned enactment of Jim Crow. Alexander presents the “war on drugs”—its attack on black communities, precisely its surgical targeting of black men—as the thrust of her argument that mass incarceration, through social and legal death, has rendered black people as second class citizens. Published two years after the election of Barack Obama, and working to combat the old myth of colorblindness and the contemporary myth-making of a post-racial society, Alexander’s arguments quickly became popular, landing her book on the New York Times Bestseller list, making it a mainstream black narrative commodity. The book’s popularity reached its peak with the derivative commodity of Ava Duvernay’s (2016) *13th: A Netflix Original Documentary*, which utilized *The New Jim Crow* as its main point of reference. As Alexander’s book links the rise of mass incarceration to the war on drugs, Duvernay’s documentary traces its inception to the 13th amendment. Both narratives, moreover, are committed to the central notion that mass incarceration serves as a means of social control of black people, driven to replay past oppression. Both commodities enact a deeper attachment to the sentimentality of pain and violence on black people to legitimize their claims, creating a narrative that exclusively measures the existence of pain across racial lines—black pain in relation to white pain, with whiteness maintaining the threshold for acceptable human pain. However, in framing the social nightmare of mass incarceration solely through a racial lens, these narratives minimize its grandeur, and its metastasizing reach across racial groups.

The sole focus on racial disparities in mass incarceration correlates with discourses that insist on the war on drugs as its main feature—a dangerous proposition that has fueled bipartisan bills among the governing elite in Washington D.C, while offering a false sense of optimism for political solutions. For example, the bipartisan bill that originated from the coalition between Senator Cory Booker (D—N.J.), Mike Lee (R—Utah), and others in 2015 focused on...
reducing sentences for repeated drug offenders, while enhancing penalties for serious violent offenders. As reflected in this bill, the public sympathy toward drug offenders has been complemented with a harshening of sentences for violent offenders, when, in reality, the majority of people in prisons are serving time due to property and violent crimes (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). In fact, releasing every person who is currently incarcerated on drug sentences would only reduce the state prison population by 20 percent, doing little to challenge the carceral state (Gottschalk, 2016). Improving laws around drug crimes would greatly impact individuals held in federal facilities and their families; however, in 2018, only 225,000 of the more than 2 million people incarcerated were held in federal prisons (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). As Gottschalk (2016) points out, the U.S. would still have a mass incarcerations crisis even if every black person in prisons and jails were released (Kilpatrick, 2015). Acknowledging factors beyond the war on drugs begs an interrogation of the whole carceral system, taking into account harshening sentences for violent and sex offenders, the re-institution of detention centers, the criminalization of immigrants, and the rampant legal power of judges and prosecutors.

According to the Marshall Project, over the last 15 years, racial disparities have actually been on the decline, but this decline along black and white racial lines has not reduced the prison population, instead shifting the target of the carceral State, while expanding its reach (Hager, 2017). The sociologist and historian Karen and Barbara Field (2012) describe this rationale as “racecraft”—instances where narrow insistence on race conceals the violence of the nation-State on all its citizens, producing a racial divide that robs people of the language with which to comprehend inequalities, and a political vehicle to build cross-racial coalitions and organize.

In the mass incarceration narrative, dehumanization and pain are not simply commodified but also monopolized, concocted to fuel a single narrative strung around race. Narratives that center racial binaries as a point of focus, even when challenging America’s racial status quo, uphold State violence on black people. Series of injustices are often manufactured and structured within the frameworks of the “black experience in America.” The power of these narratives lie in their redemptive appeal, where justice, through a distorted sense of equality, is possible only within the confines of the nation-State. While the narratives developed in *The New Jim Crow* and *13th* are important in highlighting America’s racialized history, they both maintain—in framing this debate within the black and white binary—an adherence to a form of nationalism, in this case the carceral State. Constructing resistance within the racial binary

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framework limits our political imagination. Discourses that merely assess the equal distribution of pain, obscure large-scale social movements that demand its abolition.

3.3 **Black Panther (The Juggernaut)**
The media spectacle and mega-blockbuster film, *Black Panther* (2018), illuminates the dichotomy of pain and visibility in both its content and the immense advertising campaign and buzz surrounding its production. The Marvel Studios produced and Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures distributed film, co-written and directed by Ryan Coogler, has already grossed over a billion dollars worldwide. Absent hyperbole, it can be described as the juggernaut of black narrative commodities. Without entering into myriad debates regarding the film’s content and depiction of the mythical Wakanda, we explore how the spectacle surrounding the media product uses race and disregards class, further wedding consumers to a limited nationalist orientation for global justice.

Referring to the marketing of the film, Disney executive Asad Ayaz said, “The biggest thing for the campaign was really super-serving black moviegoers while also making it the broadest moviegoing event.... This wasn't just for our core Marvel fans. We went about making it feel like a cultural event” (McClintock, 2018). In fact, the film took on a reversal of typical Marvel movies by catering to black, largely non-Marvel audiences before its core largely white Marvel fanbase. The success of Disney’s marketing campaign did produce “a cultural event”, instilling a sense of racial pride among many black consumers who revelled in the, mostly, positive depictions of blackness, including a who's who list of young black actors portraying African royalty amassing unimaginable wealth from a mineral resource, and saving the wretched of the earth (e.g. impoverished black youth in Oakland, kidnapped Muslim women in Nigeria) through their philanthropy, heroics, and good will. The cultural impact of the film was steeped in its “unapologetic blackness”, which conveniently ignored the unapologetic whiteness of the economic aspects of the product. Marvel and Disney extracted this black narrative commodity through the mining of the genius and labor of actors, writers, directors, costume and set designers, linguists, and others who helped create the powerful film. While high profile individuals were paid well, no one was compensated at the level their labor was actually worth, considering the exorbitant revenue created by the film.

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And in line with the film’s prevailing message of philanthropic approaches to justice, Disney did donate (a continuously diminishing) 0.1% ($1 million) of profits to STEM programs with the Boys and Girls Club, serving “urban youth” (Gibbs, 2018).

Consumers of Black Panther, including ourselves, and many others who saw the film multiple times, were treated to a visual spectacle—a high quality production. Viewers were also susceptible to the messaging of the larger media environment surrounding the movie. As Kellner and Share (2005) remind us, “(Media) Content is often highly symbolic and thus requires a wide range of theoretical approaches to grasp the multidimensional social, political, moral, and sometimes philosophical meanings of a cultural text” (p. 376). The theoretical approaches, offered by mainstream outlets were limited to discourses of diverse racial representation. These discourses, as Hall (2006) suggests, are dangerous in the way that blackness is constructed as a natural category, devoid of its political origins:

The moment the signifier ‘black’ is torn from its historical, cultural, and political embedding ... we valorize, by inversion, the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct ... we fix that signifier outside of history, outside of change, outside of political intervention. And once it is fixed, we are tempted to use ‘black’ as sufficient in itself to guarantee the progressive character of the politics we fight under the banner—as if we don’t have any other politics to argue about except whether something’s black or not. (p. 472)

To construct Black Panther as a black movie that “super-serves” black consumers completely misses the political point of blackness as a technology for social stratification. In this way consumers of Black Panther are not simply encouraged, but rather obliged “to display that (racial) signifier as a device which can purify the impure” (Hall, p. 472). Like other black narrative commodities, it demands the notion of “the black experience” be consumed into a quintessential national identity, where apple pie, Norman Rockwell, the founding fathers, and black suffering are the norm. Absent a critical race media literacy, consumers are expected to see blackness outside of a political project, and as something natural within the national landscape. The film becomes the sugar of aesthetic celebration and cultural representation that allows us to easily swallow the continued material reality of black pain. Through the marketing and consumption of the commodity, black visibility and celebrity replace principled political struggle toward racial justice.
Black Pain and/or Visibility as Fetish

Our analyses in this article are meant to be partial, and we certainly invite critique. We intend to provide only a glimpse of the work of the black narrative commodity in the maintenance of the nation-State. For instance, we did not include professional sports in our analysis, although they are primary sources for black narrative commodities that explicitly harness pain and visibility in the production of cross-racial patriotism and chauvinism. Our hope is that readers will continue to examine and theorize the ways in which black narrative commodities are used to reify racialism, and racial capitalism. Garner’s death represents a visceral representation and reminder of the perpetual existence of black pain. Black Panther attempts to soothe black pain by conflating black celebrity with its minimization. The New Jim Crow and 13th: A Netflix Original Documentary conjure up black pain, transforming it into black visibility in order to equalize it with white (human) pain. The process of commodification relies on this fetishization, alienating black life from its political origins.

We are not arguing that readers should stop watching movies, or stop sharing documentation of police violence on social media. Although, Ball (2018) has recently put forth what he calls the “Vernon philosophy of black media avoidance”, which is “an argument for a much needed political clarity around—and aggressive hostility toward—popular culture and mass media”, specifically depicting black people. What we are promoting is an orientation toward these media commodities that encourages skepticism about their political capabilities. Althusser (2008) argues that media, among many “Ideological State Apparatuses”, exist to serve and perpetuate State power and hegemony. Black narrative commodities, as both fungible and political, most often do the insidious work of adhering their consumers to perverse notions of citizenship. These feelings of belonging to the national project are not rooted in the equality of participatory power sharing; rather, they are rooted in the desire for acceptance and representation in the political arena, even if pain and suffering are the only resources with which to bargain.

In conclusion, we ask, “what are the political projects offered by these media commodities?”. Is it the project of holding individual police officers accountable as in the commodity of Eric Garner’s death? Is it racial equity in police violence and mass incarceration as in the commodities of The New Jim Crow and 13th: An Original Netflix Documentary? Is it just seeing more diverse representations on screen as in the commodity of Black Panther? In each of these examples, the dialectic of pain and visibility mask the political reality of a nation-State that cannot exist without social stratification, most effectively.
perpetuated through the hegemony of the naturalness of race and class. In other words, blackness becomes Americaness through the filters of pain and visibility. Critical media literacy is one tool that exists to struggle against this dehumanizing arrangement.

References


