

How We Make Teaching Remain a White Profession The Teacher of Color in the Urban High School Genre Film

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Abstract

This article discusses how a particular urban high school genre film depicts a teacher of color as a site of failure for students of color. The depiction here is representative of a larger culture of poverty discourse directed at students of color as well as teachers of color. This work acts as a response to Bulman's 2005 text, *Hollywood Goes to High School*, especially the conception of the "outsider as teacher-hero" figure in such films. The depiction of the teacher of color as the failed insider is discussed to contrast the white teacher as hero. Such a discussion of the cultural representation of teachers of color is relevant given the continued stagnation in the number of teachers of color when compared to white teachers, even as the percentage of students of color in U.S. public schools continues to increase.

Keywords: teachers of color, high school, urban, culture of poverty

Introduction

An all-too common trope in contemporary media forms is the "at-risk" youth of color. He or she is used to represent the hopelessness of urban existence, much like shattered windows in a dilapidated building. Often in television and film, both these symbols meet in a classroom within a school that looks like something out of Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*. The youth of color is sullen, removed. In such moments in school genre films, however, I find myself drawn instead to the front of the classroom, to the teacher. As a former high school English teacher, this is not too surprising. As a white teacher who taught in a diverse, working-class

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community for several years, further, I must admit to once looking at students of color and seeing sullenness when I should have been thinking about my own teaching practices.

My preparation in becoming a teacher started early with films like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and *The Breakfast Club* (1985) in which white teachers are seen as buffoons, or worse, as the enemy, within the suburban high school environment. On the other hand, films like *The Principal* (1987) and *Dangerous Minds* (1995) depicted white teachers as both rebellious and victorious in urban settings. It was an easy choice I suppose. Although I did not have the term back then, I very much wanted to be the “teacher-hero” discussed in Bulman’s *Hollywood Goes to High School* (2005). Such a teacher is an “outsider, a representative of the middle-class work ethic comes to the school to ‘save’ the students by teaching them how to be utilitarian individuals” (Bulman, 2005, p.54). Once I started teaching, however, I quickly began to see the many limitations of such a perspective and, more importantly, realized how little else I had to offer my students, especially the ‘sullen’ ones. So, I decided I needed to go back to school. But that is a longer story.

Instead, what follows is my effort to examine one particular cinematic example of a teacher and how she, as a female teacher of color is represented. Although *Finding Forrester* (2000) came along too late to impact my own miseducation of teaching, I have good cause for wanting to “talk back” against it now (hooks, 1989). As a high school English teacher, I pushed “teach” with *Finding Forrester* when I taught a Creative Writing elective class. I am saddened that I showed the film to my students without also using it as a way to critique its use of myths surrounding race, gender and class. More personally, it is troubling to consider how this film may have been ‘read’ by my students of color. This reveals, unfortunately, the white person having good intentions: I figured *Finding Forrester* was a whole lot better than *Dead Poets Society*. Given our failure, and I say ‘our’ as a current teacher educator, in finding ways to diversify the teacher workforce, such depictions and the narratives of failure that follow, must be countered if we are to thoughtfully discuss how to encourage students of color to become teachers of color.

Thus, my work here discusses how a particular urban high-school genre film depicts a teacher of color as a site of failure for the student of color, and one that must be replaced by a white teacher in order for that student to succeed. Such a depiction is representative of a larger culture of poverty discourse directed at teachers of color. My work acts as a response that both honors and challenges the work of Bulman, especially Chapter 3 of his *Hollywood Goes to High School*, entitled, “Fighting the Culture of Poverty: The Teacher as the Urban School Cowboy.” The representation I discuss offer an essential contrast to the “outsider as teacher-hero” concept laid out by Bulman, yet also attempt to ask what connections might exist between them and why teaching remains a profession dominated by white people.

“Fighting the Culture of Poverty” Still

Although persuasive work has been done to show how notions of culture of poverty have infected schools (Valencia, 1991), two crucial points still must be made. The first is that culture of poverty thinking remains pervasive, not only in long-standing school policies, but also in what some call reform (Gorski 2012). The second, and the point I would like to focus on in this section, is the negative impact of culture of poverty discourse within these films on teachers of color (and those thinking about becoming such). The discourse of these cinematic representations involves how teachers of color are perceived as lacking in their ability to reach “their” students of color.

A brief look at the primary documents that popularized culture of poverty notions is offered here. For example, from Lewis’ (1968) foundational treatise, “The Culture of Poverty”:

...by the time slum children are aged six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of the changing conditions or increased opportunities that may occur in their lifetime. (p. 188)

Lewis blames the ‘slum’ student for not being able to understand the future advancement inherently possible within our schools and larger society.

Banfield’s *The Unheavenly City* made another step in the evolution of culture of poverty thinking in 1970. In these two passages, Banfield again blames the individual for not being able to envision a successful future:

[An individual] is lower class if he is incapable of conceptualizing the future or controlling his impulses and is therefore obliged to live from moment to moment. (p. 48)

Lower-class poverty, by contrast, is “inwardly” caused by psychological inability to provide for the future, and all that this inability implies. (p. 126)

This notion of the future considers the ways in which one’s orientation towards work, investing in education and financial security, and even a view of pleasure, are all found to be absent in the ‘lower-classes.’ Thus, locked within a culture of poverty, these people supposedly aren’t interested in acquiring job skills for a future occupation, don’t save money or invest for the future, and can’t delay pleasure for a more substantive reward in the future. Although the idealized (and dominant) culture is separated from the culture of poverty in many ways, the distinction Banfield makes above is essential in determining what kinds of teachers these students need.

These culture or community-wide deficiencies travel into our schools through policies and reforms, but also impact the day-to-day interactions between teachers and students. In *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*, Valenzuela writes of U.S.-born Mexican students being subjected to the “uncaring student prototype” (1999). Valenzuela’s work details teachers who find

deficits in how their students undervalue education, but are unwilling to question how such attitudes could be simply a defense mechanism. We see many instances where this deficit thinking is inscribed on both low-income students and students of color. What is even more insidious perhaps is that such thinking continues to be passed along generation after generation under the banner of educational reform.

One such example is the 2003 book *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. In this deeply troubled, yet sadly prescient reform text, Thernstrom & Thernstrom (2003) seem to serve as two of the possible birthers to this particular contemporary repackaging. The Thernstroms contend that standards-based testing and charter schools are the way to solve our educational woes. Consider the following from *No Excuses*:

These schools also aim to transform the culture of their students. . . . When it comes to academic success, members of some ethnic and racial groups are culturally luckier than others. . . . Family messages don't always mesh well with the objectives of schools. . . . Schools can do much to close the racial gap; students, however, have to do their part: coming to school on time, attending every class, listening with their full attention, burning the midnight oil. (pp. 4-7)

In terms of locating these repeating, only slightly modified historical trends regarding students of color, Brown's "Same Old Stories: The Black Male in Social Science and Educational Literature, 1930s to Present," is insightful. Although Brown focuses on how "social science and education literature has helped to produce a common-sense narrative about all Black males," his work can be applied to other students of color. Brown writes,

While much of the research from the mid-1980s through the present has given significant attention the social, psychological and educational issues of Black males, it was clear that the analyses used were far from new. Certainly, researchers have attempted to avoid using culturally deficit models for explaining Black male conditions, however, many of the theories about Black males were simply a rehashing of arguments made in previous decades.

Such deficit thinking is exactly what is being recycled in work like the Thernstroms'. Brown rightly contends that these "new" models are the "same old stories." My own contention is how teachers of color are represented within media, particularly in the urban high school genre film, is very much cultural deficit models at work.

Contrasting Teachers of Color with Teachers of Whiteness

The intersection of factual experience and cinematic fantasy provides an interesting space to consider how cultural myths of teaching continue to thrive in our national consciousness. More specifically, I want to focus on how beliefs concerning both students of color, as well as teachers of color are produced. In such a form of production, cultural myths surrounding the "differences" between

both teachers and students of color and white teachers and white students are perpetuated.

In the opening minutes of *Finding Forrester*, Jamal Wallace's teacher, Ms. Joyce, attempts to engage him in a class discussion of Edgar Allen Poe's poem "The Raven." Ms. Joyce knows of Jamal's knowledge with the work, but is unable to entice him into sharing this interest in the classroom setting.

Ms. Joyce: Poe wrote his most famous piece, The Raven. A poem he wrote while he was strung out on coke and obsessed with death.

Student: The Raven is like the football team. They're obsessed with death, always get their ass kicked.

Ms. Joyce: Baltimore Ravens: only pro football team named after a classic poem. Anyone read it? "Once upon a midnight dreary while I pondered weak and weary" Jamal, how about it?

Jamal: I never read it.

The reason for this reluctance is presented to the viewer as rational: Jamal doesn't want to be identified by his peers as interested in poetry. Bulman's valuable critique of the urban high school film centers on such moments when students like Jamal are not "allowed to fully express themselves as free individuals" (2005, p. 43). He continues: "The academic failure of students in poverty, according to American cultural beliefs and the fantasies of Hollywood, is due entirely to the attitude and behavior of the individual and not to any obstacles in the social structure" (p. 47). Although Bulman is persuasive here, a much closer look should be taken to at the particular role Ms. Joyce plays here as Jamal's teacher. In the film, Ms. Joyce is not allowed to express herself either, nor is she given agency to act in ways that would empower Jamal's intelligence. As a teacher of color, she is the *failed insider* that must come before the white "outsider as teacher-hero".

In a subsequent scene Ms. Joyce meets with Jamal's mother and informs her of Jamal's high-test scores yet middling grades. Jamal's mother can only shake her head and remark on the many books Jamal is always reading. She tells Ms. Joyce they are books she herself has never read. Although we can assume Ms. Joyce has such shared knowledge is overwhelmed by the "culture of poverty" surrounding Jamal. Thus, he is shown as a bright kid, but one left to wallow in both a school and home environment unable to fully tap his potential. The fact that the representatives of both school and home are African American women is a sad commentary on the film's use of race and gender to establish a sense of failure as inevitable in Jamal's life. Moreover, the absence of African American men in both Jamal's life, as well as the film itself, represents another all-too common trope within films depicting poor families of color. The genderedness of the urban school and home is not surprising then, but still contrasts the male-driven narrative that follows. Simply put, Jamal needs to find a white male teacher.

But instead of focusing on Forrester as the “outsider teacher as hero,” I want to discuss the other white teacher Jamal encounters: Professor Crawford. Bulman describes him aptly as the “pompous and condescending writing teacher” (p. 124). As a white male teacher, he is the complete opposite to Ms. Joyce. Moreover, the elite private school represents the class(ed) trip Jamal needed to take in order to escape his fate in the urban school. This move to an elite school should look familiar to anyone familiar to the voucher programs and charter schools that hold such prominence in contemporary school reform. And although he doubts Jamal’s intellect from the start, Professor Crawford is able to create a classroom space where Jamal’s intellect is valued. For example, the scene in which Jamal challenges Prof. Crawford and the two finish each other’s sentences is, although combative, in direct contrast to Ms. Joyce’s ‘failure’ to create a classroom environment where intelligence is expressed to the awe and wonder of teacher and students alike. Here is the exchange:

Prof. Crawford: Perhaps the challenge should have been directed elsewhere. “It is a melancholy truth that even...

Jamal: “great men have poor relations” Dickens.

Prof. Crawford: “You will hear the beat of...”

Jamal: Kipling.

Prof. Crawford: “All great truths begin...”

Jamal: Shaw.

Prof. Crawford: “Man is the only animal...

Jamal: “that blushes... or needs to.” That’s Mark Twain.

Jamal: Come on, Professor Crawford...

Prof. Crawford: [shouting] Get out!

Prof. Crawford: [whispered] Get... out.

Jamal: Yeah. I’ll get out.

Although Professor Crawford’s suspicions of Jamal are depicted as both racist and classist, and he is humiliated by the end of the film, he is still effective in ways Ms. Joyce was not. As a trope himself, Professor Crawford represents the teacher you did not want, but end up needing.

In Bulman’s reading of *Finding Forrester*, Jamal “doesn’t need the (elite) school to have a bright future...As an underprivileged, black, and academically gifted student from a world far removed from that of the elite school, it is Jamal who has lessons to teach” (p. 124). But this interpretation fails to consider the meaning behind the implied failure of both Ms. Joyce and the urban school. After all, at the end of the film, Jamal is still at the elite school, perhaps now taking an

independent study with the now woke Professor Crawford. The contrast between Ms. Joyce, the female teacher of color in the urban school and Professor Crawford, the white male teacher at the elite private school, is an aspect Bulman ignores perhaps because Ms. Joyce is seen so briefly. I would argue that a better discussion of such representations of teachers of color, particularly African American women teachers, seen other films like *Teachers* and *The Principal* as well, is needed as both a complement and a corrective to Bulman's valuable arguments concerning the urban high school film genre.

Such a discussion must involve not only a closer look at race and gender, but how these identities intersect with class as well. Ms. Joyce is perhaps more a failed outsider given her status as a middle-class professional. And so even though teachers of color are present in the urban school, they still fail to reach 'urban' youth. Such dynamic shows and reifies the belief that a culture of failure is embedded in communities of color regardless. This 'failure' is inevitable once teachers of color attain this 'middle-class' position, as they are so far removed from their 'urban' students' lives that all the culturally relevant pedagogy in the world won't help them (re)connect.

Implications for Understanding Difficulties in Recruiting Teachers of Color

An essential relationship to discuss is the one between the high-school genre film as a cultural product, and the how this material is interpreted by young people of color considering a career in teaching. In order to discuss this relationship I lean on Johnson's (1986) concept of the "circuit of cultural production." The four features of Johnson's "circuit" are discussed here:

The qualitative researcher can ask (1) where do cultural themes come from, (2) what possible meanings do they bear, (3) how do the subjects of the study interpret the meanings, and (4) in what ways do these interpretations affect the daily lives and routines of the people being studied. (Apple & Carspecken)

And so, in hopes of making the connection between these films and the messages they sent a bit clearer, I rephrase the above questions to more closely fit my topic here:

(1) where do the cultural themes about who a teacher is come from, (2) what meanings do they bear regarding race, gender, and class (3) how do young people of color then interpret the connection between how teachers are depicted in film and their own identities, and (4) in what ways do such interpretations affect how these young people of color think about teaching as a possible profession?

Since the urban school film uses the teacher of color as a site of failure, it should not come as a surprise that young people of color pause before entering the teaching profession. Teacher educators like myself, interested in recruiting and retaining more teachers of color, must first understand how difficult it might be for young people of color to take an interest in teaching given how our culture produces, and

reproduces, this role of failure in the classroom involving not only the student of color, but the teacher of color as well. Since “interests” are often imagined through “cultural productions of them,” a student of color may experience a “mismatch between one’s interests and the culturally shaped ways in which one thinks and talks about them” (Johnson, 1986, pg. 43). Such “interest” is structured within larger society and then reinforced (or locked) by various other (real) failings around the schooling young people of color receive. Only then can we, as teacher educators, seek answers to who is interested in teaching and who isn’t and why?

A study of the high school genre film can expand our discussions of the teaching population we need and the kinds of teachers we tend to imaginatively envision. These films are cultural productions that exist as a dialogue about what we think of when we think about the next generation of teachers. The critique of film as a mirror onto larger societal forms of representation brings an essential interdisciplinary quality to my work as a teacher educator. Such cinematic representations can be used in my own classrooms environment to discuss concepts of race in American schools. These representations, embedded in so much of our visual culture, can be integrated just as teachers so often do with representations within literature. The fact that these images are so accessible to students makes them even more useful as a way to introduce them to the patterns of characterization that swirl around them. Thus, these movies are used as “cultural models” to scaffold the more complex notions of representation for my students (Lee, 2007). Then after recognizing these representations, we can teach, and learn ourselves, what they say about our society.

For instance, one way to extend such a critique is to take this way of seeing into how contemporary news media depict our schools, especially those “urban” schools that mirror the ones depicted in the films I have discussed here. A lesson could consider how teachers in these schools are presented in various media platforms. The question becomes, is there a similar limitation, or representation to how teachers of color in particular are depicted in these “real” places? Next, the “final frontier” would be to not only critique such images, but also to view them alongside the cinematic representations.

Perhaps the quickest way such an understanding can be gained is to remain focused on the teacher of color as a character in film and literature. Students could simply be asked to gather examples from a wide range of representations. The curricular inclusion here would certainly be a powerful way to underscore how the pattern of a representation of failure is constructed as a cultural product.

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