

Undergraduate Research Symposium May 17, 2013 Mary Gates Hall

Online Proceedings

SESSION 2P

MCNAIR SESSION - ECONOMIES OF EXPLOITATION, CULTURES OF RESISTANCE

Session Moderator: Sonnet Retman, American Ethnic Studies

295 MGH

3:45 PM to 5:15 PM

* Note: Titles in order of presentation.

Brown Eyes, Blue Eyes: The Integrated Audience's Gaze on Black Performance

Alexander (Alex) Catchings, Senior, English

EIP Scholar, Mary Gates Scholar, McNair Scholar

Mentor: Sonnet Retman, American Ethnic Studies

This talk explores African American cinema, and the ways black representations emerge in different commercial contexts to appeal to interracial audiences. Understanding independent "black cinema" as films that intend to resist voyeuristic spectatorship, this talk distinguishes the economic disparities between expressly black cinema versus commercial cinema that employs specific, trope-centered representations of black characters. This discussion pivots around Manthia Diawara's theoretical framework from "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" (1988), which suggests that commercial films bearing the intent to propel negative narratives of African Americans can be viewed with a resistant, critical spectatorship by viewers of differing races. While Diawara is correct, and some directors have been producing more independent black cinematic works, this talk lays out the enduring economic boons and ramifications from continued voyeurism in black and commercial cinema. Pieces of cultural production addressed include Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000), Tyler Perry's *Madea* franchise, Tate Taylor's *The Help* (2011), Bruce Joel Rubin's *Ghost* (1990), and variety television shows including Richard Pryor's 1977 *The Richard Pryor Show* and Lorne Michaels' *Saturday Night Live* (1975). Ultimately, this talk analyzes how box office gains and television ratings both reflect and interact with black iconography and representation. Through this undertaking, a better understanding can be had as to the extent of veracity and implication when black artist Ralph Ellison

notes that, "Movies are not about Blacks but what Whites think about Blacks."

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"Black Folks Passing for Black Folks": The Black Middle Class, Hip Hop, and "Black Authenticity" in the 21st Century

Janelle Lena (Janelle) White, Senior, History, American Ethnic Studies

EIP Scholar, Mary Gates Scholar, Presidential Scholar, McNair Scholar

Mentor: Sonnet Retman, American Ethnic Studies

In Touré's 2012 book, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What It Means to Be Black Now*, Touré quotes Henry Louis Gates, stating, "if there are 40 million black Americans, then there are 40 million ways to be black." While there exist as many ways to be black as black Americans, and while American pop culture and mainstream media are experiencing new exposure to different modalities of blackness, the rhetoric of black authenticity and the perceived need to prove oneself based on a racial category are still prevalent. Through a close reading of excerpts from Stew's play *Passing Strange*, Colson Whitehead's novel *Sag Harbor*, and Paul Beatty's novel *White Boy Shuffle*, I will use the analytics of authenticity and blackness in literature to explore how identity manifests itself for black males in hip hop music. In focusing on rappers Childish Gambino and Kanye West, I complicate a static popular image of blackness that is transformed through different modes of socio-economic status and education level by these artists. My research explores the lingering rhetoric of authenticity, focusing on contemporary intersectionalities of identity in regards to gender, socio-economic status, and race. These intersectionalities can conflict and influence one an-

other for individuals who struggle to personally define themselves, while simultaneously being defined by their communities. In focusing on how black identity is created within the arts, specifically literature and music, my research aims to unpack the idea of “authenticity” surrounding blackness and make meaning of the ways in which black male teenagers and young adults explore, qualify, and define their identity in regards to race. Ultimately, my analysis sheds light on a more heterogeneous representation of black identity, while suggesting that restrictions on identity for black Americans are not obsolete in the 21st Century.