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**The Darker Side of Black Mas(k)Ulinities:
the Representation of the Black Male in Film**

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EDITORS NOTE

In Working Paper No.11 Kelvin Quintyne examines the constructions of black masculinity in film from a Derridean, deconstructive perspective. Jacques Derrida's theorising of the working of the "dangerous supplements" in language/discourse and Patrick Fuery's insights into how this could be incorporated into analyses of film are the frameworks that underpin the analysis of the films in this study. A short survey of films, from Jamaica, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Martinique, forms the main focus. The study is as much a philosophical analysis of the nature of representation in the light of Derridean deconstruction, as it is an investigation of race, gender and cultural identity from a postcolonial perspective.

The focus on black masculinity arises out of the intersection of subjectivity, Quintyne's personal location as a black Caribbean man, and his observation of the relatively small volume of research in this area. He argues that black men are stereotyped as dangerous, mysterious, sexually aggressive and violent. He explores how these films deconstruct these images, highlighting not only the diversity of black masculinities (that are represented), but their relationships with the construction of white masculinity and black femininity. Not only does the study illustrate out how constructions of black masculinity deconstruct themselves, but how this deconstruction also occurs in the relationship with filmic representation and "reality".

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KEY WORDS

Black masculinity, film studies, homosexuality, cultural identity, race, gender, gender identities, femininity.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is driven by an interest in representations of identity and the relationship between representation and reality as defined by deconstruction. The focus on black masculinity arises out of the intersection of subjectivity, my personal situation as a black man, and my observation of the relatively small volume of research in this area from a postcolonial perspective. Black men are stereotyped as dangerous, mysterious, sexually aggressive and violent; I am exploring how the filmic supplement deconstructs these images, highlighting not only the diversity of black masculinities (that are represented), but their relationships with the construction of white masculinity and black femininity in particular.

Drawing upon Jacques Derrida's philosophical insights, Patrick Fuery states that filmic representation signifies through the workings of "dangerous supplements" which threaten the fixity of the images onscreen and their meanings. Derrida states, "supplement is always the supplement of a supplement,"¹ suggesting that there is no centre or origin of meaning or "truth"; all that we have access to are constructions. Within his theory, language is shown to be metaphoric and self-referential with signification occurring within a system of interdependency among linguistic signs and linguistic constructs. This system of interdependency Derrida terms "différance", in which signs signify via their differences from other signs on the level of both the signifier and the signified, in addition to trace other signs within the sign system. Because of this, meaning is constantly displaced and indefinitely

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri C. Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976: 289.

deferred within language itself, resulting in multiple meanings for any given utterance, but no access to any referent. This system applies to all linguistic constructs, including of course, identities.

While I agree with Derrida on signification operating out a system of *différance* among signs and constructs, I have to question the idea that language itself should be accepted as something that is complete within itself in the production of meaning. Drawing on authors such as Ernst Cassirer, Lucien Levy-Bruhl and Claude Levi-Strauss, Tracy F. Hackshaw and Jerome Teelucksingh argue "Myths do not exist in a vacuum. They can only stem from human's personal experience of the world."² While structuralists and poststructuralists would counterattack with the point that language shapes human experience of the world, a valid point with which I agree, I still believe that language does not operate in a vacuum. If, as Derrida argues, signs always carry the trace of other signs, thereby rendering all signs supplements of each other, then isn't it possible that language itself could also carry the trace of something outside of itself? If the notion of origins within language is problematic, might not the perception of language as the sole producer of meanings be equally problematic? In other words, if language is a system of supplements, isn't it possible that language too is a supplement in a Derridean sense? If Derrida is reasonable in suggesting that elements absent from any single utterance is just as important and active in the production of meaning

²Tracy F. Hackshaw and Jerome Teelucksingh "M-Y-T-H Spells MEDIA: The mass media and the construction of masculinity and femininity," *The Construction of Caribbean Masculinity: Towards a research agenda - a symposium*. Centre for Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, 1996: 8.

as the elements within the utterance itself, so why would it be unreasonable to argue that the absent referent, through its supplementary relationship with any given utterance, also influences the production of meaning? I think that these questions are valid as they offer, within the scope of deconstruction, another way of viewing the relationship between sign and referent and acknowledge a possibility of an interactive relationship between language and a context that lies outside of itself. They can also lead to an alternative reading of a theory that has been criticised by many academics as being a historical and only a radical form of scepticism.

Film language, particularly realist film language, illustrates this problematic well, since the images onscreen have, at once, iconic, indexical and symbolic relationships with their referents. In other words, images resemble their referents; there is a direct causal relationship between them and their referents (the effect of light rays reflecting off an object on the film strip), and are situated within a sign system. I realise there is a problem in terms of arguing a link between onscreen images and a real world from which these images originate on the levels of the iconic and indexical because they would apply to realist film in particular and not animated films, for example. My aim is in part to analyse how language/representation works through the use of film. It is the symbolic element of the onscreen image that produces meaning through its positioning within a sign system and problematises our understanding of the referent not only within film, but any discourse.

Filmic representation of black masculinity carries the trace of other identity constructs as well as elements of “real” experiences of black men. These “real” experiences have to do with the cultural context in which black men are situated and of which they help to form. These cultural contexts are inextricably linked to complex power relations with which there is always a struggle to assert one’s personal, racial, gender or any other identity. Black masculinity as a cultural construction can be seen as a mask that gains identity in relation to other masks. It is a kind of mechanism with which the black male can use to cope with the power struggles that form an inextricable part of human life. Specifically within the colonial and postcolonial experience, these power struggles are embedded in systems of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, social stratification and inequality, globalisation and several other social systems. Black male stereotypes constitute a “dangerous supplement” within mainstream cultural discourses. However, because of how representation works, its positioning as a dangerous supplement also results in the construction of other identities as dangerous supplements. This results in problems in defining blackness and masculinity, a struggle among a variety of competing constructions seeking to validate their positions not only in relation to black masculinity, but within black masculinity. In other words, there is a power struggle between other race/gender identities and a struggle in determining what constitutes “real” black men. I shall illustrate the dynamic nature of these power relationships the ever present shifts in the dominance and centring of identities that mark the workings of the supplement. Black masculinity, like all race/gender identities, is a dangerous supplement because of its threat to the fixity and singularity both of its own construction, and

the construction of the other. The supplementary nature of black masculinity deconstructs not only itself, but other race/gender constructs.

The films which will form this paper's main focus are South African Mickey Dube's *A Walk in the Night*, Martiniquan Euzhan Palcy's *Sugar Cane Alley*, British Isaac Julien's *The Darker Side of Black* and Jamaican Christopher Browne's *Third World Cop*. I decided on this selection of countries and genres because the aim is not to come to conclusions about the subject as defined by a specific filmmaker, country or genre, but to use analyses of black male constructions in film to suggest ways in which representation as a whole works while recognising there are several generic differences among these four films. I thought that they would be suitable for analysis here because they all deal with various forms of oppression within societies either under colonisation, as in the case of the Martiniquan film, or postcolonial societies. They all also feature the lives of black men as their main focus, dealing with issues ranging from power struggles within racial politics to homophobia as a patriarchal phenomenon. The many differences between the films are also an advantage in that the different ways in which they handle similar issues highlight the plurality and complexities within the representation of the black male.

I will begin with synopses of the four films to be discussed. All four films to a large extent look at ways in which Blacks cope with poverty and oppression. It must be noted that of the four films, one is a documentary, and three are feature films; of these, two are filmic reinterpretations of literary fiction.

Euzhan Palcy's feature film *Sugar Cane Alley*, is based on a novel set in early 20th century Martinique, when the island was still dominated by a white plantocracy. It's central figure, José, a bright, young boy, is educated both by the storytelling of poor, elderly labourer Meduze and the institutionalised, education system in Martinique. From both, he gains a sensibility about his social positioning, based on history and his contemporary society, and the route by which he can best create a better life for himself away from a lifetime of poverty as a labourer on the plantation. We see José mature from the little boy who allows his friends to get him into trouble to a young man who is able to analyse those around him, stand up for himself even against adults, and take care of himself even after the death of his caretaker, Amantine.

In contrast to this retrospective, even nostalgic depiction of innocence and experience, Chris Browne's *Third World Cop*, released in 1999, is a fictionalisation of a contemporary Jamaican ghetto society beset by crime and violence. The title is significant in that it might not necessarily prepare its audience for a duel between a Third World policeman and a criminal involving the use of computers, for example, thereby undermining the implied "backwardness" which its label connotes. Star policeman Capone, shortly after returning to his hometown Kingston, finds an old friend Ratty on the other side of the law. The latter is a key man in an underground gun trading gang led by a convicted criminal named Wonie. Capone tries to convince his younger friend to find success by honest means using his penchant for organising dances and sporting activities for other ghetto youths. However, Ratty, despite being betrayed by his boss and one of his gang members, refuses to abandon

a life of crime. This leads to a final showdown between the two friends in which Capone comes out the sorrowful victor.

A Walk in the Night, by Mickey Madoda Dube, based on Alex la Guma's 1950s short story of the same title, is set in an impoverished urban space in post Apartheid South Africa. A young coloured man, Michael Adonis, unsuccessfully struggles for peace of mind after a day in which he loses his job, learns his girlfriend is pregnant, is beaten by a policeman and kills an annoying, elderly white man, Doughty, who lives in his flat. His actions result in the killing of his teenaged friend Joey, who is wrongly believed to be Doughty's murderer. This film, like the other two, dramatises the damage and violence attendant on the life of a subjugated black man (all three are concerned primarily with masculine subjectivity), although the persona in *A Walk in the Night* is, in South African racial terms, "Coloured." It is, however, a much bleaker vision, from which there is no obvious escape.

Isaac Julien's documentary, *The Darker Side of Black*, looks at homophobia, misogyny, violence and hatred within black culture. Through a potpourri of material ranging from interviews and music video clips to staged sequences and actual footage of various dancehalls in Jamaica, *The Darker Side of Black* presents various perspectives on black popular culture in Jamaica, the United States and Britain to challenge the stereotypical representations (in the minds of the audience).

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The following analysis will use the films to investigate the workings of the supplement to deconstruct blackness, masculinity and black male sexuality. Even though the focus will be on black masculinity, much emphasis will be placed on its relationship with constructions of "whiteness" and femininity. This is unavoidable since, as previously suggested, the trace of other identities is inherent in black masculinity and vice versa.