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Black Reflections: One Girl's Exploration of African-American Culture

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BLACK REFLECTIONS:
ONE GIRL'S EXPLORATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Film and Theatre

Of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts, with University Honors

And Honors in Film and Theatre

By

Zoë Johnson

December 2014

Acknowledgement

I would first like to thank my parents for instilling in me the desire to be exactly who God created me to be. Without their guidance, I would never have embarked on this journey to discover who I am and what it means to be African American.

I would also like to thank my English 2041 professor from my sophomore year, Edward Ardeneaux IV who assigned our class to read *The Namesake*, a novel by Jhumpa Lahiri that forever changed my life, causing me to ask the questions about identity and culture that led to this film.

Thank you to my African-American History professor from my junior year, Dr. Andrea Mosterman, who gave me a greater context for my culture and heritage, as well as a deep desire to add new and greater chapters to African American history.

Thank you to my thesis advisors, Professor Debra Daniel and Professor Laszlo Fulop for overseeing my progress and giving me guidance throughout this process, as well as the UNO Film Program and the Honors Department for facilitating this project.

Lastly, I'd like to thank my family and friends who supported me throughout this entire process, the African-American community for its role in shaping my life, and the 21 individuals who opened up their homes and allowed me to interview them for what has come to be *Black Reflections*:

Gideon & Gwen Carter
Janet Clayton
Greg & Lokia Feist
Robert & Charlene Fluker
Jamila Fluker
Anthony & Jackie Lea
Ray & Connie Lea
Katherine Lea
Jabrielle Manuel
Whitney Marshall
Alonia Martin (my Grandmother)
Raynell Oguigo (my Aunt)
Robert & Cynthia Vance
Dr. Ellis Williams
Chelsea Zeringue

Foreword

When I sat down to write this foreword, I found myself echoing familiar words. Sensing the similarities, I decided to look back at the prospectus I had written nearly a year ago before this project began and, as expected, found the words I was looking for. The following is an excerpt from my original prospectus, which explains the experiences that eventually led me to create *Black Reflections*:

Growing up as a middle-class African American, finding my cultural identity was complicated to say the least. As soon as I was old enough to be aware of my race (that there was even such a thing), I understood that (whether I liked it or not), I was part of something much bigger than myself. I was part of a people that had a painful and unresolved history. I was part of a people that seemed to be constantly under scrutiny, who were constantly fighting to be understood and respected. I was part of a people that I was now obligated to represent in various areas of society where we were generally underrepresented, part of a people who were constantly fighting against unfair stereotypes, discrimination, and racial profiling, whether rich or poor; a people that, just as all people

groups, had their own personal issues, a product of human nature. I was part of a people that society loved to criticize, but had no problem exploiting; a people that I grew obligated to defend, a people that didn't seem to have a strong enough voice in this world. And by "a voice," I don't mean one representative voice nominated to speak for us all, such as Dr. Martin Luther King (though thank God for him), or any of the so-called black leaders of today. I mean a collective, yet diverse voice, which could give a proper representation of the many African-American voices that I had been hearing my entire life.

Over the years, I have experienced various stages of cultural identification. Sometimes, as a middle-class individual, having been raised in the midst of "white America," I felt detached from my own "roots," which usually resulted in either a sense of guilt or a sense of resentment directed towards what seemed to be cultural obligations.

Other times, I felt proud and defensive of the race I was born into. There were even times where I was in the middle. I neither embraced nor denied who I was, because, to be honest, I wasn't always sure. However, despite all of these challenges, I wouldn't

trade my African-American heritage for anything— absolutely nothing. The truth is, while I have been overwhelmed at moments by my own identity, African Americans are a truly amazing group of people. My family is funny, hardworking, sharing, and strong. Our culture is lively, impactful, and creatively charged. So much so, that I believe, in the end, all the challenges that I have faced have been worth it. Unfortunately, I'm not sure the world knows this. Regrettably, because so many African Americans feel that they have no "voice," whenever one of us does attain a platform from which to speak to society, we want people to know the issues that we face. We want people to not pass judgment, but rather understand us. When we speak, I feel most people only hear the pain and the problems. Yet, when I look back on my life so far, it was not filled with pain and problems, rather a culture that I now value so strongly. And, after years of personal growth and discovery, I finally want to give a voice to and paint an image (as best I can) of that culture.

And thus, I went on to create *Black Reflections*, a documentary that positively highlights black culture. I hope that you enjoy watching it as much as I enjoyed creating it.

Table of Contents

Abstract | p. 1

Thesis Paper (Reflection) | p. 2

Thesis Interview Request Letter | p. 10

Thesis Interview Questions | p.12

Black Reflections DVD | p. 13

Abstract

Through a series of interviews, events, and personal narratives, *Black Reflections* is a documentary film that shares with others the positive end of the African-American experience. It is a personal cultural exploration, an effort to discover what it means to be African American. In an attempt to tell a story rarely told, *Black Reflections* aims to keep a positive focus. There is an emphasis on values rather than issues, achievements rather than struggles, hope rather than statistics. It not only works to inform others on African-American culture, but also to give African Americans a chance to see themselves in a different light, to hold up a mirror to who they are and say “look at yourselves.” This project is composed of a series of interviews with friends and family members from various generations and walks of life. In the end, this film is meant to be more artistic than clinical, to be felt as much as it is meant to be understood.

Keywords: African-American culture, African-American families, African-American middle class, African-American experience, positive images of African Americans

Black Reflections
My Personal Reflection on the Filmmaking Process

As stated in my foreword, *Black Reflections* is the product of a life-long journey of mine. However, there are two experiences in particular that served as catalysts in my decision to make this film. The first experience I would like to note occurred in my Major American Writers course. Little did I know, a year and a half ago, that a 2000 level English course would bring such a powerful change to my life, but it undoubtedly did. My professor assigned the class to read *The Namesake*, a novel by Jhumpa Lahiri telling the story of an immigrant couple from India raising their children in the US and the struggles they faced while trying to maintain and pass on their cultural identities. The narrative reminded me so much of my own experience in this country. I couldn't help but notice the similarities between these immigrant parents and my own. I recalled all of the little reminders from my parents to "remember who I was." I don't know if their true sentiments ever reached me until I read *The Namesake*, but once they did, they hit me hard. I suddenly wanted to know who I was within the context of my own culture. I didn't want to abandon the things my parents had passed down to me in order to assimilate. I started paying attention to everything, how we spoke, how we related to one another, our traditions and values. I didn't want to lose them. This newfound cultural passion of mine was only the beginning.

The following year, I was in need of a non-core elective and chose to enroll in an introductory African-American history course. Thus, the second catalyst was initiated. Many of the things I learned in this course I had never learned in my life. I learned about African empires and royal families that I never knew existed. I learned about the construction of ghettos and racism in the North (something I had previously been lead to

believe did not exist). I felt that my eyes had been opened to a bigger picture. I felt a little bit closer to knowing “who I was.” I was a mess of mixed emotions, inspired by the strength and beauty of our history, yet disgusted at the relatively little progress that our nation had made to right many of its wrongs. How could it be 2014, and yet most African Americans are not even presented the opportunity to learn an honest version of their history in primary school? As the deadline to choose a thesis topic approached, I felt more and more compelled to feature African Americans in my thesis. I wanted to make something controversial and honest. I wanted to prove something. I wanted to reveal how strong African Americans were despite how much we had been wronged and were still being wronged. But, the more I marinated on the idea, something didn’t sit right. I knew I wasn’t prepared for something of that nature and I didn’t want to invest in something so emotionally draining. Although I’m forced to deal with these heavy topics on a daily basis, I didn’t want to spend my time trying to convince others that these things were real. I didn’t want to focus on those who had no interest in understanding the African-American community; neither did I want to plead for sympathy. I didn’t see myself as a victim and I didn’t want others to see me that way either.

So, I had to figure out what it was that I wanted to say. What hadn’t been said before? What hadn’t I seen? What did I want others to see? That’s when I thought about the observations I had been making over the past year, all of the warm moments with family and friends, in which I found so much comfort. I recalled my childhood memories in which I didn’t know what it meant to be African-American versus anything else. Being African-American was very simply what it meant to be alive. I thought about the traditions and values I had begun to notice and hold on to. The warm feelings I received when these

things came to mind confirmed what I needed to do. I decided that I would shoot a documentary that focused on *these* things. I wanted to first and foremost do it with the African American gaze in mind. I didn't want to cater this film to anyone else before I considered *us*. I felt that this would be the only way to make the film genuine. This decision was the best thing I could've done for the film, because the experience that consequently followed was nothing short of inspiring.

After writing the prospectus for this film, I decided that I should start by interviewing the people that had shaped my understanding of what it meant to be African American. I began to list the family and friends who had been most influential in this process. I wrote a letter requesting interviews from these people. I ended up sending out over twenty letters. The response I received was amazing. So many people wanted to be a part of this project and I didn't turn down an interview. I even travelled as far as Dallas for an interview with the Flukers, life-long family friends. Others came to my home and were interviewed.

When I was planning my questions for my interviews, I turned to Google to find out what defined any given culture. I was expecting to find researched articles on this matter, but instead I found a simple slideshare file¹ that would be the inspiration for my questions. I divided my questions into categories based on these slides, though the final title cards used in my film are different in many ways and were not limited at all to the elements described in this slideshow. I remember being so nervous when creating these questions. I wanted to word everything just right. Although, I think my questions could have been better, as I had never conducted interviews on this level in my life, my subjects

¹ <http://www.slideshare.net/apersone/7-elements-of-culture>

did much to compensate for some of my clumsy questions. One particularly impactful interview was one with my own grandmother. It was almost uncomfortable, because I had never asked her such in-depth questions in my life. I'm not sure she had even been asked such questions in *her* life. It was the moment I realized that I was doing something important. Regardless of how my film turned out, or whether it would be well received, I knew that this interview process alone was important to the people involved. We were able to converse on topics that sometimes we were never presented the opportunity to. I loved to see someone get stuck on a question, see how they would pause and think about it. Chances were, they may not have thought about that question before, and I was facilitating an opportunity for them to do so.

The process for interviewing my family and friends was not glamorous. It usually consisted of a three-person crew (my sister Charis, my Father or Mother, and myself). Charis, who was only fourteen at the time, would travel with me to capture the audio for my interviews. I had never seen her operate a boom before, but she constantly assured me that she knew what she was doing. I had to invest so much trust in her to capture one-shot interviews, sometimes in locations hours away from our home, interviews I knew we would not be able to re-shoot. My Father and Mother alternated driving us to these locations and participated at varying levels. After attending a few interviews, my father excitedly asked me if he could conduct one, saying that he had some "ideas." One of those interviews would eventually make it into the film, the interview with Dr. Ellis Williams. I cannot thank my family enough for their involvement in this process and their willingness to help. In the case of my fourteen-year-old sister, she would routinely give up entire weekends to travel and shoot interviews with me. She and my parents would help me to set up and break down

the set – the lighting, the sound, and the camera equipment. Their presence at every shoot undoubtedly added to my positive experience.

Not surprisingly, the most difficult part of this process was scheduling. With so many people who had agreed to an interview and a very limited amount of time, I began to wonder if I would be able to fit everyone in. With an internship and my job combined, I was working forty hours a week. That usually left me with only weekends to shoot. If I had to travel for an interview, I was limited to one subject (or group) that weekend. Not to mention, I had to work with my family's schedules as well as that of the subjects. I became so concerned with the interview process that at times I forgot about the film itself. It wasn't until early September that I would shoot my final interview.

Once I had conducted all of my interviews, it was time to edit. As things tend to go in the process of making a film, there were a few hiccups. Firstly, I was forced to purchase a new laptop shortly after mine crashed. This, however, was a blessing in disguise, because I was able to purchase a much better laptop that accommodated my needs. I was excited to begin the editing process, or so I thought. Once I transferred all of my footage to Final Cut, it hit me how much work I had to do. I had shot over twenty hours worth of interview footage, and I had little over two months to edit it into a film less than an hour long. I also found that the b-roll I had shot paled in comparison to the interview footage I had. The interviews covered such a wide range of topics, of which my b-roll covered a fraction. I felt overwhelmed to say the least, but I refused to be discouraged.

After a visit with my thesis advisor Prof. Debra Daniel, I decided to give a personal narrative to the documentary, using home videos rather than the limited b-roll I had managed to capture. This allowed me to focus on the interviews alone rather than b-roll

coverage. I began by editing individual interviews, looking through them and finding the moments that stood out. However, there was still so much footage, that I felt lost as to how to incorporate everyone into the film. My second reader, Prof. Laszlo Fulop, suggested that I choose only a few of the best interviews to include in the film. I had never considered this before. It was hard for me to let go of so many interviews, as I felt a connection with all of them. I also didn't know how I would explain to those people why their interview never made the film. These were my primary worries, but I knew I had no choice. If I wanted to complete this film in time, I would have to eliminate the volume of footage I was working with. The final film that resulted contains only a fraction of the work and people that went into its development. Despite this, I was very pleased with the outcome.

With so much focus given to the interviews in this film, I found that my film was more of an audible experience than a visual one. It became more about what the subjects were saying than anything else. I edited the film in a way that brought attention to the voices of the subject. I divided their thoughts into categories based on the aspects of culture that they talked about. I included title cards to greater emphasize each section. I never once added b-roll over an interview. I think the result was a very simple discussion about culture between African Americans from varying backgrounds. I added my own narration and home video footage only to the introduction and conclusion of the film.

The final task was adding music. I was fortunate enough to find some very fitting royalty-free music to add to the film. However, I'm most proud of the music created by my sister Charis. As if it was not enough that she helped with the entire filming process, she also created three original songs for the film. They blended so well with the other music that I had chosen, despite the fact that she had never heard any of it. I'm sure my vague

descriptions of what I wanted weren't very helpful either. However, she really pulled through for me and gave me some great music, without which the film would have fallen flat.

Throughout this entire process, I was unsure of what I should title the film. I was at a loss. Nothing remotely relevant was coming to mind. Until one day I was thinking of how the film would turn out and I realized how desperately I wanted to reflect what I saw around me every day. I wanted it to be a true reflection of my community. This led to the title *Black Reflections*. At first I thought the title was cheesy, but having no other options, I used it tentatively. However, it eventually grew on me, and I later realized that the title had a double meaning. Not only was the film meant to be a reflection of the African-American community, but it was also meant to provoke African Americans to reflect on their culture and who they were. Thus, the title remained.

I could not be more pleased with the outcome of this film, considering the limited amount of time in which it came together. But more than the outcome, I am so proud of the process. I enjoyed so many moments with everyone involved, and as a consequence, I grew as a person. I am not the same Zoë I was a year ago when I wrote my prospectus. I am a more confident, more informed version of myself. I am so thankful to everyone who made this film possible, and I hope audiences will be able to see the love and passion that went into making *Black Reflections*.

Zoë Johnson
July 8, 2014

Dear Friends & Family,

I'm writing this letter to request your participation in a very important upcoming project of mine. As many of you may know, I am a film student at the University of New Orleans preparing to complete my senior year. As a requirement to graduate with honors, I will be working to complete my senior honors thesis this summer. After much thought and consideration, I have chosen to create a documentary style film that will serve to capture African-American culture. Included with this letter is my official prospectus, which gives a much more detailed explanation as to why I chose my topic and what I intend my thesis to be, but the following will give a brief summary as to what I will be doing and how those interested can help.

Through my research, I found that sociologists widely believe culture to be made up of 7 elements, which are: Social Organization (Family and Community), Customs and Traditions, Language, Art and Literature, Religion, Forms of Government, and Economic Systems (Business). My documentary will primarily focus on the first five elements, and I will most likely limit economic systems to the subject of business and/or business practices. I plan to gather information on these topics through interviews and film excursions. Subjects would not necessarily have to be knowledgeable in any of these specific areas, rather I would organize content into these categories based on the information received during interviews. This is where I will need help from you all. If anyone is interested in being an interview subject, or has an upcoming event related to any of these elements that you are willing to have recorded and documented, please contact me at the following number (985-210-0453) or send an email to this address (zjohnso@uno.edu) preferably

no later than Monday, July 12, 2014. From there, we can set up a follow up meeting or phone call to discuss areas of interest and a possible interview/ filming date (dates of availability will be featured on the following page). Also, if you are not interested, I ask that you contact me to decline. Thank you all so much for your time and I hope to hear from you soon.

Best Wishes,

Zoë Johnson

Tentative Dates of Availability

Saturday, July 12
Saturday, July 19
Sunday, July 20
Friday, July 25
Saturday, July 26
Sunday, July 27
Monday, July 28
Wednesday, July 30

Friday, August 1
Saturday, August 2
Sunday, August 3
Monday, August 4
Wednesday, August 6
Friday, August 8
Saturday, August 9
Sunday, August 10
Monday, August 11

*If none of the above mentioned dates meet your scheduling needs, please feel free to contact me in order to discuss other possible dates.

Questions

1. Family & Community

- How would you describe the African-American family/community?
- What are some things that you appreciate about the African-American family/community?
- How do you think our community differs from others?

2. Customs & Traditions

- Are there any traditions/customs that you have noticed throughout the African-American community or even within your own families?
- Are there any traditions/customs that you have intentionally passed on to your own family?

3. Religion

- How has religion influenced the African-American community?

4. Language

- What are your thoughts on “African-American English Vernacular” and what it has evolved to within greater society?
- What are some sayings, phrases, expressions that you’ve heard or use that is native to the African-American community?

5. Art & Literature

- Converse about music, television, books etc.
 - How did African-American music positively affect the community at-large
 - How has African-American entertainment positively affected the community at-large?
 - Literature?

6. Business


- In what ways do you think African American owned businesses /institutions have been successful?
- How can they do better?
- In what ways can the community support African American owned businesses /institutions?


APPROVAL SHEET

This is to certify that Zoe Imani Johnson has successfully completed
her Senior Honors Thesis, entitled:

Black Reflections: One Girl's Exploration of African American Culture


Debra Daniel Director of Thesis


Laszlo Fulop for the Department


Abu Kabir Mostofa Sarwar for the University
Honors Program

December 2, 2014
Date