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The Man Behind the Mask: The Progression of
Masculinity in African American Male Characters as
seen in films Awarded the NAACP Image Award for
Outstanding Actor in a Motion Picture

Aaron E. Bledsoe

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Media Studies**

Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program Summer 2013

Abstract (250)

This qualitative study will examine the way in which the masculinity of African American men is portrayed in films through a textual analysis of the leading male character in movies that have been awarded the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Actor in a Motion Picture. I will be performing a textual analysis of the following movies: “Flight”, “Book of Eli”, and “The Great Debaters.” Through the analysis of the main character, I discuss the following: types of marginalization experienced in the film, interactions/relations with (African American) women, as well as the importance that his education and/or occupation will play in his identity as a man. Using these factors, I argue that these characters are able to preserve their masculinity as a means of escaping the emasculation created in a society that marginalizes men of color in film. Donald Bogle points out that in the past, Black men have been portrayed as, “childlike, docile or happy as the role of a servant,” or as an extremely violent threat to society (Morris, 2011). Using the studies of Stuart Hall, I will be able to examine the extent to which representation affects the portrayal of a cultural group and how organizations like the NAACP Image Awards help in providing more of a positive acknowledgement of people of color in the media.

Abstract (100)

In this research project, I will examine the way in which Black Masculinity is portrayed in films through a textual analysis of the leading male character in movies that have been awarded the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Actor in a Motion Picture. Through the

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analysis of the main character, I analyze the following: Marginalization as an African American male, interactions/relations with (African American) women, as well as the importance that his education and/or occupation will play in his identity as a man. This allows them to preserve their manhood in a society that marginalizes men of color.

The Problem

Cultural and media studies have become closely related because a lot of what we see in the media is influenced by the history and culture we learn about daily. Stuart Hall's work in books such as *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* focuses on the representation of race in media and highlights the idea that we create systems within our mind based on what we are taught or experience. Encounters with certain people, objects, or events create an understanding of how we create language for these things. If we are not properly educating ourselves and checking the knowledge others share with us, then certain ways of understanding can lead to the development of misrepresentations. "Historically, politically, and socially, African Americans occupy a unique position within U.S. society. Their history includes religion as a cultural cornerstone, slavery and segregation, the migration North, and civil rights, as well as the Black Feminist and Black Power movements. Their political past involves voter disenfranchisement, school segregation, and separation from formal channels of power, and their economic life can be characterized as disadvantaged compared to European Americans," (Hecht; Jackson II; Ribeau, 2008)

I feel that my research study is needed because it will simply be a continuation of what so many others have done before me. There have been numerous media analyses of how different racial or cultural minorities are portrayed in the media. Donald Bogle's work in *Toms, Coons,*

Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films has become the groundwork for many researchers who look at the representation of African Americans in film. I hope to analyze the extent to which the masculinity representation of African American men has changed since the acknowledgement of stereotypes such as the Uncle Tom and Black Buck/Brute. I also to want to look at the types of operational changes have been made in order for Black male characters to keep their manhood in film. Many of my sources have indicated that the masculinity of African American men is influenced by the social construct of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity, so it would be interesting to see the way that looks when being practiced by an African American man in film. This qualitative textual analysis will be done from the framework of a Media Studies and Cultural/Gender studies lens. I am examining the way masculinity has been represented in Black men in film, and to what extent that has changed in recent films with Black men as lead actors. Stuart Hall's study of representation and the media will be investigated because much of his work connects the significance of race and representation in the media to the ideals that are shared in society.

Methodology and Research Design

The general research method being used for this study is a qualitative textual analysis. Also known as a content analysis, a textual analysis is a research method used mainly in cultural and critical studies, and it relies on interpretation of messages communicated that the audience can create. Textually analyzing something allows me to focus on the social and cultural

implications being shared within the content of the film. The content I examine is also called text; and text is anything that communicates a message, such as a film. I will look for the meaning of the message being shared about masculinity. The analysis of a text requires me to use the process of conceptualization and operationalization. Conceptualization includes the key ideas or patterns I am looking for within my content. In this case, my conceptualization will be the way masculinity is being communicated within these films with a lead character who is an African American man. Operationalization would be the more specific description of what I am measuring (Zhou, 2011). Based on my review of literature pertaining to masculinity in African American men, I will be measuring the way it is portrayed by looking at the following: The main characters interaction with women, the way they handle conflict and competition, way he handles his emotions and pain, as well as the importance his job and/or education plays in the film.

I have decided to look at the portrayal of Black men in film from the late 19th century to early 20th century using the stereotypical characters known as the Uncle Tom and the Black Buck. These were some of the first depictions of Black men in film and the way they were portrayed will give me good background information for how Black men were represented in the media overall. Their representation provides an insightful perspective into how the masculinity of Black men was communicated in film. To measure the way masculinity in Black men is portrayed in recent films, I have decided to select three films that were awarded the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Actor in a Motion Picture for several reasons. When I present the

idea of my research and the sample I have selected, many people have asked me why not the Oscars instead of the NAACP Image Awards? For one, many have already done extensive research into the portrayals of Blacks in film in comparison with the Oscars they have been awarded; therefore, I did not want to be redundant in my own research. However, the NAACP Image Awards is a great selection for film samples.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has been around since 1909 and the organization as a whole was created to fight against racial injustice and advocate for equality among all people of color. The purpose of the NAACP Image Awards is to acknowledge the excellence of people of color who are pioneers in the areas of TV, film and literature. Since I want to examine the extent to which progress has been made in the representation of masculinity in African Americans depicted in film, the NAACP Image Awards would be a perfect place to select films as samples for research.

Review of the Literature

There are many ways to define what masculinity is because it depends on the disciplinary lens through which you view it, but “masculinity...is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experiences, personality and culture” (Connell, p.71). As Connell suggests, there are many masculinities and different aspects of one’s life can affect how masculinity is viewed. In terms of African American men, many scholars, such as the Black feminist bell hooks

have indicated that Black masculinity is rooted in hegemonic patriarchal manhood as a result of American slavery as well as discrimination beginning after the end of the American Civil War.

The idea of domination over women as well as using violence to solve problems was a masculine ideal Black men learned through slavery. They equated these actions as a sign of having manhood. Affirmation through the ability to fight was also equated with manhood for several reasons. Seeing violence done at the hands of the slave master created the ideal that violence and domination give you power and respect. bell hooks points out that while patriarchal manhood is the form of masculinity that is most used, there are certainly other types of masculinity that were practiced among Black men after the end of slavery (hooks, 2004).

These ideals were set up as a result of established white societal norms, which inherently denied Black men the right to “be men” while in the bondage of slavery (hooks, pg.3). Hegemonic Masculinity is usually supportive a dominant culture of men who are superior in physical or intellectual power, domination of women and other marginalized groups (racial minorities and non-heterosexual men), as well as hiding emotions and pain (Lynch, 2009). Black men may have the capacity to be as patriarchal in their manhood as White men, but “Black men do not have the institutional power of white men” (Cheng, 1999). Holding onto one’s masculinity was especially difficult because Black men had become the marginalized group within a society where White supremacist views were the hegemonic model. However, “many members of these marginalized groups perform hegemonic masculinity in order to gain

patriarchal privilege within their group, if not the larger society” (Cheng, 1999, pg.3). Patriarchal manhood is so influential in Black masculinity because it was seen as the successful model of masculinity. “Performing hegemonic masculinity by a marginalized person is seen as a passing behavior that distracts from her/his stigma,” (Cheng, 1999, pg.3). Performing these hegemonic traits of masculinity would allow Black men to regain their manhood and help society forget about the many inadequacies they experienced as a slave. And while white hegemonic masculinity is not the only form of masculinity, it seems to be the most dominant in European/American culture. Within the dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men (Cheng, 1999, pg.3).

“Black males are socialized from birth to embrace and claim this notion of patriarchal manhood...Because African-American men have always been instrumental in protecting and providing for their families”, says Ramon Jenkins in “Black Fraternal Organizations: Understanding the Development of Hegemonic Masculinity and Sexuality” (Jenkins, 2012, pg.7). Jenkins examines the creation of the very first fraternities designed for and by predominantly African American men in college. He claims that the nature of these organizations is heavily influenced by the idea of patriarchal manhood and masculinity. This type of masculinity embraces the idea of men hiding their emotions and suppressing pain because revealing these things is a sign of weakness. Patriarchal manhood also acknowledges the idea of seeing women as objects of affection.

Not only has the historical experience of African American men influenced their masculinities, but it also influenced the way they were represented to the rest of the world. Cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall argues that our identities are an ongoing development that is affected by history and culture. This is closely connected with the way in which we form systems of representation in our minds. Representation, in reference to Stuart Hall's studies, can be very powerful and influential in terms of media and social construction. Representation is very important in terms of understanding someone else's culture; the way someone or something is portrayed in media can affect the way it is perceived to the rest of society. "Misrepresentations of Africans and African Americans serve ideologies," and in most cases, it meant danger for those who were being stereotyped in the media. "This type of misrepresentation and its reliance on masculinity is one of the most prevalent representations of black men to this day" (Morris, 2011). Stuart Hall points out that "stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power" (Hall, 1997, pg.258).

Findings and Discussion

It would not be right to examine the progression of masculinity in African American male characters in film without first retracing the beginning depictions of black masculinity in film. Representation of African American men in literature and other forms of media were often reflective of the historical experiences in African American history. One of the past depictions of black masculinity in film was the Uncle Tom. In the beginning, the Uncle Tom "was the first of a

long line of socially acceptable Good Negro characters” (Bogle, 1994,pg.4). The role of the Uncle Tom was originally played by a white actor in blackface in the 1903 silent film version; but later in 1927, black actor James B. Lowe played the leading role in the Universal Pictures version of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

Based on the anti-slavery novel by Harriett Beecher Stowe, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was meant to reveal the horrors of African American slavery in the United States. Although Stowe’s book arguably laid down the foundation of the Civil War and provided fuel for the Abolitionist movement, it is also known for the negative stereotypes of African Americans. Of the many stereotypes displayed in the novel, the Uncle Tom is one of the most recognizable. Known for his happy spirits and undying loyalty, the Uncle Tom is a slave who is insulted and belittled; yet they never turn against their white slave masters or mistresses. They remain submissive and endearing to white audiences, which makes them heroes.

The Uncle Tom was captivating to white audiences in film form during the 20th century, yet this was an implication into the representation of black masculinity in film. Because the Uncle Tom was so loyal and passionate about the satisfaction of his white master or mistress, this depicted Black men as being very harmless and ultimately no type of threat or contributor to society. The passive and naïve nature of the Tom created the idea that Black men were not men at all, but instead, they were childlike and docile in comparison to the socially superior White man (Morris, 2011).

Riché Richardson explains the political and masculine implications of The Uncle Tom myth in *Black Masculinity and The US South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta*. The Uncle Tom is often used as a symbol of those who are apolitical and counterinsurgent when it comes to matters of Black-liberation and equality. The Uncle Tom is known for being neutral and “fiery militants as Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells would play on the image of the faithful, long-suffering, honest slave” (Richardson, 2007). Having childlike behavior and mentality not only created a paternal bond with the white slave master, but it essentially emasculated the Black man in film (Morris, 2011). Black men were not only emasculated, but they were also placed in the social role as a slave and servant. This was dangerous because it perpetuated the idea that slavery was socially acceptable and justifiable. As long as the Black men were portrayed as being content in this role, it eased the conscience of those with White supremacist ideals.

Another misrepresentation of Black masculinity would be the creation of the Black Brute/Black Buck. The Black Brute was the exact opposite of the Uncle Tom and this depiction of Black men was just as harmful to their masculinity socially. The Brutal Black Buck was a mythical stereotype created as a result of the shameful and extremely controversial film “The Birth of a Nation.” In the eyes of critics, the film itself was superb in terms of production techniques, but the social implications made as a result were detrimental to African American men as a whole. Based on the book, *The Clansmen*, “The Birth of a Nation” created a framework of Black images in which Black men were extremely violent and a danger to society. The film follows various events Post Civil War and during the Reconstruction era of the United States.

The film argued the notion that Blacks did not need to be freed from slavery and integrated into the rest of society. This was done by depicting the Ku Klux Klan as the heroic figures in the movie that would come in and “rescue” white women who were being attacked by Black men. None of the black characters were actually Black; they were white actors in blackface who portrayed Black men as sexually repressed beings that were belligerent and threatening the peace of society.

The Black Buck/Brute was a reoccurring image that came about as a result of the Black rapist myth in the US South. According to Richardson, “This film is particularly useful where it highlights the specificity of the black rapist as a product of the southern cultural imagination and attempts to chronicle the residual impact of this sexual ideology on black men in the South in the late twentieth century” (Richardson, 2007). The black rapist myth perpetuated the idea that all black men were savages looking to sexually exploit white women. This over-exaggerated ideal was a representation of the white-supremacist fear of interracial relations. There is a big emphasis on maintaining a “pure” race and any sexual relations or intermarriage would taint the racial legacy.

Fortunately, we have come a long way since the days of Uncle Tom and “The Birth of a Nation.” Those representations of Black men and Black masculinity were very flat in terms of character. They were created to compliment the ideals trying to be shared through the literature they were featured in. Black Buck/Brute symbolizes the White-supremacist fear of interracial

relations in the United States South, and The Uncle Tom became a hero because it further reinforced the idea that slavery was a suitable and comfortable institution for African Americans. Certain aspects such as sexuality and response to conflict were implication into their manhood. Those are just two stereotypes of many that have been created.

Certain emotions were taken and over-exaggerated in the form of stereotypes. This coexistence of two extreme opposites can be seen in Stuart Hall's notion of binary opposition. Binary opposition is the differences between biological and bodily characteristics of the 'black' and 'white' races, polarized into their extreme opposites (Hall, 2003). The civilized nature of Whites is usually highlighted through the savage nature of Blacks in misrepresented situations such as the Black Buck/Brute. Oppositions are usually shown between two different races, but through the use of misrepresented images, the same has also been done within one race. Through misrepresentation, one extreme that is shown is a powerless figure that is childlike and is happy in a state of bondage via slavery. Then, there is a figure that is uncivilized and a danger to the society they live in. Anger and tranquility are qualities that all people are capable of showing, yet each emotion was taken and completely over-emphasized within one character.

In recent years, there have been more African American men with leading roles and more dynamic characters as a whole. In the following movies, the male lead character shows the progression made in depiction of Black masculinity in film. By no means are these characters perfect, but they represented humanity that we all possess regardless of our race and gender.

They all possess shortcomings and flaws, but they also have morals and convictions that help make them better human beings.

And the Award goes to: NAACP Image Award winning Films

Denzel Washington's character Captain Whitaker (Whip) showed a lot of qualities that not only showed the progression of Black masculinity, but they also showed the development of humanity since the Uncle Tom and Black Buck. "Flight" is the story of an accomplished airplane pilot who miraculously crash lands a plane that experiences damages due to machinery malfunctions (Zemeckis, 2012). After receiving much praise from the public, Captain Whitaker, also known as Whip, finds out that he is being investigated as a possible cause of the plane crash when his toxicology reports reveals that he had cocaine in his system as well as an amount of alcohol that was exceedingly high. Denzel Washington's performance as Captain Whitaker/Whip in the 2012 film "Flight" gained him yet another NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Actor in a Motion Picture in 2013. Washington's performance as the troubled airline pilot with a hidden battle with alcoholism displayed a lot of patriarchal masculine qualities that have influenced black masculinity. The studies of Black feminist bell hooks indicate that Black men learned patriarchal masculinity through their experiences with slavery. By observing the white slave master, they've equated their status as (grown) men with the domination of women (hooks, 2004). Captain Whitaker is very influential in most of his interactions with women throughout the movie; and he manages to get his way with them. For example, once he fully recovers from

the aftermath of his miraculous plan landing, he convinces one of the flight attendants to lie about his drinking activities during the last few nights leading up to the plane crash. Whip finds out that a toxicology report revealed that he had a blood alcohol level that was almost three times higher than the illegal limit. He tries to convince the flight attendant Margaret that she should tell the investigation team that he had 2 glasses of wine and went to bed. Not convinced that that was the truth, she tried to reason with him to get help, but he used his prestige as a newly proclaimed hero to pressure her into lying; which was indicated when she responded, “What do you want me to say?”

Whenever a female would suggest getting some type of help, whether it is for his alcohol addiction or psychological help for plane crash survivors, he automatically denies it. Hiding his emotions and pain served several purposes for Whip. Admitting he needed help was a sign of weakness and Whip hated being vulnerable to other people. Also, Whip loved his job so much because there was prestige and honor in being a pilot. He is a legacy flyer and he wants to continue the legacy of his father. This indicates the influence of patriarchal manhood by following in the footsteps of the men before him. There were times in the film where Whip would sit in his chair and indulge in heavy drinking- as he watched home videos of his father. Whip was very cunning yet aggressive in times of conflict. He relied on his job and the fact that he saved so many lives as leverage for his wrong doing. His defense attorney was skeptical of his character because he saw the raw facts of everything, but eventually he came around to seeing the humanity in Whip. They would argue a lot because Whip saw him as a threat instead of his

ally. Whip went through a lot of internal struggles with his addiction and personal convictions, but he was a good hearted person. He manages to rescue a White female that he met in the hospital while recovering who is battling an addiction with drugs. She is often harassed by her landlord and taken advantage of. When she is trying to leave her apartment due to overdue rent, the landlord gets rough with her but Whip is able to come and rescue her. This is an example of the escape from the black rape myth. In the scene, Whip refers to the white landlord as “boy”, which is a common name used for African American men during times of discrimination in the United States. Whip and the female counterpart have some disagreements because his pride gets in the way of him getting cured of his addiction, but they do end up helping each other become better individuals.

In the movie “The Book of Eli”, Denzel Washington plays a traveler in a post-apocalyptic world who is on a mission to get to a place that he constantly just calls “West” (Hughes; Hughes 2010). He runs into many dangerous situations that allow him to show his various ways of masculinity. Eli is usually short with conversation and quick in action. The valuable book happens to be the last remaining Bible known to mankind, and he happens to find much peace in its readings. Eli only wants to be about his own business but he is often challenged because people can tell that he is different. In a scene where he falls into a trap of cannibals trying to kill him, he shows no fear. Hiding his emotions allowed Eli to stay focused and not become vulnerable to the trap set up. When he chops off the hand of one of the cannibals coming at him, he proceeds to back up into the dark and challenge the remaining men. Because

the man is still in shock over losing his hand, he taunts the men by saying “He’s in shock, I think he means kill him.” After killing the remaining men who attacked him, he walks up to the woman who acted as bait in the trap and asks what their intentions were. When the woman realizes he will not harm her, she asked if she can go with him instead. In a way he managed to dominate the woman by leaving her there by herself. In the movie, women are portrayed as being very vulnerable so to leave a woman by herself is a symbol of her losing protection. Eli takes a lot of pride in protecting the last Bible for many reasons. He believes that God lead him to that book and that it is his mission to take the book “west.” His job as the guardian of that book gives him strength because he believes that God protects him wherever he goes. As a result, this book gives him purpose and identity needed to preserve his masculinity. His possession of the book as well his ability to read gives Eli a lot of power in the movie. When a corrupt mayor comes after him, the mayor acknowledges his power and education. In the film, it is uncommon for people to be able to read due to the destruction of literature. The villainous mayor often says things like “I know its power and so do you”, or he acknowledges the value of Eli’s literacy by saying “I do not know where you learned it but I sure as hell could use it.”

The final movie examined for this qualitative textual analysis is “The Great Debaters” (Washington, 2007). Once again, Denzel Washington plays the role of real life educator and poet, Melvin B. Tolson. Tolson is a professor at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas in 1935. Tolson coaches the very prestigious debate team at the school and they are pioneers for being one of the most successful African American debate teams in the nation. In fact, they are known

for debating Harvard University in the film and winning, which is a huge accomplishment for a school like that during the time period. Dealing with the horrors of Jim Crow South and racism, Tolson manages to become a father figure to the students around him. He always emphasizes the importance of them gaining their education and progressing in life. Tolson manages to dodge many person questions about him and hides his emotions. There is a particular character named Henry Lowe who always questions his authority. This exchange of words is often like a fight for manhood between them. Henry Lowe has a dark past and often finds it hard to open up, so when Tolson asks about his father during debate practice, Lowe refutes him with the same question. Tolson accepts the challenge and begins to quote the ideologies of Willie Lynch, a vicious slave owner. Then he ends his statement by saying, “I and any other professor on this campus are here to help you find, take back and keep your righteous mind because obviously you’ve lost it.” Tolson’s interaction with female debate member Samantha Booke often shows his domination of women. He has a tremendous amount of respect for her but he often challenges her character. When the students come over to Tolson’s house for debate team tryouts, he aggressively asks Samantha, “Why are you hiding?” When she has yet to come up and audition. Tolson ends up selecting her for the team after all, making Samantha the very first female on the Wiley College debate team. During the same practice that led to a passionate exchange of words with Henry, Tolson also ignores Samantha. The four team members stood in a line and Tolson would call them up one by one. He purposefully overlooked Samantha as a lesson for her to step up and take command. Unfortunately, he ends practice without giving her the chance to do so. Tolson’s

tactics were admirable, but they often perpetuated the idea that Samantha had to be like the others in order to gain respect. In other words, her own talent and skill was not enough to get respect from everyone else.

Conclusion

Stuart Hall's theories on representation confirmed that ideologies are created as a result of images created with inaccurate information. Stereotype models such as Bogle's showed that historical and social constructs influenced the depiction of African American men in the United States. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, Black men were presented as two extremes: either no possible threat to those with White supremacist views, or too much of a threat. In order to justify the ideal of slavery and violence against Black men, films and literature were produced that portrayed them as unintelligent and incapable of handling responsibility. However, the representation and presence of Blacks in film has evolved. Through the NAACP Image Award winning films, I have demonstrated that Black characters are capable of being well rounded. They can have jobs other than servant roles, and protect their loved ones. Black men are capable of contributing to society instead of destroying it. Through these tasks, Black men are able to preserve their manhood and identity in a society with ideals that marginalize men of color. In a society that emasculated Black men on film early on, men of color have been able to regain their masculinity using certain aspects of patriarchal manhood that have influenced Black masculinity.

By no means were the characters I examined perfect. They had flaws and shortcomings that hindered them at some point throughout the movie. However, acknowledging our strengths and weaknesses are what make us human. Therefore, it is more appropriate to have African American portrayals in film be a balance of both these qualities, rather than be depicted with the extremes of a stereotype established decades ago. And while the stereotypes that Bogle studied still exist in film, there is more variety with what we can see. As Hall suggested, the production of our identities are constantly being produced by the culture and history we experienced.

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