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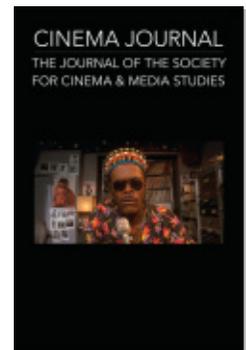
“Who’s ‘We,’ White Man?”: Scholarship, Teaching,
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“Who’s ‘We,’ White Man?” Scholarship, Teaching, and Identity Politics in African American Media Studies

by ALLYSON NADIA FIELD

One spring quarter, at the conclusion of a large undergraduate lecture course on the history of African American cinema, I received an anonymous course evaluation which read in part, “Someone should tell Professor Field it’s weird she’s so into Black stuff.” While I could dismiss this assessment as off topic and unconstructive—equivalent to a kid pointing and laughing “your epidermis is showing!”—it reflected a pervasive assumption in education and the broader culture: the notion that authority is based on identity and the experience of cultural belonging. Behind the student’s flippant comment are interesting questions about the relationship between scholarship and identity: for example, what would he or she say about a Latino or Latina studying African American media, or an African American scholar of another discipline? Like Fox News recently did, would the student question a scholar’s work on Christianity if that scholar happened to be Muslim?¹ Conversely, does the student believe that there is a straightforward category of “whiteness,” and that I, as an Egyptian American, have an uncomplicated relationship to it? Certainly, the student’s underlying assumption that academic interest is based on identity is a reductive correlation that presumes that interest and authority are narrowly confined to racial and ethnic categories as well as gender and sexual orientation, ignoring the porousness and instability of these concepts. But it also rejects the fundamental premise of scholarship: the advancement of knowledge through rigorous inquiry. Intellectual endeavors are driven by curiosity and the desire for exploration. Yet when it comes to issues of race and ethnicity, identity seems to trump scholarship. As Pamela Caughie has asked, “Will the authority derived from experience always be more convincing

1 In an interview on the Fox News online program *Spirited Debate* on July 26, 2013, concerning his book *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013), Reza Aslan was repeatedly asked by Lauren Green why he, a Muslim, would write a book about the founder of Christianity. Aslan replied coolly, “Because it’s my job as an academic.”

than the authority derived through training?”² More to the point, as scholars and teachers, how are we to reconcile the requirements of scholarly inquiry with the often charged emotions surrounding issues of identity? Put differently, why should we think that experience is inherently unscholarly? In media studies, methodologies have long been attuned to the experience of actual spectators, producers, and participants—and in a manner inseparable from other concerns (e.g., formal, industrial). For African American media studies in particular, the issue of authority and its attending privilege (who can talk about whom) is a vexed one, since part of the historical problem is that those in the dominant culture have presumed to speak of—and for—other groups. All these issues (privilege, authority, assumptions about identity) are at play in the student’s seemingly facetious remark.

What I have wanted to tell the student (and the countless other people who have expressed similar sentiments) is that I think it’s weird *not* to be interested in “Black stuff”—or in any and all of the myriad elements that constitute our cultural fabric. Being in the world means belonging to a multicultural, multiethnic society. Inherent in my student’s assumption is the belief that being white is to be without race, and to be outside the dynamics of race altogether (the lunacy of this is captured in the recurring Stephen Colbert joke about not seeing race, and it has been theorized by, among others, Richard Dyer in *White*).³ We all have a race, whether we take it to be ontological or socially constructed. And it is an undeniable fact that race, an elusive category with very concrete implications, has been a defining component of the American experience. If we take seriously Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s warning that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” then we should *all* be concerned with understanding and combating social inequities, understanding their roots, the mechanisms by which they proliferate, and the means by which they can be fought. Race affects everyone. It should matter to everyone.

How race matters is the key question for academics. As a scholar and teacher, my work is unified by two broad theoretical inquiries: how film and visual media shape perceptions of race and ethnicity, and how these media have been and can be mobilized to perpetuate or challenge social inequities. Through investigations into film history, I aim to open up possibilities for a different understanding of the visual world in which we live and the language with which we represent that world. This has practical consequences: when I teach African American film practices, I treat them as *American* practices that resonate across broader concerns, investments, and applicability. This is not to downplay the significance of particularities of production and exhibition but to advocate for a careful negotiation of the relationship between specificity and generality without necessarily privileging either. The same is true when I teach courses with more general topics—I do not believe in segregating minority media practices in a separate week or as a subset of American film history, or as only relevant to concerns

2 Caughie is speaking specifically to scholarship on indigenous literatures, but her point applies to scholarship pertaining to race and ethnicity more broadly. Pamela L. Caughie, “‘Not Entirely Strange, . . . Not Entirely Friendly’: *Passing* and Pedagogy,” *College English* 54, no. 7 (November 1992): 776.

3 Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997). Another possibility is that the student might be assuming that apparent whiteness is, in fact, raced, and that being raced as white implies a general lack of serious interest in “Black stuff,” which, arguably, is frequently true.

of race and ethnicity. At the outset of a course, I tell my students that media are multiethnic, multiracial, and variously gendered. Likewise, our considerations of them should be similarly complex.

The notion that Black media speaks only to issues of identity is a grave fallacy that is too often perpetuated in teaching and scholarship, and therefore it is our responsibility as educators not to limit what Black media can speak to or about, or to segregate Black media in a narrowly delineated unit on a syllabus. I do not wish to suggest that there is an inherent problem with courses dedicated to Black media. Instead, I believe that as we diversify our curriculum and our scholarship, we do so not by placing representational burden on already-overdetermined objects, but by asking the same questions of all objects under study. While attentive to questions of identity politics, privilege, subject position, and representation, these concerns should not obfuscate other approaches, such as formal analysis, historical contextualization, and industrial situation. Doing so risks perpetuating the marginalization against which our work fights and turns film into nothing more than sociological tracts. Taken together, these questions create a complex discursive space that is rarely neat. Yet by allowing for this inherent messiness, we are better able to grapple with the living questions that account for the richness and complexity of the material, placed within its contexts of production and reception.

More to the point, broad scholarly rigor does not diminish political investment; rather, it bolsters it. For example, when we think about Oscar Micheaux's work as important for the study of issues of narrative, adaptation, and independent production,



Figure 1. Shango (Mutabaruka) in *Sankofa* (Haile Gerima, 1993).

as well as for questions of class and reception, it significantly aids and contributes to our understanding of race films. *Sankofa* (Haile Gerima, 1993) is a film that deals with slavery and collective memory, but it is also an excellent object for discussing multiple diegeses, camera movement, sound, and other aspects of film form or even independent filmmaking practices (Figure 1). *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989) is an ideal case study of

framing, composition, and editing, just as it is a vehicle for discussing urban ethnic and racial conflict, police brutality, and the question of what the “right thing” is. Or take *Penitentiary* (Jamaa Fanaka, 1979), which was the highest-grossing independent film of 1980, yet rarely figures in histories of American independent filmmaking. In another direction, Tyler Perry's oeuvre offers insights into the structure of the contemporary film industry, genre, audience and reception, and gender and representation.

To return to my student's course evaluation, what he or she was asking, if we give the most charitable interpretation, was why *I* was personally invested in African

American cinema. When I teach or research African American media, I explicitly approach it from many critical angles. What I *don't* do is try to “explain” why I am, or why someone “like me,” could be personally invested in African American cinema. I see several problems in doing so. First, it would presume that personal investment and personal identity are straightforwardly correlative, even if the path is not immediately evident.⁴ Second, it risks pathologizing the scholar: something must have *happened* to her to make her *care* (another theme that has appeared in course evaluations and suggests a disturbing normalizing of racialized and gendered presumptions). Third, and perhaps most insidious, it subordinates scholarly inquiry to individual psychology, often manifested in gendered terms.⁵ Of course, scholarship certainly can be motivated by personal experience. In most cases it is—to dedicate a career to inquiry in a particular area, one must be motivated by passion, and passion is usually derived from strong personal experiences and/or motivating influences. Yet the personal is inextricable from the social; we ought to reject the notion that an investment in issues of social justice and a curiosity about the roots and manifestations of inequities is not a universal concern. There is something dangerous about evaluating authority on the basis of perceived group belonging, not least because it reinforces the notion that whiteness is a *lingua franca*, whereas difference (whether race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation) is the domain of identity politics.⁶ I consider it a responsibility of scholarship to work against such assumptions.

To be sure, there are limits to the scope of scholarly authority. In my work on African American film history, I am invested in how race is figured and contested, how it is present, and how the absence of its signifiers marks the presence of entrenched regimes of representational oppression. I talk frequently about African American filmmakers, spectators, and audiences. And yet I would not speak *for* them. In this way, there is less of a burden on me to be representative. While my African and African American colleagues face the presumption that their authority derives from cultural belonging, I rarely encounter an assumption that I am speaking from a specific subject position. I am assumed to be nonrepresentative, so that the student who wrote that course evaluation did not see me as a *raced body*⁷ (I wonder if he or she would have questioned my authority if I were a sixty-year-old white man). This means that I am not asked to

4 For example, in his thoughtful discussion of being a white scholar of African American studies, Mark D. Naison discusses his upbringing in the racially charged environment of Crown Heights, Brooklyn. See Mark D. Naison, “A ‘White Boy’ in African-American Studies,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 48, no. 34 (May 3, 2002).

5 For example, I have faced frequent assumptions that my interest in African American media derives from some level of intimacy, usually presumed to be sexual, with African American men. (I find this sort of assumption the most pernicious of all, given the historical paranoia over interracial intimacy that has masked Black women’s victimhood against white male aggression with the myth of hypersexual Black masculinity.) For many reasons, this is a deeply vexed and complex issue that requires more analysis than space allows here, yet it is certainly inseparable from the issue of identity and pedagogy and scholarship.

6 There has been a long-standing scholarly interest in critiquing the neutrality of whiteness. In addition to Richard Dyer’s *White*, see David W. Stowe, “Uncolored People: The Rise of Whiteness Studies,” *Lingua Franca* 6, no. 6 (1996): 68–77; Mike Hill, ed., *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Robyn Wiegman, “Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity,” *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 115–150; John Tercier, ed., *Whiteness* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, London Consortium, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2000).

7 While it is impossible to know, I assume that the student writing the comment is not Black and likely white, given the demographics of this particular class.

be representative of any group outside of being a scholar (people don't ask me what all white people think about Black culture). I am never asked to speak for a particular group, and when I offer an opinion it is allowed to be merely that of a professor without the expectation of broader applicability. This is a way of being seen that comes with the inheritance of white privilege; while students may deny me a certain type of personal authority because they do not see me as a member of a group, they nonetheless perceive me as a professional authority for that very reason. However, part of being answerable (of accepting responsibility for one's subject position and one's argument within a broader social world) is to be constantly vigilant about voice and authority: Where does it derive from? From what perspective? For me, it helps to remember my Egyptian mother's retort, channeling Tonto, "Who's 'we,' white man?," when she encounters essentializing statements or the presumed universality of the pronoun *we*.⁸ This is a good reminder that each of us speaks from a specific subject position that is informed by numerous factors, including (but by no means limited to) race.

In teaching, I constantly reiterate that there is no monolithic notion of "Blackness," just as there is no singular "Black community" (just as there's no singular white community, or no singular Egyptian community). I insist that we interrogate pronouns like *they* and *them*, *us* and *our*—along with *we*—and aim for precision in how we talk about filmmakers, characters, audiences, and broader cultures. I also directly address questions of privilege and authority, to bring these issues to the fore in the classroom. This requires a persistent deliberateness that pushes me to be a better scholar. Continually questioning my assumptions means that there can be no rest, but the personal consciousness pays off in scholarly rigor and intellectual growth. This means maintaining a critical distance from my work: no matter how familiar I become with the cultural milieu of the works I study, I can never claim to be writing as an insider. It will never be a question of trying harder, passing, or assimilating. Rather, it is about straddling that gap and accepting the always-tenuous position of outsider.

Accepting that one is writing from this position does not have to mean relinquishing scholarly authority. Rather, it helps to clarify the perspective of the scholar, a position that in many disciplines goes unchecked or unexamined. As a film historian, I take this as a fundamental methodology for scholarship: critical distance enables analytic assessment. Filmmaker Monona Wali calls herself "a friendly squatter"—an outsider who shares cultural affinities for and political investments with another group.⁹ There is something appealing about this image as an embracing of one's outsiderhood (in her case, an Indian woman working with predominantly African American filmmakers; in my case, an Egyptian American woman working on Black film history). *Squatting* also suggest transience and illicitness. I like the image of transience because it suggests that one's relationality should always be in flux. Illicitness is an appealing evocation as well because it keeps us mindful of the frequently justified suspicion of whites and

8 This originally refers to a parodic cartoon by E. Nelson Bridwell about Tonto's retort to the Lone Ranger's presumption of the pronoun *we* that appeared in *Mad Magazine* 38 (March 1, 1958) and was later repeated and thematized by many, most notably by Oscar Brown Jr. in his 1974 song "The Lone Ranger."

9 Monona Wali, "L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema Symposium" (presentation at the roundtable "L.A. Rebellion: Then and Now," UCLA Film & Television Archive, Hammer Museum's Billy Wilder Theater, Los Angeles, CA, November 11, 2011).

white authority that have attended interracial interactions from the antebellum period, through segregation, to the post-civil rights era Black Power movements and beyond. Just as much as I hope that my students do not judge me on the basis of what they perceive to be my identity, I also welcome their interrogation of their own assumptions—and, of course, mine as well. Suspicion can be a fruitful springboard for dialogue. Indeed, suspicion is often justified. After all, there is always the danger of squatting from the position of privilege (like the teenager who lives in a downtown squat but goes to her grandmother's Upper East Side townhouse to shower or eat). This is the tricky negotiation that must take place in the classroom when questions of race, class, gender, and other aspects of social disparity are on the table, and when one is dealing with students from a wide range of backgrounds. It is a useful and necessary dialogue to have with oneself as a scholar who, by definition, writes from a position of privilege.

The privilege of scholarship comes with immense responsibility to our disciplines and to our students. While embracing intellectual curiosity, as scholars we should be wary of academic tourism.¹⁰ Like the less attractive side of squatting, the touristic approach belies the dangers that historically have haunted ethnographic studies. We work from that legacy, and from the legacy of sociology in Black film studies, and we must reckon with those precedents even as we search for approaches and methodologies that expand the scope of scholarly inquiry.

Part of the responsibility we have as teachers is to model ways of dealing with vexed issues. In the classroom, my goal is to enable students to talk about race without the fear of getting it “wrong.” Many students believe that discussions about race are the equivalent of racism (another frequent theme in evaluations). This is dangerously close to the notion that studying race is divisive, as was argued in the recent battles in Arizona over Mexican American studies, or that talking about race is divisive, which recalls right-wing charges against President Obama whenever he broaches the subject, however tentatively. Such attacks on discourse are a means of silencing dissent and perpetuating the status quo of inequities, whether they are economic, linguistic, legal, or any number of mechanisms by which hegemony asserts itself.

I write this during the summer of the Trayvon Martin murder trial, the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman, and the ensuing outrage felt by many, myself included. The “national conversation about race” is frequently invoked in situations such as this, but it rarely results in anything resembling a real conversation. In the contemporary moment, there is an urgency among intellectuals working on issues of race and ethnicity to refute the fallacy of a “postracial America” that so many of our students are invested in, and that a wide swath of media constantly disproves. Yet equally vital is the imperative to consider all media production as interracial and interethnically imbricated. As Stuart Hall affirms, “[t]here is no escape from the politics of representation,” and experience is rarely homogeneous.¹¹ Likewise, our scholarship and teaching should reflect the heterogeneity of experience. The fallacy of the “postracial” is evident

10 See, e.g., Haile Gerima, “The Internal Dialogue of an African Film-Maker,” in *Transgressing Boundaries: New Directions in the Study of Culture in Africa*, ed. Brenda Cooper and Andrew Steyn (Cape Town, South Africa: University of Cape Town Press, 1996), 148.

11 Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” in *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 30.

in the student's evaluation, in which he or she cannot understand the impetus to teach outside of specific racial parameters. One strategy of addressing—and combating—assumptions surrounding race and ethnicity is to foreground discursive problems in the classroom and, where appropriate, in our writing. When we shy away from such difficult discussions, we model for our students shame and embarrassment and thereby perpetuate the notion that talking about race is tantamount to racism. It is when we are open about the nuanced difficulties of these issues, and confront them head on, that we demonstrate how discourse leads to understanding and, as a scholarly pursuit, creates new possibilities for breaking from previous paradigms of misunderstanding. *

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No Getting around the Black

by MARK D. CUNNINGHAM

Often when I read or see an interview with black filmmakers who have a film being released—particularly one of some emotional or historical heft—many seem to make it a point to explain how the themes and subject matter of their film are universal, human, and something to which everyone from all walks of life can relate. I detect a form of pacification or politeness in Ryan Coogler's revelation that he made his film *Fruitvale Station* (2013) about "human beings and how we treat each other[,] . . . how we treat the people we love and how we treat the people we don't know," especially when juxtaposed to the candor of his comments in the *Los Angeles Times* that filmmaking is "my outlet for my fears, for the things that make me angry or frustrated, for messages I want to get out. I was terrified, shocked, angry. I felt this was the film I was born to make."¹ In an MSNBC interview, Lee Daniels offers that his inspiration for making *The Butler* (2013) was "because it was a father-son love story and that transcends race; it's universal. . . . It really was a love story with the

1 Jeff Labrecque, "Sundance 2013: 'Fruitvale' Takes Two Major Festival Prizes," *Entertainment Weekly*, January 26, 2013, <http://insidemovies.ew.com/2013/01/26/sundance-2013-fruitvale-takes-two-major-festival-prizes.html>; Kenneth Turan, "Sundance 2013: Ryan Coogler on Pain, Passion in Making 'Fruitvale,'" *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jan/23/entertainment/la-et-mn-0123-sundance-fruitvale-20130123.html>.