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Recommended Citation

Thomas, Kevin D., "Black Masculinities and the Media: An Interview with Filmmaker and Activist Byron Hurt" (2019). *College of Communication Faculty Research and Publications*. 568.

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Black Masculinities and the Media: An Interview with Filmmaker and Activist Byron Hurt

Byron Hurt

Kevin D. Thomas

Abstract

In this interview, Byron Hurt reflects on his career and how he has become a prominent activist, speaker, filmmaker, and writer about media's roles in shaping Black identities and culture, especially constructions of Black masculinity. In addition to detailing his career trajectory, Hurt discusses many important topics: his inspiration to make films, the power of filmmaking to make cultural change, the filmmaker's place within a documentary, changing notions of Black masculinity, the constraints advertising and media place on Black men and boys to define their manhood, Black men's assertion of power over Black women, intersectionality, digital media's possibilities for more diverse expressions of Black identity, his current and future projects, advice for advertisers on how to represent people of

color, and the importance of providing contextual details when representing a particular group of people or a controversial topic.

Keywords

advertising, African American, Black masculinity, culture, filmmaking, foodways, gender, hazing, identity, intersectionality, masculinity, media, media literacy, men, race, sexuality, socialization, soul food, toxic masculinity, violence

Kevin D. Thomas' Introduction to Byron Hurt

Byron Hurt is a lot of things. He is an anti-sexist activist, lecturer, accomplished writer, and award-winning documentary filmmaker. However, at the heart of the matter Hurt identifies himself as a humanitarian, educator, and communicator—which is precisely why he is featured in this interview for *Advertising & Society Quarterly*. Hurt is a storyteller. He weaves together deeply engaging narratives that speak to the diversity and complexities of the Black experience, particularly in the areas of gender identity and masculinity. Hurt approaches his work with an unparalleled level of sensitivity and care, and as an African American man immersed in Black culture, his stories are also intimate and personally relevant. As such, Hurt's work exudes realness which has not only garnered him a bounty of awards and critical acclaim, but also a well-deserved sense of authenticity within Black communities.

As Naya Jones and I highlight in our recent *ASQ* article, race is sewn into the very fabric of advertising, yet the images it provides are far too often deficient when it comes to Black consumers and other non-White consumer communities.¹ Historically, brand ambassadors like Aunt Jemima, Frito Bandito, and Jell-O's "Chinese Baby" all demonstrate a dependence on a stereotypical imaginary when representing consumers of color. Recent race-related blunders by Dove, H&M, Gucci, and Prada illustrate that racist tropes remain engrained in the imaginary of the ad industry.² This reality has not gone unnoticed by consumers of color. In a recent UK study, 34% of Black respondents articulated that advertisers inaccurately portray Black culture.³ Thirty percent of Asian respondents stated the same with respect to Asian culture. Conversely, only 9% of White respondents believed White consumers suffered inaccurate representations. Indeed, there is much advertisers can learn from Hurt and his body of work.

In this interview Hurt provides insights into his journey, elucidates how he is able to craft work that emanates credibility and genuineness among its target audience, and provides specific words of advice to media producers and advertisers for advancing more authentic representations of consumers of color.

Byron Hurt describes who he is and what grounds his filmmaking and activism. He believes that his spirit is "trapped" in the 1960s because his concerns align with those of the Civil Rights Movement and engagement in civic affairs, demonstrations, marching, and advocating for civil rights. From a young age, Byron has been drawn to civil rights leaders and the struggle for Black liberation. He has been inspired by important Black figures such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman because of their "incredible work to liberate the hearts and minds and bodies of Black people." As he grew older, Byron discovered that he had a skill to communicate with people in a way that had impact.

By studying film, he discovered that he could reach millions of people at one time, which inspired him to become a filmmaker and to make films focused on social justice issues.

In college, a class called Blacks in the Media and the Press taught by an inspiring professor, Elizabeth Hadley Freiburg, challenged him to examine images of Black people in television, movies, print media, and advertising. Professor Freiburg's class forced him and his young Black peers to look at media in a critical way that questioned many of the images of Black people that he accepted without question. Rather than taking shows like *Good Times*, *That's My Momma*, *What's Happening*, and *Amos and Andy* purely for their entertainment value, he realized that these representations reinforced problematic ideas about who Black people were as well as their place in society. In particular, through his class with Professor Freiburg, he was exposed to the world of Black documentary filmmaker Marlon Riggs who presented fairer and more realistic representations of the Black experience. Hurt cites Riggs' film *Color Adjustment* as the most influential on his decision to become a filmmaker, for the way it deconstructs so many images and representations of Blackness found in the mainstream media which Hurt had not thought much about before.

Kevin Thomas asks Hurt to reflect on how Riggs addresses different modes of Black masculinity in *Black Is...Black Ain't*, which is also a subject of Hurt's films, especially with regard to homophobia. For Hurt, Riggs' deconstruction of Black manhood, masculinity, and sexuality exposed him to these issues in ways he had never heard or seen before.

After graduating from college, Hurt's understandings of masculinity and sexuality expanded further when he worked with fellow filmmaker and activist Jackson Katz on his Mentors in Violence Prevention Program. Hurt was the first young person Katz hired for this program, which had former student-athletes train and educate boys and men, especially athletes, on ways to challenge sexism, other men's sexism, and violence against girls and women.⁴ Working for Katz, Byron learned how to articulate his own social conditioning around manhood and masculinity, as well as topics such as homophobia, gender violence, and physical and sexual violence. He eventually discovered that he wanted to bridge his interests in filmmaking and gender to make films that encouraged people to think critically about these topics. In hindsight, Hurt believes his path toward gender violence prevention and filmmaking happened by fate. He studied journalism and did not take many women's studies classes in college, but his many conversations with Jackson Katz about hyper-masculinity set him on a path toward producing films where he wanted to help other boys and young men transform like he had.

Byron Hurt explains how and why he takes on the topics he does in his films. He finds that he must have a personal connection to the topic at hand, which gives him an opportunity to reflect on himself as well as what he is examining through his work. Although he does not see himself as an artist, he does find his filmmaking, activism, and writing to be a way to express and externalize himself as well as what he has experienced and felt. Similar to what Marlon Briggs and Michael Moore have done, Hurt puts himself in his films and tries to be as authentic and real as he can be to the story, the subjects, and himself when working on a film. He tries not to be preachy and wave his finger in judgment at others.

Hurt reveals that he purposely uses humor to be genuine and fair to his film's participants as well as to provide levity when discussing serious topics. For example, in *Soul Food Junkies*, Hurt shows a 'junk pot' full of many types of meats and vegetables at a football tailgate party held at Jackson State University.

In the pot are many foods that Byron no longer eats, which the tailgaters pressured him to eat. Such humorous moments provide an emotional break that allow Hurt to deal with intense issues over the long duration of his films.

Byron Hurt sees himself as an activist filmmaker. When he started making films, he thought that meant his place was to change the world through his films. He says that he has since learned that you cannot change systemic issues with just one film, but he does see one film being used as a tool to shift culture and to help those people who are already doing the kind of work that he is addressing. However, some productions can lead to significant changes. For example, dream hampton's recent Lifetime television series humanizing the women who endured violence and abuse over the years by singer-songwriter R. Kelly led to outcries for Kelly to be held accountable for his actions. Hurt tries to make a similar cultural impact through his films.

Byron Hurt discusses toxic masculinity and violence-based constructions of manhood among men of color, which he covered in his documentary *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*. In recent years there has been significant pushback against toxic masculinity and hyper-masculinity. How much of this change is due to cultural work like Hurt's documentary? How much of this change is due to life and times changing? Despite some changes, Hurt believes that toxic masculinity is still very much present in popular culture and media today. He hopes that his film has helped make some of the positive cultural shifts toward the acceptance of other, less violent forms of masculinity, but he does not see his film being the only force of good.

Hurt sees much work being done by women, activists, and young men working alongside older men to educate boys and men. He believes that younger men are more open and receptive to healthier forms of masculinity. Moreover, he sees younger men questioning and challenging traditional notions of manhood and masculinity that have been pointed out in his work.

Unfortunately, with every step forward, Hurt has observed pushback against calls for change. He cites the current US presidential administration as being an epitome of resistance to societal changes to the dominance of White male power/privilege. In American culture today, Hurt has found some people wear toxic masculinity as a badge of honor, which only reinforces and reinscribes traditional ideas and definitions about what manhood and masculinity are supposed to be.

What role does advertising play in the process of normalizing toxic masculinity? Hurt finds that social media, violent images in popular culture, and porn culture continue to perpetuate violent forms of masculinity. All of these sources have normalized male power and dominance over girls and women. When young boys see media messages that do not question violence toward and power over girls and women, they are socialized to see such behaviors as acceptable. Even supposedly humorous and tongue-in-cheek representations that poke fun at important questions surrounding sexual violence, such as having to receive consent to be intimate, can subtly tell young boys and men to not take such topics seriously. In the end, Hurt sees advertising and media playing a significant role in shaping how boys and men see themselves as sexual beings and how they relate to girls and women and people of various sexual orientations.

In his previous work, especially in *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Byron Hurt discusses how Black men are often forced to identify within a certain box of manhood and masculinity: one must be strong,

tough, have lots of women, have money, be a 'player,' be in control, and exert dominance over other people (especially men).

Has this limited notion of Black masculinity changed? Hurt believes that things have changed. Black men are being encouraged to be more expressive with and toward one another. Recently, when working with young Black men from Philadelphia using digital media to share their stories of trauma as a way to heal, Hurt observed that they are resisting violent forms of manhood. During his first time meeting these young men, he heard them use the term toxic masculinity. For Hurt, this shows that young Black men are questioning their own conditioning and socialization as Black men. He sees more Black men being more relaxed with one another than he has seen in the past. In other words, previous postured performances of Black manhood are giving way to expressions of manhood that are more authentic, caring, and open.

How have these more open forms of Black masculinity shown themselves in advertising? Hurt has seen healthier expressions of Black masculinity in advertising and the media, especially in the NBA where players are showing a sense of togetherness, friendship, and bonding over the more competitive, violent, and aggressive images seen in the past. He believes there is a generational divide where younger athletes and their fans want to see more cooperation and unity, which is also observed in popular culture more generally. Unfortunately, these themes of hyper-masculinity have not gone away. They are still present in the broader culture, as Hurt explains through the reactions to tennis player Serena Williams appearing on the cover of *Harper's Bazaar* with part of her buttocks exposed. Many Black men attempted to police Williams' display of her body because they felt she demeaned herself by revealing too much; they argued that she was not acting appropriately as a Black woman. From Hurt's perspective, this is an example of Black men trying to take control over Black women's bodies and how they express themselves.

The discussion of some Black men trying to control Black women's bodies leads Kevin Thomas to discuss Hurt's application of intersectionality, or the idea that people have multiple, blending layers to their identity that help explain the various degrees of privilege and oppression that they experience in their lives. Hurt reveals that he did not always think about the world in this way. As a Black man with an activist spirit, he learned to become an intersectional thinker over time. He has made it his goal to help others grow similarly along their life journeys.

Kevin Thomas notes that Byron Hurt has often argued that images of toxic masculinity are so prevalent because they are profitable and sell easily (much like how "sex sells"). Given the democratizing power of digital media, can more authentic images of Black masculinity be spread? Hurt believes digital platforms give people an ability to self-define more quickly and easily. They no longer have to wait for larger corporations to validate their identities and stories. However, there is a danger with digital media, too. Some people use digital platforms to reinforce and entrench traditional visions of manhood and masculinity.

How does Hurt navigate the world of advertising to promote his own activist filmmaking? He believes that he is fortunate that he has not faced pressures from large corporations or advertisers to limit what he says and does through his films. Much of Hurt's work is done for media organizations like PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), which have a more public service-oriented mission. Hurt has not

compromised what he has put in his films to stay true to his values in what he is doing as a filmmaker. For example, BET (Black Entertainment Television) asked him to remove an interview of a BET executive in order to air *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*. Hurt refused to cut the scene.

Hurt continues to do work that explores Black culture and identity. In the future, he is considering making a film about Black family reunions. He is currently finishing a film on hazing culture, which he finds has tested his creativity to make high-quality documentary films.

In reflecting on his career as a documentary filmmaker, Hurt says that he would tell his young self to learn the business side of documentary filmmaking, find a knowledgeable business partner, be more prolific by spending less time working on individual projects, and streamline his process. On the side of content, he would tell himself to put out more work, especially related to new representations of masculinity in advertising and media, such as the recent Gillette "We Believe" ad challenging toxic masculinity.

Byron Hurt provides advice to advertising and media practitioners who are representing Blackness. First, more people of color who have a certain level of social consciousness and awareness to challenge certain themes and ideas included in advertising should be in the production room. Second, corporations need to be aware of the impact of their representations and messages about people of color, so the voices of people of color are heard when ads are produced. Hurt believes that there is and will be positive change, as was observed recently with Beyoncé asking for Black photographers to contribute to the production of her image on the cover of *Vogue*. Hurt finds that people of color need to express their demands for change, and important Black artists like Beyoncé who have claimed their power will only help others do that, too.

Hurt then talks about his current project on hazing. By examining hazing culture through his own experiences, Hurt is challenging the traditions and rituals that have been normalized historically across race, culture, and class. Because he is taking a broad view of the topic, the film's production has been challenging, but Hurt hopes it will have an important cultural impact by starting important conversations about hazing.

Kevin Thomas asks Hurt to reflect on how the Black community has responded to his work. Hurt draws attention to important issues often only discussed within the Black community, so Thomas is wondering if he has received pushback for "airing dirty laundry." From his experience, Hurt has received negative reactions from people, but that is usually before his films come out. Once viewers see the care he puts into his films to contextualize the issues he covers, they often change their views.

Hurt admits that he has walked a tightrope in producing films. He wants to provide his audiences with new ways of thinking about a topic, and to do that best, he has learned that it is very important to provide the fullest historical, political, and social contexts to avoid stereotypes and misrepresentations. Because Hurt puts his personal stories into his films, he cannot avoid representing Black culture. His life stories and experiences go hand-in-hand with Black culture. Therefore, he finds it a duty for him to take his experiences and situate them in relation to details within *and* beyond Black culture.

Thomas reminds Hurt that he has the time and space to provide many details through the longer format of documentary film, but advertisers only have seconds to tell a story. How can advertisers tell

respectful and fair stories within such time constraints? Hurt believes that if advertisers are serious about being careful, they will find a way to contextualize what they are representing, especially given the large number of talented creative people who work in the advertising industry. The question is whether the desire is there, and whether the right people are working to develop thoughtful messages and images that avoid harmful stereotypes and tropes in advertising. Hurt calls for more diversity in advertising, especially at the executive level.

Byron Hurt

Byron Hurt is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, writer, and anti-sexist activist. Hurt is also the former host of the Emmy-nominated series *REEL WORKS with BYRON HURT*. His documentary *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and broadcast nationally on PBS' Emmy-award winning series Independent Lens.

Byron's latest film, *Soul Food Junkies*, won the CNN Best Documentary Award at the American Black Film Festival and Best Documentary at the Urbanworld Film Festival in New York City. *Soul Food Junkies* aired nationally on PBS' Emmy-Award winning series Independent Lens in January and April 2013.

A member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated, Hurt's next film is called *Hazing: How Badly Do You Want In?*

Kevin D. Thomas

Kevin D. Thomas, PhD, is an educator, analyst, and engaged scholar. He currently serves as Assistant Professor of Multicultural Branding at Marquette University. Dr. Thomas specializes in using policy-relevant and community participatory action research methods to critically examine the relationship between marketing, consumption practices, and notions of self and community. He is particularly interested in how identity markers, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, are represented in marketing and experienced in the marketplace. He is co-founder of Food for Black Thought, the Black Media Council, and the Race in the Marketplace Research Network.

Footnotes

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3. Lloyds Banking Group, *Ethnicity in Advertising: Reflecting Modern Britain in 2018?*, retrieved from https://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/globalassets/documents/our-group/responsibility/ethnicity-in-advertising/lloyds_banking_group-ethnicity_in_advertising.pdf.
4. For more information about Jackson Katz and his Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) Program, see Jackson Katz and William M. O'Barr, "Masculinities and the Media: An Interview with Activist Jackson Katz," *Advertising & Society Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (2019), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/728901>.