

Excerpt from the panel discussion, "Of Subjugation and Human Consciousness, DuBois in Africa and Fanon in the U.S." between Michele Lewis, the Robert E. Lee Chair of Sociology at University of California, Berkeley and Fran Touissaint, Performance Studies Chair of University of Mississippi at Jackson. This conversation took place as part of the symposium, "Humans after Labor" hosted by the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, in November of 2014. Moderated by August Vollbrecht and plenary from Andrew Mehall. This excerpt is from 1:03:52 to 1:17:41 and focuses on face paints contemporary role of masking in relation to rap music.

August Vollbrecht: I think we have to go back to the clown the contemporary understanding of the clown and it's understanding in America. It presupposes minstrelsy and--

Andrew Mehall: And brings us back to the more local concerns and ICP and how they're taking it from an earlier Black, Detroit model, Esham more specifically the cover of *Homey Don't Play*--

AV: Which is 1991 and predates face paint in *Dead Presidents*, that's 1993, drawn from an earlier model which is from *Bloods*, and that came from recorded interviews of returning Black Vietnam vets.

Fran Touissaint: Black Skin, White Mask! I see where the title comes from! (audience laughter)

Michele Lewis: Cue the Rolling Stones robbing Bo Diddley at gunpoint! (audience laughter)

FT: Yeah, but only stealing a sawbuck. The contemporary clown, albeit seemingly neutral, is steeped in these racial, gender, and class misrepresentations. Janet Davis talks about this in her book about the American circus. I wish I could cite this better but it's been a few years, and we'll eventually complicate this but just to get started she says the clown is a metaphor for American Blackness, which is a necessary distinction from the so-called African savage, I'm using her definition here.

ML: African as African-American?

FT: The African is indicted in this but it's African-American because that's the way we think about it contemporaneously, its a separation that exists now because Africans are viewed as immigrants as opposed to African-Americans viewed as native surplus. A green card problem as opposed to a welfare problem. All this allows for a Nativist impulse which is then redoubled with the other. Double whammy.

ML: That Nativism thinks differently of who was here and what we have a right to take, yeah? Is it an ethnographic taking? Is it a postcolonial taking? No one is fighting for the immigrants wares or cultural traditions fresh off the boat, it takes time to acclimate to those and take, as opposed to gold or wheat or slaves in the colonial invader model. Cultural mores aren't precious metals or commodities so it can't be immediately interpolated into the existing modes of trade. Even when Life magazine profiles Dimaggio, they claim he doesn't smell of garlic like the typical Italian, and just a reminder that he was only 24 then and 5 years later he was turned down for combat duty but at the same time his immigrant parents were declared enemy aliens, required to carry permits, and their boat was seized. That's such a wildly leaden Nativist

distinction. It becomes a question of when we take something, an act of performance after a thing has been acculturated locally as opposed to the colonial taking of whatever kind of local thing there is, something like dreads that are no longer in any way a unique cultural signifier, or a critique in this country. Not 20 years ago it meant something to have dreads, it seems you had an alliance with Toni Morrison or Marley, the Maroons, the same way I Almost Cut My Hair, is this absurdly incisive critique of the capital and the square, White critique of Whiteness, rejection of social norms but also a critique of violence against Blacks. We see this in Crazy Baldhead too. But of course there are plenty of White men with dreads at Coachella, at Bonnaroo, at Burning Man, and of course at the Gathering of the Juggalos which isn't to say that there aren't all manner of other people with dreadlocks too but it's now barely an indication of anything other than the ability to grow one's hair.

FT: Yeah, I think what you're describing is scene-based individualism but they use the same tropes and produce the same conditions. There are a limited amount of places to shop (laughs). DeLillo was all over this in *White Noise*, "through products and advertising people obtain an impersonal identity," in other words because shoppers buy all the same products they can't be unique. Hair is a really specific response to growing one's self rather than externalizing one's labor and then performing wealth through accumulation with that externalized labor.

AM: If I could just go back to Janet Davis, if I may, she introduces this notion of the clock-bound in the aforementioned section, I'm looking at it here courtesy of Google books, especially the clock-bound American, is that a site of refusal regarding performance in this language we're describing?

AV: Yeah, Andrew and I have talked about this before and we wanted to bring up this idea how surplus labor works, right? The David Simon line on surplus labor, slaves were brought to this country for manufacturing and since manufacturing no longer exists there's no place for the slave descendant nor the deracinated former immigrant to exist. Then we have this secondary aping by the average juggalo who refuses to look for a job who only goes to the job begrudgingly and they, the juggalos, really traffic in a, "Deez Nuts" positionality, they are definitely not winning any customer service awards. This is a site of aping shiftlessness so it's kind of a pre-Fordist invention of the shiftless Negro and then a late capital performance or reperformance of the White Juggalo as the job refuser--

ML: Had Esham not been there for ICP to readily hermit crab style occupy his total model, which is horrorcore, which is nihilism, which is savvy independently produced commercialism then where would they be? It's very much the colonist arriving and taking over the local fishery that the colonist hadn't even been aware of or at least hadn't properly monetized because it supplies local trade rather than fueling a regional or global market.

FT: If I can just interject here, I want to chop that up a sec, rap is a part of this model, it's not just horrorcore as a genre, but rap itself because up until this point rap is not a totally viable commercial entity. ICP looking to Esham is unique in that he's (Esham) defining a new space and ICP is the early adopter of that space

locally by taking a very specific model. They could have done that for some other thing be it some other artform or making pizzas or something. Somehow I imagine it's not uncommon for juggalos to make pizzas. Then if i can remember how Arthur Jafa describes Menace to Society it's this incapacity to address the general incompetence of the work itself. Because they both grew, Esham and ICP, at a time when a commercial framework hadn't been solidified there was an allowance for the art to be well behind everything else, persona and production are way ahead of technique which isn't to say we shouldn't be critical of the art or work but when we look at these things and we look back there's very little cultural appreciation of the material outside of the Vice onlookers, the Harmony Korines, the Gummo people, they take the ironic position or mock anthro, because it appears nothing is at stake, not even technical ability. It's talent show level at best.

ML: There's everything at stake for the person who actually needs a job though, who won't allow themselves to be defined as surplus. So that appeal, this question, and I think this happens a lot with Eminem who is also guilty of drawing from this model but traffics in technique, is what is at stake? All three talk killing babies, and Esham was certainly first. Babies, miscarriages, fetal violence. Ultimately when Eminem or ICP does it there's very little at stake, and that's where it approaches absurdity. And not to go off on a diatribe on Eminem but he's spent his career fending off this looming absurdity that he engendered whereas ICP has courted it and made that a thematic.

FT: You're identifying inherent dynamics of Black rap and White rap, because I think this comes before rap. I think rap is besides the point. When Esham is initially talking about Detroit as a hell space, not a celebratory space that's not even an expression of nihilism, that's an expression of frustration and terror. And so to ape that without qualification and make it a platform for absurdity is the ugly part. It becomes the site of commercial possibility for Eminem and ICP and diminishes the liberatory possibility as both art and business and reportage for Esham.

AM: Should we be moving away from Eminem?

ML: The only reason we should move away from Eminem is there's no face paint so we can talk about him as a post-facepaint clown, something he would surely shudder at.

AM: Of course, all we have to do is look at the *My Name Is* video or pick a song out of the hat. All the fundamental components are there: violence against women, homophobia, self loathing. Marilyn Manson is also a symbiotic coping mechanism and Eminem aligned himself with a face painted musician who shared blame for Columbine. It get's pretty twisted and complicit.

AV: That rhymed (audience laughter).

ML: Just to get back to Andrew's earlier point to not get off point about Eminem I think Eminem is still in the wheelhouse because we're still talking about colonialist theft mentality, whereas I think Marilyn Manson isn't pulling from any earlier specific Black models in the same way as ICP.

AM: If I may, again I don't want to get too far off track but I think we should talk about all the models available, if Marilyn Manson is pulling from Paris is Burning, from voguing and also Bowie who clearly borrows from these models while claiming authorship, it's a different kind of umbrella theft.

AV: I'm not really sure, I don't really know much about the history of Bowie outside of that Santa Monica bootleg from '73. If you're taking the language of the cabaret it allows for the White male to occupy any space that he wants to. This is a colonial performance if I'm reading this right, to colonize another another subject position--

AM: Because when Bowie sheds his masculinity it becomes extraterrestrial as opposed to feminine so he doesn't resign his position as male, he just grows the possibility exponentially.

ML: I think when we talk about emasculation for me it brings up lynching and the response to the Black male to White women and this is critical in the vilification of Black males and we are still seeing this up until most recent times, and I'm disappointed, distressed, that the country is not on fire right now but perhaps at least in Detroit there is so little left to burn.

AV: That trajectory is exactly where Esham is operating from when he says *Boomin' Words From Hell*, that it's a metaphor from hell but it's actually not too long after the fires of '86 where you had 810 fires in one night.

ML: With the White male/female relationship, it's not a threat in the same way because there's not a history of a performance of the White male predation of the White female, it's subjugation as opposed to Black male/White female which the confederacy wrote as almost purely a tale of predation because a lazy someone can't really be a villain. When ICP/ Eminem perform this with and without makeup we can assume that it's tongue in cheek and absurdist and someone like Em(inem) can claim victimhood and you can go ahead and say the same thing is true of ICP and the FBI identifying them as a gang, which is itself is absurd tax payer money drip. The FBI has now identified the laziest gang in America. Aping that predation, there is almost nothing at stake for the White male.

AM: Hey, I just want to back to Janet Davis again and her idea of the, "low other" which is to say that the clown operates as a metaphor for both the Black man but also a pre-industrial, pre-Fordist Euro-American slavery. The fact that it's not clock bound, there's a possibility for it's own emancipation as an individual.

AV: The clown? Oh! Even though he's enslaved. I get it.

ML: I think we should keep going back to the clown using clown as a stand-in for performance in general but particularly its the possibility for low performance.

FT: I think you should qualify low.

ML: Maybe I misunderstand the quote, but there is possibility of being more than a “low other” and that low is actually the reperformance not the performance--

AM: Which severs that binary, it's no longer low or high, Euro or African. it's neither of those because it's American which is a third space, frontierist, which in the case of the juggalos is their parents basement (audience laughter).

FT: We have to assume this prolonged adolescence we've identified within juggalos, this avoidance of responsibility, credit scores, student loans seems fundamentally un-American or anti-American or maybe anti-American dream.

ML: But that possibility of refusal there is actually the site of privilege. If you list those things out, no one wants student loans, a credit score, no one wants the responsibility of the job, no one wants alarm clocks. When we're thinking of this in a wage-based system in America which directly relates to slave labor and is actually a foundational, slave-produced site and the recent and continuing inability of the American Black to participate in those responsibility sites, this is where the division is. There is no opportunity for the clown in that moment except in performance of the clock-bound White male as a clown himself because those conditions don't exist except to be hunted, the Black clown, clown as Black, a certain form of runaway of someone attempting to exist outside the market. The clown in general is not a hunted species, but we only have to think about the seriousness of Billie Holliday and the criminalization of that artist's body and put that in the same frame as Eminem's victimhood from talking about the destruction female body, any female american particularly his closest family. That shit isn't the same.

FT: I just want to say here that that possibility of refusal or site of privilege, I understand that. That's actually a sort of equivalency to someone who rather than running the mile in high school, walks the mile. I think credit refusal if we look at that as a site, and the juggalo is trying to occupy that same space go around that same track the same amount of times but in a different time frame you can put soft in front of anything, soft utopia, soft revolution as a qualifier but this isn't soft radicalism this is lazy radicalism. There not achieving neutrality because they still go around the track as many times. That's kind of a malformed metaphor but i'm hoping it reads.

AM: To quickly go back to Eminem, there's some Freud shit in there. That violence against Kim and his mother is... or we can just say they're the same-- That violence is in retaliation, against the destruction of his ego when their only crime is not giving Marshall all the attention he wanted. But I know about as much about Freud as August knows about Bowie.

AV: Is there a Freud bootleg out there? But seriously we have to condition this with the understanding that the opportunity to have that kind of ego crush is not the same as a body crush, the physical, the literal destruction of a human. When we talk about performance we can't talk about performance inside subjugation and enslavement because it starts first with the body when it comes to Black males so with clown questions, we're still wondering what these clowns are in relation to Black comedians where we're still dealing with this Richard Pryor understanding of Black and White engagement and only now are we getting past that where we have someone like Chris Rock who himself is a "low other" shamer taking the pics of police pulling him over. Where it's somewhat acceptable to acknowledge the violence against the black and brown body.

ML: We can't ignore the Wayans brothers and White Chicks as a very current example of whiteface too.

FT: I don't wanna go down a road with those two. I would argue they don't have an active role in this because that's so purposely made as a non-threatening gesture from the Black male to the White female that these conditions were describing are exactly not this, it's more about emasculation, and White faced Tyler Perry.