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Organic Representation as Cultural Reparation

Lena Waithe dons a black shirt and a backwards baseball cap as she sits in the audience of an empty old theater. At the time best known for being the first Black woman to win an Emmy for writing, Waithe introduces short films funded by AT&T in the YouTube behind-the-scenes video for the film *Spilt Milk* (Blake Calhoun, 2010): "I don't love representation just for the sake of representation. Yeah, we can have a bunch of TV shows with Black people in it but if none of them have substance, if the artists aren't doing it with care, then it's actually . . . it's fast food."[1] The film Waithe is executive producing includes a crew of mostly Black women, anchored by director Cierra Glaudé. AT&T's sponsorship of Waithe confers corporate legitimacy on representation "for us by us" as valuable in the networked era.

As Hollywood works to correct decades of marginalizing communities by their race, gender, sexuality, and other intersections, how do we evaluate better representation? Kristen Warner's theory of "plastic representation" provides a useful framework, connecting the art of storytelling to its production and distribution. Warner argues for a shift in focus away from visible diversity, from "positive" and "negative" representation where "the degree of diversity [becomes] synonymous with the quantity of difference rather than with the dimensionality of those performances."[2] Meaningful representation emerges in writing, directing, and producing by filmmakers of color. As Warner writes, "actual progress would involve crafting a more weighted diversity, one generated by adding dimension and specificity to

1 AT&T Hello Lab, "#SETLIFE | The New Creative Class with Lena Waithe—Episode 4," YouTube, September 13, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BPOQ_UqMrE.

2 Kristen J. Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 33.

Aymar Jean Christian and Khadijah Costley White, "Organic Representation as Cultural Reparation," *JCMS* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 143–147.

roles."[3] Warner refocuses cultural politics beyond what is visible to the underlying systems that determine what can be represented and the people who craft its narratives. These systems need deeper repair.

The problem of representation is that the current system does not afford those underrepresented the time, freedom, or ownership to represent themselves meaningfully and sustainably. Most US media is still "fast food," as Waithe puts it, manufactured by writers with formulaic ingredients and rapidly released without enough care for those represented. Hence, we must ask of representation, Is this *organic*? "Organic representation" comes from an intersectional perspective and provides a useful framework for considering how to correct systems built for bias in media and journalism. Organic representation begins when systems and institutions empower those who have been historically marginalized not only to appear in their stories but also to own and fine-tune narratives, marketing, and distribution.

In this essay, we explain the importance of thinking beyond simple representation and recommend a reparative approach to the historical exclusion of Black and other disempowered creatives and audiences in media. Representation does, indeed, matter, but we offer a more substantive, community-centered way to address racial (mis)representation, acknowledging collective value or harm from the perspective of people marginalized because of a collective identity. The organic representation framework can shift scholars' assessments of representation from whether a given text is good or bad to whether it substantively addresses realities and histories of intersecting experiences and oppressions from production to distribution.[4] To illustrate this claim, we first discuss how debates around representation have historically centered on harm and reparation without substantively addressing either. Then we show how organic representation can repair historical problems of representation by addressing inequalities in production and distribution.

Why does representation matter? Artists and media audiences consistently remark on the "spectatorial pleasure" of seeing oneself onscreen.[5] Positive media images, for example, bolster children's self-esteem and result in societal shifts such as acceptance of gay rights or a Black president. By contrast, discussions of representation among media scholars and activists tend to center on representational harm. For over a century, the NAACP has waged campaigns, boycotts, and legal action for the portrayals of Black people in news and narrative television, arguing that negative racial depictions detrimentally impact children's self-esteem and increase marginalization.[6] Cultivation theory suggests long-term effects of negative representations in news and scripted TV dramas.[7] Research from scholars across disciplines argues for

3 Warner, 35; see also Mary Beltrán, "Meaningful Diversity: Exploring Questions of Equitable Representation on Diverse Ensemble Cast Shows," *Flow*, August 27, 2010, https://www.flowjournal.org/2010/08/meaningful-diversity/.

4 Aymar Jean Christian, "The Value of Representation: Toward a Critique of Networked Television Performance," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 1552–1574.

5 Stephane Dunn, *"Baad Bitches" and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 20.

6 Nicole Martins and Kristen Harrison, "Racial and Gender Differences in the Relationship between Children's Television Use and Self-Esteem: A Longitudinal Panel Study," *Communication Research* 39, no. 3 (2012): 338–357.

7 Travis L. Dixon, "Black Criminals and White Officers: The Effects of Racially Misrepresenting Law Breakers and Law Defenders on Television News," *Media Psychology* 10, no. 2 (2007): 270–291; Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, "The 'Mainstreaming' of America: Violence Profile No. 11," *Journal of Communication* 30, no. 3 (1980): 10–29; and Constance P. Derouche and John E. Derouche, "Black and White: Racial Construction in Television Police Dramas," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 23, no. 3 (1991): 69–91.

the importance of correcting and repairing these representations. Media representations of marginalized people may function as the primary way that privileged people learn about them. Representations have tended to produce, amplify, and affirm prejudiced views. In news, media over-representations of Black and Latinx people as criminals, athletes, entertainers, and poverty-stricken freeloaders bolster support for harsh criminal justice policy, burdensome and inadequate social welfare policy, and white supremacist views.[8]

Decades of intervening in "negative" representation have netted mixed results. The colorblind approach to remedying Black representations resulted in the casting and writing of stories that tend to over-represent Black people in professional occupations like police officers, judges, or doctors. Over-correcting for representations affirms the righteousness of the racist American system, what Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis call "enlightened racism"; "respectable" representation also diminishes the generative potential of less respectable ones.[9] As Herman Gray writes, representing Black people as social menace *and its opposite* cannot be understood apart from the aggressive attempts of establishing a "conservative hegemony hostile to progressive notions of racial entitlements."[10] Creating narratives that do not reflect or explicitly acknowledge systemic barriers can also produce harm. The fallout of representational interventions undermines what oppression is actually like and results in a lack of resources and support for historically marginalized and community-based storytellers, journalists, and creatives.

Moreover, discussions about media representation rarely focus on the history of cultural theft and appropriation. This includes the literal theft of intellectual property, as has been common in the history of Black music.[11] Theft can also be of stories and traditions, which is common among indigenous cultural production. The many careers and dollars made from the labor and stories of Black, indigenous, and other people who lack social and economic capital—even as they are visible onscreen—show the limits of visual representation as a remedy for marginalization.

Hence, we need to analyze representation beyond the text and focus on its production and distribution from an intersectional, community-centered perspective. Historically, corporations have not invested in organic representation because of the 1) devaluing of audiences outside historical norms, 2) marketing value of established narratives, 3) lack of intellectual property rights in production, and 4) lack of investment from Hollywood's entrenched hierarchical, unrepresentative power structure.[12]

We propose thinking of representation as reparational and akin to organic food production: it should be "sourced" from the community it serves and in which it must thrive. Reparational production must prioritize intersecting communities that

8 Entman and Rojecki, *Black Image*; and Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

9 Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism:* The Cosby Show, *Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992); and Racquel J. Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

10 Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 16.

11 Kevin Greene, "Copynorms, Black Cultural Production, and the Debate over African-American Reparations," *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal* 25, no. 3 (2008): 1179; and Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How It Threatens Creativity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 117–148.

12 See Jennifer Fuller, "Branding Blackness on US Cable Television," *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 2 (2010): 285–305; and Alfred L. Martin Jr., "Generic Closets: Sitcoms, Audiences, and Black Male Gayness," in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, ed. Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).

have been historically disempowered to have ownership over the entire production process, from who is writing the story, producing it, acting or speaking in it, and editing it. The process embraces failure and imperfection and invests the appropriate resources to achieve a nutrient rich product. This form of production is best practiced as either local or community-based, expanding the power of production away from global, corporate centers that are removed from those they represent.

We see these shifts strongly in independent spaces and in some corporate contexts across the production process, including the following:

in story development from shows about Black people written by white people and approved by white executives to examples like *Random Acts of Flyness* (HBO, 2018–) with large teams of mostly Black writers and directors;[13]
in crew labor from mostly white and male film and television sets to indigenous production like independently produced and distributed TV series where those behind the camera share community with those in front;[14]
in acting from colorblind casting to casting actors for deep historical and sociocultural connection to the material;[15] and
in post-production from reality TV series where those represented have no say in the final cut to participatory documentary.

Organic production is still nascent and will not be without controversy. Consider Tyler Perry, who writes, directs, and produces most of his films but who has been roundly critiqued for misrepresenting Black people in misogynist, homophobic ways.[16] This case, and many others, point to the need for involving a variety of intersectional communities in production and rejecting regimes that isolate singular producers or protagonists as solutions.[17] A collectivist orientation requires engaging more voices and input at each stage of development: welcoming and integrating input from the community represented; giving back to the communities that contribute their stories and knowledge; investing in a pipeline of creative talent, particularly in communities most visibly represented; and supporting independent funding structures that focus on such engagement.

It is not enough to have organic productions. Productions reach audiences through distribution. Reparational distribution prioritizes historically disempowered communities, not as commodifiable markets but as communities inherently worthy of shaping the institutions that profit from telling their stories. Evidence of harm in distribution abounds, including (1) the decimation of Black film distribution networks at the end of the twentieth century, (2) the underfunding and mismanagement of Black, LGBTQ, Latinx, and indigenous peoples' TV channels, (3) the lack of funding or

13 Felicia D. Henderson, "The Culture behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers' Room," *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 2 (2011): 145–152.

14 Aymar Jean Christian, "Expanding Production Value: The Culture and Scale of Television and New Media," *Critical Studies in Television* 14, no. 2 (2019): 255–267.

15 Kristen J. Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

16 Brittney Cooper, "Tyler Perry Hates Black Women: 5 Thoughts on the Haves and the Have Nots," *Crunk Feminist Collective*, May 29, 2013, https://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2013/05/29/tyler-perry-hates-black-women-5-thoughts-on-the-haves-and-have-nots. See also Aymar Jean Christian and Khadijah Costley White, "One Man Hollywood: The Decline of Black Creative Production in Post-Network Television," in *From Madea to Media Mogul: Theorizing Tyler Perry*, ed. TreaAndrea M. Russworm, Samantha N. Sheppard, and Karen M. Bowdre (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 138–158.

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regulatory acknowledgment of independent television channels working to correct the aforementioned inequalities, (4) the decline of the Black press amid over-coverage of white supremacist movements and the marginalization of Black uprisings by corporate journalism, and (5) the lack of sustained critique of white heteropatriarchal corruption across all media.[18]

Organic distribution can repair media systems through platforms, networks, channels, and publications for Black women, queer people, indigenous communities, and Latinx and brown immigrant communities. These solutions are always present in the market but need resources like Ava DuVernay's ARRAY initiative to buy and distribute Black film; Byron Allen's legal quest to get telecommunications companies to carry channels owned by people of color; and the plethora of independent blogs, independent TV channels, and community-based film initiatives across the country.[19] These initiatives require support in government and in the marketplace. Without an organic distribution environment led by individuals with consistent and deep commitment to advancing complex, intersectional stories, we will continue to lack the narratives we need to repair the extensive history of plastic representation.

Organic representation is one way to repair the exclusion of Black and other historically marginalized people from cultural production. This approach requires a reparative praxis to production, funding, and distribution. It is inspired by a long, deep history in which representation is, quite often, white theft, resulting in the commodification and estrangement of whole communities through which corporations generate substantial global profits. And yet it is not enough to use visible representation—for example, centering Black characters in stories or casting Black journalists and actors to be on camera—as a way of remedying marginalization in journalism and media. A reparative praxis requires engagement and restoration, not just taking stories but using them as an opportunity to train, fund, and provide resources to the communities from which these narratives originate. We cannot achieve cultural reparation by papering over historical harms. Organic representation needs to be a consistent praxis.

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18 Eve Ng, "A 'Post-Gay' Era? Media Gaystreaming, Homonormativity, and the Politics of LGBT Integration," *Communication, Culture and Critique* 6, no. 2 (2013): 258–283; Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, *Pimpin' Ain't Easy: Selling Black Entertainment Television* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Miya Williams Fayne, "A Digital Black Press? Exploring What Constitutes the Black Press Online," *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, no. 6 (2016); Khadijah Costley White, "The Case of 'Misguided' Thugs: Baltimore Youth, Activism, and News," in *News of Baltimore: Race, Rage and the City*, ed. Linda Steiner and Silvio Waisbord (New York: Routledge, 2017), 158–175; and Khadijah Costley White, *The Branding of Right-Wing Activism: The News Media and the Tea Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

19 Aymar Jean Christian, "Beyond Branding: The Value of Intersectionality on Streaming TV Channels," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 5 (2020): 457–474, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419852241; Sarah J. Jackson, "(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism," *Women's Studies in Communication* 39, no. 4 (2016): 375–379; and Candace Moore, "Distribution Is Queen: LGBTQ Media on Demand," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (2013): 137–144.