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A Documentary Narrative: The African-American Male

by Rebekah Rifareal,
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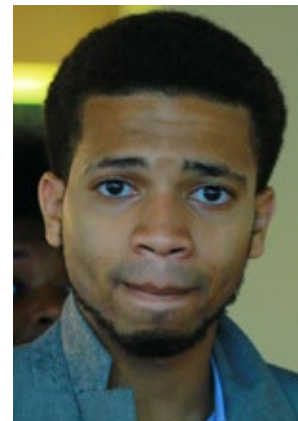
Project: "Aspect of the African American Male"

*Program: UROP Summer Fellowship for Undergraduate
Research and Creativity*

Mentor: Bob Paris

Year: Senior

Major: Kinetic Imaging (KI)



How did you first get started with your project?

I went to New York with a couple of friends of mine. We're all artists. It was a trip through the Kinetic Imaging department. We're in New York and we're these black males – we felt free to do anything we wanted. We recorded ourselves spitting poetry or dancing. The idea kind of came to me: You know, I want to do a film that has that freedom, that has that feeling of not caring about a specific plot line, but that shows the aspects of who we are out there in public performance. So when I came back to

VCU, I got an email saying that UROP was having a summer grant application. I looked back at what I've done in the past and what I am as an artist. I love performance art. I love dancing. I love poetry. I love film. So how do you combine all those things together?

I came up with "Aspects of the African American Male" by talking to people who were a part of my family, part of my friends, part of the surrounding area, and got a feel for how they see themselves. I thought: Why don't I allow these people to perform? And I'll film it like a documentary and then put it together. And now, it's grown. Someone can put on a performance to explain his or her identity but there is so much more to that. I came up with this theory of a documentary narrative that I wanted to explore.

So I actually got a cast and asked them, "Before I start this project, I want to know personally about you." I put them in situations where they could talk about identity. So, when constructing a script for it, I really had to piece questions together: How much of this do I want to control? How much of this can I let go and let them work their magic? I'm trying to get the fine line of both the narrative and the documentary part and create a story.

Is most of what you're researching the history of documentaries? Or films in general?

The first part that I researched was equipment. So, how do you go about making a film and what equipment do you need? I started researching what goes into good writing. What goes into making a good script, but more importantly, what goes into making a good story? And that led me to, let's say, Kurt Vonnegut. He doesn't do anything in film, but he knows stories...with the film that I was going for, it's partially narrative. So it's not so much what the story entails, but how the character evolves, or how the characters grow and what they give the audience.

So I had to look up character development. And there are multiple views on that, like with Aristotle. Aristotle says character development is secondary. Aristotle is actually one of my favorite philosophers, so I was kind of sad, like, "Aw...well let's not make that secondary." That is the important part. Let's find a way to intertwine a plot into character development... What do the characters need to go through in order for them to talk, in order for them to be truthful to themselves, in order for them to be

passionate? And if that comes across as real, as genuine, the viewers who will see the film will really get a feel of their film and their learning. And it's entertaining.

Are you leaving the script up to the characters, for them to improve?

The plot line centers around a group of friends who are at a part and conflicts come up. That's the overlying arch of it. But throughout the piece, there are things that happen and I script those things. One of them is that my character gets pulled over by the police and you get his voice. What is it about a black man getting stopped by a police? What are those questions that lie in everyone's head? It's not necessarily scripting that the police are going to search him and unjustly arrest, but the characters can address those issues that they have with a justice system that might be against them.

Another part is conflicts between characters. I have a character who likes to be humble and doesn't like to brag about his success, but I have another character who is always working hard, always boasting. He has to remind himself how successful he is because he compares himself to others. You put these two characters that kind of butt heads together. They're foils of each other. You see what conversation comes out of that. So it's a lot of scripting scenarios and allowing the conversation to come out.

Are you bringing kinetic imaging to the film?

Definitely. Kinetic Imaging is a program where you learn about motion. Everything has motion. Everything has energy. So the department focuses on the visual creation of motion. Film is like the visual representative of energy, of life, and it crosses over to documentaries, which is the non-fiction side, to create that energy of those visuals and portray something to the audience.

And then there's, sound, which I have a hard time with. How do you make someone feel, without any visuals, just sounds? It's a lot different from the music department, which works on symphonies and recording music and music theory. We just work on describing moods. There's an image of a haunted house – what kind of sounds go into giving someone that feeling of being in a haunted house without actually being there? I use

the kinetic imaging knowledge of how to construct visuals and plot lines that really touch people, along with sound. A soundtrack is one of the most important things of a film. I have to bring the sound knowledge that I have from kinetic imaging to understand what is really appropriate. Is it experimental sound? Is it something that is room tone?

Do you have any history with filmmaking or do you do that within your major?

We make videos. These videos can be films, they can be music videos, they can be documentaries, interviews. We usually touch on every inch or aspect and find which one speaks to us. I've gotten really interested in filming dance and movement of the human body. We learn about close-ups, wide angles, establishing shots, and different ways to film subjects. We don't necessarily learn what we need to do to obtain the visual or emotion we want. That's all self-exploration. I've done a lot of poetry pieces. I take that poetry aspect of filming somebody who is speaking words and then combine that with the visuals of movement and dance. I've done a piece called Flash which is poetry about an African American male coming to America and then getting put into the jail system. He has a son who tries to reach out to his father, but his father's not there.

What do you hope people will get from watching your film?

I guess the message is that there's not really one aspect of the African American male. It's basically just that everyone faces the same problems. It may not seem like these problems match up. Like if a black man walks into a store, he may be looked at for suspiciously. But anyone can walk into a store and generate suspicion from the way they dress or the way they act. It's really to take those specifics and modify them and then talk about them so they are then relatable to everybody. Another thing is, when there's a conflict, there's not necessarily always an answer. I think that's a big one within African Americans' dialogue with themselves. You can have a problem, but it's not necessarily going to be solved the moment you find a solution.

What is a typical day like for you?

It's definitely Internet research based. So I would go online, look up something that would lead me to somewhere else. Today, I looked at "narrative." And that led me to "nonfiction narrative" which led me to "new journalism." It's very straightforward, very to-the-point. But, back in the day, journalism only mentioned the relevant parts of the story. Now, people show you everything that happens when it happens, not waiting for a consensus to see what's important. It kind of threw me off. There's history with nonfiction narrative and a lot more I need to look at.

Other than the Internet research, I meet with my cast every week. Most of my research is talking to them and allowing them to prepare themselves for the roles they are going to take because if they're not ready, it's not going to come across as genuine. We have meetings about every week. And then, every two weeks, I talk to my mentor, Bob Paris. I give him an update. I tell him where I'm going and then he'll tell me either "I like that!" Or he'll say, "That sucks. You need to reorganize this, allow it to fail, but allow it to grow."

What do you feel is the most important thing you've learned about the research so far?

If you look at some of the films that have been done, it's really intense and not realistic. It's entertaining, but it's taking those stereotypes, fears, and insecurities of the African American male and blowing them up. I want to shrink those fears down and show what's real. It can get kind of boring, but still, I think that voice, when it's handled in the right way, can be very respected.

Do you think you're going to continue with this after the UROP program ends?

I'm already thinking about my senior year and what I can do to set myself up to travel and initiate more projects like this in other areas. Actually, I want to apply for the Dean's International Scholarship to go overseas to see the African perspective – of identity, but of art. Art is how we express ourselves and how we get down to who we really are.