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### Donald Glover's Relationship With Culture

Today in the twenty-first century, there is a more diverse variety of cultures than there has ever been. Even within nations and states each community has its own unique culture. Some might be similar and some might have drastic differences. For example, Californians and Texans have vastly different cultures when they are looked at in a general sense; however, certain communities in these two states may have very similar cultures and ideologies. Culture can be defined as the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group. Many things influence the development and maintenance of a culture no matter where you are in the world. According to Encyclopedia.com, the main factors attributed to culture are religion, diet, job types, education, art, and leisure time pursuits. While these definitely have an impact on a community's culture, a major influence on and around culture is the media consumed by the people, especially in the twenty-first century. Media is defined in the dictionary as the main means of mass communication regarded collectively through broadcasting, publishing, and the internet; however, media can also be used to describe a form of art such as a film, song, or painting. Media is used by filmmakers, musicians, and journalists in order to reflect, transform, and comment on the culture of communities and social groups, critiquing the flaws and celebrating the aspects that make them unique. There are thousands of different forms of influential media and impactful artists that deal with culture; however, few are more profound and impactful on American culture than Donald Glover and the media outlet in the form of his show *Atlanta*.

Media and culture have always gone hand in hand. Media comments on the culture of people while culture influences the media produced in order to reflect and transform the culture. It is a cycle that has gone on since the beginning of human societies and will continue forever. In order to analyze the relationship between media and culture, we must first understand what culture is and how it develops. Raymond Williams gives a great understanding and examples of what culture is, how culture is created, and the types of things that influence it in his essay titled "Culture is Ordinary". While explaining what culture is and how it comes to be, Williams says, "Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings... The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land" (Williams 2). This means that culture is fluid, always changing based on new things or ways of thinking introduced into a society. This includes stuff created by people, such as different media. Williams also explains how and why certain people and groups of people try to control and influence culture to their benefit, like corporations. Williams states, "These men were given skills, given attachments, which are now in the service of the most brazen money-grabbing exploitation of the inexperience of ordinary people" (Williams 4). This is just one example of the why and how behind cultural developments. People create culture through a common way of doing things and culture influences the ways we think about the world. Some use this to comment or influence society with good intentions, but some use it for their own selfish gain, especially through media such as art or news outlets.

Media and culture live together as a duality within society. Our culture influences the media that is put out; however, media not only influences culture but it reflects and transforms it. A great explanation of the ways media and culture influence one another is given by Brian L. Ott

of Missouri State University in his chapter titled “Introducing Critical Media Studies”.

According to Ott, the term media comes from the Greek word *meduis* meaning “middle”. Media is the medium in which information such as film and music gets to the public. Ott elaborates on this by saying “... mass media are, first and foremost, communication technologies that increasingly mediate both what we know and how we know... Whether listening to an iPod while walking across campus, sharing pictures with friends on Facebook, receiving the latest sports scores via your smartphone... the mass media are regular fixtures of everyday life” (Ott 2). Once a form of media is put out into the world the influence it has is up to the way the people interpret it. The individuals may interpret a form of media in many different ways; however, the culture it creates or influences is based on the commonalities between how those in a society view it. Certain media may not only influence change in a society's culture, but often it comments on the state of the current society or the people in it as well.

Media is often used in order to reflect the cultural state of a society. Sometimes, media depicts the cultures of different races through lenses like racial justice, prejudice, and stereotypes. It is also used to highlight the cultural beauty of different ethnicities. In 2005, Tony Bennett along with other editors of Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, revised the work of Raymond Williams to create a new book titled “Race”. Bennett hones in on the depiction of “black” in western culture and media, how it is often the color of malice or danger and how this reflects racist undertones towards the black community. He then continues on how certain industries have begun to commodify cultures and “races”, like the music and fashion industry for example. Bennett states, “Blackness has in some ways been appropriated and commodified in fashion, advertising, and contemporary culture, sometimes in ways that suggest racial or bodily fetishism, and prompted concerns about racial stereotypes, and representations of ‘the other,’ particularly

black masculinities” (Bennett 293). Now, whether this commodification is progressive or deconstructive for minority communities is up to individual interpretation, but the fact remains that the reflection of “race” is viewed and depicted through media has a profound influence on the culture of within communities. This can be seen through the racial repression and discrimination used to keep certain groups down.

Continuing, it is seen time and time again that certain groups tear down other groups in order to maintain superiority, especially when it comes to “race”. In his chapter titled, “Hegemony”, Justin Lewis explains the process of hegemony along with how it has been used through media. Lewis describes hegemony as, “... not merely a description but a process, one that makes the dominance of certain groups or ideas in society seem normal, natural, or inexorable—even to those in subordinate positions” (Lewis 88). This systemic process is the main reason why ideas of “race” have been predominantly white and ideas of “gender” have been predominantly male throughout the history of western culture. In his writing, Lewis specifically gives an example of male versus female hegemony in the media; however, it could easily be replaced with an example about race. He describes a commercial where a wife is making dinner for her child and husband, then explains the difference in the viewing experience of the audience if it were the other way around, with the husband cooking for the wife and child. He explains that if this does happen there is always a nod to the reversed stereotypical gender roles, like a joke about a man's ineptitude in the kitchen. He also acknowledges how men have dominated the entertainment industry. He explains, “So while we may know that there are roughly equal proportions of men and women in society, we do not necessarily notice it when men dominate time on screen (which, surveys show, they do across most genres)” (Lewis 88). These examples show how the media reflects gender norms and gives men more attention

than women. This is the same with the “white” demographic, which, according to findings by Dr. Darnell Hunt and Dr. Ana-Christina Ramón at the University of California, in the past ten years of filmmaking, about eighty percent of lead roles in the United States were filled by white actors. But race and gender ideas are not the only way media is connected to culture.

Stylistic choices like realism and surrealism present in the media we consume are used by the creators of that media in order to reflect and change aspects of culture. Realism is when a filmmaker creates an illusion of reality on screen through the dialogue, audio, and visuals with little interference from their own creativity and artistry. This style of filmmaking is almost always used as a reflection of real life and can be used to show people certain aspects of cultures or events so they can imagine themselves in the story. Surrealism; however, pushes beyond the limits of reality. A French Writer of the early twentieth century by the name of André Breton, viewed surrealism as both an artistic and political tool. In his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, Breton describes surrealism as “Psychic automatism, by which one proposes to express... the real functioning of thought” (Breton 5). This means that surrealism aims to reflect how people think, rather than the set in stone reality around them. Surrealism lets art express what is really going on at the personal and social level by giving the audience an outside view of the world. This allows us to view situations and people without bias, showing us the world in a new light. Breton makes it clear that the goal of surrealism is not just to create a new form of culture, but to use art to reflect on and transform culture into revealing its true structure. Breton states that “The world is only very relatively in tune with thought” (Breton 6). This means the way we view the world is not necessarily an accurate representation of how the world really works. Realism and surrealism are used to highlight the influence media and culture have on one another in order to change the

peoples' perspective of their culture. Recently, Donald Glover has been using this in the media he creates.

Donald Glover delves deep into cultural norms while turning stereotypes on their head in the media he has created and released to the world, in order to reflect on race culture in America and transform the way people look at the conversation. This can be seen in his television series, *Atlanta*. In this show, we follow Earn, a Princeton dropout who is trying to find a way to make a living with the little to no opportunity he is given as a black man. He links up with his cousin, Alfred, also known by his rap alter ego, Paper Boi, and becomes his manager. All the while he tries to balance his relationship with the mother of his daughter Vanessa, or Van, and becomes friends with Alfred's roommate, Darius. Although this is a fairly simple premise for a show, *Atlanta* pushes the boundaries of reality to insane lengths using realism and surrealism in order to make viewers question their own, or other's, cultural ideologies. He does this by giving viewers a realist, as well surrealist, lens for them to look at social issues within American culture. Same goes for Glover's music video, where the song is a commentary on the oppression of minorities with clever surreal visuals to emphasize the message.

First off, Donald Glover uses realism in order to depict life in Atlanta as a struggling black man accurately. We can see this through Alfred who, in the first couple seasons, lives in a basic Atlanta apartment building. This removes the fictionalized sparkle of rap videos which are prevalent in American culture and gives the viewer the real and not so glamorous reality behind the rapper persona. Glover intentionally puts Alfred in a setting where he, at his current level of stardom, would actually live. For example, Paper Boi and his roommate Darius can often be found hanging out on a lone couch in the middle of their neighborhood, across the street from their house atop a grassy hill. Somebody with actual money and celebrity would never do this

because it would be too dangerous. This comments on rap culture and how the industry makes their artists viewed as higher class when they might have a similar social status as the average person. This relates to Raymond Williams' claims of how culture is created and how this creation is used for manipulation and, in turn, reflected by our media. If a record label pushes a certain image on an artist it creates an expectation that other artists should be that way, causing artists that do not fit that description to be pushed out or blackballed. In turn it changes the normality of a culture so now the ordinary person is tricked into wanting to be like the artist. For example, buying jewelry, clothing, and the changing of personalities. *Atlanta* often depicts the three main characters as people who you or I could know, but the other characters and situations they find themselves in are only roughly based in reality.

In contrast to the realism, *Atlanta* is chalk full of surrealism and nonsensical characters which helps make this show so memorable and entertaining, while shining a light on our American culture from an out of the box perspective. Through this surrealism, Glover challenges the viewer to rethink and reflect on American pop culture as a whole. This is shown well in the season one episode, "Nobody Beats the Biebs". In this episode, Paper Boy is playing a celebrity basketball game which Justin Bieber is rumored to be participating in. The crux comes when Justin Bieber shows up and turns out to be black. This subversion of our expectation serves to not only create some comedic moments, but also serves as a social commentary on how race influences how people view a celebrity. The black Bieber acts like a young Bieber in every way, he treats reporters and fans with disrespect, he acts like a brat, has a huge posse, and can not imagine someone getting more attention than him. After acting like this for the majority of the episode, Bieber holds a press conference and performs a new song where he apologizes for his misdeeds, which is something that happened in real life with his hit single, "Sorry". This episode

ties in to what Tony Bennett argues in “Race” and what Justin Lewis argues in “Hegemony”. At the time, Justin Bieber was the epitome of appropriating black culture with the way he dressed and his vernacular. The misrepresentation of Bieber’s ethnicity reflects the misrepresentation of African Americans in our media and leaves the viewer contemplating the question, would Justin Bieber’s behavior be looked at differently if he was black? This reflection acts to transform the conversation around Bieber’s actions into a conversation about whether or not American culture forgives white celebrities for bad behavior while holding celebrities of color to a different standard. This standard is put on celebrities of color in order to bring them down while white celebrities rise above.

From these examples, it is clear how much media and culture reflect and transform one another. While looking through these various works from different individuals who lived at different times throughout history, it is interesting to find that the way media and culture interact with each other has not changed much. This means that, most likely, this trend will continue into the future. The more we are aware of this the more we can use it towards the betterment of society. Tensions between races will continue to be a part of the world for generations more; however, with artists like Donald Glover, who push the boundaries and comment on cultural stereotypes with their media, the future looks brighter and more open to social and cultural reform. Even all the sources I gave are forms of media reflecting the world that may influence the readers of this essay into a new way of thinking that will eventually transform culture. I hope readers of this essay have learned various valuable aspects of the way media influences the world. They should take this new found knowledge and spread it to their peers in order to continue the study of this topic.

Bringing things to a close, artists and journalists use the forms of media they create in order to shed light on social groups and aspects of their culture so that a change in that culture could be made. Media and culture reflect and transform one another. The media and information a group of people consume has a vast impact on how they speak, dress, what they eat, and how they think. Nowadays, there are so many different cultures in not only the world or nations or states, but neighborhood to neighborhood, friend group to friend group. Since so much media is being made in the modern age, most cultures can be seen reflected in one form of media or another. Additionally, all this new media has contributed to the creation and transformation of all these distinct cultures. It is an ever flowing process that most do not turn their head towards and instead look past it. From these sources and media, readers should be able to identify when their media is reflecting cultures other than just their own and think about how this could be used for personal change or change in the community. In a world that seems to get crazier by the year, it is important to understand and acknowledge what is being given light and what is causing influence so you can navigate the noise.

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