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HE THINKS
HE'S DOWN

White Appropriations
of Black Masculinities in the
Civil Rights Era



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INTRODUCTION

Can He Be Down?

WHEN CHAMPION AMERICAN swimmer Ryan Lochte was photographed with one of his gold medals during the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London, he smiled to show off his custom-made red, white, and blue grill. The grill, a metallic mouthpiece long associated with African American rappers, sparked a conversation among cultural commentators that focused less on whether the fashion accessory is aesthetically pleasing in general and more on whether it was appropriate for a young white swimmer to sport it. In Eric Wilson's *New York Times* article, for instance, fashion designer Robert Tateossian bemoaned Lochte's grill because it was "so nonharmonious with his image and with the sport that he represents." Tateossian believed that the grill had no place around the pool because "swimming is such an elegant sport"; it's "all about softness."¹ Implicit in Tateossian's statement is a judgment about those who are associated with the grill in the mainstream US imagination: African American men. If swimming precludes grills because it is elegant and soft, then those who usually wear the mouthpiece are inelegant and hard. Tateossian seemed to object to the meaning of Lochte's appropriation of this symbol in a sport dominated by white men and women.

The media attention that Lochte's grill garnered was partially a result of the swimmer's claim that he had been asked by US Olympic officials not to wear it on the podium, but it was also, as Wilson argues, a result of media curiosity about Lochte's motivations for appropriating "a style that became fashionable among rappers" and media debates about "whether he could pull it off." According to Wilson's article, Lochte wore the grill to "show off his personality," a vague comment on its ability to set the swimmer apart from others in his sport.² But Lochte's decision to wear a mouthpiece that was associated in the popular cultural imagination with the rebellious, hypermasculine, and hard black men of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century rap signalled a variety of possible messages to viewers. Perhaps Lochte used the grill to set himself apart from the very white world of swimming. Perhaps he wanted it to represent his distinction from teammate Michael Phelps: Lochte may have wanted to be the "bad" man to Phelps's All-American athlete. Or perhaps he just believed, as so many white Americans do, that black masculinity represented a cooler version of manhood than white middle-class masculinity ever could. Regardless of his specific motivations, Lochte appropriated a symbol of black male culture in order to define his public image.

The example of Lochte's grill is just one among many recent instances in which young white men have appropriated cultural symbols of black masculinity. Young white men who wear clothing associated with black urban youth to ensure their coolness, use rap to denote their struggles, and speak with Hip-Hop jargon to highlight their street sensibilities are so common in today's culture that there are slang terms such as "wigger" to describe them. While "wiggers" do not always openly acknowledge the black culture from which these pieces of clothing, music, and language are taken, observers recognize them as signifiers of black masculinity, as was the case with Lochte's grill.³

Many people believe that this phenomenon is a relatively recent one, but it is not new, despite the emergence of new terms to describe

white men who appropriate signifiers of black masculinity. Since the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, various white men have been engaging in what is sometimes referred to as “racial tourism” or racial “slumming.” In the early twentieth century, white men journeyed to New York City’s black neighbourhoods in large numbers to listen to black musicians, attend the literary parties of black artists, and watch black performers in live shows. As they did so, some adopted language and style that was associated with black culture in this period. For instance, the language associated with jazz peppered the slang of the urban white middle and upper classes, and the clothing associated with the same movement adorned the white men and women who populated New York City neighbourhoods beyond Harlem. This was a relatively small and regional phenomenon, however, and it did not extend far beyond those who lived and played in New York City and other major urban centres. Nor did it maintain its central place in urban popular culture much beyond the Great Depression.⁴

Although less often studied by historians, white men’s appropriation of black masculine signifiers accelerated dramatically after the Second World War. One of the important contexts for this was what various scholars have described as the crisis of white masculinity, which was fuelled by various economic, political, social, and cultural changes in the mid-twentieth century. The shift to a white-collar consumer economy and the rise of the corporate “organization man” after the Second World War led many men to reimagine a US manhood that had for so long been defined by physical strength and physical labour. This was exacerbated by the reality that thousands of men were returning from the warfront with physical and mental injuries that made a masculinity defined by physical strength and ability much more difficult to achieve. Furthermore, the political instability of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race created anxiety and fear among US men, which also threatened their sense of manhood. The black freedom movement and the growing presence of powerful and talented black men in popular culture, such as boxer

Jack Johnson and Olympian Jesse Owens, also challenged the supremacy of white men. Labour unrest, changing gender roles, and a push to marry young and move to the suburbs compounded these economic and political realities. As is outlined in the following chapters, white men responded to these perceived threats to white middle-class masculinity in many forms of popular culture in the postwar era.⁵

Historically, middle-class white men had often defined their masculinity in relation to a variety of class-, ethnicity-, and race-based masculinities, including those of Indigenous, black, Jewish, Italian, Irish, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and working-class Americans as well as various US femininities. This continued in the postwar period, as the perceived crisis of middle-class white manhood perpetuated desires among some white men to incorporate attributes associated with these groups into their own performances of masculinity.

In large parts of the country, and especially in big urban centres, African Americans were often the most visible minority group in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, making black masculinities especially important to middle-class white men's performances of gender. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Great Migration and as the black freedom struggle intensified in this period, middle-class white men's media exposure to images of empowered black men increased, especially as television became ubiquitous. Black men were often well positioned to attract the US popular imagination. First, the African American civil rights movement greatly influenced political, social, and cultural life in this period. Black men fighting for their rights, whether through liberal civil rights organizations, Black Power movements, or less formally organized words and actions, became iconic symbols of liberty, freedom, and democracy in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Before this period, black men commonly evoked images of enslavement, criminality, degradation, or weakness in the white popular imagination, and they were often used in mainstream white culture as foils for ideal and idealized

manhood. As the civil rights and Black Power movements gained momentum, however, the black man came to symbolize a powerful and liberating rejection of US failures and limitations. Within some sectors of white society, black masculinities increasingly came to be seen as appealing to white men who were seeking to redefine their manhood.

Second, literature, film, and music in this period, helped by the proliferation of popular culture technologies, presented images of black men that appealed to white middle-class men who felt stifled by postwar US society. Images of black masculinity as more “natural and authentic,” of black men who were presumably liberated from capitalist and familial responsibility, and of black manhood as rebellious and urban in a time that seemed to demand conformity and suburban living were common in the popular culture of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. These images often did not represent the reality of black life in the United States in this period, which was as complicated and varied as the lives of white Americans, but they still permeated the popular imagination and offered white middle-class men powerful alternative versions of manhood.

Finally, challenges to anti-black racism in this period made it easier for middle-class white men to see black men as deserving of respect, admiration, and emulation. The strength of the black freedom struggle in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s undermined US stereotypes of African American men as bumbling, feminized fools or rabid, terrifying rapists, allowing many white men to reimagine the value of blackness. Moreover, the civil rights and Black Power movements made it more possible, albeit not completely acceptable, for some white men to celebrate certain black masculinities without fear of ridicule or rejection from their white peers.

He Thinks He's Down examines negotiations of white manhood and masculinity in the civil rights era through the lens of appropriation. It seeks to understand how and why some white artists and activists, feeling alienated from the ideals of middle-class white manhood, were attracted to black masculinities. To explore

appropriation as a site for negotiating white masculinity, I rely on three case studies chosen for their consequential relationships to popular culture. These case studies by no means represent an exhaustive study of appropriation and masculinities in this period, but they are representative of a larger phenomenon in a period normally understood as polarized by racial segregation and strife. The reality was much more nuanced and included countless episodes of interracial dialogue, exchange, and appropriation.

From 1945 to 1980, a significant number of middle-class white men who felt alienated and marginalized in US society sought out and appropriated, either consciously or unconsciously, African American cultures in order to benefit from what they believed were powerful black masculinities. These white men, many of whom felt that they stood outside of hegemonic white American masculinities because of their religion, ethnicity, age, generation, politics, or sexuality, found alternatives to middle-class expectations on the fringes of masculinity, a space partially occupied by black culture. In so doing, these men did not destroy hegemonic white masculinities or relinquish the privileges associated with them. This book demonstrates, in fact, that marginalized white men who appropriated symbols of black masculinities in their work and lives, even when they believed themselves to be challenging racism and other forms of injustice and oppression, reinforced the power of white manhood.

The white men who adopted what they perceived to be black masculinities often did so without questioning the racist foundations on which these perceptions were based. Assumptions about black male sexual prowess, evolutionary primitivism, biological simplicity, and honourable suffering were linked to a long history of racist justifications for the enslavement and disenfranchisement of black men and women. In appropriating black masculinities, often without careful self-reflection, these white artists and activists frequently perpetuated the very pernicious and tenacious stereotypes that black men and women who were engaged in the black freedom struggle

were trying to destroy. Even when white men were aware of and critical of racist stereotypes, they did not generally appreciate that their invocation of these stereotypes might contribute to their reproduction.

Furthermore, in focusing on the power that black men gained from their alienation and their fight for freedom, the white men who adopted black masculine signifiers rarely considered black women, the specific ways in which they were exploited, or their key role in the black freedom struggle. These white men tended to erase and eliminate black women from the narrative of black culture and black life, thereby contributing to the long-standing problem, inside and outside the African American community, of privileging black male voices over black female voices.

Finally, the white men who appropriated black masculinity did not generally consider the complicated dynamics involved in the act of appropriation when it involves groups with disparate access to power. White artists and activists used black masculinities to deliberately relinquish their birthright, which included access to the privileges inherent in white manhood. They often focused on the ways in which social and political disenfranchisement made black men more manly, ignoring the harsher realities of this isolation. Even when they acknowledged these harsh realities, as was the case for activists who were deeply engaged in anti-racist politics, they never really considered their structurally based ability, which was denied to black men, to either accept or reject hegemonic masculinity. White men's power to either accept or relinquish the demands of their racialized gender was key to their privilege. They could live on the margins if they so chose, but they could reclaim their white manhood whenever they wanted, as many did in this period. This demonstrates their ultimate ignorance about the ways in which appropriation served to perpetuate the hegemonic structures of white privilege that these marginalized white men claimed to abhor and that African Americans were struggling to dismantle.

He Thinks He's Down builds on the important work of scholars who have explored the United States in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Historians of these postwar decades have emphasized the ways in which social movement struggles shaped politics, society, and culture in this era. The most influential movement at this time was the black freedom struggle. Scholars such as Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Peniel Joseph, Charles Payne, Timothy Tyson, and Victoria Wolcott have traced the complicated history of the black freedom struggle, which included both the civil rights and Black Power movements.⁶ Hall and Joseph in particular have undermined any notion of a distinct split between civil rights politics (normally understood as the movement to guarantee the legal, political, and social rights of African Americans) and Black Power politics (a complicated combination of black nationalism, other forms of black radicalism, and various movements that promoted self-determination for people of African descent). They have instead emphasized the ways in which both political ideologies existed throughout this period, sometimes even in the same individuals and organizations. Hall thus refers to the black freedom struggle as “the long civil rights movement.”⁷

He Thinks He's Down accepts the “long civil rights” periodization but extends the scholarship by focusing on developments outside of formal politics and political protest. The various cases investigated here, arranged in chronological order, show that the black freedom movement strongly influenced mainstream popular culture in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. As historians such as Ruth Feldstein, Grace Elizabeth Hale, and William Van Deburg have demonstrated, white writers, activists, editors, and filmmakers in this period were attracted to civil rights and Black Power organizing, which they associated with liberation, fraternity, and empowerment, and they incorporated ideas about black freedom into their work.⁸ My study of the influence of the black freedom movement on popular culture in this era challenges the notion of a clear split between civil rights and Black Power politics. These political orientations had much in common, had influence throughout the period, and had many of

the same spokespeople in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and it is therefore unsurprising that both shaped postwar popular culture.

This book also makes gender central to the narrative of popular culture in the civil rights era. Black popular culture provided a space for black men and women to define themselves in the face of racial exclusion. It also created opportunities for white men to redefine themselves in order to reject the imperatives of white middle-class masculinity without abdicating any real privilege. In addition to contributing to new ways of thinking about the history of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, this book builds on and contributes to scholarship on the history of gender. Feminist and queer scholarship has interrogated gender and sex as important historical categories. It has brought attention to the ways in which gender changes and varies, the ways in which power and gender are linked in various historical contexts, and the ways in which the practice of history itself is gendered. Furthermore, in questioning the power of heteronormativity, the links between genders and sexualities in historical spaces and times, the relationship between power and sexuality, and the nature of sexual desires, acts, identities, and communities, these histories have injected a necessary consideration of sex, sexuality, and sexualized bodies into investigations of gender. In other words, these studies have contributed to an understanding of gender as contested, performed, historically contingent, and linked to sex and sexuality. They have also reinforced an understanding of the ways in which men can be masculine or feminine, as can women, and that gendered identities can never be assumed.⁹

Over time, there has developed a much stronger sense that gender is relational and that it is important to study men, manhood, and masculinity as gendered rather than continue to leave them unmarked. The study of masculinities has used the foundations laid by feminist and queer historiographies, as well as the significant work of R. W. Connell, to explore the dynamics of manhood in US history. In her 1995 sociological study *Masculinities*, Connell argues for a deeper understanding of the differences between “hegemonic

masculinity” and “subordinate” masculinities and the ways in which negotiations of manhood are influenced by relationships to power. According to Connell, “hegemonic masculinity” is the “currently accepted strategy” for maintaining patriarchy, or “the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” She stresses that it requires a “correspondence between cultural ideal” and “institutional power” and that it is a “historically mobile relation.” Subordinate masculinities are masculinities that take the oppressed position in the “gender hierarchy among men.” They are directly related to hegemonic masculinities in that men who perform subordinate masculinities are “expelled” from acceptable social norms.¹⁰ The case studies in this book confirm that hegemonic masculinity in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was directly related to normative cultural performances of manhood and power. They also demonstrate that masculinity cannot be separated from other categories of power and oppression, such as race, and that hegemonic masculinity changed in reaction to various political, social, economic, and cultural realities as well as to challenges from subordinated men and women.

In fact, Barbara Ehrenreich anticipated Connell’s theories of masculinity in her influential 1985 study *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. Ehrenreich’s book explores the ways in which the culture of this era revealed growing anxiety among white middle-class men about the requirements of suburban, monogamous, and corporate manhood. Ehrenreich’s study created the groundwork for later masculinity studies scholarship, including the work of Ava Baron, Gail Bederman, Michael Kimmel, John Tosh, Anthony Rotundo, and Kevin Murphy, which insist on the contested nature of US manhood.¹¹

Studies of historical masculinities have made several important contributions that inform *He Thinks He’s Down*. First, this work emphasizes that masculinity and manhood change over time: they are not biological, innate, or essential. Second, this work argues that masculinities are never monolithic in a particular historical context: there are dominant and subordinate masculinities and these are

often related to class, ethnicity, sexuality, race, (dis)ability, and so on. For instance, many scholars of masculinity have investigated the ways in which access to whiteness was a necessary precondition for achieving ideal manhood. But subordinate cultures had their own senses of what constituted ideal manhood and masculinity, and these were often quite different from the middle-class white ideal. For example, physical strength, the ability to work with your hands, and violence, while of minimal importance in performances of nineteenth-century upper-middle-class masculinities, were of extreme importance in performances of working-class manhood in the same period.

He Thinks He's Down expands our understanding of the changing and contested nature of masculinities in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s by looking specifically at the importance and significance of white appropriations of black masculinities in this era. In recent scholarship, especially among postcolonial scholars such as Ann McClintock, the power of hegemonic gender structures to consume aspects of subordinate gender structures for their own gain is explored.¹² The case studies investigated here, however, further complicate any easy division between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities by showing that those who embody traits of hegemonic masculinity in some ways often embody subordinate masculinities in others. Furthermore, many men who have had access to hegemonic masculinity have chosen to reject it in favour of subordinate masculinities, and yet they have still been able to maintain their access to power and privilege. Finally, those who are subordinate are often more powerful in the popular imagination than their access to political and social power would suggest. Black men in the Black Power movement, for instance, were imagined as so powerful that they posed a real threat to US structures of power. All of these complicated realities, which are explored in the case studies of this book, demonstrate the deeply tangled nature of masculinity in the history of the United States and force us to reconsider our theoretical categories.

The case studies included in this book also contribute to the historiography of racialized gender. Historical scholarship has combined the intellectual legacies of “whiteness studies” with explorations of gender to consider the ways in which race and gender broadly, and whiteness and masculinity specifically, intersect. Studies by Gail Bederman, John Kasson, and David Roediger investigate the ways in which various types of US men have worked to negotiate their whiteness in attempts to gain access to the rights and privileges of hegemonic masculinities.¹³ This scholarship emphasizes that in times of perceived crises, due to war, economic downturns, or civil unrest, white men exhibited intensified anxieties about their social positions. This was especially the case for those who lived on the margins of power, such as working-class white men. In order to combat these feelings of anxiety and powerlessness, many white men emphasized their place in the racial hierarchy as well as their manhood. Scholars who have worked on these topics have demonstrated that whiteness and masculinity influenced one another in multiple ways.

Within this historiography, many scholars have emphasized that white manhood was often defined relationally. Ideal white men were understood to be inherently different from marginalized men, such as black men, Indigenous men, male immigrants, gay men, and others, who were often imagined as unmanly or hypermasculine. This was particularly true of black men, who, due to their enslavement, had a special position in the racial and gender hierarchy of the United States. If white manhood was at the top of the US social hierarchy, then black manhood was at the bottom. Those who existed somewhere in the middle often worked to be considered white because they feared being relegated to the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Roediger demonstrates this in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, which explores the ways in which white working-class men, afraid of being perceived as equal to black slaves, acted in various ways to be understood as “white.” Foundational to many of these studies of the

relationship between white and black masculinities is the work of scholars who have investigated the ways in which manhood has been negotiated by African American men. This includes work by Christopher Booker, Steve Estes, Herman Graham III, Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, Andrew Leiter, Marlon Ross, Penny von Eschen, and Maurice O. Wallace as well as the work of scholars who have explored the role of sex and sexuality in white and black historical negotiations of US manhood, such as Heike Bauer and Matt Cook, George Chauncey, and Angus McLaren.¹⁴

He Thinks He's Down demonstrates that when white men felt threatened they did not necessarily emphasize their distance from nonwhite masculinities. Nor did men whose status as white was contested, such as Jews and European immigrants, always work to “whiten” themselves in order to find power and stability, as the Irish immigrants in Roediger’s study of the antebellum United States did when working to distance themselves from African American slaves. The case studies presented here show that many white men who lived on the margins of power because of their age, class, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation appropriated marginalized black masculinities in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Alienated by hegemonic middle-class white ideals of masculine restraint, corporate work, and suburban domesticity, these men came to see black masculinities as appealing, attractive, authentic, free, liberated, natural, powerful, sexual, and strong. Some of these white men came to believe that by associating with black men, by adopting what they believed to be black men’s styles and sensibilities, and by acting and speaking like the black men they imaginatively constructed in their minds, they could solve the crisis of white masculinity that threatened to emasculate them. The fact that in this period black men were commonly associated with struggles for equality, freedom, and justice only increased the perception among many whites that black men were on the cutting edge of masculine power. For these and other reasons, some white middle-class artists and activists incorporated what they believed to be black masculine qualities into their lives and work.

In studying these incorporations, this book makes important interventions in theories of appropriation, a subject that has long been considered by cultural studies scholars. Most of these scholars understand appropriation to mean the act of borrowing or taking something from a culture that is not one's own and incorporating it into one's life or work. They most often explore the tendency of mainstream groups to adopt the culture of marginalized peoples. In the case of the United States, at least, they tend to focus on white people's appropriation of various marginalized cultures. Scholars debate, however, the origins of these adoptions and the wider consequences of appropriation. Stanley Crouch, for instance, in his book *The Artificial White Man: Essays on Authenticity*, differentiates between artists who engage in "empty-headed appropriation," which leads to racist and exploitative portrayals of the Other, and those who feel "inspired" by "influences from outside of one's class and ethnic conventions," which can lead to interesting art.¹⁵ E. Patrick Johnson, however, argues that all appropriation between groups with different social statuses perpetuate essentialist and hierarchical understandings of difference.¹⁶ While scholars agree that white Americans are attracted to marginalized cultures, then, the reasons for and the consequences of appropriation remain contested and complicated.¹⁷

Many scholars have specifically studied the history of white appropriations of black cultures in the United States. Historians such as Ann Douglas, Benjamin Filene, and Grace Elizabeth Hale have considered specific moments in which white Americans have appropriated cultures associated with black Americans.¹⁸ This work often utilizes concepts of primitivism in order to understand why in moments of economic, social, or political crisis white Americans have turned to black American culture. Some of this scholarship, including Douglas's foundational study of the 1920s, emphasizes fears of emasculation to explain why white Americans have adopted black American culture.

These scholars offer various explanations for why this adoption has occurred. Some scholars, such as Robert Dawidoff and Kevin

Phinney, define this type of appropriation as a form of cultural theft, concentrating on the profit motive of white producers to capitalize on popular black culture. These studies most often explore music. Other studies define appropriation as a version of slumming, focusing on elite white Americans who travelled to lower-class neighbourhoods, often populated by racialized groups, and enjoyed the “exotic” culture of the Other. Frequently taking the Harlem Renaissance or the Hip-Hop era as their historical subjects, scholars who investigate appropriation as racial tourism, such as Ann Douglas and David Levering Lewis, point to the ways in which elite Americans weaved the culture of the Other into their highbrow entertainments in order to create a distinctly American modernity. Finally, some scholars, such as Thomas Frank, understand appropriation as an avenue for white Americans to establish and maintain their cultural cachet, which helps distinguish them from mainstream whiteness.

He Thinks He's Down contributes to scholarly understandings of the relationship between white and black culture as well as the larger historiography of appropriation in the United States. First, historians have emphasized the ways in which white Americans have used negative portrayals of black masculinity in the service of white supremacy, such as depicting African American men as sexually threatening in order to justify segregation. This study, however, points to some white men's admiration of black masculinities, even in a time of heightened racial tensions, and their subsequent appropriation of imaginary black manhood as a way to find empowerment. Furthermore, it demonstrates that, paradoxically, this type of admiration often worked in the service of white supremacy.

Second, *He Thinks He's Down* fills important gaps in the historiography of white men's appropriation of black cultures. Against the scholarship that emphasizes economic or cultural cachet motives for these appropriations, this book highlights personal motivations related to racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities and the ways in which these influenced some white artists' and activists'

decision to appropriate imaginary black masculinities. Additionally, alongside the scholarship that has focused on the Harlem Renaissance and the Hip-Hop era as key moments in white men's appropriation of black cultures, this book uncovers the ways in which these appropriations operated in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, drawing attention to the importance of appropriation as a tool for racialized gender performances throughout the twentieth century.

He Thinks He's Down's examination of appropriation in the civil rights period also contributes to our understanding of popular culture. Popular culture is sometimes understood as the culture consumed primarily by non-elite groups. Traditionally, this included literature, theatre, film, music, and fashion. Many scholars have expanded this conception of popular culture to include language, ideas, and attitudes. Beginning in the late 1980s with scholars such as Jackson Lears, Lawrence Levine, Janice Radway, and Andrew Ross, studies of US popular culture have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which popular culture can serve as a site for the expression of political concerns and social values for all Americans.¹⁹

In early studies, scholars often understood popular culture as a site of cultural hegemony, a medium used to reproduce and disseminate political, economic, social, and cultural ideals for the masses. The foundations of this understanding of popular culture were laid by theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their important treatise, published in 1944, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the popular culture industry produced standardized, shallow entertainment that was meant to pacify the masses and distract them from the problems in society.²⁰

More recently, however, scholars have emphasized the ways in which popular culture can be a site of conflict and contestation, a space for producers and consumers to exercise agency and resistance. Robin D.G. Kelley, for example, argues that popular culture has been an important site for resistance in black working-class communities, especially since African Americans have often been

denied access to official political power. In this context, Kelley explains, popular culture was one of the only public spaces for African Americans to exercise their agency.²¹ The role of popular culture continues to be debated, but most current scholarship accepts that popular culture has allowed for some resistance by US marginalized groups, even if it has also been used to reinforce hegemonic ideals.

He Thinks He's Down demonstrates that the role of popular culture in negotiating power cannot be neatly divided into the ways in which those who have social, political, and economic power use it and the ways in which it is used by those who are marginalized within these sites of power. The case studies show that popular culture has been used by white men who existed on the peripheries of these sites of power to mimic the racialized gender performances of those who were marginalized. Furthermore, they did this not to reinforce hegemony but to resist it. This demonstrates that popular culture has been a site where the lines between powerful and marginalized peoples have been blurred.

Some scholars have also dissected the specific nature of subsections of US popular culture: the popular culture of African Americans, Indigenous peoples, Asian Americans, the working class, gay men and women, and Latinos. Many of these studies emphasize the ways in which marginalized groups have used popular culture to negotiate meanings of race, class, and ethnicity in the United States. Some scholars have also emphasized the role that popular culture can play in constructions of gender and sexuality. Finally, many scholars have investigated the business of popular culture, focusing on industry structures and capitalist incentives. Many of these studies take as their premise the notion that popular culture is an important site for all Americans to negotiate personal, group, and national identities.²²

He Thinks He's Down seeks to expand the definition of popular culture to encompass the role of political activism and ideology, an inclusion that is key to an understanding of popular culture after the Second World War. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, social

movements steeped in the politics of civil rights, poverty, and anti-war activism took over the popular imagination. These movements and their styles of activism generated music, fashion, theatre, film, and literature that were initially countercultural but that eventually permeated the mainstream. This means that even those not involved in the movements were influenced by their ideas and styles. The three popular culture genres examined in the book – literature, fashion, and film – demonstrate the important role that the black freedom movement had in shaping the ways in which the male artists envisioned genders and sexualities in the popular culture that they produced.

By exploring intricate relationships between racialized gender, cultural appropriation, and popular culture in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, then, *He Thinks He's Down* contributes to multiple fields of scholarship. It expands existing theories and histories in order to complicate understandings of the role of popular culture and cultural appropriation in negotiations of white masculinities in the civil rights era. In so doing, it explores the meaningful and complicated experiences of those who lived through an era influenced by the reimagining of various racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities.

In order to explore this complicated terrain, this book is divided into three chapters, each exploring a different genre of popular culture: literature, fashion, and film. These genres represent a small portion of what I believe was the much larger phenomenon of white men's appropriation of imagined black masculinities. A study of music, sport, comedy, theatre, and television could also demonstrate the existence and the character of this kind of appropriation. The case studies were chosen because the artists studied were leaders of influential cultural movements and produced work and ideas that were consumed by large numbers of Americans. In addition, gender and race were important themes in the work they produced, and the case studies allow me to focus on the appropriation of racialized masculinities. This is not meant to imply that only men engaged in

debates about, or appropriated, masculinity. In fact, the histories of these movements explicitly show that women played a significant role in these debates and appropriations, and, at critical moments, I consider their voices and viewpoints.

He Thinks He's Down does not mean to argue that racial realities in the United States in this period can be divided into a simple binary of white and black. Instead, the case studies here consider the ways in which white manhood has been defined historically against Indigenous, working-class, Jewish, Irish, and Mexican masculinities as well as against various femininities. Many marginalized groups continued to play a large role in how US white men understood their masculinity. But because of the growing significance of the black freedom struggle and black popular culture in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, as well as the personal histories of the artists and activists studied here, they were especially invested in the appropriation of imagined black masculinities.

Nor does this study intend to reinforce the essentialism, racism, and sexism perpetuated by the ways in which the white artists and activists imagined black masculinities. Much of what these white men believed they were appropriating from black culture was, in fact, a product of their imaginations. It was not necessarily part of black men's cultural realities. I use the concept of appropriation, then, not as way to understand what black men were doing, thinking, consuming, or performing in this era, but to understand the ways in which these specific white male artists and activists imagined black men and what purpose these imaginings served.

He Thinks He's Down begins in 1945 and concludes in 1979. Many of the artists produced popular culture beyond the period in which they are investigated in this book, but their relationship to black masculinity was heightened at this time due to various factors, including their age and generation, the mid-century crisis of white masculinity, and the social movements of the period. The case studies are arranged in chronological order, beginning with literature of the late 1940s and the 1950s and ending with films of

the 1970s, in order to consider the continuities and changes in white appropriations of black masculinities during this period. By crossing the historiographical divide between scholarship on the 1950s and early 1960s and scholarship on the late 1960s and early 1970s, the case studies also allow me to highlight the connections between these two periods, which helps to undermine the notion of a dramatic split.

Chapter 1 explores the literature of Norman Mailer and Jack Kerouac from 1945 to 1965 in the context of the growing civil rights movement and black literary portrayals of masculinity. Mailer, who was Jewish American, and Kerouac, who was Franco American, had complicated relationships to white masculinity and significant encounters with black masculinities. A close examination of their early work illuminates the ways in which their gendered and racialized feelings of anxiety about a changing US society permeated their literary depictions of white men. For both writers, the decision to alleviate these concerns by having white male characters admire and adopt imagined black male characteristics culminated in their iconic works, *The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster* and *On the Road*, but then continued to influence their later works. It also perpetuated racist stereotypes about black primitivism and, therefore, worked in the service of white supremacy.

Chapter 2 considers the role of *Playboy* magazine and its publisher Hugh Hefner, often celebrated for his racial politics and denigrated for his gender politics, in the popularization of a Black Power fashion aesthetic in the 1970s. An analysis of fashion in *Playboy*, one of its most important features, demonstrates that the magazine promoted black masculine fashion on white male models in order to solidify the supposedly anti-establishment masculinity of the readers. In so doing, Hefner trivialized the struggles of African American men engaged in the fight for black self-determination.

The black urban hustler is the focus of the final chapter. Blaxploitation, a black action film genre, became wildly popular among African American audiences in the first half of the 1970s.

Starting out as an independent film movement, Blaxploitation films surpassed expectations for the intended black urban audience. But the genre was also very popular among white audiences and eventually drew the attention of Hollywood. White Hollywood filmmakers appropriated Blaxploitation films, incorporating them into their lexicon, and in many ways honoured the black masculinity so central to these films and the Black Power movements. They also, however, reconfigured the masculinities to fit their own agendas and, consequently, stifled an important expression of resistance to white hegemony.

One of the case studies focuses on the role of liberal civil rights in defining masculinity in this period. The other two focus on the role of Black Power ideologies in defining manhood. While not meaning to overemphasize a split between these two ideologies (in fact, white-directed Blaxploitation films demonstrate that Black Power and civil rights orientations coexisted in the filmic imagination), it is important to recognize that their relative influence shifted with popular perceptions throughout the three and half decades explored in this book. Two of the case studies also focus on popular culture that had an explicit profit motive. The fashion and film movements studied here were overt in their pursuit of a mainstream market to make money for various popular culture industry giants. The literary movements were partially related to the book market, but the two examples explored here were never explicitly used for financial gain or market domination. These differences are important to the book in that they emphasize the complicated reasons for white appropriations, the ways in which these reasons changed, and the diverse arenas in which white men appropriated black masculinities.

Each case study follows a parallel structure that addresses the reasons for and outcomes of white appropriation of black masculinities. First, each chapter dips back into the historical relationship between white American and black American cultural productions within the genre, specifically as they relate to gender, demonstrating

the existing relationship on which later appropriations were built as well as the distinct nature of the appropriation in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Second, each chapter investigates the black American popular culture that was available to the white artists and activists in the chosen period and the ways in which this popular culture explored the link between gender and race. Third, each case study explores the personal history of the white artists or activists in order to highlight their previous engagements with black masculinities. Fourth, each case study shows that the white artists felt marginalized from ideal US manhood, contemplated their alienation in their cultural work, and then appropriated what they understood to be constructions of black masculinity in an attempt to adopt alternative ways of being a man. Finally, each chapter contemplates the specific reasons that each white artist or activist turned to black manhood as an escape from ideal masculinity and the consequences of this decision, ultimately offering critical perspectives on white men's appropriation of black masculinities.

By focusing on white masculinity, there is a danger that these case studies will perpetuate the privileging of white men in US history and reduce African American men to tropes and stereotypes. *He Thinks He's Down* attempts to avoid these difficulties in several ways. In outlining the black contribution to US popular culture in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, it continues the project of showing how black masculinities were as complicated and nuanced as were white masculinities. While I focus on white male appropriations of black masculinities, I do so in ways that intend to promote a greater understanding of the images and realities of black masculine identities in the civil rights era and the ways in which these images and realities changed over this period. I also highlight the ways in which white masculinity and black masculinity are inextricably linked.

Furthermore, in focusing on the role that race plays in negotiations of gender, and specifically the ways in which "white" and "black" are arbitrary categories that have been contested, negotiated,

and appropriated, this book contributes to the long-standing project of undermining the power of race as a tool to disenfranchise the many while privileging the few. All three of the case studies investigated here prove that race is not necessarily a singular experience: it changes with history, society, and perspective. Masculinity is also a varied experience, often contested, and rarely assumed. By paying attention to the ways in which race and gender intersect and change in various periods of US history, as well as the ways in which they are strategically deployed in popular culture, this book undermines any single definition of “white masculinity,” as well as “black masculinity,” and helps to clear a space for the further unravelling of the arbitrary power discrepancy between the two.

As part of this project, *He Thinks He's Down* demonstrates that white American male artists and activists, feeling alienated from hegemonic masculinities in the civil rights era, turned to popular ideas about black masculinity, and it considers the reasons for and effects of this appropriation. Ultimately, in appropriating images of black masculinity, the white artists and activists failed to recognize their own privilege or acknowledge the ways in which their art and activism perpetuated the privileging of masculinity at the expense of black and white women. Sometimes, despite their best efforts, they did little to empower real black men, which trivialized the very black freedom struggle that they admired. In fact, in seeking respite in the shadows of the margins, these white men ultimately stood in the way of those trying to come out of the darkness.

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