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Race v. gender

Baldy Center conference tackles progressive black masculinities

A major conference in spring 2002 brought to UB Law School many of the leading thinkers and writers in an emerging subject of critical scholarship: African-American male identity.

Titled "Exploring, Constructing, and Sustaining Progressive Black Masculinities," the conference was held at the Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy for three days in mid-April and was co-sponsored by Buffalo State College. The brainchild of UB Law Associate Professor Athena D. Mutua, the conference was an outgrowth of a continuing initiative, the Black Masculinities Project, which organized a workshop sponsored by the Baldy Center last year. The steering committee, chaired by Mutua, is jointly composed of faculty of UB Law and Buffalo State College, including: UB Professor of Law Stephanie Phillips and Buffalo State Assistant Professors Scott Johnson, Criminal Justice, Tim Brown, Communications, and Professor Ron Stewart, Sociology.

Other UB Law participants included Associate Professors Shubha Ghosh, Martha McCluskey and Teresa A. Miller, and Professors Isabel Marcus and Makau Mutua.

Athena Mutua explained that "progressive black masculinities" involves looking at "the ways that men relate to the world and others around them, as well as the ways the world relates to them. More specifically, "progressive black masculinities are those masculinities that are not predicated upon the subordination and domination of others. They take a critical stance toward



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— Associate Professor Athena D. Mutua

social structures such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, classism, etc.," she said.

"Masculinities" is plural because "we are committed to the notion that there is not one model of manhood. Similarly, blackness is a term that we also understand as multidimensional. There is no one way to define blackness, nor a single model or standard of blackness or of being black."

Part of the theory, Mutua suggests, is that black men are subordinated by race but privileged by gender. "We are

exploring this aspect of the theory, as well as the role of law in its operation. But sometimes black men seem to be oppressed by both race and gender."

For instance, the phenomenon of "driving while black" – the tendency by some law enforcers to pull over black drivers more than white drivers – "happens more to black men than to white men, white women and black women, seemingly because black men are both black and men," she said.

Other examples include the historical practice of lynching and the current imprisonment of large numbers of men of color. "Society views black men as something to be feared, and that perception also operates in the criminal justice system. When a black man reaches to pull out his wallet and is shot dead by 40 bullets, what are the images in the police officers' minds that cause that to happen?"

The issue has many dimensions, Mutua said, some of them addressed by panelists and speakers at the conference covering topics such as: black men and economic marginalization; law, religion and gender; sexuality and the politics of desire; black men and popular culture; nurturing progressive black children; and "black civil society."

Kendall Thomas, professor of law at Columbia and participant in the workshop suggested that the discussion of black masculinities is very much tied to the project of "reviving a 'black public sphere'" or black civil society in U.S. communities. The attrition of black-owned newspapers, for instance, has limited the forums for African-Americans to express "distinctively black American views on a whole range of

subjects." Ironically, he said, the success of the civil rights movement in making blacks' voices heard in the larger society has "eviscerated the remaining institutions of the black civic public, of the black public sphere, in largely urban communities throughout the United States."

Keynote speaker Michael Eric Dyson is an African-American scholar and best-selling author whose work addresses urban, cultural and religious studies and popular and hip-hop culture. He spoke in the auditorium of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

Part Baptist preacher (by training), part stand-up comedian and part deadly serious scholar, Dyson riveted an appreciative audience with a discourse that focused on the "demonization" of African-American men by the larger society; the problem of the "deification" of black men in black communities in response to that demonization; and the need to "de-mythologize" black men so that the full range of their personalities and potential is recognized and realized.

"To think about black men in the 21st century," he began, "is to think about the profound and complex history of how black men have been viewed, not only here but around the globe." He argued that the success of American capitalism has been built "upon the labor of black people in general, but the labor of black men in particular. This becomes the exploitable commodity for the perpetuation of white supremacy."

Sustaining that situation, he said, "demanded the demonization of black men in order to justify and legitimate their being extirpated from African soil and brought to American soil in the West to serve as the engine of

American capital."

This characterization of black men, Dyson said, includes stereotypes of laziness, suspicions of an inclination toward violence and images of uncontrolled sexuality, especially in relation to white women. This, he said, was part of the public fascination with the O.J. Simpson case, because the victim was a white woman and the defendant — especially in the infamous Time magazine cover, in which editors artificially darkened his face — was black.

"When I think about black men being demonized," he said, "you have to remember that it did not start today. All of this stuff has resonance because of centuries of historical action against us, whether intentional or not," noting that in the contemporary

moment, hip-hop, while demonized, generates huge profits for white corporate America. "It is a self-perpetuating machine that has to be interrupted by constant political, ethical and moral activity."

"And in the pre-Sept. 11 atmosphere," he said, "black men bore the brunt of race-based suspicions. What we saw was the demonization of black identity," Dyson said. "Post-9/11 is just an extension of that, and we look un-American if we speak up about it. Driving while black is not that much different from flying while Muslim."

Mutua said that a book arising from the conference is in the works, *Mapping the Contours of Progressive Black Masculinities*. It will contain parts of what was said at the conference and workshop as well as original articles by some of the participants.

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