



PROJECT MUSE®

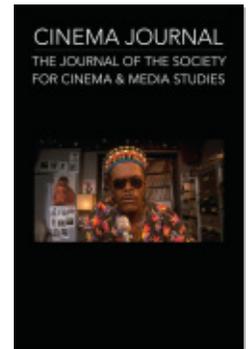
No Getting around the Black

Mark D. Cunningham

Cinema Journal, Volume 53, Number 4, Summer 2014, pp. 140-146 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2014.0044>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/550097>

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. *

Thanks to Paula Massood, Richard Yarborough, Michael Gillespie, Kristen Warner, and Daniel Morgan for their input on this essay, many conversations, and collegial debates. Paula, in particular, read several drafts and provided thoughtful and engaged feedback. Thanks as well to Beretta Smith-Shomade and Racquel Gates for their insightful editorial suggestions. Much appreciation goes to the Black Caucus of SCMS for their dedicated advocacy for African and African American media studies.

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>.

civil rights movement in the backdrop.”² Whether they make such assertions because they are playing the marketing game or are honestly invested in such an admission is up for interpretation. But as a film scholar and aficionado who just happens to be black, I have to wonder what, for example, is “human” about the way Oscar Grant was shot down in the prime of his life on a Bay Area subway platform by an overanxious white officer. What is “transcendent and universal” about the way, fictionalized or not, Cecil Gaines worried about the well-being of his college student son who chose to join the ranks of the Freedom Riders while, at the same time, drumming up enough of his own courage to confront a bigoted employer who failed to pay black butlers in a manner commensurate with white ones? These experiences are a decidedly horrific part of black experience as a whole, and comments like the ones the aforementioned black filmmakers make, from either a promotional or a personal standpoint, seem to soften the importance of that.

I have come to realize that comments like these reflect or play into the concept of a postracial America that many have negligently and naively wished into existence, especially after the election of Barack Obama as the nation’s first black president. People act as if everything is of equal accord and that racism has fossilized and become extinct, but we know better, right? Or, at least, we should. From the academy, I have read, agreeing and disagreeing with, countless essays, blogs, and social media nuggets of wisdom and erudition that point out any negative portrayals or problematic visions of black culture. But yet, arguments on the horizon suggest that “this *black* in black popular culture,” to refer to the title of Stuart Hall’s renowned essay, is not really necessary; that the problem in specifying the *black* is limiting and opens up a can of worms that does not consider complexities in identity, ethnicity, ethnography, experience, and gender.³

For example, an increasing number of white scholars are academically invested in the origins and mechanics of black artistry. As quoted in E. Patrick Johnson’s *Appropriating Blackness: Politics and the Performance of Authenticity*, Henry Louis Gates affirms this interest when he writes, “No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world.”⁴ His assessment may very well be correct, but I find myself wanting to know exactly why they are interested in these topics. I have never asked any of the white scholars I know who concern themselves with black subject matter the source of their scholarly fascination. I am certain I have refrained from inquiring out of an uncomfortable combination of civility, not wanting to make enemies or prompt disdain so early in my career as an academic, and the feeling that only I saw it as the elephant in the room.

Still, the question persists because I see it as yet another method (in a long historical line of them) in which black popular culture gets appropriated by outside racial groups. It is an extension of the quizzicality I feel about such cases in point as Eminem being considered the biggest-selling hip-hop artist of all time, about the vitriol leveled

2 Michele Richinick, “Oprah: ‘The Butler’ Shows Perseverance of Black Families,” *MSNBC*, August 14, 2013, <http://www.msnbc.com/morning-joe/oprah-the-butler-shows-perseverance>.

3 Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” *Social Justice* 20, nos. 1–2 (1993): 104–114.

4 E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.

at filmmaker Spike Lee by blacks and whites alike for criticizing director Quentin Tarantino's Oscar-winning slavery satire *Django Unchained* (2012), not to mention the ease with which Tarantino tosses the word nigger around in his films only to have it met with laughter and considerable box-office receipts, or singer Justin Timberlake aligning himself with every black artist and producer he possibly can to enjoy the designation from critics, award-show categories, and audiences alike of "R&B and soul artist." It gives credibility to what Academy Award-nominated screenwriter and director John Singleton says in a guest column he wrote for the *Hollywood Reporter*, in which he considers whether a white director can effectively make a film about issues and topics related to black culture. Singleton suggests what studio executives might be thinking when they fail to seek the input of black talent about said films: "We want it black, just not that black."⁵

Perhaps my thinking about black popular culture in general and the scholarship written in critique of it is a direct result of the difficulty of the academic job market. Something inside of me is disquieted with reading a white scholar writing about the films and filmmakers that inspired my own sojourn into the Hollywood game two decades ago. Why do they get the chance to do it? A recent trend in filmmaking may possibly answer that. In that same column, Singleton questioned, in a conversation with a screenwriter friend of his, if the recent successes of black-themed films helmed by white directors, including *42* (Brian Helgeland, 2013) and *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011), might be making it more difficult for black screenwriters and directors to get hired. His friend provided this reasoning: "It's simple. Hollywood feels like it doesn't need us anymore to tell African-American stories."⁶ Singleton goes on to say of Hollywood ideology, "The thinking goes, 'We voted for and gave money to Obama, so [we don't need to] hire any black people.'"⁷ Once again, the postracial narrative that imagines an existence devoid of any disparity is at work. Like Singleton and his friend, I wonder and worry, as a fledgling scholar trying to declare a position in the academic setting, about the necessity of and regard for my own investigations of black popular culture if my reality as a black man could be perceived as negotiable and expendable. I liken it to Claudia asking why Shirley Temple gets to dance with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and she doesn't, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.⁸ Nonetheless, my trepidation extends beyond just mere scholarly coveting. Many encounters and conversations with white people about black popular culture have been the source of much contemplation and consternation for me as well.

As an undergraduate, I once sat in on a graduate-level course on the novels of Toni Morrison taught by a black female professor. The professor possessed a tremendous gift for blending anecdotes with theoretical and critical discussions of the novels she taught—a skill I thought brilliant and akin to the narrative abilities of my own mother, grandmothers, aunts, and cousins. During one class meeting, while discussing *Sula*,

5 John Singleton, "John Singleton: Can a White Director Make a Great Black Movie?," *Hollywood Reporter*, September 19, 2013, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/john-singleton-can-a-white-630127>.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 19.

this griot of an instructor began to connect a tale from her own experience to a salient point made in the novel.⁹ To her left, a white female student interjected well into the story, with a patronizing half giggle, “Can we get back to *Sula* at some point?” The professor glanced at the student casually and firmly proclaimed, “We can when I finish my story,” and proceeded to do just that. I remember my younger Malcolm X, verse-filled self (a stance also encouraged by the reach of black popular culture at the time in the guise of Spike Lee’s epic 1992 film) being incensed at the audacity and disrespect of that student.

However, years of thought about this incident have revealed to me that the student’s disrespect stemmed from her lack of appreciation for the oral storytelling tradition, a foundation that supports much of black popular culture. What she believed to be superfluous and off topic spoke to the very thematic elements employed by Toni Morrison in her own storytelling, for which the student obviously had great affection and admiration. She could see the benefit of folklore in the work of an author who had not yet won the Nobel Prize, but she could not recognize or apply that same respect to the stories and personal experiences of this professor.

Recently, this same inability to transfer experiences and awareness made itself known to me again. On a recent trip to San Francisco, with a very good friend of mine I saw the film *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, 2013) during its release in selected theaters. Prior to seeing it, my friend, who is white, did not know a lot about Oscar Grant or the events surrounding his unfortunate death in 2009. This case did not incite the national outrage the way the recent Trayvon Martin case did. After seeing it, we were both emotionally affected but in different ways.

My emotional response stemmed from my excitement about seeing the film, my prior knowledge of the events and multiple viewings of the YouTube clip of Oscar’s death for my dissertation research (long before there was even a movie in the works), and my own experiences and understanding about my place in the world as a black man. Conversely, while my friend was justifiably outraged by the injustice of it all, he could not bring himself to understand the reason Oscar was shot. He kept asking, “But what did he do? Why would they do that?” My continued explanations about the threat of the black male body and that body’s defiance of the white officer’s commands to stay seated despite the fact that the police had no real reason to detain him did not bring my friend any closer to an answer. The inability to reconcile this discrepancy even resulted in a brief and awkward dispute between us that was, no doubt, born of frustration on both our parts and because our viewing positions and readings of the film are located in our individual racial identities and subjectivities.

Now, what I thought was interesting is this: my friend has a deep affection and fondness for hip-hop and R&B music. In fact, it comprises his entire music collection. In the midst of all the Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, Drake, Big K.R.I.T. and the like—which he enjoys and can recite word for word—themes of blackness in America, and more specifically, black maleness in America, come up in the corners and crevices of their lyrical compositions. Our conversation, and his seeming lack of context for the police shooting of Oscar Grant, led me to wonder: What *does* he hear when he listens

9 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).

to this music? How could he fail to connect the messages these artists advance with the story that unfolds in *Fruitvale Station*? Maybe, to my friend, an appreciation of black popular culture has little to do with comprehension and more to do with a passive listening experience that affords him a certain coolness factor without actually having any empathetic or meaningful investment. He gets to participate in a black experience, which is largely centered on popular entertainment, without *really* having to be black. I am not sure it would be so “cool,” however, if he were forced to renounce his white male privilege and really live the life depicted in some of the music he listens to. I am reminded of a moment during Chris Rock’s stand-up routine *Bigger and Blacker* (1999) when he speculates to his audience that there is not one white person, even the lowliest of them in status, who would trade the cultural luxuries of that whiteness for his blackness, wealth and all.

While I am keenly aware that it can be difficult to know from what perspective anyone approaches the art he or she consumes, I would argue that the attempts to excise the *black* from black popular culture speak to an artifice of sorts in the scholarship written by those who suggest that it might be interchangeable with universal, human experiences. If we deem the distinct messages regarding race and community outlined by black music artists, filmmakers, photographers, and writers as stories we *all* can relate to, we diminish the uniqueness of what the art attempts to convey about a particular people, and we compromise the message being presented. To remove or dismiss the culture of an artist from his or her work is to do fundamental violence to the work itself. For this reason, the black experience, in all its varying forms, is significant when discussing the black popular culture this series of In Focus essays speaks about. As Gina Dent states, “We must remain mindful that the basis of the popular is its association with the people. And we must never forget that the mirage of representativeness is merely a symptom of our experience of that powerful and profoundly mythic realm—our culture.”¹⁰ Further, as Harry B. Shaw claims, black culture is connected to popular culture “because it continually looks toward the roots of the common Black experience and draws from these roots for its creativity.”¹¹ Finally, Singleton, too, expounds on the necessity of acknowledging the “black” in black popular culture when he writes, “There are cultural nuances and unspoken, but deep-seated emotions that help define the black American experience. The rhythm and cadence in which we carry ourselves among one another is totally alien to most non-blacks, even if it is a constant fascination to them.”¹² Therefore, it matters.

In my dissertation I wrote about my beginnings as a man. At the age of twenty-one, I was profoundly shaped by my interaction with four examples of black popular culture: Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; the lyrical content of Ice Cube’s album *Death Certificate* (1991), and John Singleton’s *Boyz n the*

10 Gina Dent, “Black Pleasure, Black Joy: An Introduction,” in *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 17.

11 Harry B. Shaw, introduction to *Perspectives of Black Popular Culture*, ed. Harry B. Shaw (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), 1.

12 Singleton, “Can a White Director Make a Great Black Movie?”

Hood (1991).¹³ In particular, Singleton's film was probably the most influential because it not only spoke to the way I thrived in the urban community of Oak Cliff in Dallas, Texas, but also provided tremendous inspiration for my creative self, the part of me that wanted to tell stories on film about my neighborhood the way Singleton did.

Because of him (with some Spike Lee added in for good measure), I wrote a screenplay about my neighborhood called *Public Love* (I took my title from one of my favorite lines in the last paragraph of Morrison's novel *Jazz*) and navigated the brisk and callous terrain of Hollywood off and on for a period of three years to get my film made.¹⁴ Although my path did not parallel Singleton's success the way I had imagined, he did inspire me, as a young black man, that it was at least possible. Morrison's novel was significant not just because of the beauty of language and phrasing but also because of the familiarity in the homespun wisdom of, and way of being in, her narrative.

Malcolm X and Ice Cube made me aware of just exactly what I was up against as a young black man in America. I come from a female-led, single-parent home, and my mother effectively taught me immeasurable and valuable lessons, but Brother Malcolm and Cube taught me what my father should have. They represented; they stood in for the men in my life when I was not able to be with my grandfather or uncles. They explained to me the futility of some things while making me believe in the hope to be found in others. These expressions of black popular culture were very much what I needed to sustain myself as a black man on all accounts. Ignoring the *black* in these forms of popular culture was not possible for me, and it should not be possible when we assess this construct overall. Where would I be now, I wonder as I type this, if these things were relatable to *all*?

As a film scholar, I approach my research interests with the same depth of feeling and thought. I eventually decided to write my dissertation on narrative, race, and gender in the trio of films John Singleton branded his "hood trilogy": *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *Poetic Justice* (1993), and *Baby Boy* (2001) (Figure 1). I initially vacillated over what to write about because I wondered if I was *expected* to write about these types of films because I was black. I was also anxious about whether I would pigeonhole myself as a scholar. After all, as one of my mentors reminded me, "Mark, you don't just know black movies; you know movies period." And he was right. I *do* know movies, both foreign and domestic.



Figure 1. From left, Tyrese Gibson, Taraji P. Henson, and Kylon (Kylan) Bolton in John Singleton's *Baby Boy* (Columbia Pictures, 2001).

13 Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Plume, 1987); Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987).

14 Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 229.

However, another mentor, who is black, reminded me of something else: “No matter what you write about, you will always be the black scholar who writes about ‘fill in the blank.’” It crystallized for me then that there *is no* getting around the *black*. Therefore, I decided against some of my other choices, which included writing about filmmaker John Sayles (although I wanted, and still do, to explore his portrayals of black people in his movies) and stuck with Singleton.

For the first time in my life, I felt as if I was in command of deciding what kind of man I wanted to be, and the four examples of black popular culture I’ve mentioned here were essential to the development of my character and self-perception. That they were distinctively black in their language, ideology, expression, and storytelling connected to those parts of myself I had either ignored or was blind to. The culmination of those artistic expressions stimulated an awareness, eagerness, and even anger within me. They were a call to action. For those reasons alone, I cannot fathom a black popular culture in which the *black* is given little or no merit. In my quest to understand what motivates their interest, I am not advocating for white scholars to forgo research that is black focused, or for filmmakers and screenwriters to shy away from those topics as well. However, I am suggesting that the *black* in black popular culture benefits immensely, in terms of discussion, critical analysis, and interpretation, from scholars and artists who know and truly understand that the adjective in the phrase is about more than just the universality of the human condition. *

Whose “Black Film” Is This? The Pragmatics and Pathos of Black Film Scholarship

by TERRI FRANCIS

Teaching black film, whether in the form of African, African diaspora, or African American media, has become more commonplace in cinema and Africana studies programs across the country. Yet those who teach this material, and allies who seek to diversify and deepen what we mean by “film studies,” encounter a range of practical, pedagogical, and political conundrums in rapidly changing environments both within and outside the university. The popular understanding of African American film history continues to run parallel to and seemingly apart from the knowledge and insight that professional researchers and archivists share with their constituencies. So, whose “black film” is this, and what are we doing with it? What is this “black film” in black film? This essay addresses three current challenges for the field of black film scholarship. First is navigating