

## Undergraduate Research Symposium May 17, 2013 Mary Gates Hall

### Online Proceedings

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#### SESSION 2P

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#### MCNAIR SESSION - ECONOMIES OF EXPLOITATION, CULTURES OF RESISTANCE

*Session Moderator: Sonnet Retman, American Ethnic  
Studies*

**295 MGH**

*3:45 PM to 5:15 PM*

\* Note: Titles in order of presentation.

#### **Brown Eyes, Blue Eyes: The Integrated Audience's Gaze on Black Performance**

*Alexander (Alex) Catchings, Senior, English*

*EIP Scholar, Mary Gates Scholar, McNair Scholar*

*Mentor: Sonnet Retman, American Ethnic Studies*

This talk explores African American cinema, and the ways black representations emerge in different commercial contexts to appeal to interracial audiences. Understanding independent "black cinema" as films that intend to resist voyeuristic spectatorship, this talk distinguishes the economic disparities between expressly black cinema versus commercial cinema that employs specific, trope-centered representations of black characters. This discussion pivots around Manthia Diawara's theoretical framework from "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" (1988), which suggests that commercial films bearing the intent to propel negative narratives of African Americans can be viewed with a resistant, critical spectatorship by viewers of differing races. While Diawara is correct, and some directors have been producing more independent black cinematic works, this talk lays out the enduring economic boons and ramifications from continued voyeurism in black and commercial cinema. Pieces of cultural production addressed include Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000), Tyler Perry's *Madea* franchise, Tate Taylor's *The Help* (2011), Bruce Joel Rubin's *Ghost* (1990), and variety television shows including Richard Pryor's 1977 *The Richard Pryor Show* and Lorne Michaels' *Saturday Night Live* (1975). Ultimately, this talk analyzes how box office gains and television ratings both reflect and interact with black iconography and representation. Through this undertaking, a better understanding can be had as to the extent of veracity and implication when black artist Ralph Ellison

notes that, "Movies are not about Blacks but what Whites think about Blacks."