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Intersectionality within the International Film Series

This spring I was fortunate enough to attend a French film titled “Ouvrir la Voix” (or “Speak up”) as part of the International Film Series here at the University of Richmond. The film was held in Ukrops Auditorium with showings on Thursday, February 28<sup>th</sup> at 7:30pm and Friday, March 1<sup>st</sup> at 3pm and 7:30pm – I attended the 3pm with the reception to follow. The film was a documentary focusing on the experiences of black women in France (and other European countries) as they share stories of discrimination and prejudice that influence how they live their lives. The film did not much so have a plot but rather presented several topics and displayed several women providing their thoughts with anecdotes of personal experiences. The documentary aimed to place the women as their naked selves - void of makeup, ornament or association to anything else – as they explained how their entire life has been shaped by the color of their skin and their gender. The stories of intersectionality were raw, jaw-dropping, and enlightening. By the end, tears were shed by the majority of the audience as many of the women explained despite all this oppression they still remain loyal to the country that discriminates against them.

Ouvrir La Voix serves as an embodiment our discussions in Media Culture and Identity. Keywords such as identity, culture, stereotype, representation and power were clearly at play throughout the film, but the most prevalent would be intersectionality. The theme of identity was evident from the very beginning– these women explained how they identify with France but are often assumed as being from another country. Some of them who moved from Africa at a young age explained how they didn’t realize they were ‘black’ until they arrived to Europe. They began to hear, “wow, you’re so pretty for a black girl!” Others who were born in France said they

commonly receive comments like, “how did your French become so great?” They cannot escape this feeling of being an outsider in their own home. It was interesting to hear perspectives of those who mentioned that even when they seem to be respected, society pushes their ideal fantasies of identity upon them of the “genuine African women identity” instead of attempting to learn their raw individual self.

Other anecdotes involved being constrained by stereotypes, such as how people associate their skin type with certain behaviors and have certain expectations of how they will live their lives – such as the expectation to date another black guy. I was immediately reminded of Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a woman?” quotation from our Intersectionality keyword reading where she highlights that she is not just discriminated against for being black, but being a black woman makes her all the more excluded and dehumanized... She conveys the message that “universal categories like “woman” reinforce an exclusionary norm of privileged and elite whiteness, leaving a vast majority of women of color unrepresented, even invisible” (Weber, 2017, p. 111). The women explain how they were subjected to lower standards in school under their male counterparts who involved black men and thus have had to work considerably harder to reach the same positions in the workforce. One woman explained how her daughters were not given the invitations to certain honor societies and applications to private schools whereas white boys and girls were expected to join.

Moreover, the keyword of representation that permeated through the Masters of None episode also related to Ouvrir la Voix. Multiple stories women shared involved people relentlessly expecting specific behavior from them just because of their skin color. Just as Dev was expected to provide an Indian accent and perform the role of a taxi driver, these women were often depicted to be talented at hair-braiding, out of work, and be overly emotional (Ansari

& Wareheim, 2015). One of women mentioned that the most often she is represented by stereotypes when she is speaking to those who do not come into contact with many black acquaintances but rather they only through television – drawing explicitly from our class discussions on how the media and culture influences how society makes assumptions about groups of people. Looking at it through the angle of MCI made me quickly realize that many of the assumptions people made about these women were most certainly stemming from pieces of media that they allowed influence their thinking about all people. The course really allowed me to see how society is primed by media to assume defining characteristics about others before ever allowing them to make their own impression. Intersectionality, fueled by media tools, has forced these women into the margins of society.

## Bibliography

- Ansari, A. (Writer) & Wareheim E. (Director). (2015). Indians on T.V. [Television series episode]. In A. Ansari (Producer), *Masters of None*. Netflix.
- Weber. B. (2017). Intersectionality. In L. Ouellette & J. Gray (Eds.), *Keywords for Media Studies* (111-113). New York, NY: NYU Press.