AN IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM OF PORTRAYALS OF BLACK MEN IN FILM: AN ANALYSIS OF DRUMLINE, DANGEROUS MINDS, HIGHER LEARNING, AND STOMP THE YARD

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AN IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM OF PORTRAYALS OF BLACK MEN IN FILM: AN
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CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED BLACK FILMMAKER SPike lee said “Black audiences are dying to see themselves portrayed realistically” (as cited in Margolis, 1999, p. 50). lee also asserts that “people of color have a constant frustration of not being represented, or being misrepresented, and these images go around the world” (spike lee quotes, 2014). lee (1989) has used his films to serve as what he calls a “wake-up call” about the issues that involve the topic of race in america. for instance, in his film do the right thing (1989), lee explores portrayals of racial tension between italian-americans and black-americans. in the film, italian-americans and black-americans fight each other, verbally abuse each other, and destroy each other’s property. ultimately, do the right thing displays that “racism is so deeply ingrained in our society that the disease itself creates mischief…” (ebert, 2001).

film is a visual text that displays stereotypes and shows how these stereotypes support racist structures in the world (beyerbach, 2005). films and television shows have been thoroughly studied for their stereotypical images, especially of minorities (pardo, 2013; tyree, 2011). a primary goal of studying images represented in media is to assess if the blame for stereotypical images rests on the media (banjo & fraley, 2014). for black men in particular, film “imagery has been an important issue in the relation
between blacks and cinema” (Margolis, 1999, p. 51). Glenn and Cunningham (2009) explain that films typically use characteristics that are exaggerated in nature, and use limited roles for black characters that appeal to broad audiences. Some of these characterizations include Uncle Tom, magical Negro, tough, oversexualized, inferior, failure, lost, and criminal (Ericcson, Talreja, & Jhally, 1999; Margolis, 1999; Petersen, 2009; Schrader, 2011).

There are a number of reasons it is important to study how black men are portrayed in film. First, race is socially constructed and aids in helping with development and upkeep of one’s identity (Richmond & Johnson, 2009). According to Francis (2014), black audience members have a lack of trust in Hollywood filmmakers’ portrayals of blacks, thus providing another reason to study popular images of blacks in film. Even black films, defined as “representations of black culture” are being called into question by black audiences due to authenticity concerns (Francis, 2014, p. 147). It is also important to study black men in film because the stereotypes that exist in film can be found in nonfiction areas such as news stories. Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton (2011) said the majority of U.S. news stories portray “black men as criminals, drug addicts, derelicts, and other kinds of losers” (p. 468). In addition to these stereotypes, Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton (2011) found black men in news stories to be portrayed as gangsters, as being in the penal system, or as being unemployed. Both Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown were unarmed black teens who were shot and killed by authorities (Love, 2014; Von Drehle, 2014). Many have expressed discomfort at how Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown were portrayed in the media as criminal upon report of their shooting deaths.
For these reasons, it is important to continue the study of representations of black men in popular culture.

Film in particular is important to study because it is recognized as a powerful tool that can have influence on decisions, moods, thinking, and views, especially of youth (Faulkner, 2013; Yaun, 2015). Although the stereotypes of black men in film has been studied before, critical studies of the portrayals of black men in educational settings in film appear to be limited in number. Therefore, this study is important for popular film studies and for society overall because it fills this gap. This thesis will analyze four films in which black men are primary characters. The films chosen for analysis are Drumline, Dangerous Minds, Higher Learning, and Stomp the Yard (Bourne, Finerman, Gerson, & Stone, 2002; Bruckheimer, Simpson, & Smith, 1995; Packer, Versfelt, & White, 2007; Singelton & Hall, 1995). Drumline (2002) is a film about Devon Miles, a highly talented drummer who experiences a tumultuous freshman year of college at Atlanta A&T University. In Dangerous Minds (1995), an ex-marine turned teacher uses unorthodox methods to educate her rebellious and troubled high school students. College freshman Malik Williams and his counterparts experience the harsh reality of racial tension at Columbus University in Higher Learning (1995). After the violent death of his brother, DJ Williams attempts to move forward by attending Truth University with the hopes of receiving an education, landing a girlfriend, and winning a step competition in Stomp the Yard (2007).

These films all take place in either a high school or university, and consequently shed light on how black men are portrayed in these settings. It is important to study black men in the high school and university setting because these years of schooling may be
when students are discovering who they are. The following study performs a rhetorical analysis using ideology criticism in order to explore stereotypes of black men in popular film. Specifically, I ask: What images or stereotypes are drawn on to portray lead black male characters? How does each film portray its lead black male characters? Are these portrayals in line with traditional hegemonic stereotypes of black men, or are the portrayals counterhegemonic? How have these portrayals changed over time, if they have changed?
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was established by a group of law professors and students, led by Harvard law professor Derrick Bell. When Bell took temporary leave at Harvard, professors and students retaliated when the request for a minority professor to take over Bell’s “Race, Racism, and American Law” class was denied. As a result, professors and students became a part of an alternative course of racism and law, which in turn led to the beginning of the Critical Legal Studies movement, a movement that evaluated law and how law influences legal and social issues (Olmsted, 1998; Russell, 1994). In turn, when racism began to be incorporated in the conversation, the Critical Race Theory was born (Cerezo, McWhirter, Peña, Valdez, & Bustos, 2013).

CRT is an academic discipline that asserts society is divided into racial lines that include white oppressors and black victims (“An Overview of CRT”, 2014). CRT theorists believe that racism is a continuous facet of life, racism is supported by legal structures, and that distributions of power and resources are unequal (Olmsted, 1998; Richmond & Johnson, 2009). The more privileged part of the distribution of power and resources belongs to whites, while minorities are marginalized (Richmond & Johnson,
Although there is no one doctrine with all characteristics of CRT, most Critical Race theorists agree on a few basic principles:

1. Racism is endemic, inherent, and normal in American life, 2. Both white supremacists and people of color support racism through a process of hegemony, 3. Words are powerful and should be used to create counter-accounts of social reality, 4. The individual life experiences of people of color should be recognized and made public. (Olmsted, 1998, p. 325)

Cappice, Chada, Lin, and Snyder (2012) sum up the primary message of CRT’s tenets by saying “critical race theory acknowledges the importance of the experiential knowledge of persons of color in understanding and teaching its relation to racial subordination” (p. 47).

Although CRT was first used in law, it has since been applied to the areas of education, educational policy-making, immigration studies, and entertainment media (Cerezo, McWhirter, Peña, Valdez, & Bustos, 2013; Romero, 2008; Yosso, 2002). For instance, Cerezo, McWhirter, Peña, Valdez, & Bustos (2013) used CRT to aid in the development of a program for Latina/o students that worked to increase racial consciousness at predominantly white universities (PWI). These authors took the tenets of CRT into consideration by granting Latina/o students the opportunity to speak about their concerns in regards to challenges, and by making sure these students were exposed to how race and racism are active in the college atmosphere.

Romero (2008) argued for using CRT to analyze how the Chicago School of Sociology “distinguished between newly arrived ‘immigrants’ and their children, who were identified as ‘ethnic groups’” when entering the United States (Romero, 2008, p. 23). Romero said “Sociologists of immigration must therefore abandon a research agenda
narrowly focused on assimilation, acculturation, generational conflict, and social mobility, and actively broaden their analyses to include issues of social justice” (p. 34). By applying CRT to an analysis of immigrants, Romero said that CRT would aid people in understanding racial antagonisms and specific barriers immigrants face. In the realm of entertainment media, CRT has been used to analyze racist images (Yosso, 2002). Specially, Yosso (2002) used CRT as framework to study the images of Chicana/o students in films that primarily had a high school setting. Yosso found that Chicana/o students reported that they felt they had to prove negative film stereotypes wrong by taking action in their own lives. These students felt that they could combat negative stereotypes by becoming professional people, staying in school, and by pursuing an education. As in Yosso’s study, this thesis will draw on insights from CRT to analyze images, language, and situations that can be construed as racist specifically for black men.

In contrast to CRT, theorists who support a postracist society, or “the idea that racism is no longer a problem, that race no longer matters,” believe that racism is a subject of the past (Dubrofsky, 2013, p. 83). According to Ono (2010), some who believe current society is in a state of postracism deny certain historical impacts of racism as well as downplay key racial events such as the Holocaust and slavery. Ono (2010) further says

Postracism strategically draws attention away from existing racism. By suggesting racism no longer exists and has been solved, postracial discourse functions as a discourse of distraction, filling up blog space, airwaves, and screens with vision and measures of progress, hence keeping legitimate information about contemporary and historical racism at bay. (p.229).
An example of postracist beliefs today can be seen in a phenomenon called the “I-Love-Obama-thus-racism-no-longer-exists” (Ono, 2010). This phenomenon came to be as a result of Barack Obama, a black man, becoming President of the United States. The phenomenon signifies that since a black man became commander-in-chief, racial barriers have been knocked down and as a consequence racism cannot withhold anyone from success. In fact, Teasley and Ikard (2010) call the election of Barack Obama as the first black President of the United States as the beginning of a “postracial era” in the United States.

Joseph (2011) argues against the “I-Love-Obama-thus-racism-no-longer-exists” phenomenon. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s (1981) conception of racism, Joseph analyzed internet images of Barack Obama and discovered the images fell under the categories of being either overt racism, which is “an openly racist argument” or a “racist view or policy,” or inferential racism which is considered to be “apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether ‘factual’ or ‘fictional’, which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions” (p. 28).

Joseph found that the overtly racist images of Barack Obama included Obama being characterized as an ape, thug, or terrorist/Osama Bin Laden. These images fit into racist stereotypes of black men that express that black men are violent, threatening, and brutish (Bogle, 1973; 2001). The images of Barack Obama that are inferentially racist are worse and more harmful because this type of racism is coded and harder to distinguish (Joseph, 2011). These inferentially racist images either remove Obama’s blackness or show him to be transcending his blackness. In terms of inferential racism, Joseph found
an image that portrays Obama as a messiah who is angelic and who has light( end) skin. In this image, there is a sky and clouds in the background that represent a “play on traditional codes of American patriotism…from the suggestion of a field of wheat waving in the wind and of sunrise” (Sturken, 2009, p. 171). Joseph further describes this image as “an almost-white, postracial sign of a utopian, racial strife-free future” (p. 396).

Another type of racism that can be viewed as being somewhat inferential is hipster racism. Hipster racism is often used in comedic performances and includes jokes, skits, and shows that play on racial stereotypes and epithets (Squires, 2014). Many of these jokes, skits, and shows are performed by “educated, middle-class white people who believe that not wanting to be racist makes it okay for them to be totally racist” (West, 2012, para 1). Squires (2014) explains that although society is aware that racism is not appropriate, Hipster racism is used in the postracial entertainment world as a means to push boundaries. Comedians and their audiences may believe that hipster racism does not count as real racism, but West (2012) begs to differ. West says that Hipster racism is still racist because “it’s all tied up with the deliberately obtuse people who conflate ‘freedom of speech’ with ‘immunity from criticism’…. [Racist jokes] hurt people. Why do you want to hurt people?” (para 10). The concept of hipster racism may be found in films analyzed for this thesis. For instance, Hipster racism may be found in Drumline because it is a film that falls under the genre of comedy, in addition to being a drama (Bourne, Finerman, Gerson, & Stone, 2002; IMDb.com, 2015).

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a leader of CRT, also combats the “I-Love-Obama-thus-racism-no-longer-exists” phenomenon by saying “the removal of formal barriers, although symbolically significant to all and materially significant to some, will do little to
alter the hierarchical relationship between blacks and whites” (as cited in Rossing, 2007, p. 5). Displays of the hierarchical relationship between black and white men in particular can be seen in the masculinity stereotypes of black and white men in a variety of areas. These areas will be discussed further in the following two sections.

Black Male Masculinity

Society is patriarchal, meaning society is ruled by and centered on men (Foss, 1996). In patriarchal society, men are the creators of dominant culture, and are considered to be level-headed, logical, and sexual beings (“It’s a Mad, Mad,” 2012). According to hooks (2004), masculinity is related to patriarchy for men of all races. Traits that are considered masculine are aggressiveness, toughness, independence, strength, and violence (Ericcson, Talreja & Jhally, 1999). Other attributes associated with masculinity are having athletic power, being a family patriarch, being regarded as a hero, and being a phallic symbol (Trujillo, 1991). Overall, masculinity is what a culture’s idea of a man is.

Although masculinity is related to patriarchy for men of all races, black male masculinity in particular is heavily associated with negative stereotypes and marginalization (Dickerson, 2014; hooks, 2004). Some of the stereotypes that are related to black male masculinity include dangerous, criminal, angry, loud, heterosexual, hypersexual, inferior, and uneducated (Ericcson, Talreja, & Jhally, 1999; hooks, 2004). In addition to these stereotypes, Gray (1987) found black males to be portrayed as being absent from their family responsibilities, and for black males to have issues in the areas of family, education, and crime. Through his research, Gray (1987) discovered that the predominate images of black men in media portrayed black men as being drunk,
loitering, and in trouble with the law. The persistence of these stereotypes in film indicates a need for continued study in order to expose the ways these stereotypes function.

*Black Men in News*

Stereotypes of black male masculinity exist in areas such as news, sports, education, television, and film (Ericsson, Talreja, & Jhally, 1999; Gray, 1987; Griffin & Calafell, 2011; hooks, 2004; Lacy & Haspel, 2011). In news stories, black men are often portrayed as being bums (Tyree, Byerly, & Hamilton, 2011). In their study of news portrayals of black men, Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton (2011) found that among a number of stereotypes, six out of nineteen stories on the news portrayed an unemployed and lazy stereotype for black men. For instance, a story was presented about a 25-year-old black male who was identified as being unemployed. Further reinforcing the unemployed and lazy status, this man was also described as “living for the moment in his girlfriend’s apartment, surrounded by nothing of his own.” In another story, a 27-year-old “deadbeat” black male, is predicted to have difficulties with his upcoming role as a father based on his past behaviors, and the fact that he has not considered marrying the woman of his unborn child (Tyree, Byerly, & Hamilton, 2011). He is described as having had constant struggle with stability and achievement. For example, it is stated that this man has not had a job past six or seven months, has a record of beating a man, and no high school diploma. Not only is this man portrayed as lazy, neglectful, and unemployed, he is also portrayed as being violent and uneducated.
In addition to being portrayed as unemployed and lazy in news media, black men have been portrayed as dangerous and criminal in news stories (Lacy & Haspel, 2011). For example, the Hurricane Katrina aftermath news coverage focused on black men as being looters, shooters, murders, and rapists, while whites were portrayed as being heroes who saved people from black ruffians. Also, a number of the violent stereotypes of black men in the media are portrayed through the black male athlete (Enck-Wanzer, 2009). The media portrayals of black men as dangerous and criminal will be elaborated upon in the section of this literature review called Portrayals of Black Men in Film, but first the media portrayals of the black male athlete will be discussed.

**Black Men in Sports**

Black male masculinity is heavily associated with sports (Griffin & Calafell, 2011). In sports, black men are portrayed as being violent, suspicious, cool, and as less graceful with presenting masculinity than their white counterparts (Griffin & Calafell, 2011; Trujillo, 1991). In regards to domestic violence in the sports world, the media has largely focused on domestic violence cases involving black men (Enck-Wanzer, 2009). For instance, the media focused heavily on the O.J. Simpson murder case of 1995. In 1995, 21 out of 38 magazines regarding intimate violence were about O.J. Simpson or an extension of Simpson’s case that applied domestic violence to a larger group of people (Enck-Wanzer, 2009). Recently, the media focused heavily on the domestic violence elevator case of black Baltimore Ravens player, Ray Rice, and the domestic violence case of black Minnesota Vikings player Adrian Peterson (NBC News, 2014). In 1997, black Golden State Warriors player Latrell Sprewell choked his white coach, P.J. Carlesimo (Collins, 2004). In another instance, on November 19th, 2004, an altercation started with
black Indiana Pacers forward Ron Artest and black Detroit Pistons center Ben Wallace. This altercation led to fights between players and audience members from both teams (Meagher, 2014). Due to violent acts such as these, Collins (2004) explained that the NBA players involved and black men as a whole were viewed as possessing physicality over intellectual ability. In regards to physicality, Collins (2004) said that black male athletes’ bodies are the epitome of black male masculinity, and thus are hegemonic in the area of black male masculinity. In addition to this, historically, black male athletes were viewed as “primarily bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instinct” (p. 152).

As stated earlier, black male athletes are often portrayed as being “cool” in media news stories. Trujillo (1991) conducted a study that analyzed the hegemonic masculinity in mediated sport to see how the images of male athletes are reproduced. Although Trujillo’s study primarily focused on the masculinity of white baseball pitcher Nolan Ryan, an example of a black sports figure being portrayed as cool and as less graceful in comparison to Ryan is discussed. There is a “cool pose,” also known as the “urban pose that exists for inner city black athletes, and black baseball player Rickie Henderson exuded this quality (Ericcson, Talreja, & Jhally, 1999; Majors, 1986). Some attributes related to the cool pose are brashness, delinquency, and intellectual inferiority (Ericcson, Talreja, & Jhally, 1999; Hall 2009). The cool pose is also related to black men’s “cool” demeanor, walk, stance, and gestures (Majors & Billson, 1992).

Trujillo found that although race was not a factor that was mentioned, sportswriters compared how a black baseball player and white baseball player both conducted their behavior when being recognized for athletic achievements. When black player Rickie Henderson broke a record, he responded by saying, “Lou Brock was a
symbol of great basestealing. But today, I am the greatest of all time” (as cited in Trujillo, 1991, p. 300). When white player Nolan Ryan achieved his seventh no hitter milestone, he responded by saying, “This no-hitter is the most rewarding because it was in front of these hometown fans who have supported me since I have been here. This one was for them” (as cited in Trujillo, 1991, p. 300). In comparison to Ryan, The Sporting News said that it was “too bad Henderson couldn’t have handled his moment of renown with similar decorum” (as cited in Trujillo, 1991, p. 301). The Sporting News also said “It was a day when Henderson and Ryan displayed two forms of speed, but only one man exhibited class” (as cited in Trujillo, 1991, p. 301). Although race was never mentioned, based on the comments of The Sporting News, it is clear Ryan’s white masculine “class” is preferred to Henderson’s black masculine “cool.” The following thesis will explore the parallels between the stereotypes discussed in the literature above and those appearing in the films I analyze.

Sexuality

The sexuality of black men is a heavily studied subject in black masculinity. Black male sexuality “has been under attack by white society since the days of slavery, evidenced in hundreds of years of lynching” (as cited in Bausch, 2013, p. 268). In her book, hooks (2004) provides a history of black male sexuality and how the history has shaped today’s stereotypes of black male sexuality.

Hooks (2004) explains that during slavery, black men’s bodies were subjected to being sexualized by European-American torture tactics, which included genital mutilation and the selling of body parts. European-Americans believed that black men’s sexuality needed to be oppressed because black men were believed to be “the sexual primitive, the
demonic beast in their midst” (hooks, 2004, p. 68). When black men were no longer
oppressed by slavery, they could freely and uninhibitedly express their sexuality, and as a
result they embraced their new freedom to explore their sexual desires (hooks, 2004).
Black men paralleled sexuality with patriarchy and in the patriarchal world, it is
imperative to engage in sexual intercourse (Jensen, 1997). Upon their sexual awakening,
black men were told that sex was the primary way in which they would find fulfilment in
black men equated manhood with sex, they saw “status and economic success as
synonymous with endless sexual conquest” (p. 71). In order to practice what was
believed to be patriarchal right, black men in power used their power to sexually
harasses, seduce, have sexual intercourse, and produce children with a number of black
women. This behavior also extends to black men who may not be in power. Related to
the stigma of black men sexually harassing, seducing, having sexual intercourse, and
producing children is the stereotype that black men are obsessed with booty (Collins,
2004). Collins notes that urban legends exist about black men who seek “bootycalls” or
sex without commitment, from women. The sexuality of black male main characters will
be analyzed in depth in the following thesis.

**Education**

In addition to black men being viewed as having physicality over intellectual
ability due to violent behavior in sports, black men are viewed as not possessing
intellectual ability in regards to their educational level. According to hooks (2004), “more
than any other group of men in our society black males are perceived as lacking in
intellectual skills” (p.33). The stereotype of black men being unintelligent dates back to
slavery times. In slavery times, education was seen as a way to get to freedom (hooks, 2004). However, black people had a shortage of resources that were necessary to live, and as a result, black men placed their attention on securing jobs that could help provide for their families instead of getting an education (hooks, 2004). Even in the early post-Jim Crow era, black men still encountered difficulty with receiving an education due to the same issue of having a shortage of resources to provide life’s needs.

The process of receiving an education during the post-Jim Crow era was complicated. Black journalist and author Ellis Cose said that he remembers being berated by a white teacher for simply posing critical thinking questions and being labeled as a troublemaker and unintelligent along with his fellow black male classmates (as cited in hooks, 2004). The stereotype of black men being labeled as troublemakers and unintelligent is still popular in today’s society (hooks, 2004).

Past literature about black male success in education has blamed the lack of success on black men themselves, calling black men disadvantaged, unintelligent, at risk to fail, and incapable (Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). In their study, Kim and Hargrove (2013) depart from past literature by reporting that issues such as feeling singled out, feeling unwelcomed on campus, and being a victim of microaggressions can lead to problems in the educational setting for black men. Kim and Hargrove (2013) found that despite stereotypes and statistics, black men can be and are successful in the educational setting. “Black men succeed when they feel welcomed on campus, have strong self-efficacy, and peers, family members, mentors, and spirituality along their journey to success” (Kim & Hargrove, 2013, p. 300). All films that will be used for analysis in the following thesis take place in a high school or
university setting, and thus present portrayals of black men in these settings which include portrayals of black men’s educational abilities.

*Portrayals of Black Men in Film*

Many of the stereotypes of black men in news, sports, sexuality, education, and television that were discussed in the previous sections are also seen in film. These stereotypes are especially prevalent in New Black Realist films. New Black Realist films gained popularity in the early 1990’s, and are typically black directed films that center on the lives of black people (Bausch, 2013). One of the issues New Black Realist films explore is the relationship between the black father and black son. According to Cloud (1998), the behavioral issues of black males have often been attributed to black fathers. Cloud said “the responsible black father whose presence-and appropriate demonstration of family values-solves the problems of alienated black youth” (p. 69). Cloud’s statement is illustrated in the New Black Realist Films *Boyz N the Hood* (Nicolaides & Singleton, 1991) and *Menace II Society* (Scott, Hughes, & Hughes, 1993).

*Boyz N the Hood and Menace II Society*

John Singleton’s 1991 film *Boyz N the Hood* is a coming-of-age story centering on main character Tre Styles about growing up in the ghetto. Although he is tempted, thanks to the leadership and guidance from his father, Furious, Tre avoids common pitfalls for men in the ghetto such as being in a gang, being in prison, and doing and selling drugs as the characters without strong father figures do (Cloud, 1998). Instead of engaging in illegal and dangerous activity, Tre is taught to do the dishes, clean the house, rake the yard, and to take care of his family. Furious also teaches Tre that even though
society says sex defines manhood, sex does not make a man (Bausch, 2013). While Tre’s friends Ricky and Doughboy have sex with a number of different women, Tre has sex with only his girlfriend, Brandi. Consequently, in the end, monogamous Tre lives while hypersexual Ricky and Dougboy die. In these ways, Boyz N the Hood displays a good black/bad black dichotomy (Cloud, 1998).

This good black/bad black dichotomy is also displayed in the Allen and Albert Hughes 1993 coming-of-age film, Menace II Society (Schroeder, 2001). The primary question of this film is the same as Boyz N the Hood. That question is if the main character, Caine Lawson, will choose a dangerous life of violence, imprisonment, and/or death, or if he will rise above the dangerous life. Unlike Tre, Caine falls into the temptations of the dangerous life. He becomes involved in robberies, drug dealing, and murder. Caine also watches his friends commit robberies and murder. Again, the role of father is important for the development of a black male in this film. In Menace II Society, Caine’s father is described “as the really bad father” (Schroeder, 2001, p. 152). In the end, Caine is killed. Overall, Menace II Society showcases black men who do not make it out of the hood (Christian, 2013).

The portrayals shown in Boyz N the Hood and Menace II Society paralleled to events going on in real life in the 1990’s, and even parallel to more recent real life events (Bausch, 2013). In the 1990’s, AIDS, teen pregnancies, and single-parent households were prevalent, and Boyz N the Hood and Menace II Society display these issues. Perhaps one of the issues these films portrayed the most was racist police violence (Cloud, 1998). Cloud (1998) says that
Each film features a scene in which police beat main characters without warrant or provocation, emphasizing the oppressive actions of the police and building sympathy for the plight of the urban youth whose own violence becomes less exceptional in context. (p. 73)

In a scene in Boyz N the Hood, chaos ensues after gun shots are heard at a street gathering that Tre, Ricky, Doughboy, and Shalika are hanging out at (Nicolaides & Singleton, 1991). Although Doughboy threatened people at the gathering with his gun, he did not commit any physically violent crimes, as is the same with Tre, Ricky, and Shalika. When Tre and Ricky are riding away from the scene of the gun shots, they are pulled over by police. At first, the police frisk them and ask if they have drugs or guns. As Tre responds that he does not have any of those items and that he did not do anything, he is handled roughly by a black officer as the officer turns Tre around to face him. The officer begins to be verbally abusive to Tre, calling him a “little nigga” and telling him that he “ain’t shit.” The officer also tells Tre that he looks “like one of them Crenshaw mafia motherfuckers.” While the officer is saying these verbal assaults, he is pressing a gun deeply into Tre’s neck. In this scene, tears stream down Tre’s face. Clearly, this officer believed Tre was guilty of some violent behavior and as a result physically and verbally abused him without justification.

In Menace II Society, main character Caine says that due to growing up in the hood he is “used to getting sweated by the cops” (Scott, Hughes, & Hughes, 1993). He goes on to say that cops follow he and his friends while they drive and stop them for no real reason. There is a scene where Caine and his friend are arrested by police for no apparent reason. In this scene, Caine and his friend are both slammed onto the police car, shoved, and told to “shut the fuck up” numerous times. As Caine and his friend are being
pushed into the police car, an officer begins to kick. The physical and verbal abuse does not stop there. Once in the police car, Caine and his friend are beaten. It is never stated why the police feel the need to treat Caine and his friend the way they do, so it is assumed that the officers had no legitimate reason. It is obvious that these two black men are viewed as dangerous criminals by the officers.

As stated earlier, black men are portrayed as dangerous and criminal in news stories (Lacy & Haspel, 2011). These dangerous and criminal portrayals in news, along with those in film, may have implications on how society views the behaviors of black men. According to Weitzer and Tuch (2004), society views blacks as being more prone to criminal behavior than whites. Martinot (2013) furthers this notion by saying “the media thus grants humanity and personhood to white people, and withholds it from people who are not white” (p. 64). For instance, in April of 2012, an Asian student at Oikos University brought a gun to school and shot and killed six white people. The media focused on the victims’ lives and families, while the only focus on the Asian shooter was on his motive (Martinot, 2013). A few days later, two white men shot and killed three black people and wounded two others in a random shooting in a predominantly black neighborhood. In this case, the media focused on the gunman’s lives and family while the victims were not paid attention to (Martinot, 2013).

The subject of police brutality against black men has been a highly analyzed and publicized subject recently. Family and friends of those shot and killed, along with community members and citizens from other areas, have been protesting police brutality and questioning why unarmed black men are being shot and killed by white police officers (Sanchez, 2014). The national attention of these police shooting deaths has
sparked protests all over the nation about police brutality against unarmed black men (Paulson, 2014).

Perhaps the first catalyst in bringing major attention to the subject of police brutality against unarmed black men was the death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. On February 26th, 2012, neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman followed Trayvon Martin, who was carrying only a pack of skittles and an Arizona Iced Tea, home after feeling Martin looked suspicious (Martinot, 2013). A spree of crime had been going on in the Florida neighborhood, so when Zimmerman deemed Martin to be suspicious, he called police to report so. The police told Zimmerman that a squad car would be sent, and that he did not need to continue to follow Martin. Despite this, Zimmerman did continue to follow Martin, and a fight ensued which ended with Zimmerman shooting and killing Martin and claiming self-defense (Martinot, 2013). According to Martinot (2013), Martin was portrayed in the media as being the primary attacker. Martin was also portrayed as being aggressive, a troublemaker, and as paranoid due to his marijuana use (Hart, 2013; Martinot, 2013). Clearly, media portrayals of Martin fit within Lacy and Haspel’s (2011) dangerous and criminal stereotype. Zimmerman was found not guilty for the death of Martin (Botelho & Yan, 2013).

Michael Brown was also portrayed as a troublemaker by the media. In August 2014, 18-year-old Brown was shot and killed by white Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri (Clarke & Lett, 2014). Yet again, fitting into the dangerous and criminal stereotype, the media portrayed Brown as being a troubled youth by focusing on him as being a marijuana user and as having been suspected of stealing cigars from a local store right before his death (Harris-Perry, 2014; Lacy & Haspel, 2011). In an
interview, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee said Brown would not have been killed “if he behaved like something other than a thug” (as cited in Moftah, 2014, para 1). Although the details surrounding what exactly lead to Officer Wilson shooting and killing Brown appear to be muddled, Huckabee said “What gets you shot is when you grab a police officer’s gun, and you lunge at him, and you try to hit him in the face” (as cited in Moftah, 2014, para 2), further portraying Brown as a thug. Officer Darren Wilson was cleared of Brown’s shooting death (Basu, Yan, & Ford, 2014).

Forty-three-year-old Eric Garner was also portrayed as a thug in the media (Sanburn, 2014). The media focused on the fact that Garner was accused of selling untaxed cigarettes and that Garner repeatedly yelled and argued with police officers when they attempted to arrest him (Sanburn, 2014). Due to his resistance to being arrested, Garner was taken down and placed in a chokehold by Officer Daniel Pantaleo (The Guardian, 2014). Even after pleading and saying numerous times, “I can’t breathe,” Garner was still restrained in a chokehold. Eventually, Garner died by chokehold, and Officer Daniel Pantaleo was cleared of charges for his death (Celona, Conley, & Golding, 2014).

Based on this literature, it is clear to see that the majority of the portrayals of black men are negative. The commonness of these negative portrayals could suggest that black men are the racialized Other, meaning black men and their behaviors and traits are “a deviation from the norm,” placing them into the Other (Bosse, 2007; Gottschild, 2005, p. 46). This deviation from the norm is in comparison to whiteness. In the case of black men, the Other is described as “exotic, physical, and sexual,” thus further enforcing the portrayals presented in this literature review. While this is the description of the Other,
white men and women are described as “universal, normal, and beautiful” (Schrader, 2011, p. 129).

Whiteness

Whiteness, also known as whiteness studies, is a subgenre of critical race theory that analyzes the structure of white identities and privileges, and how these identities and privileges are renegotiated and maintained by mass media (Squires, 2007). Whiteness and white privilege act as consistent invisible frames that direct understandings of portrayals of black characters for audience members. Whiteness is privileged, meaning it is “normalized, deified, and raceless,” in the areas of law, literature, popular culture, religion, communication studies, and in other areas in life (Johnson, 1999, p. 1). White privilege is described as “the invisible knapsack of unarmed assets that members of dominant racial groups cash in every day” (McIntosh, 1998, p. 1-2).

In addition to white privilege, there are other facets of whiteness such as white invisibility, white innocence, and white masculinity. White invisibility refers to the notion that the majority of the time, white people are not raced as their minority counterparts are, and therefore, whiteness is invisible (McIntosh, 2005). According to Nakayama and Krizek (1995) whiteness is invisible because of its universality. This universality refers to whiteness being defined as “everything” in society (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Enhancing the notion that white experiences are the norm in society, Dyer (1997) said

In the realm of categories, black is always marked as a colour (as the term “coloured” egregiously acknowledges), and is always particularizing; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything—white is no colour because it is all colours. (p. 45).
Thus, “white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular,” (Dyer, 1997, p. 44).

*White Innocence*

Another part of whiteness studies is white innocence; the dominant racial ideology in the U.S. White innocence presents itself as discourses or attitudes that display the racial pain white people experience (Gresson, 2004; McPhail, 2002;). Rhetorical discourses are what aid in keeping white privilege and power, and also serve as a coping mechanism for whites (Squires, 2007). This mechanism deals with the loss of white supremacy to social movements of minorities that made White men view themselves as oppressors (Gresson, 2004). In efforts to maintain white privilege and power, also known as white supremacy, Gresson (2004) explained that white innocence discourses and attitudes are considered to be performances by whites, meaning that these discourses and attitudes are acts that are meant to both maintain and restore white masculinity, heroism, and innocence.

Lacy (2010) conducted a study that analyzed the white innocence discourse by former Klansman and Nazi sympathizer, David Duke. Lacy found that Duke’s discourse was performed in such a way as to keep Duke’s image as innocent and nonviolent. Duke often played down certain past behaviors, referring to certain acts as a “teenage college stunt,” and “microscopic.” In relation to violence, Duke said, “I have never been accused of any violence or any injury against anyone anytime” (as cited in Lacy, p. 213, 2010). Duke further maintains innocence and nonviolence by attacking the actions of blacks. For instance, without any details, Duke says that Jesse Jackson has committed a number of
violent crimes. Clearly, Dukes maintains his white innocence and makes Jesse Jackson seem questionable. When called racist by the media, Dukes said that he was simply trying to preserve his heritage. Furthermore, in using discourse that builds up merit for white men, Dukes aims to keep white innocence and to keep white supremacy.

In terms of masculinity, white men are considered to be the closet to what is perceived as ideal masculinity. White masculinity is described as being hegemonic, and thus, is dominant (Griffin & Calafell, 2011; Hughey, 2012). The topics of white masculinity and white supremacy appear to overlap, so these topics will be discussed together in greater detail in the section below.

White Masculinity and White Supremacy

The stereotype of white men being the ideal form of masculinity has been around awhile. In the 19th and 20th centuries, white elites ruled wealth and had power influence (Wander, Martin, & Nakayama, 1999). In U.S. society, White men had power and perceived authority in relation to minority groups which included white women (Sue, 2014). White men are still in possession of that same power and perceived authority today (Sue, 2014). White men who are heterosexual, well-educated, and affluent are model citizens in the U.S. (Parlow, 2011). In their study on whiteness, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) explained that a local newspaper commentator Raoul Contreras (1993) described white men as being everywhere. In relation to white men, Contreras also said:

They control money and finance; they control the flow of information; they control corporate boards, and union leadership. They predominate in police departments; they outnumber everyone in the officer ranks of the military. They are the majority of the doctors and lawyers in this country. They dominate political officers at all levels of government…(p.13)
Clearly, white men are the “majority” in society (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

As stated earlier, rhetorical discourses serve in keeping white supremacy strong due to certain threats that can be posed against white supremacy (Gresson, 2004; Squires, 2007). Specific groups such as National Equality for All (NEA) and Whites for Racial Justice (WFRJ) operate to defeat threats brought to white supremacy (Hughey, 2012). A member of one of the organizations stated that white people are biologically and culturally superior to black people, thus reinforcing his white supremacist feelings (Hughey, 2012).

In contrast to the heavy reliance on stereotypes to portray black characters, white characters are most often portrayed positively in film. Whites are often saved by a black character called the “Magical Negro” when in a predicament or when needing help to make a difficult decision (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009). In the end, whites are portrayed as being improved for the better and are consequently viewed in a positive manner (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009). The Magical Negro, serving as the moral conscience, places attention on “their abilities towards assisting their white lead counterparts” (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009, p. 135).

Examples of Magical Negro characters can be seen in the films Ghost and The Green Mile (Darabont & Valdes, 1999; Weinstein & Zucker, 1990). In Ghost, spiritual medium Oda Mae Brown uses her gifts to help the white male leading character communicate with his wife from beyond the grave (Weinstein & Zucker, 1990). In The Green Mile, character John Coffey uses his spiritual gifts to inform character Paul Edgecombe about specific events (Darabont & Valdes, 1999). Coffey also uses his gifts
to both heal and cause affliction on others for the advantages of his fellow white characters.

Often, whites are portrayed in powerful roles such as Commander-in-Chief (Hungerford, 2010). According to Hungerford (2010), white men who have played a president on film and/or television, are portrayed as successful simply because they are white and a male. Even if a white male does something negative, he can still be portrayed in a somewhat positive light (Wing, 2014). According to Wing (2014), when a white person kills, news outlets report the news in such a way that expresses disbelief that this behavior could happen. When James Eagan Holmes committed a mass murder at a Colorado movie theatre in 2012, certain media outlets referred to him as a brilliant science student, thus portraying him in a somewhat positive manner (Wing, 2014). Clearly, the concept of whiteness is predominate in society.

The following study performs a rhetorical analysis using ideology criticism in order to explore stereotypes of black men in popular film. Specifically, I ask: What images or stereotypes are drawn on to portray lead black male characters? How does each film portray its lead black male characters? Are these portrayals in line with traditional hegemonic stereotypes of black men, or are the portrayals counterhegemonic? How have these portrayals changed over time, if they have changed? This thesis will analyze what the portrayals convey of black men in educational settings, and how these constructions align with or challenge the stereotypes of black men discussed in the literature review.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

An Ideological Criticism Analysis

The following thesis is a rhetorical analysis that employs an ideological criticism and is guided by critical race theory. This thesis analyzed four films where the leading character is a black male. The films used for analysis were: Drumline (2002), Dangerous Minds (1995), Higher Learning (1995), and Stomp the Yard (2007). Drumline is a film about Devon Miles, a highly talented drummer who experiences a tumultuous freshman year of college at Atlanta A&T University. In Dangerous Minds, an ex-marine turned teacher uses unorthodox methods to educate her rebellious and troubled high school students. College freshman Malik Williams and his counterparts experience the harsh reality of racial tension at Columbus University in Higher Learning (1995). After the violent death of his brother, DJ Williams attempts to move forward by attending Truth University with the hopes of receiving an education, landing a girlfriend, and winning a step competition in Stomp the Yard (2007). These films were chosen based on their plot lines and the fact that all of the films take place in either a high school or university setting.

In comparison to films such as Avatar (2009) and The Avengers (2012), which made life-time grosses of $760,507,625 and $623,357,910 respectively, the four films
chosen for analysis have low life-time domestic grosses (Box Office Mojo, 2015; Cameron & Landau, 2009; Feige & Whedon, 2012;). \textit{Drumline}’s life-time gross domestic total is $56,399,184 (Bourne, Finerman, Gerson, & Stone, 2002; Box Office Mojo, 2015). \textit{Dangerous Minds} life-time gross domestic total is $84,919, 01 (Box Office Mojo, 2015; Bruckheimer, Simpson, & Smith 1995). \textit{Higher Learning}’s life-time gross domestic total is $38,290,723, and \textit{Stomp the Yard}’s gross life-time gross domestic total is $61,356,221 (Box Office Mojo, 2015; Singelton & Hall, 1995; White, Packer, & Versfelt, 2007).

Despite low domestic grosses, these films still warrant analysis due to the portrayals of the black male lead characters. Also important are the New Black Realist film attributes each film has. According to Bausch (2013), “New Black Realist films were made in the 1990’s, and were directed by young African-American men” (p. 258). Films of this genre showcased African-American issues through the perspective of African-Americans instead of the Caucasian-American perspective (as cited in Levy, 1999). New Black Realist films were important because the movies “unraveled portraits of black lifestyles previously omitted from or misrepresented by the media” (Levy, 1999, p. 45). Each film selected for analysis centers on themes that are characteristic of New Black Realist Films and all films but \textit{Dangerous Minds} were directed by African-Americans.

As previously stated, this thesis is a rhetorical analysis that employs an ideological criticism and is guided by critical race theory. Before discussing rhetorical analysis, a definition of rhetoric must be provided. According to Foss (2009), rhetoric is “the human use of symbols to communicate” (p. 3). Looking at a film from a rhetorical criticism standpoint is to study the many possible meanings a text may have (Brummett,
First, the meanings of a text are where rhetorical power is because texts are made to influence (Brummett, 1994). Texts, or films in the case of this thesis, can mean different things to different people (Brummett, 1994). Due to the fact that texts can have different meanings, texts are often described as “sites of struggle over meaning” (Brummett, 1994, p. 69). This means that defining meanings of texts is “rarely simple and straightforward” (Brummett, 1994, p. 70). Brummett explains that as a rhetorical critic, one must perform the role of the “meaning detective,” and explain the possible meanings a text may have. A proper meaning detective must also explain that there can be a number of possible meanings for a text. When conducting a rhetorical criticism, it is also important to analyze the structure, or “the pattern, the form, the bare bones or organization of that text” (Brummett, 1994, p. 95). One of the facets of structure is called subject position. Subject position refers to the fact that a text, or film in the case of this thesis, can ask and encourage its audience to be a certain type of subject or viewer (Althusser, 1971). Subject positions are what rhetorical critics should heavily focus on.

There are certain steps used to conduct a rhetorical analysis that are used for this thesis. These steps are description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation (Stoner & Perkins, 2005). During the description process, I described the messages in the texts that were analyzed. I watched the four films several times in order to immerse myself in the visuals, images, themes, and other elements of the text. The Critical Race Theory (CRT), or an academic discipline that asserts society is divided into racial lines that include white oppressors and black victims, along with scholarship from the literature, served as my guide of the analysis of the four films (“An Overview of CRT”, 2014). During the analysis step, I systematically analyzed the text (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001; Stoner &
Perkins, 2005). I used scholarship from the literature to draw on and identify specific themes, patterns, hegemonic stereotypes, and counterhegemonic elements in the films. For the interpretation step, I explained what the particular rhetorical devices used in the films mean (Stoner & Perkins, 2005). I then made reasonable conclusions that are based on evidence found in the film analysis. These conclusions address issues such as why a particular rhetorical device has been used and what its potential impact may be, what the device choices indicate about audience, society, and culture, and if there are any missing perspectives from the films and what might this suggest (Stoner & Perkins, 2005). For the final step, evaluation, I determined the worth and significance of the films (Stoner & Perkins, 2005). I have specific criteria consisting of elements from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the literature. The specific criteria allows me to draw further conclusions about what impacts the films have on society as a whole, and what the films say about black men in educational settings.

This thesis employs an ideological criticism. According to Foss (2009), when one is conducting an ideological criticism, “the critic looks beyond the surface of an artifact to discover the beliefs, values, and assumptions it suggests” (p. 209). The suggested beliefs, values, and assumptions reflect an ideology, which is defined as a set of beliefs that a group uses to interpret aspects of life (Foss, 2009). Ideologies exist for a number of different concepts in life. For instance, an ideology that exists for the American Dream is synonymous with equality, liberty, inalienable rights, and the pursuit of happiness (Beach, 2007). Through her discourse studies, Cloud (1998) discovered that a specific stereotype existed for black men in relation to their role in the household. Cloud noticed that these discourses surrounding black men in the home became a hegemonic ideology.
that suggested black men were to blame for their families’ hardships. Ideologies are important to study because an ideology may become a hegemonic, or dominant, part of society, and as a consequence, facets of the world will be viewed through the lens of the particular ideology.

Overall, media messages and meanings are important to examine because the media “provide evermore material for fantasy, dreaming, modeling thought and behavior, and constructing identities” (Kellner, 1994, p. 23). Both social and political issues are displayed through the media, and are shaped by media culture. Media messages and meanings surrounding black men are especially important to study because media plays a critical role in preserving harmful narratives that can shape biases of audience members (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011). Further, the messages and meanings surrounding black men in the media can become hegemonic ideologies. Ideologies shape how subjects perceive and view themselves in the world. The following thesis examines how the main black male characters in the films Drumline, Dangerous Minds, Higher Learning, and Stomp the Yard are portrayed (Bourne, Finerman, Gerson, & Stone, 2002; Bruckheimer, Simpson, & Smith, 1995; Packer, Versfelt & White, 2007; Singleton & Hall, 1995).

For this thesis, I compared the films from the 1990’s to the films of the 2000’s to see if leading black male characters are portrayed in the same way, or if stereotypes have changed over time. I did this by looking at patterns each film suggests. I analyzed images of a group of people who have a history of being marginalized in society. I analyzed textual/visual and situational elements such as the ways leading black male characters are depicted as coping with or staying stuck within in the confinements of marginalization. I analyzed the various situations leading black male characters are placed into to see if the
situations are marginalizing and to see how the characters respond. I analyzed if specific elements in the literature review such as the stereotypes surrounding black males in relation to sexuality, criminality, and education are portrayed the same way in the four films as in the literature review. Overall, I looked beyond the surface structure of each film to analyze the films to see if they are in line with traditional hegemonic stereotypes of black men, or if they are counterhegemonic. Finally, I stated an ideology that the films express, and I explained what implications these films could have on society.
CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

*Identifying Hegemonic and Counterhegemonic Themes and Rhetorical Devices*

*Drumline, Dangerous Minds, Higher Learning,* and *Stomp the Yard* were all thoroughly analyzed several times for this thesis. Each film has specific themes that have the same rhetorical devices and follow the same patterns in the majority of situations presented. These themes are related to each leading male character and are as follows: display of the cool pose/urban pose, entitled attitude, black male athletic body, black male sexuality, educational struggle followed by educational success, absence of the black biological father, and racist police violence.

This thesis addresses all themes found and the rhetorical devices and patterns in these themes with Critical Race Theory (CRT) serving as theoretical framework. This thesis answers the research questions and analyzes if the portrayals of the leading black male characters are in line with traditional hegemonic stereotypes of black men, or if they are counterhegemonic. Ultimately, the ideology the films present as a whole is discussed, as well as what implications this ideology has on society.
The first theme and rhetorical device that is discussed is the “cool pose,” also known as the “urban pose” (Ericcson, Talreja, & Jhally, 1999; Majors, 1986). The cool pose/urban pose is a stereotype associated with black male athleticism (which will be discussed further in the analysis), and its attributes which include brashness, delinquency, and intellectual inferiority (Ericcson, Talreja, & Jhally, 1999; Griffin & Calafell, 2011; Hall, 2009). Persons who use this pose are said “to walk with a bold, arrogant stride” (Peterson, 2012, p. 618). In addition to this, the “cool pose/urban pose” is also related to black men being pimps, and according to Sheidlower (2008), the pimp walk is “an ostentatious swagger affected chiefly by African-American men” (para 4). Although each lead black male character in the four films exhibits the pose in demeanor and stance, the pose is mostly displayed in walk. The cool pose/urban pose suggests that black men do not handle situations with grace and respect, but instead with strides of arrogance.

In a scene in *Drumline*, lead character Devon is asked by upperclassmen drum leader Sean what the last rule of the band rule book is. Although his friend Ernest attempts to help him achieve the correct answer, Devon does not give the correct answer because he failed to read the rule book. In the following scene, a fellow bandmate throws Devon a copy of the band rule book while he is sitting in the middle of the band’s equipment room. Devon, who sports cornrows, learns that whoever does not read the rule book must have their head shaven. As Sean patronizes Devon and makes a move forward to shave Devon’s head, Devon says “whatever,” shakes his head, and stands up from his chair to greet Sean in an aggressive manner. After a few more choice words, Devon looks
Sean up and down and walks away from the scene with an arrogant look on his face, thus displaying the “cool pose/urban pose.”

In another Drumline scene, after being removed from the Atlanta A & T drumline for not being able to read music, Devon speaks to Mr. Wade, the band director at Morris Brown College. Mr. Wade tells Devon that there could be a spot available for him on the Morris Brown drumline, as well as a part-time job and a lot of financial aid, but before this can be set in stone Devon needs to provide information about what band director Dr. Lee has in store with the Atlanta A & T band. After being bribed for a few minutes, Devon admits that he does not know what Dr. Lee has planned, but he hopes that whatever it is wipes up the Morris Brown band. After this statement, Devon walks away with the “cool pose/urban pose.” Devon walks with an aggressive scowl on his face, with his hands in his pockets, and with a bit of a limp, which is reminiscent of popular culture’s stereotype of the pimp walk.

In Dangerous Minds, Durrell displays his “cool pose/urban pose” in the middle of a class assignment. During a lesson on grammar, a student exclaims that the word “must” is a verb. The teacher, Miss Johnson, asks the class if they can “must” something. Durrell gets up from his desk and says “I must piss right now.” Durrell smiles, laughs, jokes, and walks with a limp as he makes his way to the door to exit. With his “cool pose/urban pose,” it is obvious that Durrell feels he can behave as he pleases and that he runs the classroom. Durrell displays another example of the “cool pose/urban pose” during another lesson. In this scene, Miss Johnson has Durrell and another student named Raul practice simple karate techniques on each other. When Miss Johnson asks Durrell if he
thinks he can take on Raul, Durrell nods, tilts his head in a cocky manner, and says that he knows he can take Raul.

Similar to Durrell’s cocky pose, Malik of Higher Learning also displays arrogance in his pose during class. In this scene, Malik volunteers to read a list of names out loud to the class for his professor, Dr. Phipps. Just as Durrell walked out of class with the pimp limp walk, as Malik stands up and begins to walk, he sticks his tongue out and proceeds to confidently walk to the front of the class with a limp. As Malik reads off the names for Dr. Phipps, he stands in a manner that exudes arrogance, thus showcasing the “cool pose/urban pose.” Malik also displays the “cool pose/urban pose” after he talks to Dr. Phipps about a paper he feels he was graded unfairly on. After Dr. Phipps explains that Malik’s paper consisted of many errors, Malik stares him down, calls him a sell-out, and walks away with brashness and arrogance.

DJ exhibits the “cool pose/urban pose” when he attends a step showcase in Stomp the Yard. As the Theta Nu Theta and Mu Gamma Xi fraternities step in front of a large crowd, DJ eyes a young woman he is interested in and wants to talk to. Although the step showcase is actively going on, DJ insists on walking in the middle of the performance. DJ specifically exhibits the “cool pose/urban pose” by arrogantly pushing, shoving, and elbowing members to make his way through the crowd. As DJ does this, he keeps an aggressive scowl on his face.

The “cool pose/urban pose” is also displayed by DJ when he and his friends enter a dance club together. DJ and his posse of well-dressed friends walk into the dance club slowly so they can check out the scene. As he walks, DJ’s roommate, Rich, rubs his
hands together slowly and nods as if he is confident he belongs in the current environment. As DJ walks, he nods his head with the same air of confidence as Rich.

Although the situations that cause the characters to exhibit the cool pose/urban pose happen in different contexts, each character appears to feel threatened and in order to deal with the threat, the cool pose/urban pose is enacted. This suggests that the cool pose/urban pose is a type of defense mechanism for black men, and according to Cunningham (2003), blacks have been socialized to use retaliation methods when feeling attacked. Further, black youth have “learned coping styles where respect is gained by projecting an image of being unruffled in the face of threat and of appearing confident in their ability to take care of themselves” (Cunningham, 2003, p. 88). This suggests that the cool pose/urban pose is not only a defense mechanism for black men, but also a means to gain respect and to maintain dignity. Since black men feel the need to defend themselves, gain respect, and maintain dignity through the use of the cool pose/urban pose, this suggests black men have both an insecurity issue and a need to feel powerful. This insecurity could be an outcome of centuries of white oppression and white violence that has been inflicted on black men.

In the cool pose/urban pose examples, the characters may have only perceived that they were being attacked due to personal insecurity issues, and as a result felt they had to portray aspects of power in order to gain respect and to keep dignity. On a less significant level, the cool pose/urban pose suggests that attributes such as brashness and delinquency are simply a part of being a black man, and in this way, the pose is in line with the hegemonic stereotype literature discusses.
Entitled Characters

In addition to displaying the “cool pose/urban pose,” Devon of Drumline and Malik of Higher Learning both prove to be entitled characters. They both display characteristics and actions that show they feel they are owed something by everyone with whom they come into contact with. Devon, along with the other freshman drummers, is ordered to choose a drum to practice with from a particular set of drums reserved for underclassmen. As the other freshman drummers do as they are told, Devon picks out a drum reserved for the upperclassmen. When drum leader Sean tells Devon to take the drum off, Devon says “I’ll take it off when you calm down” (Bourne, Finerman, Gerson, & Stone, 2002). Sean responds by telling Devon to never disrespect him, to which Devon says “Dog, you gotta give respect to get respect.” Devon begins to conceitedly talk about how Dr. Lee came to his home and said that the drumline really needed him. Sean replies that he does not care and that he is the owner of the drumline, so if Devon wants to move through the ranks, he must go through him. This scene suggests that because Devon feels that Dr. Lee insisted he join the drumline, he should receive special treatment that is above the other freshman.

In another instance, Devon and the rest of the drumline are excused for a five minute break. Devon takes it upon himself to flirt with his love interest, Laila, for a prolonged amount of time. When Devon returns after his break, the entire drumline is assigned push-ups due to his actions. Again, Devon feels that he is entitled to special treatment and that he can break rules.
Malik displays his entitled attitude in a number of scenes in *Higher Learning*. For instance, there is a scene where Malik is casually walking in the “cool pose/urban pose” manner to track practice in his street clothes and sunglasses. When Malik reaches his track coach, he is asked why he is not dressed properly. Malik begins to say that he had an upset stomach, but before he can finish his sentence his coach tells him that although he is an all-star rookie freshman, he can be replaced. Malik’s reaction to his coach’s threat is a smile and a question of who can possibly replace him. This can be compared to the scene in *Drumline* where Devon brags about Dr. Lee recruiting him for the drumline. Since Malik does not feel there is anyone who could replace him, it shows that he carries an entitled attitude.

In another *Higher Learning* scene, Malik is visiting the financial aid office in order to find out why his bill has not been paid in full. Malik arrogantly shakes his head as he assures the financial aid representative that there should not be any problems with his aid. The representative tells Malik that his fee bill has not been paid in full because he has a partial athletic scholarship. Malik looks surprised and exclaims with a cocky tone that he is a full scholarship student and that there must be a problem with the computer system. Clearly, Malik feels that there is no way that he is a partial scholarship recipient, and once again, he is displaying his entitled attitude. Since the depiction of the entitled attitudes is an extension of the cool pose/urban pose, the portrayals are in line with hegemonic back male stereotype.
Another theme and rhetorical device found in the films relates to the display and use of the black male athletic body. The bodies of black male athletes serve as the epitome of black male masculinity (Collins, 2004). Also, black athletes are viewed as being “primarily bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instinct” (Collins, 2004, p. 152). Although not all of the lead characters in the films are considered athletes, these characters still have black male athlete characteristics. In *Drumline*, Devon’s brute strength and natural instinct are displayed in his drumming capabilities. Devon is such an aggressive and strong drummer that it can be suggested that his aggressive behavior and strength is brutish. Also, the way Devon plays drums suggest that it is natural instinct for him, as is evidenced by the fact that he can play music after only hearing it once, and while he cannot read music, he can still play it back perfectly. Also, Devon is deemed to be the best drummer by many of his fellow bandmates.

Similarly to Devon’s brutish way of drumming, Malik of *Higher Learning* is represented in a brutish manner in a scene where he is at track practice, and in a scene where he is running after another character. In the track practice scene, the camera is careful to focus on shots of Malik’s muscular and toned arms and legs. The camera also focuses on the fast speed Malik is going as he runs. In another scene, Malik and a character named David get into a physical altercation with Remy, a member of a white supremacist group. After Remy threatens Malik and David with a gun, in the following scene, Malik runs after Remy. The camera shows Malik raising his arms in the air and developing a scowl on his face. This action appears very animalistic and resembles that of a strong ape, thus resembling brutish behavior (Bogel, 1973; 2001). In regards to
possessing natural ability, running appears to be a natural instinct for Malik because he is at the university on a track scholarship, is a star athlete, and uses running as a way to identify himself.

Although Durrell of *Dangerous Minds* is never mentioned as being involved in sports, he still has black male athlete characteristics. In a scene where Durrell and Raul are instructed to practice simple karate moves on each other, Durrell exercises his strength. Durrell shows aggressiveness toward Raul, and by the way Durrell picks up on the karate moves suggests that he may be used to fighting. Although Raul also exercises his strength and by no means backs down from Durrell, he is smaller than Durrell and does not seem to be as natural at fighting as Durrell is.

DJ of *Stomp the Yard* is not an athlete, but a street dancer. While his dancing does not equate to brutishness, DJ’s strength is displayed in the complicated dance moves he does which include flips, break dance moves, and picking others up. DJ’s natural ability as a dancer is evident by the fact that he is a street dancer who has not had any professional dance training, yet appears to have had so.

In addition to being viewed as aggressive, powerful, muscular, and animalistic, black male athletes have also been viewed as being violent (Collins, 2004; Enck-Wanzer, 2009). An event that brought major attention to the black male athlete violence stereotype came when Golden State Warriors basketball player Latrell Sprewell choked his white coach (Collins, 2005). Each main character discussed in this thesis has a physical altercation with another character. The case of Malik from *Higher Learning* is especially important because the case parallels to the incident of Sprewell. A scene in *Higher*
Learning depicts Malik engaged in a fight with Remy where Malik begins to savagely choke Remy as Sprewell did his coach. In this scene, Malik is viewed as having what Collins (2004) describes as a primary body that is ruled by brutish strength and natural instinct. This particular scene, as well as other scenes that showcase violence in the films, suggests that the black male athlete stereotype is popular, common, and a believable attribute for a black male character to have. Since all characters meet the attributes of the black male athlete stereotype, the films reinforce the stereotype.

Black Male Sexuality

The exhibition of the black male athletic body leads into a discussion about black male sexuality. Hooks (2004) explained that historically, black men were viewed as being sexually primitive and beastly, and therefore as hypersexual individuals who engaged in sexual intercourse often. Hooks further explained that these stereotypes have made their way into current society. In regards to the films used for analysis, for the most part, the lead characters do not present characteristics that are related to being sexually primitive, beastly, and/or hypersexual. Minus Durrell of Dangerous Minds who is not provided a love interest, all of the lead characters are attracted to one woman and devote their desires to her (Bruckheimer, Simpson, & Smith, 1995). In addition to the lack of stereotypical black male sexuality traits, the lead characters are not shown engaging in explicit sex scenes despite all films being rated PG-13 or R by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). Scenes do exist in each film where lead characters passionately kiss and embrace their love interest, but these scenes are limited in number. In these ways, the characters offer a relief from the hypersexual stereotype.
Although the lead characters in the four films are not portrayed as being hypersexual, there are supporting characters who portray a seemingly diluted form of hypersexuality in *Drumline* and *Stomp the Yard*. These traits appear to be diluted because they are not displayed often and they do not complete the range of what hypersexuality is stereotypically supposed to be. The two characters are very similar to each other, and interestingly, are roommates of lead characters. In *Drumline*, diluted hypersexual traits are displayed in Devon’s roommate, Ernest, and in *Stomp the Yard*, the traits are shown by DJ’s roommate, Rich. Upon being introduced to college life at Atlanta A & T University in *Drumline*, Ernest notices a young woman, Diedre, that he finds attractive on the drumline. During a practice session, the drumline is asked to stick their chests out. Ernest, standing next to Diedre, very noticeably stares at Diedre’s chest and mouths the word “damn.” Similarly, Rich of *Stomp the Yard* checks out a woman’s backside at a step gathering. As Rich and his friend admire the woman’s backside, Rich says that he has “been there, done that once or twice.” As this is taking place, the camera zooms in on the woman’s backside to accentuate Rich and his friend’s point-of-view. As Ernest is preparing to go to a fish fry in *Drumline*, he exclaims to his roommates that he is going to “get up on some honeys.” In comparison, there is a scene where Rich in *Stomp the Yard*, out with friends, hits on a woman at a bar by lightly taping her shoulder and attempting to make conversation. Although these characters do exhibit black male masculinity traits, overall these characters are far from completing the hypersexual stereotype of black men.

*Educational Struggle Followed by Educational Success*

According to Collins (2005) and Ericcson, Talreja, and Jhally (1999), black men are stereotypically viewed as being more athletic than intellectual. Further, black men
are also stereotypically viewed as lacking intellectual skills, and as having difficulty with
education (hooks, 2004). In the four films, each main character appears to be interested
in education, even if education is a struggle at first. For instance, Devon of Drumline
does not know how to read music, which is a requirement to be an Atlanta A & T
drummer. Due to his not being able to read music, band director Dr. Lee enrolls Devon in
a music class where he can learn how to read music. As Devon sits in the class, he shows
that he does not understand the concepts being presented, and as a result, he comes across
as lacking the intellectual skills to learn how to read music. Although Devon has
difficulty in this class, it is obvious that he is smart, a talented drummer, and that he does
have desire to learn. Devon can hear a piece of music once, and play it back perfectly, as
is evidenced in several scenes. Also proving that Devon is smart and talented, he and
drum leader Sean both develop a piece of music for a major band competition. This piece
of music is described as being complicated in a variety of ways. Devon’s portrayal taps
into social commentary on the intellectual inferiority stereotype that has defined black
men throughout history. Devon’s portrayal suggests that just because some black men
may not learn in a traditional sense, does not mean they cannot learn in some other
fashion.

Both Malik of Higher Learning and Durrell of Dangerous Minds learn academics
through alternative methods. Although neither of these characters is placed into an
official remediation course, they both are instructed in manners which can be viewed
through a remediation lens. In Higher Learning, Malik only takes education seriously
because he believes that receiving a degree is needed in order to be a successful and
productive member of society. In one scene, Malik asks his friend Fudge if he can borrow
his copy of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Douglass, 1845). When Malik says he is only reading the book because he has to for class, Fudge responds by saying, “read it for yourself and not for a damn class” (Hall & Singleton, 1995). Although this comment is forcefully said, it is not enough to make Malik want to actively learn for himself at first. However, as Malik discovers that he has struggles in the classroom, his stance on receiving an education begins to change. Upon receiving a graded essay back from Dr. Phipps, Malik is told that his paper contains issues such as punctuation mistakes, misspellings, and grammatical errors. Instead of Malik accepting his errors and asking for help, he calls Dr. Phipps a “sell-out.” Soon after, Malik realizes he needs academic assistance. He begins to be tutored by his love interest, Deja, and appears to take genuine interest in improving his academics. Soon, Malik improves his grades with Deja’s help. These *Higher Learning* scenes show that although Malik may not be learning in the traditional classroom, he still learns academic lessons in part to his tutoring sessions with Deja, and in part to Fudge’s “read it for yourself and not for a damn class” comment. Once Malik fully digests Fudge’s comment, he wants to learn for himself.

Malik’s interest in improving his academics changes when racial tensions began to run high at Columbus University. After Malik has a gun pulled on him by white supremacist student Remy, and after being involved in a fight with Remy and other members of the white supremacist group, Malik expresses that he does not know if he finds school purposeful anymore and that he is going to “let shit cool out” by taking a semester off. In addition to this, Malik expresses that he simply does not feel welcomed on the Columbus University campus, and according to Kim and Hargrove (2013),
unwelcomed feelings on campus often lead to educational problems for black men. After Malik, Fudge, and other black friends engage in a fight with a white supremacist group, Fudge says that they (white people) own everything and that he, Malik, and all other black students at Columbus University are “behind enemy lines.”

Fudge notes that white people own the couch he and his friends are sitting on, the shoes they are wearing, and the educational institution they are attending. Fudge’s statements further enforce Malik’s negative feelings toward the university, and tap into issues of structural racism by criticizing white society and speaking to the marginalization of black people. Fudge’s statements suggest that he is operating with the notion that it’s a white person’s world, and while black people are inhabiting this world, they cannot truly be a part of it, and cannot have true ownership of anything of importance. Fudge’s comments assert that white people have top advantage in regards to structural elements such as employment and education due to white privilege. Black people are marginalized because they do not have access to the advantages of white privilege and as a result do not get to own certain rights. Fudge also makes the comment that “one beat down will never compare to 439 years of captivity, never” (Hall & Singleton, 1995). With this statement, Fudge suggests that no matter the actions of black people in current society, these actions will not be enough to equate with the actions of slavery.

In Dangerous Minds, Durrell is not placed into an official remediation course, but his teacher, Miss Johnson, uses unorthodox methods of education that can be viewed through a remediation lens due to being unorthodox. At first, Durrell does not seem to take education seriously. When his class reads the lyrics of the Bob Dylan song “Mr.
Tambourine Man,” Durrell makes a joke of the lyrics and asks why the protagonist wants a tambourine (Dylan, 1965). Durrell, while laughing, goes on to ask if the protagonist has a radio he can use for listening pleasure instead of a tambourine. This comment displays that not only is Durrell uninterested in learning what the lyrics are about, but also that he may not have the capacity to critically think about the meaning of the lyrics.

As Miss Johnson becomes heavily absorbed in all of her students’ learning, and provides fun yet unconventional incentives for learning such as trips to the amusement park and nice restaurants, Durrell begins to take education more seriously. Miss Johnson holds a class contest called the Dylan-Dylan Poetry contest; the two Dylan’s being poet Dylan Thomas and musician Bob Dylan. Students are required to find a poem by Dylan Thomas that compares to themes presented in Bob Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man” song (Dylan, 1965). During this exercise, Durrell researches at the school library and poses questions and opinions to his contest group members. Durrell’s group ends up winning the Dylan-Dylan Poetry contest.

After the contest, Durrell begins to participate in class more and answer critical thinking questions posed by Miss Johnson and other students. Unfortunately, as Durrell is beginning to enjoy receiving his education, his mother pulls him out of school in order for him to make money to pay bills. When Miss Johnson attempts to visit Durrell at home in order to talk about his missing school, his mother says that she is not raising any doctors or lawyers, and that Miss Johnson needs to find some other “poor black boys to save.” According to hooks (2004), black men have historically focused their attention and efforts on providing for their families survival needs rather than on receiving an education. Durrell’s mother pulls him out of school for this reason exactly, to make
money and pay bills. In this way, Durrell’s mother serves as a voice for poor black families/urban underclass who do not have the luxury of staying in school. This is not to say that the education of her sons is not of some importance to her, but making sure that familial needs are met through her son’s takes precedence.

Durrell’s mother represents a racial reality that speaks to structural racism, or the belief that blacks are purposely oppressed and that whites have the advantages of white supremacy (Lawrence & Keleher, 2004). Durrell’s mother feels that her sons do not have the advantage of receiving an education as white students do because they must spend their time working to cope with their financial oppression. The character of Durrell’s mother calls attention to issues of inequality in education, and reminds viewers of structural racism that does not grant blacks the same opportunities as their white counterparts based on the advantages of white privilege. The character of Durrell’s mother would also argue that the failure of her sons to receive an education is based on structural racism issues that prohibits them from receiving an education, and not from their personal individual choice to not receive an education. Further, Durrell’s mother’s decision to remove him from school displays how racism and poverty impact the ability for black males to succeed. Education is a tool used to gain success, and if a black man does not have the opportunity to be educated, his chances of being successful are reduced (O’Reilly, 2014). When black men are not in school, they, as well as their mothers, are portrayed as “unemployed, unskilled, menacing, unmotivated, ruthless, irresponsible” instead of being portrayed as someone who is suffering from the effects of racism, poverty, and marginalization (Gray, 1989, p. 385). In turn, because of this portrayal,
hardworking but uneducated black men will be viewed from this negative lens and consequently will have lowered chances of being successful.

Miss Johnson communicates about education from a white middle class perspective. Instead of structural racism, Miss Johnson believes “the sanctity of individualism, and the availability of the American dream” (Gray, 1989, p. 376). Therefore, Miss Johnson believes that if her students take advantage of opportunities, they can be successful. Miss Johnson holds these beliefs because she is operating under the influence of white privilege, and white privilege is “normalized, deified, and raceless” (Johnson, 1991, p.1). Thus, Miss Johnson may not be aware that people outside of her race do not have access to the same opportunities as she. However, as is exemplified with Durrell’s mother, Miss Johnson’s standpoint on education and what opportunities education can bring about is not a reality for some.

In the scene where Miss Johnson visits Durrell at home, she questions Durrell’s mother about her thoughts of the importance of education. When Durrell’s mother expresses that the education of her son’s is not a top priority, Miss Johnson’s surprised facial expression displays her disapproving thoughts. This example suggests that Miss Johnson believes Durrell’s black world and her white world can achieve racial pluralism through education. Her character embodies a view of education from a position of white privilege. Clearly, Durrell’s mother does not support this belief as is evidenced by Durrell and his brother continuing to remain out of school.

The Durrell situation encourages Miss Johnson to work even harder at helping her students with their educational pursuits. In this way, Miss Johnson employs the white
savior narrative. The white savior narrative refers to the stereotype that a white hero saves or rescues a foreigner in an exotic land from danger (Yang, 2014). Durrell (before his mother intervenes), as well as other students of color, is saved from academic peril by his white teacher. Miss Johnson travels from her safe neighborhood to the dangerous neighborhood her students live in. She inspires her students by telling them they are capable of doing good work and by challenging them with interesting assignments. Perhaps the way Miss Johnson inspires her students the most is by actually caring about them, and by becoming involved in her students’ lives outside of the classroom to show she cares for them. Eventually, several students achieve various levels of success. In terms of the white hero narrative, these students are only successful and “saved” due to their hero, Miss Johnson. In this way, the white slave narrative is racist because it asserts that black people cannot do for themselves.

The only character of the four films who does not appear to struggle educationally is DJ of *Stomp the Yard*. In several scenes, DJ is shown studying or doing homework. Like Malik of *Higher Learning*, DJ takes advantage of tutoring, but only because he has a crush on a particular tutor named April. Although April knows DJ has a crush on her, she believes he is in need of her tutoring services. There is a scene in the film where April asks DJ what the difference was between the Republicans and Democrats political response to the great depression of the 1930’s. DJ looks confused and frantically flips through his history textbook. When April shows signs that she believes he does not know the answer, DJ says, “By political response were you referring to the Republicans belief that the marketplace would correct itself as opposed to the new deal laid out by the
democrats?” (Bourne, Finerman, Gerson, & Stone, 2002). At first, April is amazed that DJ produced this response, but then she looks impressed and intrigued by DJ’s wits.

The portrayal of these lead characters having educational struggles reinforces the historic stereotype that says back men are intellectually inferior (hooks, 2004). The portrayals suggest that black men may learn in nontraditional ways. Since three leading characters overcome their educational struggles, the intellectually inferior stereotype is altered, perhaps to tap into more current time periods where black men have more access to education than in the past. However, since these characters are at first portrayed with educational issues, the stereotype is still reinforced. The portrayals of the characters suggest that black men have been left behind in terms of education. This could be due to systemic factors such as having to work instead of being able to go to school, or by not having education be of importance in the home. According to O’Reilly (2014), when education is not of importance in a household, and when a household consists of a single parent, this serves as the foundation for issues that plague black men such as unemployment and the lack of financial resources. According to the education department, only 69% of black students graduate high school, while 86% of white students do (as cited in O’Reilly, 2014). In terms of Critical Race Theory, these statistics reflect the advantages of whiteness.

Whiteness, an issue of CRT, plays a role in educational access and opportunities. Whiteness is “normalized, deified, and raceless,” and it analyzes white identities, privileges, innocence, and how these attributes are maintained in society (Johnson, 1999, p.1; McIntosh, 2005; Squires, 2007). Whiteness is continuously renegotiated and maintained by mass media (Squires, 2007). Whiteness is important to discuss because the
white characters in the films are not raced as the black characters are, and therefore are not subjected to the same negative stereotypes.

In Dangerous Minds, there are two classroom scenes that make a comparison between students of color and white students. One scene shows the classroom where the majority of students are black or Latino. In this classroom, students are loud, obnoxious, disobedient, and the teacher cannot lecture. The other scene shows a class where the majority of students are white. In this classroom, students are quiet, respectful, obedient, and the teacher can lecture without any disruptive behavior. These scenes suggest that the white students have the privilege of having access to a better learning environment than the other classroom. These scenes also suggest that the white students have the privilege of having a better educator since the teacher in the black and Latino students’ classroom cannot successfully gain control.

White innocence is also at play during these classroom scene examples from Dangerous Minds. It is clear that the polite behavior of the white classroom is correlated with innocence. Even if a white student behaved in a way that was questionable, the privilege of white innocence may still serve as a safety net. For instance, in Higher Learning, white character Remy makes racist remarks and often becomes physical with people of other races. Remy goes so far as to threaten to kill members of other races with guns. Although Remy’s behavior is not innocent, he is granted automatic innocence when police officers break up a brawl between him and Malik. In the context of whiteness, Remy is granted this innocence because he is white. The classroom scenes and brawl scene with Remy present a strong message to society about how powerful whiteness is.
Absence of the Black Biological Father

Another common theme and pattern found in all four films deals with the relationship the lead characters have with their biological father. As Cloud (1998) stated, the relationship between black father and black son is a very prevalent issue in black films. While each lead character minus Durrell has a present father figure, relationships with biological fathers are either absent or of an unknown status, and thus is in line with the hegemonic stereotype of the absent black father. The relationship between black father and son is so prevalent in the media because if a black father is absent, the blame for children’s undesirable actions is placed on the father (Cloud, 1998). Each scene that will be discussed below makes a comment about the need for the father figure in the black male life. In regards to the portrayals of fathers in black films Boyz N the Hood and Menace II Society, Cloud (1998) said “the responsible black father whose presence-and appropriate demonstration of family values-solves the problems of alienated black youth” (p. 69). As evidenced in aforementioned scenes, each lead character in this analysis has academic and/or behavioral issues. Academic and behavioral issues begin to recede when a father figure becomes present in the characters’ lives.

Band director Dr. Lee serves as Devon’s father figure in Drumline. Dr. Lee scolds Devon when he is wrong, and applauds him and is proud of him when he does the right thing. For example, when it is discovered that Devon lied about his ability to read music on several occasions, Dr. Lee tells Devon that his actions are a big deal and he takes Devon off of the drumline. As Devon attempts to refute Dr. Lee’s argument, Dr. Lee tells Devon that lying is the reason why he got the position in the band that he previously had. When Devon learns to read music, shows support for the band, and when
he and Sean work out their differences and create a piece of music for a major band competition, Dr. Lee expresses his pride by allowing Devon to play during a part of the competition and by verbally praising him.

Devon’s relationship with his biological father is almost nonexistent. Near the beginning of the film, Devon visits his father at the New York City Transit after his high school graduation. Devon slips his father one of his high school graduation tickets. After it takes Devon’s father a few seconds to recognize who he is, Devon tells him that he received his diploma, has never been arrested, does not have children, and is making something of himself by attending college. Devon concludes by saying that he hopes his father is proud because he made it without him. After this interaction, both men are teary eyed, but do not make any other attempt to communicate with each other. There is a scene later in the film when Devon receives a package of cassette tapes from his father, but that is the extent to which this father-son relationship goes.

In Dangerous Minds, viewers never know if Durrell has a relationship with his biological father because there is never mention of him. However, Durrell’s teacher Miss Johnson could serve as a possible parent figure in Durrell’s eyes, although this attribute is not shown directly except for when Miss Johnson visits Durrell at his home. Miss Johnson shows she is a parent figure to Durrell and her other students when she rewards them for doing well with tough poetry by taking them to an amusement park free of charge. Again, Miss Johnson’s role as a parent figure is displayed when she teaches Raul how to order a meal at a restaurant, when she delivers dinner to a student named Callie at her job, and when she allows a student named Emilio to hide out at her house when he is on the run from someone who wants to kill him. In these examples, Miss Johnson is
displaying behavior that is stereotypical of a parent. Again, the white savior narrative is employed in these examples. These examples suggest that without the help of the superior and all-knowing white Miss Johnson, the supposed poor and ignorant students of color would continue to fail and be lost.

Similarly to Durrell, the relationship between Malik and his biological father in *Higher Learning* is unknown because there is never mention of Malik’s father. However, Malik does have a father figure in Dr. Phipps. In a scene, Malik calls Dr. Phipps a “sell-out” simply because Malik cannot accept the fact that he did not do well on a paper. Dr. Phipps takes this situation as an opportunity to scold and teach Malik in a fatherly manner. In the next scene, Dr. Phipps and Malik are in Dr. Phipps’ office. Dr. Phipps asks Malik what his opinion of him being an Uncle Tom has to do with his ability to write a grammatically correct paper. Malik responds by saying that he feels Dr. Phipps, who is black, is treating him differently because he himself is black. Dr. Phipps calmly tells Malik that he treats all of his students the same, and that he needs to rid himself of his entitled attitude. When Malik says that he does not have anything to prove to anyone, Dr. Phipps tells him that he has something that he has to prove to himself. In another scene near the end of the film, Dr. Phipps comforts Malik by holding him in his arms when he collapses while he mourns the very recent murder of Deja.

Out of the four films used for analysis, viewers are only exposed to one character’s biological father, and this is Devon of *Drumline*. Thus, the black absentee father stereotype is largely reinforced with these films. Although the biological father is absent or the relationship status with the son is unknown, biological mothers are present in *Drumline* and *Dangerous Minds*. In *Drumline*, the mother is supportive and
encouraging, as is shown in scenes where she attends Devon’s high school graduation and gives him congratulations. Even after Devon encounters a number of troubles, his mother always shows up full of love and encouragement.

Durrell’s mother possesses traits that suggest she is attempting to be somewhat of a father figure, and that Durrell’s biological father may not be present. For instance, she displays masculinity by being aggressive in her speech, tone, and body stance (Ericcson, Talreja, & Jhally, 1999). Durrell’s mother also possesses stereotypical characteristics of the aggressive matriarch. The aggressive matriarch is a woman who is overly aggressive toward her family and who emasculates the men in her life (Yarbrough & Bennett, 2000). Durrell’s mother displays her emasculating tendencies by telling Miss Johnson that she is not raising any doctors or lawyers in reference to her sons. In addition to representing the aggressive matriarch stereotype, Durrell’s mother can be viewed as being inadequate and as representing the Sapphire stereotype for black women. The Sapphire stereotype symbolizes the “bad” black mother who is angry, loud, verbally abusive, and emasculating (Collins, 1990; Versluys, 2014). The character of Durrell’s mother can be viewed as inadequate because she does not take interest in her children’s education as a parent is expected to. Instead of encouraging education, Durrell’s mother takes her children out of school. When Miss Johnson attempts to converse about the situation, Durrell’s mother becomes angry, loud, and verbally abusive, calling Miss. Johnson a bitch and disrespecting her role as an educator. Devon’s mother’s support versus Durrell’s mother’s lack of support creates a good black/bad black dichotomy that can be compared to the good black/bad black dichotomy of characters from Boyz N the Hood (Cloud, 1998). In theory, the good black/bad black dichotomy purports that if a black
male is raised with support and guidance, he is more likely to avoid the troubles other black males who have had a lack of support and guidance often fall into. When a black male does encounter troubles, the fault is on the biological father for either not being present or for not raising the child correctly (Cloud, 1998).

Racist Police Violence

Finally, the topic of racist police violence is visited in *Higher Learning*. The films *Drumline* and *Dangerous Minds* do not present racist police violence. The scenes of racist police violence in *Higher Learning* tap into the violence that was taking place in the world during the early to mid-1990’s. For instance, just four years before the release of *Higher Learning* was the beating of Los Angeles black motorist Rodney King. This beating made national headlines largely due to King being beaten severely by white officers (CNN Library, 2015). This beating eventually lead to the 1992 Los Angeles riots where rioters burned buildings, beat whites, and committed acts of looting in retaliation of King’s beating (CNN Library, 2015).

Cloud’s (1998) research on *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993) draws similarities to the films used for this analysis in terms of racist police violence portrayals. In the films *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993), a scene shows the main characters being beaten by police without a reason other than being racially profiled (Cloud, 1998; Nicolaides & Singleton, 1991; Scott, Hughes & Hughes, 1993). This also happens in *Higher Learning* and *Stomp the Yard*. Both films provide critiques of racist police violence. They are both careful to show the arrests of Malik and DJ in detail, and suggest that black men can be targeted by police for unjustifiable means.
In *Higher Learning*, while Malik is targeted by police officers for questionable behavior, after he shows his obedience to police orders, officers have no true reason to treat Malik the way they do. For example, near the end of the film, Malik is engaged in a fight with white gunman Remy at the top of a staircase. While police are aware that a gunman is at large, they do not know who the gunman is. When police see Malik on top of Remy, they immediately begin to savagely beat Malik with batons, even after he appears to be complying. While this is happening, another police officer helps Remy up and asks him if he is all right. Emphasis is especially placed on Malik being beaten after complying with police. The camera lingers too long on the shot of him being beaten, leading to an uncomfortable and shocking few minutes. As Malik continues to be beaten, Remy gets away. In this scene, Malik is discriminated against due to being black while Remy is not subjected to racist police violence because he is white.

DJ of *Stomp the Yard* is also treated unfairly by police officers. Near the end of the film, Truth University officials discover that DJ has an aggravated assault charge against him for participating in a group brawl that ended with the death of his brother. The scene of the brawl is near the beginning of the film, and in the scene it is evident that DJ fights in order to defend himself and his brother, but is still arrested with an aggravated assault charge. The camera is careful to show DJ visibly protecting his brother, and the camera also conveys the shock he feels at being violently arrested when he was only behaving in self-defense. When questioned about his past by university officials, DJ says that the only reason he has a charge against him is because he has a public defender who cannot remember his name. In this statement, DJ is conveying the message that he does not matter to his public defender and that he is viewed as just
another black male who is in the midst of the legal system because of a violent alteration. Overall, these scenes provide encouragement to be critical of police and these scenes challenge the stereotype that black men are inherently violent and the source of trouble. In both scenes, each lead black male exhibits violence only in terms of self-defense, yet they are treated as otherwise by police officers.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the stereotypes of black men in film. The films used for analysis take place in either a high school or university, and as a consequence, the films display how black men are portrayed in these settings. This thesis performed a rhetorical analysis using ideology criticism in order to study the stereotypes of black men in film. The major themes and rhetorical devices analyzed were: cool pose/urban pose, entitled attitude, black male sexuality, educational struggle followed by educational success, absence of the black biological father, and racist police violence.

All of the rhetorical devices used and discussed can be interpreted as having certain meanings and implications. The images in the films at once rely on hegemonic stereotypes, but at times depict counterhegemonic stereotypes. The stereotypes and portrayals in the literature review are found in each of the films, which span from the mid-1990’s to early 2000’s. It is important to discuss how the stereotypes studied in the films relate to the theoretical framework used, Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT is defined as an academic discipline that asserts society is divided into racial lines that include white oppressors and black victims (“An Overview of CRT”, 2014). Since the stereotypes found in the films are well-known and follow many of the same patterns across the films, these stereotypes can be viewed as both endemic and normal for black
men (Olmsted, 1998). These stereotypes can become racist if people are judged by them, and in turn, are treated differently.

Overall, these films suggest that black men in educational settings are portrayed as feeling threatened by teachers, peers, and the educational system. Some of the subjects black men feel threatened about relate to education and the feeling of not belonging. In order to cope with feeling threatened, these portrayals suggest that black men react in aggressive ways such as the display of the cool pose/urban pose, fighting, aggressive language, and having a sense of entitlement. In regards to these elements, the films suggest that these are attributes of black men who also possess stereotypes related to black athleticism.

The ideology suggests that black men are portrayed as always being academically challenged and not being able to overcome this obstacle by their own means. In order to overcome academic challenges, black men must have the help of a white savior or a smart parental figure, particularly a biological father. However, the films suggest that black men lack the presence of the biological father, and as a result, black men have an array of issues.

Although her role in the film is minimal, the portrayal of Durrell’s mother in Dangerous Minds makes a particularly strong statement about black male’s mothers. The portrayal of Durrell’s mother suggests that black mothers are inadequate and embodiments of the Sapphire stereotype. In contrast to Dangerous Minds, the portrayal of Devon’s mother in Drumline suggests that black mothers are supportive. While these two films make strong suggestions, the topic of black mothers is not discussed in great detail.
Another stereotype that is not presented in the films in great detail but still makes a profound statement is the hypersexual stereotype. None of the characters across the four films are displayed in hegemonic hypersexual terms, thus suggesting black men are not hypersexual beings.

Perhaps the most profound statement these films make is one that refutes the traditional hegemonic stereotype that black men are violent and the source of altercations. This statement is best displayed with Malik of Higher Learning. In Higher Learning, Malik does act violently, but only in terms of self-defense. When he is apprehended and beaten by police, the officers do not view Malik as acting in self-defense as the audience does. Through a variety of camera angles, the audience sees that Malik’s violence steams from self-defense, while white character Remy does not act out of self-defense, but instead out of pure violence. This scene suggests that black males are not inherently violent and that police are not always correct in their actions. This scene is so profound because it relates to issues of racist police violence against black males in current society. The discourse surrounding this topic is at a high due to the number of unarmed black males being killed by white police officers.

New Black Realist films were popular in the early 1990’s, and were films directed by black men that focused on the lives of black people (Bausch, 2013). These films displayed black issues from the viewpoint of a black male instead of the viewpoint of someone of another race, and they “unraveled portraits of black lifestyles previously omitted from or misrepresented by the media” (Levy, 1999, p. 45). Higher Learning serves as the New Black Realist film in this thesis. Although Higher Learning is a New Black Realist film, it still taps into racist hegemonic stereotypes of black men for the
majority of the film. The fact that a New Black Realist film still perpetuates racist attitudes warrants further discussion and further study.

This thesis displays that while there are a few counterhegemonic stereotypes presented in the films, overall, the stereotypes associated with black men in these films reinforce traditional hegemonic norms. The stereotypical portrayals found in the films from the 1990’s are still present in the films from the 2000’s. Since these films reinforce racist attitudes, they can have serious implications for the ways viewers understand obstacles facing young black men. These films can have serious implications on adolescents in particular, especially black men. “Films have the power to shape the lives and minds of adolescents,” and if young black men continue to see racist stereotypes perpetuated, the outcome could be detrimental for them on a personal and societal level (Faulkner, 2013, p. 1). This suggests that the discourse surrounding stereotypes of black men needs to change, and as acclaimed black movie director Spike Lee (1989) said about his films, it is time for a “wake-up call” about the issues that involve race in America.
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