
SUMMER SCHOOL

WITH DR. NIKKI LANE

On Being Ratchet and Boojie: Black Class Politics in the 21st Century

Important Quotes

"It is imperative **not to limit class analysis to the narrow interpretation of the economic**, because **class relations are about much more than economic inequalities**, but also how people are valued, and how moral judgments are made about their worth" (Binnie 2011: 23).

Vershawn Ashanti Young argues that class has had an increasingly significant effect on the African American experience since desegregation, "yet the increased influence of class on African American identity has benefited the middle class, if not politically and socially, certainly economically, more than it has helped the poor and lower classes" (Young 2011: 3). In contexts where black people predominate, **class becomes rubric by which one's position gets assessed, and a filter through which they come to view their experience.**

"Performance artist-scholar Bryant Keith Alexander says, 'For me a boogie performativity references those perceived repetitive actions performed by black people, plotted within grids of power relationships and social norms that are presumably relegated exclusively to white people; hence, by virtue of their enactment and in the presumed absence of black folk, these performances are critiqued as rejecting or abandoning some organic construction of black character and black people.' [...] **Alexander's point is that the epithet can go too far, be unjustly applied to middle-class blacks, who, like himself, may have white lovers and regularly move through white circles but who have not deserted the folk and do not want to be white**" (Young 2011: 8).

"**The call for dignity and the call for respectability are not the same, though they are frequently conflated.** Demands for dignity are demands for a fundamental recognition of one's inherent humanity. Demands for respectability assume that unassailable social propriety will prove one's dignity. Dignity, unlike respectability, is not socially contingent. It is intrinsic and, therefore, not up for debate" (Cooper 2017: 5).

"Ratchet has been defined as foolish, ignorant, ho'ishness, ghetto, and a dance. **It is the performance**

of the failure to be respectable, uplifting, and a credit to the race, as opposed to the promotion of failure or respectability that is important here. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam suggests that '**under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world**'" (Stallings 2013: 136).

"**The concept of 'role models' overstates the extent to which notions of respectability, morality, and community responsibility are passed down by individual example.** It not only presumes that these values originate solely with the black middle class, but it obscures the role that community institutions play in determining and instilling modes of behavior, beliefs, expectations, and moral vision. When we begin to look at, say, black churches as places where cultural values were enacted, taught, and policed, we discover that the so-called "lower-class" was not always on the receiving end. Occasionally it was the wealthier black folk who violated Christian principles..." (Kelley 1996:40)

"The gap between rich and poor is even more pronounced among Blacks than among whites. The richest whites have 74 times more wealth than the average white family. **But among African Americans, the richest families have a staggering 200 times more wealth than the average Black family**" (Taylor 2016).

- African Americans make up 1.4 percent of the richest 1 percent of Americans, or 16,000 of the 14 million Black families in the United States (Taylor 2016).

"Class differences have always existed among African Americans, but the pall of legally instituted racism in an earlier era essentially tethered Blacks together into a Black community. Today, **the absence of formal barriers to Black economic and political achievement has allowed for more differentiation among African American and has frayed notions of "community"** (Taylor 2016).

Reading List

- Binnie, Jon. 2011. "Class, sexuality and space: A comment." *Sexualities* 14 (1):21-26. doi: 10.1177/1363460710390567.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. *The Forms of Capital*. In *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. E. Richardson: Greenwood Press.
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- Kendi, Ibram X. 2016. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. New York: Nation Books.
- Lacy, Karyn R. 2007. *Blue-chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Lane, Nikki. 2015. "All the Lesbians are White, All the Villages are Gay, but Some of Us are Brave: Intersectionality, Belonging, and Black Queer Women's Scene Space in Washington, DC." In *Lesbian Geographies: Gender, Place and Power*, edited by Kath Brown and Eduarda Ferreira, 219-242. London and New York: Ashgate.
- Marable, Manning. 1983. *How capitalism underdeveloped Black America : problems in race, political economy, and society*. 1st ed. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Stallings, LaMonda Horton. 2013. "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination." *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 2 (2):135-139.
- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. 2016. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black liberation*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books.
- Young, Vershawn, and Bridget Harris Tsemo, eds. 2011. *African American Life Series: From Bourgeois to Boogie : Black Middle-Class Performances*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Discussion Questions

- 1) According to E. Patrick Johnson, the lens of performance offers an important way to think about black middle-classness in part because it makes it easy to understand how "someone who appears bourgeois may not actually inhabit that socioeconomic position and someone who is materially situated within the middle-class might not perform a bourgeois sensibility" (Johnson 2011, xx). Can you identify ways in which black middle classness or working classness are performed?
- 2) Aside from their definitions, I've argued that boogie and ratchet are quite similar in their function. They do similar kinds of things when people use them. What are some of those similarities? And what other differences can you identify? Do you agree with the assessment that they still function the same: they both attempt to establish authentic and/or 'best' practices of performing blackness.
- 3) A few of my informants talked about the need to "get ratchet" or do something ratchet every now and again. Based on our discussion, what does this mean? Is "getting ratchet" occasionally different from "being ratchet"? Why might someone want to distinguish between the two?
- 4) "Uplift suasion," as defined by Ibram X. Kendi, refers to the belief that "White people could be persuaded away from their racist ideas if they saw Black people improving their behavior, uplifting themselves from their low station in American society" (Kendi 2016, 124). It has been a strategy used by many black people in the US since the era of enslavement. Do you agree or disagree with Ibram X. Kendi who writes the following in his book *Stamped From the Beginning: A Definitive History of Racist Ideas*. Why or why not?
Everyone who has witnessed the historic presidency of Barack Obama—and the historic opposition to him—should now know full well that the more Black people uplift themselves, the more they will find themselves on the receiving end of a racist backlash. Uplift suasion, as a strategy for racial progress, has failed. Black individuals must dispose of it as a strategy and stop worrying about what other people may think about the way they act, the way they speak, the way they look, the way they dress, the way they are portrayed in the media, and the way they think and love and laugh. Individual Blacks are not race representatives. They are not responsible for those Americans who hold racist ideas. Black people need to be their imperfect selves around White people, around each other, around all people. Black is beautiful and ugly, intelligent and unintelligent, law-abiding and law-breaking, industrious and lazy—and it is those imperfections that make Black people human, make Black people equal to all other imperfectly human groups. [Kendi 2016, 505]

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