GOING NOWHERE: AN EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY

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Identity can often be difficult to define. Are people who they define themselves as, or are they defined by how others perceive them? Additionally, how do stereotypes affect that perception? For the last four hundred years in America, black women have been perceived and defined through the lens of a white, patriarchal gaze. Black femininity was depicted by racist, sexist stereotypes that were designed to strip black women of their personhood. These early stereotypes placed upon black women have not disappeared over time; they've evolved. When these stereotypes arise in film and television, they perpetuate the subjugation of black women. Black stories are often centered around pain, struggle, and oppression. So although black women are present on screen, their stories aren't centered around their experiences. Instead, their presence on screen is centered around the experiences of the white main characters. If black women are main characters they are frequently depicted as either angry, sassy, bitter, or struggling. Unpacking the impact that the lack of genuine representation has had on how black women perceive themselves, and how black women are perceived by society as a whole is integral to making progress towards authentic representation of black femininity. Media representation reflects the ideals of the culture they are created and distributed in. As long as there is inaccurate representation of black femininity in media, societal perception of black women will continue to be shaped by racist stereotypes. Additionally, black women will continue to lack representation that allows them to form their own identities. This indicates that the representation of black femininity is only accepted by society in terms defined by white people, not black women themselves. This control over perception is troubling, especially the impact it has had on black women historically. In an attempt to understand how identity is defined, I've explored how historical stereotypes have aided in the subjugation of black women by narrowly

and negatively defining black femininity, how that subjugation has always been motivated by racism and misogyny, and how it affects self-perception and societal perception.

Black women in America live at the intersection of racism, sexism, and class subjugation. Throughout history, black women have been oppressed by the white patriarchal majority, who set the standards for society and held power in shaping public opinion. The power of media controlling public opinion was studied and defined as 'Cultivation Theory' by professor George Gerbner in the mid-1960s. The theory was specific to television but theoretically can extend to other forms of media such as films, books, and advertising.

First, television doesn't create as these elements do not originate out of the void, but derive from a dynamic process in which society, the public, media institutions, and interest groups influence the creation and distribution of mass-produced messages. These messages, in turn, would generate, influence, and suit the needs, values, and ideologies of the public. For example, presenting a somewhat realistic image of an adolescent female member of a given social class may help viewers define and form various distinct identities (Mosharafa).

Cultivation theory categorizes opinions formed based on media consumption into three categories; the mental image, the stereotype image, and the nation image. The mental image refers to an individual's perception of others and influences how the individual interacts with others, particularly people of different cultures, races, or religions. The stereotype image is what the media depicts that then formulates the mental image. The national image is defined as "impressions a people forms about the features of another people or country" (Mosharafa). The

mental, stereotype, and national image all play a role in not only how black femininity is portrayed and perceived in media, but also how they are treated in reality. The Cultivation theory essentially argues that media representation and lived experiences do not exist as separate from each other but instead as a reflection of each other.

Applying the Cultivation Theory to depictions of black femininity in media today requires examining the history of colonialism. Depictions of black femininity as racist stereotypes in media date back to the Antebellum south, as white slave owners attempted to strip black women of humanity to justify white superiority. Dr. Marquita Gammage, author of *Representation in the Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood,* describes how black femininity has historically been depicted and controlled by white people, and defines it as damnation.

Damnation is here defined as the purposeful condemnation of Black womanliness as inferior, inhumane, and ungodly, It entails a systematic monopolization of Black women's images in an attempt to destroy and control the value placed on Black femininity. (Gammage).

The term damnation implies that because the only depictions of black femininity in media have been negative for such a large part of history, these stereotypes have come to be defining mental images for consumers of media. The mental images then extend into stereotypes, and the stereotypes feedback into media representation. The three most widely circulated tropes that were born out of the American south are the mammy, the jezebel, and the sapphire stereotypes. The mammy trope portrays black women as loyal house servants, content in their role. They do not seek freedom or autonomy, and exist to serve the white family they are owned by. Mammies

are depicted physically as “obese, coarse, maternal” asexual figures (Pilgrim). These physical attributes were meant to suggest that black women were not objects of desire, as the standard of beauty at the time was Eurocentric. This caricature of black womanhood allowed White Southerners to control the narrative of slavery, even though it was incredibly inaccurate. Depictions of mammies were prevalent in advertising, and films and reinforced the idea that black women were content in domestic servitude. The Jezebel stereotype, in contrast to depictions of mammies, was an image of a hyper-sexualized black woman. This trope served as “ a rationalization for sexual relations between white men and black women, especially sexual unions involving slavers and slaves” (Pilgrim). They suggested that black women were naturally promiscuous, and attracted to white men, therefore any sexual act was justified, regardless of consent. This trope was applied to black women as well as young black girls and suggested that their “only value is as sexual commodities” (Pilgrim). The Sapphire stereotype depicts an image of a black woman as “rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing” (Pilgrim). Sapphires were also perpetually complaining about injustice. Popularized by the minstrel show *Amos n’ Andy,* depictions of the Sapphire are visible today in the form of the ‘angry black woman’. These depictions in media directly impacted the societal status of black women and were controlled, created, and circulated by white America.

These stereotypes over time shaped public perception of black femininity and black womanhood. These were the only three images of black femininity that were circulated in media, and each depiction has its own attributes, but one thing they all have in common is that the attributes were assigned to them by white society. Historically in America, white people have held more power than any other demographic, specifically white men. Their power allowed them to create what

society deems as normal or acceptable, and to reinforce these ideas through media. Television and film allow for assumptions to be encoded and distributed to the masses, whether it's outright or more covert, and the white, patriarchal gaze is still the most prevalent in film and TV production. As of 2019, 84.9% of directors in Hollywood were white men. This means that the portrayal of black femininity is still largely controlled by white people. For example, the 2011 movie *The Help* was directed by a white man and based on a book written by a white woman. The story centers around a young white journalist, and her journey in writing as expose about black southern maids working for white families in the South. The maids are not the center of the story, they're supporting characters in relation to the white protagonist. The film saw incredible success at the box office and was widely praised upon release. However, critics have accused the portrayal of the black women in the film as being "another slice of the same old ham" (Brooks). A statement released by the Association of Black Women Historians after the film's debut criticizing the portrayal of black women in the film.

The Help distorts, ignores, and trivializes the experiences of black domestic workers." Far from being empowered and liberated, The Help's domestic drudges represent "a disappointing resurrection of Mammy.

The Help offers a more direct example of historic tropes being recirculated, despite black women directly stating that these shallow definitions do not represent black women. Viola Davis, who played one of the main black maids in the film made a public statement after the film's release stating that she regretted the way her character was portrayed. In her interview, she stated "I know Aibileen. I know Minny. They're my grandma. They're my mom. And I know that if you

do a movie where the whole premise is, I want to know what it feels like to work for white people and to bring up children in 1963, I want to hear how you really feel about it. I never heard that in the course of the movie" (In the 21st century there is still a lack of black representation that does not center around one-dimensional representation, white protagonists, or black women struggling in the face of oppression. Although black women are in films and on the screen, the representation isn't providing new perspectives or challenging any tropes depicting black femininity. The TV show *How to Get Away With Murder* also features Davis as the protagonist; a black female lawyer. While on the screen she holds a position of power and status, she is depicted as angry, bitter, and incapable of love throughout the entirety of the show. This depiction of black femininity draws similarities to the Jezebel stereotype. Grammage further addresses this evolution of tropes and what it means in terms of representation.

What we are witnessing is an evolution in the stereotypes of Black women, such that century-old stereotypes are evolved to fit into modern society. So instead of caricatures and Blackface of Black women as seen in the 1900s, we now see Black female actresses embodying the same characteristics while working in high-powered jobs. These cultural and ideological assaults on Black women help justify reactionary public policies that endanger the lives of Black women. If indeed the representations that dominate current popular media remain, if left unchallenged and unchanged, these racist misogynistic representations can lead to the absolute devaluation of Black womanhood (Grammage).

The tropes used to depict black femininity have affected access to opportunity in society in the past and still do today. Black womanhood was reduced to these stereotypes and deprived black

women of their own autonomy. They had no control over how they were portrayed, and the societal ramifications of that portrayal. The depiction of black femininity historically was always controlled by white America. Circling back to Cultivation Theory, if black femininity is portrayed in media as these tropes, then society will perceive them as accurate, whether they do so consciously or subconsciously. Essentially, tropes created by white people are being circulated to white people and further fuels stereotypes against black women. This is how others perceived black women, but how does this representation affect how black women see themselves?

Black feminist and theorist bell hooks wrote in her book *Rock My Soul: black people and self-esteem,* that "The practice of self-love of is difficult for everyone, in a society that is more concerned with profit than well-being, but it is more difficult for black folks, as we must constantly resist the negative perceptions of blackness we are encouraged to embrace by the dominant culture" (hooks). When the images of black femininity are only depicted as negative, black women internalize that image and it can then lead to self-depreciation. Furthermore, because the representation of black femininity is limited in scope, black women lose their sense of agency in defining themselves. Without a strong understanding of self, it becomes difficult to understand one's identity. If we can't relate to black femininity as portrayed by society, then how do we define who we are? Are we damned to only exist in the confines of these tropes?

There are many theories on how identity is formed, but most experts agree that it's shaped primarily in the developmental years of youth. Because media consumption is inescapable from birth, it plays a role in how we develop self-perception. The stress and anxiety that comes with oppression also plays a role in how identity is understood and expressed. Because media

portrayal plays a role in the subjugation of black women, in turn affects their self-perception. Being constantly aware of the dehumanizing way that white society views black women feeds into this stress. Poet Opal Palmer Adisa wrote an essay titled “Rocking in the Sunlight: Stress and Black Women” that described this stress.

Did you ever wonder why so many sisters look so angry? Why we walk like we’ve got bricks in our bags and will slash and curse you at the drop of a hat? It’s because stress is hemmed into our dresses, pressed into our hair, mixed into our perfume, and painted on our fingers. Stress from the deferred dreams, the dreams not voiced; stress from the broken promises, the blatant lies; stress from always being at the bottom, from never being thought beautiful, from always being taken for granted, taken advantage of; stress from being a black woman in white America. Much of this stress is caused by how the world outside us relates to us. We cannot control that world, at times we can change it but we can assert agency in our own lives so that the outside world cannot over-determine our responses, cannot make our lives a dumping ground for stress (hooks).

While the stress of living in America as a black woman is present, it’s important to realize that while they are victims of oppression, they do not desire to be victimized. Society has failed them by painting a negative image of black womanhood, but black artists and activists have been fighting to redefine black femininity on their own terms. Reshaping societal perception of black femininity begins with allowing black women access to tell their own stories, instead of allowing white executives to exert power over how we are depicted in media.

Black female artists and filmmakers have been challenging media representation of black femininity but rejecting tropes and integrating their experiences into their work. This process

liberates black women from having to exist in media under the control and limitations of the white patriarchal gaze. Cheryl Dunye's film *Watermelon Woman* (1996) explored race, gender, and sexuality all at once, and effectively represented black femininity in film in a way that subverts Hollywood tropes. Dunye also made history, at the time she was the first black lesbian to direct a film that was that widely viewed. Dunye demonstrates the importance in black women having agency over their own stories and depictions. She spoke to how creating our own spaces and narratives can further distance black femininity from tired tropes in an interview with IndieWire in 2016.

I am so tired of not seeing black queer lives in the future. I'm so tired of the magical negro syndrome," she said. "That's why I'm doing the post-apocalyptic sci-fi, looking at queer afro-futurist type things," she said. "I want to be able to tell stories as a filmmaker, and have the right to do what every filmmaker is allowed to do. For me, what the 20th anniversary and reception of 'The Watermelon Woman' is saying is: Make your film, don't worry about it (Dry).

Positive, authentic representation is something that black women have been denied for years and by redefining black femininity, filmmakers like Dunye are providing that representation. Creating media that black women see themselves in and can relate to allows them to explore their identity and creates a space that is untouched by the white, patriarchal gaze.

Black femininity has been defined in terms established by the white patriarchy for hundreds of years. The claims about black womanhood were rooted in anti-black and anti-woman belief systems, and as technology progressed they made their way into media

circulation. The circulation of these racist tropes has affected the societal perception of black femininity, individual perception of self. By refining black femininity in media and film, black women reclaim their agency and reject stereotypes placed upon them. Because media consumption plays such a large part in daily society, it's important to consider the ramifications of one-dimensional black representation. Until Hollywood diversifies, the white patriarchy will still hold power over how black femininity is portrayed on screen. However, representation has increased in the last few years. Black femininity is not monolithic, it can be expressed differently by each individual.

Without access to a wide range of media portrayal, society will continue to only see black women as the stereotypes they have been portrayed as. There is a distinct power in reclaiming autonomy from white ownership of the definition of black femininity, and that reclamation allows for opportunities in exploring identity. In a society that is so centralized around media and media consumption, it would be irresponsible to fail to examine the impact of media representation on the individual and society as a whole.

As the year progressed, my research shifted from focusing on black femininity and how it is portrayed in media.I felt that the themes I was originally addressing were incredibly important and that I wanted to pursue them at a time where I had more access to time, resources and was less inhibited by the pandemic. I also found it difficult to narrow my focus, as I felt there were so many different ways that my project could go but I couldn't narrow my focus. I spent a lot of time experimenting and trying to find something that inspired me. I eventually realized that I wanted my project to focus on personal identity and how it can often be evasive.

My senior project titled Going Nowhere was influenced by three key things: my experience growing up in Idaho as a woman of color, my loss of a sense of self throughout the course of the pandemic, and feelings of uncertainty surrounding life after college. Early iterations of my project more directly focused on a more general sense of displacement for women of color living in a capitalistic, patriarchal society. I planned to have two channels of video, one that addressed the experiences black women in America, and the other the experience of cisgendered, white men. I struggled to conceptualize, and eventually abandoned that idea after speaking with my advisor. Our conversation made me realize that it wouldn't be wise to make a generalized project about the experiences of cisgendered white men, because I have no personal connection to those experiences. Although originally I wanted to avoid making a project that focused on my personal experiences, I felt confident in my ability to make something personal into a work that avoided being too self-important. This conversation put me on a path that led me towards the final version of my project.

Before I reached the final iteration of Going Nowhere, I was stuck between making a video that had a loose narrative, or focusing more on visuals that were less narrative but had strong imagery. I knew narrative video wasn't one of my strengths, but subconsciously kept telling myself it was the safest choice to make. I tried to create storyboards and write dialogue, but it didn't feel genuine. I then made the decision to focus on more abstract visual imagery, and decided to just start shooting footage and experimenting with editing to see what came of it.

When I began shooting test footage, and originally planned on shooting footage of myself in front of a green screen. I was really focused on the idea of finding ways to make my face unrecognizable, and placing myself in unfamiliar environments. I shot a lot of footage outdoors to superimpose onto the greenscreen, and drew inspiration for the abstraction of my face from the episode *USS Calister* from the television show *Black Mirror*. While reading about the episode, I discovered that the "no face" effect was inspired by an early episode of *Star Trek* titled *Charlie X*. I also experimented with using stock footage, and while I was happy with the result, I was unsure of what purpose it was serving, besides looking interesting. I was set on shooting in color, as I had recently watched Wes Anderson's *Grand Budapest Hotel* and was inspired by his use of color.

Humans are naturally very expressive, and the idea of having no face to display emotion or accurately communicate with others felt very representational of feelings surrounding a lack of belonging. It was unsettling and eerie, but so uncomfortable that it was captivating. I put a mask over footage of my face in Premiere, and the result was footage that felt like I was looking through myself, like I was hollow. I was striving for something that could be categorized as

uncanny valley as a vehicle for the themes of displacement that I wanted to address. The retro-futurism in Black Mirror and Star Trek then led me to Alex Prager's short film *UNCANNY VALLEY*. I briefly considered pursuing a more science-fiction angle, but ultimately decided it wasn't suited for the project. However, the colors in Prager's work stuck with me. I had plans to experiment with different colors and textures that were the result of a direct influence of Prager.

After shooting enough test footage to begin experimenting with editing, I realized that I wanted to create something that emulated a multi-channel video installation. I had recently seen an article about Akeem Smith's video installation No Gyal Can Test, which features archival footage of the dancehall scene from the 1980s to the early 2000s. It then occurred to me that multi-channel video could create really interesting juxtapositions between the whirlwind of emotions I was trying to address. I was still having a difficult time visualizing, so I began incorporating text animations into the multi-channel footage. The text was ultimately scrapped after another conversation with my advisor, who described the text as a crutch. I agreed, realizing that the text was over-explaining the points I was trying to make with the visual imagery.

After shooting test footage and experimenting with editing in After Effects and Premiere, I wasn't happy with most of my footage. I found an After Effects plugin online that had an option for face replacement, and the concept began to grow on me. However, the plugin required an incredible amount of computing power and I soon realized that my laptop would struggle to render an entire video using the software. I was frustrated because I really enjoyed the end result of the footage, but decided to scrap the idea of doing anything surrounding face-replacement or getting rid of facial features. I then started to pursue other alternatives that involved abstraction.

I continued to shoot footage outside, unsure with what would come of it. I planned two days to shoot a Rye Beach, and ran into multiple issues. I brought a friend with me to stand in for certain shots so I knew where I needed to be, and to act as a camera assistant if the need arose. I planned to shoot a lot of b-roll with a camcorder, because I really appreciated the nostalgia and the look and feel of footage shot with older cameras. The camcorder I brought was malfunctioning, so I had to move on from that idea. I resumed shooting with a Canon EOS Mark 7D II. I had a tripod with me and I set up each shot myself and directed my friend to stand, walk and position himself in frame. He marked places in the sand so I would remember where to be, and then we began shooting. I had an external monitor attached to the camera, and shortly after we began filming the cable connecting the camera and the monitor stopped working. I was frustrated but continued shooting, although it was more difficult to position myself within the frame. The setbacks I had resulted in a lot of lost daylight, and I made plans to reshoot but they ultimately fell through.

After shooting footage on the beach, I realized that instead of setting myself in artificial environments, I wanted to shoot in nature. I decided to begin shooting footage in the woods behind my house. I was again thinking of making something more narrative, but was struggling with conceptualizing. I decided to focus on creating a loose narrative that was centered around searching for a sense of self as a more literal journey. I planned to shoot footage exploring the woods and coming across different variations of myself. However, after I started shooting, I realized that I wanted to focus more on shooting b-roll and creating visuals that evoked a sense of feeling instead of taking the role of an actor. I shot footage over the course of two weeks, taking a camera wherever I went and shooting footage whenever I felt inspired. I went for walks in my neighborhood and focused on shooting birds, trees and the sky. I then drew inspiration from shooting on the beach and began shooting footage of myself in nature. Instead of obscuring my face with editing techniques in post-production, I decided to just avoid showing my face in the footage I shot. I chose to wear all white in hopes of standing out against the environment I was placing myself in. I decided to switch from shooting in color to shooting in black and white, as I felt it unified the different channels of video more than shooting in color would.

The first cut of my project was less representational and I still wasn't sure exactly what I was trying to communicate with my footage. I talked again with my advisor, she advised me to dig deeper and figure out what emotions I was trying to convey. This is when I began to realize that themes of my project had shifted from being broad, to more personal, and back to being broad. While my project was inspired by my personal experiences, it didn't have to be a direct representation of them. I then began focusing on illustrating a loss of identity in a more general sense, instead of trying to directly recreate my own experience with a loss of sense of self.

When Senior Presentation Day came around, I received some very helpful feedback from the faculty members that critiqued my work. I was very focused on making something that was about feeling out of place, but was told that my footage felt like the subject and the environment were very unified. I was shocked because I thought my intention was incredibly clear, but incredibly appreciative for the honest feedback. Additionally, I was told that the video shot on the beach felt very metaphorical, as if I was on the edge of something. I hadn't considered that interpretation, but it was a welcome realization. I was also told that the video felt very immersive, so I continued to add b-roll to create something that allowed the viewer to enter a state of contemplation. I was also encouraged by my advisor and the faculty members critiquing my project, to make the video transitions more punctual, and to experiment more with the different combinations of footage, and how they interact with each other. At the time, the working title of my project was Where Do I Go From Here? After Senior Presentation Day, I changed the title to Going Nowhere. I felt that the original title indicated the journey of self discovery would end with a resolution, but that wasn't how I felt. I thought that it made more sense to keep the destination at the end of this metaphorical journey more ambiguous.

Going Nowhere really started to take shape when my advisor gave me a list of artists to look to for inspiration. She introduced me to the work of Maya Deren, and I was instantly drawn to her work, specifically her video project *Meshes of the Afternoon*. I was really drawn to her style, and I was definitely influenced by her style, and saw thematic similarities in my project. *Meshes of the Afternoon* also featured a woman as the subject, and although her face and identity

were present in the piece, there was a sense of ambiguity and mystery. I planned to shoot the next day, with Deren's work fresh in my mind.

The next day I went into the woods to shoot, and was blessed with an incredibly beautiful fog. I set up my tripod and shot footage of myself walking, standing facing away from the camera, and captured more b-roll footage. The weather occurred by chance, but I felt that it added an element of mystery. I shot additional footage on later dates, and was lucky enough to have more overcast, foggy weather to keep my footage consistent. There were a few days that I had planned to shoot where the weather wasn't similar, and I avoided shooting any footage that was inconsistent. After editing the channels together, I felt that something was still missing. I experimented with different combinations of footage, channels turning on and off at the time, and

channels turning on and off at staggered times. I ended up with a combination of both for my final video. I also then began to realize that a lot of my footage was very static, and I thought the project could benefit from some movement. I imported my footage into After Effects and created

a zoom effect on some of the clips using key frames for position and scale. However, I still felt something was missing. I then returned back to my original idea of obscuring my face, and decided to include footage of myself at the end with an unrecognizable face. I created a mask in Premiere, and then applied a gaussian blur effect to completely obscure my facial features. I also changed the audio I included. Originally, I had used a soundscape I found on freesound.org. I felt that it was a bit too uplifting and exuberant, so I decided to switch the audio to a track that I found on another open source soundscape site called zapsplat.com. I had originally planned to create my own soundscape, but sound art, specifically musical sound art is not one of my strengths. I chose to focus more on the video instead of the audio, so I could focus all of my energy on the visuals.

This project has gone through many phases throughout the past year, and I felt that if I had more time it just would have kept evolving. Although I am content with my final iteration, I wanted to just keep editing and experimenting with footage and different video effects. For the Senior Show titled Your Cars Extended Warranty, I created a very simple website using cargo that allowed my video to emulate a multi-channel installation. The video melted seamlessly into the webpage. Looking back on the year, I would have never foreseen my project turning out the way it did. It was a challenge to scale back my ideas and expectations, as I was simultaneously shooting and directing the project on my own. A lot of my original ideas were more suited for a large scale production, so I definitely learned a lot about how to conceptualize in a more practical way. I was set on doing a project about race relations in my home-state of Idaho, then shifted to a broader scope of race relations in America, then shifted to black femininity and societal perception. Eventually, I realized that I could draw inspiration from my research and my

experiences, and make something that was inspired by all of the above. I was focused for so long on directly translating my research to a project, and had a revelation that not everything needs to be a direct representation of something. Although Going Nowhere wasn't a direct representation of my research, my research provided me with context that enabled me to transform the information into something poetic.

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