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### **“What Can Black America’s Current Cultural Capital Produce?”**

Whether you venture into Black American areas of influence, scan print media, observe Internet postings, view movie roles, or watch television, there is typically a restricted set of topical areas in which Black Americans are visible.

One of the most prominent and persistent images on a year-around basis is sports: Football, basketball, baseball, track, tennis, even golf with the Tiger. A second prevalent personification is music. There is a plethora of artists that are in the limelight, but for the moment, count in Kanye, Cardi B, Jay-Z, Beyonce, Rihanna, and Drake—just to name a few. On the theatrical front, there is a smattering of male and female actors who receive consistent coverage: Denzel Washington, Samuel L. Jackson, and Michael B. Jordan, Halley Berry, Kerry Washington, and Viola Davis. Kevin Hart is in the mix as an important comedic actor. And somewhere in the midst of all the entertainment, you find the inimitable Oprah Winfrey; Spike Lee has been up-front and center for an extended period; but fast on the rise to the top as a producer of Black American media content is Tyler Perry. We should add here that because of the runup to the 2020 presidential elections, one sees quite regularly in the news Senators Kamala Harris and Corey Booker—our political entertainers. We would be remiss if we failed to mention those religious entertainers who offer the dramatic and religious spoken word, but who weave in a musical component such as T.D. Jakes, Noel Jones, Jamal Bryant and so many more. These, my friends, comprise important presenters of Black America’s cultural capital.

You may argue with the hierarchy and you might favor injecting different personalities, but you cannot deny the fact that for Black America, when you say sports, music, and theatrical entertainment, you have said it all. Occasionally, you might hear about a Black scholar, who, like a shooting star, receives brief acclaim for authoring a book that is closely linked to the Black American experience. The same can be said for Black writers, such as Ta Nehisi Coates. But in the main, Black entertainment is Black America. Of course, this abstracts from the fact that the drum beat in the media for Black America always has an undertone of drugs, sex, and crimes.

What is the problem with this overarching characterization? Is there anything inappropriate about being prolific in sports, music, and theatrical entertainment? Agreed, there is nothing incorrect about reflecting this profile—if it is just one component of your broader profile as a people. But when your areas of expertise are restricted mainly to such a narrow angle of the 360-degree circle, then you guarantee your uselessness and you guarantee your failure—not your long-term success.

Of course, the argument has been that the old economic adage based on Keynes is correct: “demand gets its own supply.” That is, White America is only willing to consume Black American production of sports, music, and theatrical entertainment, and that White America crowds out other areas of Black American production—especially through discrimination.

Nevertheless, we all know of the occasional Black American who excels in some other important field of endeavor. We all know about the great Black psychologists Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark and Dr. Alvin Poussaint. We know about the great medical geniuses such as Dr. Charles Drew, who discovered how to preserve blood plasma, and the current Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and former presidential candidate, Dr. Ben Carson, who performed successfully the most intricate of surgery on conjoined twins. We all know about one of today’s greatest astrophysicists, Neil deGrasse Tyson. And, if we do not know, then we should know about great inventors like Granville T. Woods, the first Black American electrical and mechanical engineer with over 60 patents; and scientists/engineer Mark Dean, who directed the design of personal computers that we use today while working for International Business Machines during the 1980s. Who will ever forget the work of the great scientist George Washington Carver, who revolutionized agriculture not just for America, but for the entire world? Finally, we must not forget the great entrepreneurial exploits of Madam C. J. Walker and others all the way down to the first Black American billionaire, Robert Johnson.

In other words, there is abundant evidence that Black Americans can rise and excel in much more than sports, music, and theatrical entertainment. We should not ignore the fact that one is likely going to encounter considerably more hurdles when attempting to become a scientist than one will encounter while seeking entertainment stardom. But the fact remains that we can do much more than entertain. Therefore, the monumental question facing Black Americans today is: “Why do we take the easy way out and settle for specializing in entertainment?”

Is it an outgrowth of our history as slaves? Do we get pleasure out of pleasing “masser?” Are our family dynamics so unbalanced and disrupted that we are starved for attention and seek that attention as entertainers? Or is it a logical choice for those seeking to accrue wealth?

These are not rhetorical questions. They deserve frank answers. We will not attempt to answer them here because they are beyond our area of expertise. However, we will leverage the foregoing questions to pinpoint the focus of this commentary: “Given our mainly entertainment cultural capital, what can we produce?”

Is this a trick question? No! Yes, it is quite obvious that entertainers can produce entertainment services. Therefore, one response to the question is: As a people, we can continue to produce entertainment services for ourselves and for the broader nation and world. At least until current forms of entertainment lose currency. You retort that Black Americans are the key manufacturers of American culture and that we reinvent that culture over and over again: From the Spirituals to the Blues to Jazz to Rock & Roll to Rap to Hip-Hop. However, we should be cognizant of the fact that the 21<sup>st</sup> century concerns technology, robotization, and artificial intelligence that has already invented new languages. There is the real possibility that Black American cultural inventions may become redundant because: (1) We are unable to invent a new and appreciated cultural form; (2)

the technology invents a better cultural form; or (3) the entire society evolves away from, and no longer demands, entertainment through cultural forms as they are understood today.

That is not to say that we as a people will not appreciate the forms of cultural expressions that we invent. However, we may not be able to commercialize what we invent. Given an inability to trade, and being of those who produce little else, we will be unable to support ourselves even less effectively than we do today.

In other words, the question, “What can we produce with our cultural capital?” is designed to motivate Black America to see that we are potentially on a road to decline and possibly extinction. If we can produce little else than entertainment services, and if the nation and world economy with which we transact reach a point of no demand for our entertainment services, then how can we justify and support our existence?

How serious is this problem? Very! If an economy only has the knowledge and infrastructure to produce widgets, but widgets go out of favor in the rest of the world, then that economy is likely to die/disappear even while it scrambles to develop knowledge and an infrastructure to produce a new good or service that is in favor in the rest of the world.

Consequently, an important piece of advice for Black America is to begin immediately to turn away from a potential death sentence by de-emphasizing sports, musical, and theatrical entertainment, and to begin to emphasize heavily other, more robust, and more long-lasting fields of endeavor. It will not be easy. If sons and daughters are now specializing in entertainment, then it is probably because their fathers and mothers were also entertainers. Therefore, there may be few sources in the immediate environment (culture) that have the knowledge, skill, and ability to help develop new expertise in new fields.

The one point on which we can rely is that we have past examples of Black Americans who reached the top of some seemingly alien fields without much assistance from our cultural environment. That is, it is possible to achieve new and unexpected outcomes, to travel previously untraveled paths, and to produce new products, if the desire, the moral support, and the work ethic are embedded in our environment. Given the latter three factors and persistent perseverance by new generations that venture into fields that will survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond, we can build new cultural capital.

The relevant conclusion here is that, while we are only likely to be able to produce entertainment services with our current cultural capital, we have within our historical DNA the wherewithal to work to excel in new fields of endeavor—thereby producing new cultural capital. It is that new cultural capital that should enable Black Americans to rise to new heights on the national and world stages where we will not be entertainers, but we will be among those who invent, orchestrate the production of, and trade valued goods and services for the world of tomorrow.

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