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Deconstructing the Black Coming-of-Age Film and its Effect on the Negotiation of Black Identity

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Overview

Introduction

Films are social scripts. Headlining thespians on Broadway and star Hollywood actors actively study their lines, practice the characters they are meant to emulate, and bring them to life on the stage or silver screen. The best scripts and the most talented actors are able to reproduce the exact actions and reactions these characters would have in the social situations they are placed in. A particularly stubborn baker can be expected to lose his cool when a new employee leaves a pie in the oven too long. A charming school teacher is expected to hold the attention of her students better than the off-putting and critical teacher down the hall.

There are also social recipes in film. Adding certain ingredients to a scene in a film's story often times has a predictable outcome just as adding certain ingredients to a dish one is cooking should have an expected product. Each scene in a film is placed in a social frame where the setting, surrounding characters, and situation are key components of the story told. Within the borders of this framework, featured characters act accordingly. In the context of the black coming-of-age films *ATL*, *Pride*, *Stomp the Yard*, and *School Daze* this holds true. The ingredients in these films - suffering neighborhoods, bitter, not-to-be-trusted characters, and temptation are a recipe for touching stories in which the paths these characters choose to follow tug at the heartstrings of viewers.

ATL's Esquire, a young man desperately wanting to escape his miserable and despair-filled neighborhood is the distressed and worried character one would expect in many scenes. The recipes used in the social scripts of these coming-of-age films place the characters in situations where their actions and interactions determine how they behave. For the viewer, the power of these social scripts and recipes is not to be underestimated.

The age-old question among film lovers is whether life imitates art or art imitates life. For the black story, both ideas hold true. Film is a discourse and though, according to Patricia Hill Collins, “images and representations do not determine behavior... they do provide an important part of the context for explaining it.” (2005: 18).

Purpose

It is the goal of this paper to critically deconstruct four black coming-of-age films: *ATL*, *School Daze*, *Pride*, and *Stomp the Yard*. The social scripts and recipes used in these films will be analyzed in terms of their parallel themes and their direct and indirect relations to interpreting lived realities in black communities, specifically of black youth. The correlation between the social scripts of these films and the realities that play out everyday in black communities are extremely important to sociologists and lead to some key questions. What sociological lessons are taught by the black coming-of-age film? Do black coming-of-age films help negotiate black identity?

Since culture, media, and communication are inextricably tied, how the media's messages about cultures are communicated is unequivocally important to how this information is received. It is also important in the respect of how the stories are told. For blacks, the media's portrayal of them has not always been accurate or fair. Television images have skewed the images of black people into stereotypical delineations of the trickster, the violent black male, and the snappy black woman. Film is not immune to this distortion either.

In many ways, film has become a resource for learning about black culture. This inevitably raises the question of whether there is such a thing as black film. If so, what makes a film a black film? Sociologically speaking, a black film tells a black story, one that a black viewer can look upon as a shared or a relevant experience.

Sadly, throughout history, viewers have seen false social scripts of black culture play out in film as the medium has struggled with finding a balance between entertainment and reality. This is due in part to black film not receiving the same exposure and treatment as its mainstream counterparts. The 1970s Blaxploitation film era, a time marked by films where such phrases as "funkadelic" and "groovy" were coined, was also the period that featured the deliberate mocking and caricaturization of "black life" at the time.

Before this there had been the era of bamboozlement where black people were portrayed by whites in blackface, a makeup system that

consisted of the painting of white faces with black paint and exaggerated black lips meant to mock the bigger lips “characteristic” of black people. Films like *The Birth of a Nation*, in which the Ku Klux Klan participated in the lynching of black males for crimes they had been falsely accused of, set the stage for what the role of blacks in film, and in society for that matter, was to be limited to in 1915 and for years thereafter.

The false or falsified portrayal of black people in film has existed seemingly since film’s inception, so how do true stories of blacks ever come to the screen and what makes them true are important questions to ask.

What is a coming-of-age film?

Documenting the reality of a people can be done with fiction or non-fiction films. The black coming-of-age film represents the power of fictional film to contextualize the existent social situations of youth in black communities. All youth go through a stage where they experience an event or series of events that marks a new phase in their lives or signifies that they are about to embark on a new journey. In the films, *Stomp the Yard*, *ATL*, *Pride*, and *School Daze* the main characters are in a key transitional period in their lives - high school and college. It is during these formative years that many youth decide or in many cases are told, what the next step will be. The black youth in these films experience the true-to-life events and issues of dealing with the pressures of escaping

their depressed and despair-filled neighborhoods, focusing on materialism, fitting in with their peers, experiencing a fear of “acting white,” and wavering between who they are and who they want to be.

How do the social scripts in these films contribute to the negotiation of black identity?

The importance of film in negotiating black experience is inarguable. Films are meant to allow viewers to live vicariously through the main characters. When a viewer has something in common with the character such as sharing the same ethnicity or race, the films takes on a new importance and the ability to relate to the story is enhanced. Though their stories may seem completely separate from the chapters written in the characters’ social scripts, the viewers can apply the lessons taught and the themes displayed to their own lives. The impact of the tales is not to be underestimated. The compatibility of the characters in films with the audience can be substantial to the themes of the film having relevance to their lives.

Sometimes the truths revealed through films can hurt and audiences may prefer to ignore the messages being sent, and instead categorize the social scripts as simply being entertainment. But a lot is to be said about these films which teach an all too familiar, yet sometimes unlearned lesson to its viewers about life. These films also reflect issues that still plague America in general and black communities in particular.

Methodology

To deconstruct the films used in this project, *ATL*, *School Daze*, *Pride*, and *Stomp the Yard*, I critically analyzed their content. I watched each film multiple times and took extensive notes on the themes I found emerging over my repeated viewings. I used a computer software program, Freemind, to code my notes. The program allowed me to create a mindmap, which is a document consisting of nodes, or bubbles, in which a user types notes and thoughts about a subject. I used the mindmap to separate the themes found in the films that were distinctly different from each other and to connect together those that were similar.

After completing my mindmap and multiple viewings of the films, I created a document in which I translated my mindmap into “textual” form, meaning I put my findings into standard document format. I completed my thoughts and structured my ideas into essay form.

The next stage consisted of extensive sociological research and a review of the literature. I read multiple books exploring the black community with a distinct social lens. These books focused on the effect of social constructs on blacks such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and the intersection of these constructs. I then performed research using sociologically-based databases. I looked for peer-reviewed articles in refereed journals specifically investigating and examining the themes found in the coding stage of my film research. These articles were used to

explore the themes I had found in the films and to create a distinct and purposeful connection between the two.

In order to provide a framework for the reader and to clarify my findings I decided to use one film, *ATL* as the benchmark film of my study and the other three films, *Pride*, *Stomp the Yard*, and *School Daze*, as ancillary examples of the themes and social issues I found. As a result, there is considerably more time spent on the film *ATL* than the other three films and this was strictly for coherence and creative purposes.

My undergraduate academic majors Television, Radio, and Film and Sociology helped extensively with increasing the thoroughness of this project and in my research. I have taken multiple classes in which I learned how to critically analyze films visually, stylistically, and directorially. I have found that all creative choices in films serve a purpose and that many of these choices are worth exploration. My sociology background has helped me to contextualize my findings and to describe the larger and far-reaching social impacts of this film research. I also took full advantage of my academic course elective requirements to take African-American Studies courses, which increased my knowledge of black cultures and issues facing black communities.

The Films

School Daze

Spike Lee's *School Daze*, released in 1988, was one of the first movies to explore contemporary black college life. It was also one of the first films to delve into the relationship between the black college campus and the black community. The film was set at the fictional historically black institution, Mission College.

The casting decisions for the film were creative and inspired. On the surface, the actors' typecast looks fit perfectly with the stereotypical characters they were meant to portray: the stuck-up, prissy black girl, the have-it-all, degrading, and oblivious boyfriend, and the not-going-to-fit-in anywhere outcast. But, as Spike Lee would reveal through multiple storyline scenarios, there was much more to these characters than was apparent at first sight. For each stereotypical characteristic and portrayal, there was a substantial issue meant to strike the audience either through innuendo or outright negation/questioning of these ideas.

This formula of putting the audience at ease by giving them what they expect, but also opening up their minds to important issues by sending out subliminal messages was a substantial part of what made the film so noteworthy. Not only were the distinct physical attributes and personalities of the characters perfect for keeping interest in the storyline, but they also were a surefire way to get Spike Lee's point across - we are not all the same and we are not all who we seem to be.

Jane, played by Tisha Campbell, was the black girl everyone loved to hate because of her stunning looks - her light eyes and “good” hair made the other college girls jealous. Jane’s fiery personality meant she did not accept any nonsense from her peers, except from the king of her life and supposed best-of-the-batch boyfriend, Julian. To outsiders she may have appeared to be on top of the world, but her relationship with Julian demonstrated a common, but rarely discussed problem of misogynistic control in relationships between black males and females. Jane’s wavering bouts of agency versus complete subservience was epitomized by her scene at the end of the film where she was forced to have sex with another man to prove her love to Julian only to be called a “ho” afterwards. It becomes evident that Jane’s subservience wins out over her agency as a woman. This clash is a major plotline of the film.

The title of the film worked simply because of its quiriness and catchiness, but it also was symbolic of the film’s purpose. The main character, Vaughn “Dap” Dunlap, played by Laurence Fishburne, believes black communities, specifically black college students, are in a daze. That is, do not attend to what is going on around them socially and politically. They assume that their own actions play no role in the “external” things that are occurring. There is a certain power that comes with being in college even as a black amongst a capitalist white society, which Dap feels his peers are failing to realize and take advantage of. This complicit silence is often times blamed on “the man,” on institutions against black

power, and the fact that that is the way life is. Dap believes to the contrary, that blacks in America have a lot to do and say about these matters and it is their responsibility to take power into their own hands. This idea is symbolized through Dap's involvement in the South Africa divestment movement on the Mission College campus.

Another strong theme, the tension over the real definition of black masculinity, is established within the first few minutes of the film with a minor run-in between DaFellas, who are Dap's followers and the Gamma Men, Julian's followers, on the steps of Morris College's Administration building. Dap, dressed in a traditional African kente cloth scarf and activist t-shirt, disciplines the late attendees to his South Africa Divestment call-out. (Dap's struggle between his Americanized college boy persona and his African, down-for-the-cause agenda will be expanded on throughout the film, especially in his dialogues with long-time girlfriend, Rachael.) His character immediately establishes himself as a leader and activist on campus, or at least someone who is outspoken about the issues of the day.

However, the larger issue of Dap's concern, why the administration is not supporting the South Africa divestment movement, quickly gets lost in the smaller, but more egotistically-driven issue between him and Julian of which kind of man is a better man. The two men verbally duke it out by shouting insults at each other and the original cause of helping an entire South African people in their political battle is

subsumed. In the end, they both spend so much time and energy trying to prove who is more masculine that they resemble childish boys and not well-educated college men. This struggle over black masculinity is not just in film, but it is also a real problem in society.

Even the manner in which Julian enters the scene showcases some of the problems with black masculinity. Julian leads his Gammites, the pledges hoping to become Gamma men, into the gathering like a group of slaves up for auction. Dressed in black and silver, they are chained and crawling across the gravel as if they are dogs. The viewer may recognize this as an exaggerated and hyperbolized representation of the black Greek pledging process, but it has even more symbolic value. Repeatedly throughout the film, masculinity is proven through the degradation and humiliation of others. The men do not just inflict these insults on each other; often times women are their victims and are caught in the crossfire of men wanting to prove their manhood by subjecting them to hateful words and abuse.

Spike Lee creatively manages to demonstrate this supposed dichotomy between good and bad and right and wrong (black versus not acting black, masculinity versus not being masculine enough, light skinned versus dark skinned) throughout the film and at the same time tell his audience why and how these issues converge. A prime example is the scene between Samuel L. Jackson's character and DaFellas outside of the KFC restaurant. The light-skin vs. dark skin dilemma is explored through

a musical piece in a beauty salon where the sorority girls argue over who is more attractive based on skin tone and hair texture. Even Dap's girlfriend, Rachael comes to wonder if the only reason he is with her is because she is dark-skinned and makes him look more "down."

Stomp the Yard

Fast forward nearly twenty years to *Stomp the Yard* – a film that provides a new and fresh lens into the black campus college circuit. Produced by Rob Hardy and directed by Slyvian White, *Stomp the Yard* explores the black fraternity and sorority system in the new millennium. DJ, played by Columbus Short, is the protagonist and reluctant hero of the story, which starts out on the rough streets of Los Angeles, but transitions to and focuses on Atlanta, Georgia where DJ moves to attend Truth University.

DJ's narcissistic behavior proves to be trouble throughout the movie. His all-about-me attitude causes much strife for himself and those who come to care about him, especially April Palmer - his eventual love interest. A contrast to this seemingly unwavering feeling of self-worth is DJ's much more sensitive side brought on by the death of his younger brother, Duron in the beginning of the film. DJ cannot stop blaming himself for this tragedy and is quick to take any criticism personally- especially that which he receives from the only person able to take on the authoritative role in his life, his Uncle Nate.

A much more positive light is shed on the fraternity and sorority system in this movie than in *School Daze*, though the problems concerning black masculinity are still alluded to with the scenes showcasing the tension between the rival fraternities, Mu Gammas and Thetas. Grant is the mastermind behind the Mu Gammas, and his misogynistic mistreatment of April is perhaps most symbolic of how negative social values can permeate black Greek life. Grant and DJ's character seem to be complete opposites and at the same time they are also very much alike in that they are focused on showing who is more masculine than the other. In the process, April's needs are ignored and pushed to the side as not important.

Both *Stomp the Yard* and *School Daze* urge their audiences to analyze who has power on historically black college and university (HBCU) campuses and what those blacks do with that power. In the case of *School Daze*, the college administration is not portrayed in a positive light. Similarly, in *Stomp the Yard*, April Palmer's father, Dr. William Palmer, is the provost of Truth College and is to blame for some corrupt practices, including DJ's near expulsion. The conflict between the students and administration in the films leads to a critical question of what needs to be done differently on historically black college campuses today as well as for black students on predominantly white campuses.

ATL

ATL focuses on another pivotal time in the lives of black youth - high school - a time when many from the 'hood decide, or rather are told by unsupportive high school guidance counselors and the like, whether they are "college material". Rashad, the syrupy-skinned and husky-voiced protagonist of the story played by rapper T.I., has already accepted his fate as a permanent failure of the Mechanicsville 'hood. The stone-faced high school senior feels success is simply not in his future. 'hood life to Rashad is like a rigged poker game; despair and hopelessness are the cards he was dealt and a hand he feels he can never win.

But, as the audience learns, Rashad has a great deal of potential. He is a talented sketch artist and enjoys working on comic strips. His youth is not a reason to doubt his heart and his ability to withstand turmoil either. Three years earlier, his parents died in a tragic car accident and he took on the role of raising his younger brother, Ant. Rashad's dedication to Ant, who he describes as being "hard on the outside and soft on the inside" like a jellybean, speaks volumes of his father-like character. The death of their parents has affected them both, but in very different ways. Rashad has all but given up hope for himself, but he predicts a much better tale for Ant if he would just steer clear of trouble.

Protecting the naïve and often times hardheaded Ant proves to be a difficult task though, especially since Ant likes to think he is grown and ready to take care of himself by hustling the block. Flossing, or making

money and having flashy jewelry, is the main concern of Ant. There are many scenes which reveal just how susceptible and easily influenced Ant can be by the dangers of the 'hood. Rashad does have high hopes of Ant making it out though. Staying away from the "dope boys," the local drug dealers on the block, is key to Ant "making it." Ant, though, has trouble following Rashad's advice. There is a constant pull from Marcus, Mechanicsville's main drug dealer, and plenty of other outside forces making this a hard task. The brothers' Uncle George and bitter caretaker is suffering a mid-life crisis, all the while blaming them for his misery and lack of female companionship.

Then there are Rashad's boys, each of them having his own growing up issues. Esquire has hopes of attending an elite, mostly-white college. The only problem is he is from the 'hood and after a meeting with his guidance counselor his worst fear is nearly realized - that a "brother from the 'hood can't make it out." But Esquire is determined to escape the trials of 'hood life. Yet, he also does not want to leave his boys behind. This struggle leads to a bifurcated existence for the college hopeful. Brooklyn, a New York native, has problems keeping a job. His employment options seem to be limited to fast food positions and he does not aspire to much more than that. Even by the end of the film, when most of the characters have met their goals, Brooklyn appears content to have become a manager of a fast food restaurant. Teddy, who often provides comic relief for the crew by cracking jokes in times of tension, does not

appear to have much more of a purpose other than that. He has had an extended stay in high school and may have become too used to the scenery and given up on excelling past high school.

New New, Rashad's potential love interest, shares a bifurcated existence similar to that of Esquire. Her beautiful honey skin and bright smile have already caught Rashad's attention by the first time the audience sees her on screen at the Mechanicsville Waffle House. Dressed in a striped halter top and blue denim Capri pants, she gives him a quick wave as she takes a seat with close friends, Star and Veda. Everything about her appearance reads "real" to Rashad, but something about her still makes him feel she is too good to be true. She is the only person able to make him have a sense of hope about his own future and to not just look to Ant's existence as the only one that matters. Alternatively, Rashad makes New New feel "real" and that she is a part of the life she dreams of- being a 'hood girl, which in her mind equals "authenticity." But New New's "realness" is prevented by her lifestyle- she is the daughter of the great black entrepreneur John Garnett and resides on the "good" side of town in Buckhead.

New New is in no way torn between who she is and who she wants to be. Her current privileged lifestyle is meaningless to her. Her confrontation with her father after he embarrasses her and pulls her out of the Cascade skating rink located in the heart of Mechanicsville sums up all of her feelings about being a black member of the upper-class. The fight

between New New and her father symbolizes a real struggle in black communities where classism among blacks trumps their shared racial experiences, which in turn leads to a sharp divide.

The film develops the contrast between New New and Esquire's ability to blend into the surroundings they yearn for in an interesting way - through their skating abilities. Early in the film, when the boys are hanging out at the gas station, they attempt to teach Esquire a few skating moves to use at Cascade skating rink. He struggles to pick up the moves and stumbles over his own feet as he attempts the footwork. Ant, Rashad's younger brother, comments, "We have found the weakest link." This is one place where Esquire shows he does not fit in with the rest of the crew. The boys constantly have to reteach him steps and help him out with choreography for their skating routines. This is a small hint that Esquire is supposed to be different from the rest of them.

New New, on the other hand, displays her seemingly natural skating talent at Cascade a few nights later. New New joins in on the crew's skate line behind Esquire and is picking up the moves better than he is. This skating routine serves as a metaphor for blacks and classism and that blacks are holding each other back over a moot cause. Class is too often looked upon as something that separates people when it may have nothing to do with who they are.

Star and Veda, New New's friends are the quintessential epitome of ghetto girls. When the audience meets their mother, Gayle, it becomes

clear why; she too is “ghetto” and fits the prototype of the neglectful black mother. Other problematic images of the black female appear in the film as well including the subservient black mother, the “bitch,” and the hypersexualized black woman.

Pride

Pride, based on a true story, explores what it is like to be a black youth in a time earlier than any of the other movies, during the ‘60s and ‘70s, a time marked by the Civil Rights movement and post-Civil Rights movement. Segregation, racial tensions, and discrimination are at an all-time high in the country and it shows. Terrence Howard’s character, Jim Ellis, is filled with ambition, but he, like many black males, is forced to realize that a black man in America has limited options. He attempts to get a job at Main Line Academy from Tom Arnold’s character, Mr. Binkowsky. Despite Jim’s impressive and rare college credentials he is turned down because of the color of his skin. Then he receives the same harsh treatment at the unemployment office from a black worker who literally laughs in his face when he mentions that he has a college degree. Both scenes emphasize that some things do not change over time, especially when it comes to racism.

Pride focuses on a group of black boys who find solace in the basketball hoop right outside of the Marcus Foster Recreation Center. They go to the basketball court, talk junk to each other, and find time to be

“boys.” But, even in a leisurely activity they participate in to separate themselves from the troubles of the community, they cannot escape reality. Franklin, the town drug dealer, and self-appointed mayor, hovers over the boys like an incurable virus. In the first scene at the basketball court, Reggie accidentally hits Franklin’s stereo with a basketball. Franklin responds by threatening Reggie and tells him he owes him “big time.” It is drug dealers like these who poison the minds of youth in the ‘hood and seduce them into believing that hustling drugs is the only way out.

The education system, which is explored in the “Stay in School... Why?” chapter is also explored in this movie. One of the boys, Hakim has trouble reading and is struggling to make it through school. His older sister, Sue Davis, who is also city councilwoman, looks at it has her sole duty to ensure his success in school. Swimming, she feels, is sure to be an obstacle to this goal.

Sexism also occurs in *Pride*. There is one female who joins the PDR (pride, determination, and resilience) swimming team, Wilamenah “Willie” Thompson. Her nickname, Willie implies a masculine nature to her character that may have been strategically used by the writers of the film to give her equal footing with the rest of the guys. But, in spite of her masculine nickname she is constantly flirted with by her male teammates. The viewer is left contemplating whether “Willie’s” character is

conforming to patriarchal social constructs or taking a feminist stance by using a “male” name.

These themes from the films will be explored in the following chapters:

“Hood Dreams: Ain’t No Escape” focuses on life in the ‘hood and how it affects the mindsets of the films’ characters. Generally, the characters have a feeling of being locked in to their despair-filled and depressing surroundings. The result is a lack of hope that life can exist for them outside of this microcosm. The characters deal with the limits of ‘hood life differently and in very interesting ways to say the least. In *ATL*, Rashad’s character has a sense of embitterment, but holds onto hope for his younger brother Ant to escape the ‘hood. He stays on top of Ant to do his school work and not get involved in hustling, or drug dealing. Esquire, Rashad’s close friend, believes he can escape the ‘hood, and is willing to do so at almost any expense. He utilizes all of his resources to get recognized as not being just another guy from the ‘hood, even going as far as to lie about being from the ‘hood. Meanwhile, New New desperately wants to be a part of this ‘hood life. She takes on the wardrobe, dialect, and what she thinks is authentic role of the “‘hood girl” to get this attention.

“Stay in School... Why?” focuses on how these coming-of-age characters deal with the education system. The two films that revolve around college life, *School Daze* and *Stomp the Yard*, provide a different perspective on the matter than the other films, *ATL* and *Pride*, where the main characters are still in high school. *Stomp the Yard* focuses on DJ who feels he is not cut out for the “college boy” role and is instead living his little brother’s dream, which he believes was cut short by his negligence. He is, in essence, stuck between the ‘hood mentality and doing the right thing in school. In *School Daze*, the majority of the secondary characters the audience is introduced to are focused on their college studies and some explain that they are doing so in an effort to have more than their parents had. Dap’s activist stance, and attempt to rebel against the institution, they worry, will drive them away from their dreams and prevent them from being successful. In *Pride*, the boys cannot imagine college. They go to school, but it serves no purpose other than to pass the time in the day. In *ATL*, the only one who sees the point in staying in school in the crew is Esquire. Meanwhile, Rashad, the one who perhaps lacks the most hope, ironically expects and makes his younger brother, Ant, focus on his studies even though he does not do the same for himself and just wants to get by.

“Taste of the Good Life” is a chapter that focuses on how these ‘hood characters get exposed to the upscale and privileged life they have only

dreamed of. In *ATL*, Esquire gets his taste of the good life at the Shady Grove Golf Club where he works as a waiter at the exclusive restaurant. There is an interesting conversation between Teddy and Esquire in the club parking lot where Teddy brings Esquire back to reality and calls him “Tiger ‘hood.” This comment lets Esquire know that although he may have dreams of the good life, at the end of the day, he is still in the ‘hood. In *Pride*, the team’s bus ride to the white, middle-class area of Philadelphia shows them a life of estates and beautiful cars. It is in sharp contrast to their dilapidated bus and the lifestyle they are used to. The importance of race in the separation of the lifestyles is emphasized in *Pride*. Once they arrive at their meet in the rich area they are mocked and chastised by the crowd. Jim Ellis scolds them about laughing things off when they arrive home. His lecture emphasizes that what they experienced was essentially a form of new racism, in which the blacks subconsciously laughs at how they are treated by whites.

“The Black Woman: Deconstructing Tyra” discusses the multiple types of black women that appear in the coming-of-age films. Just as there are multiple Tyrones, or types of black men, there are multiple versions of the black woman, including the fast girl, the bitch, and the neglectful black mother. Most of the labels placed on these women come from black men and not other black women, which is symbolic of the control black men have over defining womanhood. In *ATL*, Ant, a teenager, calls a grown

black woman who refuses to give him her phone number “a bitch.” This is not only disrespectful, but also shows how men in many black communities attempt to subjugate women despite their age.

CHAPTER 1: 'Hood Dreams: Ain't No Escape

ATL

The *ATL*, *School Daze*, *Pride*, and *Stomp the Yard* characters are all in different chapters of their lives when their stories begin in the films, but the 'hood is an inescapable element of each of these tales. Poverty, suffering, distress, and lack of hope are typical components of life in the 'hood. This challenging sphere of existence entraps many of the characters in a seemingly inescapable mire of despair and, as a result, affects how they attempt to move forward in their narratives.

ATL, for example, follows life in Mechanicsville, Georgia and as Rashad put it in the beginning of the film, Mechanicsville is the, "middle of the city and center of our universe." This statement says a lot about the perspective of the locals of the area. Life simply does not exist outside of the Mechanicsville 'hood. For Rashad and his peers, it is hard to have dreams when it appears impossible to escape their nightmare of life in the 'hood. The mostly black-populated, rundown area of Mechanicsville does not have much to offer its residents due to the decaying infrastructure illustrated by the inadequate education system at the high school. The houses certainly are not mansions like on the other side of town in Buckhead where New New lives and the people in Mechanicsville are struggling to make ends meet every day. What happens in the 'hood, big or small, is a big deal because that is all they know.

Rashad and his friends deal with 'hood life in different ways. Their varying perspectives shed light on beliefs held in real 'hoods outside of film. Rashad represents the pessimistic and doubtful 'hood dweller. He does not feel too confident about his chances of escaping Mechanicsville. He explains, "My Pops used to always say dreaming is the luxury of children and that I should enjoy it. Here it is, the last year of high school – and this is all I can ever really see myself doing. When you got responsibilities, you ain't got time to dream. I guess it's the difference between being a boy and a man." Rashad was forced to grow up early and take on the responsibility of single-handedly raising his younger brother when their parents were tragically killed in a car accident three years earlier. Since their Uncle George does not really want anything to do with the parenting process that he feels has been forced upon him, he removes himself from the task. He discourages his nephews from dreaming and even chastises them for doing the right thing at times.

This is a sad truth for many 'hoods in real life. Black youth often do not see themselves excelling beyond high school and college is not even an option for financial and social reasons. Too often parents or caretakers like Uncle George do not encourage their children to pursue an education because life has not existed for them beyond the 'hood and they cannot help but succumb to their own limited lived realities.

Even though Rashad is much more responsible in his parental duties to Ant than Uncle George, he too has lost hope. Missing out on a

carefree childhood undoubtedly had an impact on a Rashad's development. According to sociologist Joy DeGruy Leary, author of *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, this is not an isolated emotion and many in the hood share this same sentiment. She says frustration, anger, and rage are common to the hood experience (2005: 13).

New New is the only one who kindles a spark of hope for Rashad. She finds some of his sketches in his bedroom and is impressed by his talent. She questions him about the drawings and he finally admits that when he was younger he always dreamt of being a graphic artist.

Ironically, it is after arguing with New New that Rashad uses his talent for drawing to symbolize his feelings about never escaping Mechanicsville. He had just learned that New New was not a Mechanicsville native, and, in fact, was not "hood" by his definition of the term at all. He had assumed being 'hood meant that New New must share a connection of suffering and despair. To him, her not being from the area meant she was not "real" and could not have felt such emotions.

Rashad is sitting somberly on the couch in his basement bedroom and penciling in a few details on his sketch of an arm breaking free from the ground. Though the arm has broken free from the concrete, there is a rope tightly wound around the wrist still trapping it. Rashad thought he was finally breaking free of his mindset of believing 'hood dreams do not come true, only to once again have his hopes shattered when New New

turns out not to be who he thought she was. The observant viewer can spot the word “lies” Rashad has cryptically sketched into the drawing.

For Rashad, ‘hood life has consisted of a series of lies. The idea of ‘hood dreams itself is now a lie; they are only nightmares for Rashad. He gets frustrated, rips the paper from the book, and crumples it into a ball.

Still Can’t Let Go

Rashad still has one of the most complex reactions to his ‘hood lifestyle. Though he cannot envision any way that he could leave it behind, he also does not seem to have fully accepted his life in the hood as made evident by the scene of Ant, Uncle George, and him at work. Swann Cleaning Service is the family business and it is obvious it is not Rashad’s passion. He has his gray jumpsuit uniform hanging down below his waist and his white undershirt showing. His way of wearing his uniform is reminiscent of the way traditional prison garb is displayed on black males in popular American media outlets such as music videos. In this scene, it shows a lack of respect for the system and also a sense of being trapped - a victim of the system. Rashad does not like this type of work, yet he does it because he knows that he has to in order to survive. The song, "Do Something" by Macy Gray plays as they clean the office space. The song’s lyrics are very symbolic of Rashad’s struggle:

Get up, get out and do somethin'

Don't let the days of your life pass you by

You got to get up, get out and do somethin'
How will you make it if you never even try
Get up, get out and do somethin'
Can't spend your whole life tryin' to get high
You got to get up, get out and do somethin'
'Cause you and I have to do
For you and I . (Macy Gray: 1999)

Rashad is doing this cleaning service for his brother. The audience by now has sensed a pull in Rashad's character to keep doing the right thing even though he appears not to have a thread of hope. This is what is called survival in the 'hood; though one may not feel like he or she is working towards anything, he or she still holds on to a fighting spirit.

Ant is dispirited about the job as well. He sits on the side in the hallway staring at the ground. He looks let down and disgusted to be in the office space cleaning it. Uncle George demonstrates his carefree and disrespectful attitude in the scene as he clips his toenails at an office desk.

Focus on Materialism

A result of this lack of options and opportunities is a focus on the acquisition of material goods. If one cannot escape the 'hood, he might as well look like he is not from the 'hood. "Flossing," or creating the illusion of a different life other than the one that is actually being lived, can easily become an alternative for members of the 'hood - even in high school.

Rashad introduces his high school, Mechanicsville High, as a breeding ground for such activity: “Alma mater to some of the greatest players in Mechanicsville.” The majority of the students at the school are black.

Ant has fallen victim to the idea of flossing in this scene:

Rashad: Shining, ain't ya?

Ant: Can't you tell, man?

Ant reaches up and feels the fake diamond earrings he is 'flossing' in his ears.

Rashad: Guess, you just gonna fake it 'til you make it, huh?

Ant: Man these going to be getting me girls.

He attempts to flirt with a girl named April.

Ant: Can I talk to you?

April: You just did. Bye.

April brushes by without even pausing.

The movie sends the negative, but perhaps true message that materialism pays off in the 'hood when it comes to getting women. The same message is sent in hip-hop music videos. In *Deconstructing Tyrone* (2005), authors Natalie Moore and Natalie Y. Hopkinson comment on hip-hop's pervasiveness. They explain that the influence extends beyond just parenting and infiltrates almost all segments of black life. Hip-hop is an active agent in the misogynistic images that are spread across America. Tuning a television to any music channel one is almost guaranteed to see a

black woman shaking her butt and a black man, armored from head to toe in gaudy jewelry, watching her predatorily as she dances in a lewd and explicit fashion. In Chapter 5, titled “Hip-Hop,” the authors explore these hypersexualized images: “... it has become an increasingly accurate mirror for American values... If rappers are modern-day blues singers ‘telling it like ‘tis from the streets, then it’s fair to conclude that in the ‘hood you’ll find a deep hatred toward women” (2005: 86).

Yet, black women do not seem to share the same hatred of these Tyrones, or black men who participate in such misogynistic acts, for treating them as “bitches” and “hos.” The women even fail to see how they are participating in their own degradation and claim that these rappers are not “talking about them” when they use such vulgar language. But the reality is they are talking about every black woman. Hopkinson and Moore found video model Karrine Steffans to be a perfect example of how this hypersexuality plays itself out. Steffans, who is otherwise known as “Superhead” among her peers for her sexual acts (2005: 92), penned a book *Confessions of a Video Vixen* in which she describes her sexual encounters with rappers and entertainers in explicit detail. She capitalized on her own hypersexual depiction. Instead of exercising her agency to fight her own degradation and telling these Tyrones that it is not right to participate in the depiction of black females as animalistic sexual beings, she chose to make money off of it.

Later in the film at Cascade skating Rink, when Ant has started hustling and runs into the same girl who rebuffed his earlier overtures, she practically throws herself at him. Ant does not even appear to mind that she only wants him for his “shine,” or jewelry. In fact, he acts like a little boy in a candy store at the idea of becoming a real man by losing his virginity to her. She has sex with Ant that very same night in a car because he is “shining.” This sends a negative message about young women in the ‘hood and makes it seem like they will settle for someone who is able to put on the façade of wealth and prosperity. Materialism drives attraction and worth in the ‘hood among blacks.

For Ant, dealing with the ‘hood means making the best out of it by living “ghetto fabulous.” When the audience first sees Ant, he is gussying up in the bathroom preparing for another day at school. Ant is looking in the mirror, holding his toothbrush with his right hand and holding up a copy of *Crunk* magazine in his left hand. The cover of the magazine reads, “Who is Mike Jones” and features a large photo of rapper Mike Jones flossing in all of his “ice,” or jewelry. Ant, with a cubic zirconium earring in his ear, smiles at the mirror and matches his smile to the one he imagines Mike Jones to have. Mike Jones and other rappers claim to fame is that they are living the American dream and hip-hop has become a way out of poverty (Hopkinson and Moore 2005: 96). Ant is emulating his version of the American dream in the ‘hood. The idea of this is oxymoronic because living a life filled with wealth and prosperity as the

American dream proposes, does not seem possible in an area filled with despair and frustration like the 'hood.

Ant sees his first opportunity to capitalize on the lifestyle he dreams of at the city pool. The entire crew is hanging out and Ant sees his friend leaving the pool angry because his money got wet. Ant follows him into the locker room:

Ant: What you doing?

Boy: Nigga, what it look like. I am drying my money.

Ant: Hey, why don't you come to school no more?

Boy: Too busy making money.

Ant: I see that. I saw you with Marcus the other day.

Boy: Yeah, that's my cousin. We gets paper.

This would be just the beginning of Ant's hustling ways and he would get wrapped up in a sour relationship with the drug dealer, Marcus. Their relationship is symptomatic of the pervasive problem in black communities of young men seeing drug dealing as a way "out." The idea of other young black men being seduced by their peers to join the drug game is a fact of life many neighborhoods face.

Author Joshua Nosa Okundaye (2004) explores the frequency of drug trafficking amongst black youth and found, "... at times children ask other children to join them in these activities. Where the youth are when asked to sell drugs appears to be irrelevant as some

were asked in school, on the playground and in front of their houses” (293).

Ant, like the youth in Okundaye’s study, was not able to resist the temptation of making quick and easy money. This teaches the viewers that ‘hood dreams do not come easy and often involve illegal activity in order to morph into the American dream.

Dealing with Hood Dreams

Rashad’s friends each have their own way of dealing with ‘hood life. Brooklyn, a New York native, has trouble adjusting to the hot and humid weather in Mechanicsville and he also has trouble keeping a job. Though presented in a comical light, Brooklyn’s constant firing from jobs represents a reality of many members of the ‘hood’s lack of employment options (Rhoden 2006: 240-243). After getting fired from a pizza shop, Brooklyn proclaims to his friends that he needs a vacation. There is a jump cut to a scene where Brooklyn is seen drifting on a floatation device in a pool. The tight shot of Brooklyn in the water leads the audience to believe that he is, in fact, on vacation and has temporarily escaped the ‘hood. Then the reality of ‘hood life overtaking Brooklyn’s dream is once again reinforced when he gets flipped over by a group of kids. The audience realizes that Brooklyn is in a city pool. This scene, though humorous, is a symbolic representation of not being able to escape a certain life. One can dream about it, but reality will soon set back in. The fact that escaping the

'hood is not easy, and sometimes impossible, is subtly and cleverly made by the director of the film.

Later in the film, Brooklyn gets fired from his job at a pizza shop after an apparent disagreement with his employer. The audience does not see what led up to the argument that takes place in the parking lot, but the employer, who is of Indian descent, belittles Brooklyn and mocks what he assumes to be "'hood talk.'" Brooklyn in turn exercised his agency and talked back. He moves on to another fast food place after the pizza shop called KKK Soul Food Restaurant. The name of this pizza shop certainly has meaning and it appears the writers are implying something to the viewers about the role of race in blacks' employment choices and who controls the fate of blacks in America's workforce.

Teddy takes perhaps the most lax approach to his 'hood surroundings. Teddy represents the black male that is unreliable, still living with his mother, has "'hood dreams", and is still in high school at age 21 or 22. In fact, he defends the 'hood in his conversation with Esquire in the parking lot of the Shady Grove Golf Club, where Esquire works. Teddy's gold tooth and constant smiles tell the audience he is not a very serious character. How does Teddy deal with not being able to escape the 'hood? He embraces it. Teddy works as a pseudo-dental hygienist, supplying the locals with flashy gold teeth. If Teddy had taken his education more seriously, he may have actually been able to attend dental school. All the blame, however, should not go on Teddy for not

being successful in school. This will be explored later in the chapter entitled “Stay in School... Why?”

While the crew is dining at the Waffle House, the topic of graduation comes up. Teddy asks, “Did ya’ll get your caps and gowns yet?” Esquire quickly replies, “Oh yeah, I got mine!” Teddy replies sarcastically, “I know you do.” Brooklyn decides to chime in, “Hey, Teddy. Are you sure you’re graduating man? Come on, just give it up man.” Teddy attempts to defend himself, “Hey, I am trying man, I’m trying.” Esquire jokes, “Well, ain’t you about to be in the fourteenth grade now, dog?” Teddy replies, “Yeah, I am in the same class with your mama!” They all laugh. The crew jokes about Teddy’s extended stay in high school as does he. Is laughing it off a way of neglecting a serious problem among blacks in high school who are struggling to graduate?

Esquire is the only member of the crew who actually believes he can escape the ills of the ‘hood. He is not the token black in that he does not act different or superior to his friends. Esquire deals with the notion of not being able to escape the ‘hood by refusing to accept that it will not happen for him. Rather, he is intent on changing his reality.

His determination and ability to maintain a friendship with the crew from the ‘hood, while all the aspiring to get as far away from the ‘hood as possible, creates a bifurcated existence and makes him a complicated character to deconstruct in the film. His nickname, though, sheds light on his complexity. It is, in fact, a mirror representation of his

'hood character. By definition, "esquire" means above a mere gentleman, a candidate for knighthood. Esquire certainly wants to believe he is a candidate for greatness and that he can be the one to make it. The nickname was likely given to him by his friends since they view him as the "chosen one" and frequently refer to him as the smart one of the group. His real name, Ben, on the other hand, represents the socially adept Esquire, and is only used in his interactions with people of power like Mr. Sapp, his guidance counselor, and Mr. Garnett, the man he believes his future is vested in. In his dealings with Mr. Garnett, Esquire is depicted as someone who gets lost in his belief that he must present himself as someone he is not. Esquire leads a bifurcated existence because he presents himself as the person he aspires to be in certain situations, and as the person he has grown up to be in others.

The boys still show love and admiration for Esquire even though he is trying to "escape." Rashad says, "My boy book smart... but he just plain ol' Esquire to us." Early in the movie, Rashad and Ant drive Esquire across town to his private and exclusive high school - a small symbol of Rashad's support for Esquire. Esquire is dressed in his school uniform: a navy blue blazer, red tie, white collared shirt, and khaki pants. His attire creates a strong contrast between himself and Rashad and Ant who are both dressed comfortably and appropriately to their Mechanicsville roots in oversized t-shirts and baggy shorts. But Esquire still seems to fit right in with his friends in the modest red car. Rashad turns to Esquire and

voices his opinion on Esquire's recent acceptance into a top, mostly white college, "Either way you look at it man you lucky." Esquire responds, "Yeah, but it ain't paid for yet. I'm going to need loans, grants, a job, and a dream to pay for this stuff." Esquire recognizes the limitations of 'hood life and though he is driven, he tries to act and dream cautiously.

Esquire is only able to attend an elite high school by cheating the system and lying about his place of residence. On his application, Esquire wrote that he lives in the rich suburbs of Georgia. This "qualified" him to be a student at the institution in a society where social status determines academic worthiness.

It is made obvious that Esquire is infiltrating enemy territory by Ant's reaction as he and Rashad pull off from the school. Ant leans out the window and yells to Esquire, who is now in a sea of his white peers, "We mean war brother, war!" and holds up a clenched fist. Ant realizes the importance of what Esquire is doing and the role race plays in what he is witnessing.

Esquire was taking a stand by matriculating in an entirely white institution. He was also brave for showing his intelligence in the classroom. Many school-age black males in society have said that they are afraid to raise their hand in the classroom out of fear that they will be chastised by their peers for trying to be smart and like "them," meaning the white students who actually have a chance of making something out of themselves. Historically, black males have not fared well in the school

system. This includes secondary school and higher education. Theodore Cross (2000) explores some of the reasons why this is the case:

Teachers, who are predominantly female, tend to see black boys as disciplinary problems. A huge number of black boys are tracked into caretaker-type special education classes in which they are forever classified as incapable of serious academic pursuit. (Secondly) an anti-achievement ethic has become very strong among many young black men. Black males who seek to improve their opportunities through the educational process are constantly subjected to abuse and rejection by their peers. They are often accused of "acting white." Among many young blacks, profound shame attends charges of acting white.

Esquire shows a determination to not let this norm affect him. He pays a visit to the school's guidance counselor. The middle-aged white man with brown combed-over hair and a bulletin board filled with important documents greets Esquire pleasantly. When Esquire reveals why he is there the pleasant ambiance of the room completely changes. Mr. Sapp responds to Esquire's request for help with a scholarship opportunity for Brenton University, a school he has already been accepted into, rather unsupportively:

Mr. Sapp: GPA is a 4.0. Essays strong. Scores high. All you need is a letter of recommendation and you'll be all set.

Esquire: Well, I was hoping you could write that for me, sir.

Esquire smiles.

Mr. Sapp: I'm flattered Ben, I am. But I'm really not the right person... I am sure your parents know somebody... a judge, a businessman.

Esquire: I don't think my parents know anybody like that, sir.

Esquire's smile has faded.

Mr. Sapp: Sometimes it's not what you know... it's who you know.

Mr. Sapp's conversation with Esquire is setting him up for the challenges he is going to face the rest of his life as a black man in America. Esquire has been working tirelessly to earn his way into a prestigious university only to hear the cliché, "Sometimes it's not what you know... it's who you know." This comes from the very person whose job it is to encourage Esquire and to do everything in his power to help him reach his goals. This is a form of new racism (Collins 2005: 32-35), in which some whites with power choose to limit the options of blacks in seemingly deracialized circumstances. It is the cause of much turmoil for black youth in white institutions where they are supposedly everyone's equal. Mr. Sapp is failing these black students. Esquire is more than qualified to attend the school, but his race and where he grew up are the only detrimental factors to what he has to offer.

Later in the film, when Rashad is driving Esquire to the other side of town to Mr. Garnett's house they talk about the differences between the 'hood and the rich lifestyle. It is here where the views of Rashad and Esquire are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Rashad says, "I'll never feel

comfortable on this side of town.” Esquire responds, “Kind of how I feel about our neighborhood.” This quote is an exemplification of Esquire’s bifurcated existence: he loves his boys, but he also desperately wants to get away from the ‘hood. Rashad, on the other hand, has accepted his existence. He does not like what the ‘hood has to offer, but, also does not think that he can escape it.

Esquire, in many ways, fits into the prototype of what sociologist Prudence Carter (2006) would call a “cultural straddler.” A cultural straddler:

... understands the functions of both dominant and nondominant cultural capital and value and embrace skills to participate in multiple cultural environments, including mainstream society, their school environments, and their respective ethnoracial communities. While straddlers share cultural practices and expressions with other members of their social groups, they traverse the boundaries across groups and environments more successfully. The straddler concept illuminates another place on the spectrum of identity and cultural presentations for African American and other ethnic minority youths that splinters the acculturative/oppositional binary divide.

Esquire’s balancing act between his ‘hood dreams and the privileged life that awaits on the other side, show his ability to straddle the two different lifestyles. This, however, may be problematic to his psyche.

Esquire goes on to say, “Man, this John Garnett, the millionaire. If he want me to cook dinner I am with it.” This statement displays Esquire’s willingness to literally slave over a chance of getting into this

school and once again symbolizes the consequence of his bifurcated existence.

At the Garnett mansion, Esquire has a conversation with his idol:

Garnett: One thing you should learn early in this life. It's not always what you know, sometimes it's who you know.

Esquire: Yes sir.

This is the same thing Mr. Sapp said to Esquire in the beginning of the film. It is ironic that Mr. Garnett, a black man, would use the same discouraging words a white man used in his conversation with a hopeful young black man. It shows where John Garnett's head is at in terms of understanding the struggle of black men in America. Esquire, meanwhile, is willing to sacrifice everything about himself to get into this school - even his self-worth.

Where are the parents in the 'hood?

We never see the parents of any of the 'hood boys. We do see the mother of the twins, Veda and Star. She, though, is not a positive representation of black mothers at all and is discussed more in the "Deconstructing Tyra" chapter. Is this to say that the parents are really not influential or present in their kids lives? Or does it just emphasize that being in the 'hood is really about survival of the fittest, and young black males are too often forced to be on their own from an early age? It may have been a purposeful visual exaggeration in the film to solidify the idea

that some 'hood parents do not play enough of a role in their children's lives.

Dr. Leary (2005) provides a possible explanation for the parents' absence:

Slave mothers and fathers had been belittling their children in an effort to protect them for hundreds of years. Yet what originally began as an appropriate adaptation to an oppressive and danger-filled environment has been subsequently transmitted down through generations. While on the surface seemingly harmless, such behavior serves to both humiliate and injure the young black children of today, who cannot understand why their mothers and fathers, who are obviously proud of them, speak so poorly of them. All too often these children actually begin to internalize the demeaning criticisms. Furthermore, these criticisms create feelings of being disrespected by the very people that they love and trust the most, their parents. It is not hard to imagine the impact of these painful, vilifying remarks on the self-esteem of many black children, especially when one considers the years of repetition. Sadly, neither the black mother nor her children understand the historical forces that have helped to shape her behavior (15).

This could be a possible explanation for the films' caretakers emotional withdrawal from their charges.

Taking Care of the Family

Rashad introduces himself in the beginning of *ATL* as the "man of the house." Many viewers may be taken aback by Rashad's statement, especially since he is a young man and does not really appear old enough to run a household. But the viewers' thoughts of Rashad's immaturity are quickly erased. It is a school day and Rashad is rushing to get ready. He bangs on the bathroom door to alert his younger brother, Ant that he has to hurry up and get ready for school. Ant responds like many adolescents to

a parent and rolls his eyes and says he will be ready soon. Rashad then makes his way to the kitchen and attempts to pour himself a bowl of cereal. The cereal box, however, is empty except for one flake of cereal, which drops into the plastic bowl on the table. Rashad quickly gets up and knocks on his Uncle George's bedroom door.

Uncle George is supposed to be the man of the house since his sister's, Rashad and Ant's mother's, death and is quick to claim the title, but his reaction to Rashad's request for another box of cereal negates his claim of fulfilling any of his parental duties. George, who is wearing a doo-rag and a wife beater (a sleeveless undershirt), is filling out an Atlanta love connection questionnaire and is visibly upset that Rashad has disturbed him from his important endeavor. He reluctantly hands over a box of cereal and tells Rashad not to use a big bowl. Rashad shakes his head in disgust at his uncle and continues to get ready to leave for school.

It becomes clear that the household would not function without Rashad taking hold of the reins. He does not do this because their own father is a "dead beat dad" as is often the assumed prognosis of any situation in a black family where the father does not play an active role. Nor is it because they are being raised in a single-parent home. Rather, it is because both of their parents died in a tragic car accident three years earlier and Rashad wants to ensure the success and well-being of his younger brother. This is an ironic twist of the classic "ghetto" story where the father is not reliable or wants nothing to do with the family.

Uncle George, on the other hand, whose job it was supposed to be to take on the role of the father-figure in the family, perfectly fits the “problematic black male” prototype. George is lazy, unmotivated, and does not want to do anything productive. His lack of success is solely his nephews’ fault, according to him, because “no woman wants a man with bad kids.” He is not so concerned with ensuring his nephews’ well-being either. Perhaps, the most obvious example of Uncle George’s feelings is when he tells Rashad that Ant selling drugs could be a good thing because it “brings money into the house.”

This was a very powerful scene. Emotions were still running high because of the fight that had just taken place between Rashad and Ant, but to hear Uncle George support the poisoning of his own nephew and the household was even more striking. This shows how family members can suppress the development of coming-of-age youth. Struggling to make ends meet is not to be taken lightly and the desperation for a way to survive is not to be underestimated, but the extent to which Uncle George was insinuating that Ant should go was disturbing.

According to Scyatta A. Wallace and Celia B. Fisher (2007), the influence of family on the choices that youth make is undeniable:

The presence of only one family caregiver (single parent households) has also been associated with youth substance use... Such findings in the general population may have significance to Black youth since national statistics confirm that there is a higher rate of single-parent households in Black American families than that of white families.

Uncle George has been doing a terrible job playing the single-parent role to his nephews. Many of Uncle George's problems stem from his own issues with black masculinity (Collins 2005: 82). Black males have come to rely on how many women they can "conquer" as a scale of their masculinity. Uncle George does not have a significant other and blames this on his nephews. Class factors such as the profession of a black man also seemingly affect this lack of self-worth. Uncle George's occupation as a janitor, a job he despises, makes him feel less masculine and is reflected in his treatment of Rashad and Ant.

With Uncle George clearly out of the picture for being a reliable role model, Rashad was Ant's only hope. Had Rashad not taken on the role of the man of the house and been there to negate some of the wrong Uncle George was instilling in Ant, the Swann household may have had even more problems.

Rashad and Ant display their father/son connection when Ant comes home from his meeting with Marcus, the local drug dealer, at the trap house. Rashad is not aware of Ant's hustling ways yet, but he can sense Ant is up to no good like many parents seem innately able to do. The scene is reminiscent of a worried parent waiting up for a child at home. Rashad, who is sitting at the kitchen table working on a sketch of New New, instantly spots Ant when he attempts to quietly enter the house. Rashad calls after him, "Hey, where you been?"

Ant: Out.

Rashad: Out?

Rashad looks at Ant suspiciously.

Rashad: Come here.

He orders Ant into the kitchen.

Rashad: I know you ain't been out there being stupid. I'm telling you Ant I ain't playing-

Ant: What?

Rashad: What? Don't what me man. What's up with you missing history class, that's what.

Ant: Man, probably caught me on bathroom break or something.

Rashad: Do I look stupid?

Ant: Man, I'm saying though I just don't see how the Great Wall of China is supposed to help me clean the floors at Value Village.

This is not an uncommon argument made by students struggling in the 'hood. They question the relevance of school and the value of the skills they learn there. Rashad takes Ant downstairs to his room and shows him a stash of money that he has hidden in his boombox. Ant's first 'hood instinct is to believe his older brother has been doing some illegal activity in order to have so much cash:

Ant: What you hustling?

Rashad: You ain't gotta be a dope boy to have money.

This is what cleaning floors get you. Three years since the

car accident and I have been saving this for you so you can go to school and get away from here.

Ant: You should spend that on some rims or skates or something. Don't be wasting that on me.

Rashad: I believe in you even when you too stupid to believe in your damn self.

Rashad firmly believes in his brother's capability to be successful. Just as many parents wish for their child to be able to do more in life than they were able to, Rashad has plenty of faith in Ant's potential. There is, though, a problem in that Rashad has already written himself off as not being able to be "somebody." He is only a senior in high school and cannot foresee himself as having a future beyond Mechanicsville High.

Ant's suggestion for Rashad to spend the money on some rims or skates once again returns to the problem of the focus on materialism among black youth. Being flashy, even if one's lifestyle does not really allow for it, is more important than taking advantage of an opportunity to work one's way out of the terrible surroundings preventing one from getting these things legally. Also, his statement for Rashad not to waste his money on him provides insight into how little confidence Ant has in himself. He implies that he does not believe he is worthy of so much money. Being a product of the Mechanicsville 'hood has caused Ant to depreciate his calculation of his own self-worth. It seems being a product

of the hood, in Ant's belief, is a prerequisite of having no chance for success.

Erin vs. New New

New New, on the other hand, aspires to have 'hood dreams. Her clothing choices, doorknocker earrings, and 'hood lingo help her to fit right in with the crowd in Mechanicsville. That is, until her father ruins her cover at Cascade skating rink. She is the exact opposite of Esquire, but they have something in common in that they both would likely do anything to escape their current surroundings and to switch places with each other. While her peers would do anything to escape the 'hood, she wants to be "'hood.'" She resents her rich upbringing and thinks being 'hood means she is real. Prudence Carter (2006) elaborates on this struggle amongst social groups over what constitutes authenticity. She says, "Social groups develop both tangible and symbolic social boundaries, and these social boundaries, entail criteria for determining membership and ways of signaling membership and exclusion." The complexity of the struggle between the middle and lower classes is brought to light in the interaction between New New and Esquire at her home. Her father tells her to come downstairs to meet a guest:

John Garnett: I'd like you to meet my daughter. She's going to Brenton next year too. Erin, honey come on down.

He calls upstairs to New New.

JG: Erin, I'd like you to meet Ben.

Erin (New New) looks flabbergasted. This is one of the few times the audience hears Esquire's real name, Ben. Erin is dressed in clothes that fit her rich surroundings: denim jeans, Ugg boots, and a baby-tee. Her hair is pulled in a messy bun and her large doorknocker earrings and dramatic lip gloss are both missing. Behind Erin, there is a portrait of her looking like a princess in a white gown and gloves. But the picture represents the epitome of what New New despises. Esquire says, "Erin, it's a pleasure to meet you. It is always nice to meet NEW people."

Esquire emphasizes the word "new" to make New New ashamed of the lying game she has been playing with them about where she comes from. New New retorts by reminding him of his own bifurcated existence and greets him like a stranger though they have spent lots of time together in Mechanicsville before they knew the truth about each other's real lifestyles. The two conspirators have a conversation about their dilemma:

New New: You're not telling Rashad!

Esquire: Wow, you even talk different!

New New: You're not telling him and I'm not telling my dad about you. If I tell him where you're from you're done.

Esquire: Is that a threat? Rashad was telling me how New New is so real. You ain't shit-

Esquire telling New New she is not worth anything is ironic because she is living the life he aspires to. What does this say about what he wants? Is he jealous?

New New: Excuse you.

Esquire: How'd you even find Cascade? Did you go buy a ninety-nine cent ghetto handbook to show you how to keep it real? The salad fork goes on the other side.

New New shoots him a look.

New New: I'm from the Trey.

Esquire: You're from the Trey, that's funny.

New New: Well, my dad is.

Esquire: I never read that.

Esquire looks confused.

New New: He never talks about it.

Esquire: I don't blame him.

New New: Are you serious? He is a sell out!

Esquire: You really want to be ghetto. Believe me you can have it. I'll take the Picasso.

New New: I'm not going to Brenton. I am going to Spelman.

New New's preferred school is an interesting choice in that it fits right in with the identity she is trying to gain.

Spelman is an all-female black college. New New is probably hoping to solidify her 'hood identity by going to an all black school and leaving her current white surroundings far behind. It is also interesting that New New thinks being hood is what makes her attractive to black males. Is this a fair assumption?

Pride

Coming-of-age youth in neighborhoods even thirty years prior to the time of *ATL* grappled with the same issues. They could not build a sense of hope and much of this was due to a lack of economic resources. The needs of the residents of high-poverty neighborhoods are not a primary concern to elected city officials. They attend more to the needs of voters higher on the socioeconomic ladder. *Pride* illustrates this point with its introductory sequence between Coach Jim Ellis (Terrence Howard) and Elston (Bernie Mac).

Jim walks into the run-down Marcus Foster Recreation Center and makes his way down the junk-filled hallway to the even more cluttered office space of Elston, the director of maintenance. Elston is sitting in a dingy chair intently watching his soap operas on a small black and white

television screen. He is aware of Jim's presence although he has yet to acknowledge him. Jim attempts to introduce himself, "Excuse me sir, my name is Jim Ellis. The city sent me down here to uh..." Jim realizes that Elston is not paying attention to his preamble and takes a moment to take in the messy surroundings. Jim once again attempts to get Elston's attention and waves his hand ineffectively in his direction. He asks, "This is the Foster Rec Center, right?" Elston cuts him off and asks, "What's the sign say?" He points to a wood panel behind him resting on a file cabinet with more than a few letters missing. It has written across it, "Marc Foster Rec Center." Jim responds, "It don't say nothing at all, man." Elston makes an inappropriate comment.

J: Okay whatever. Like I said the city sent me down here to pack up this place because their closing it down in a few months and told me to be here at 9 o'clock so...

E: What the clock say?

Elston completely ignores Jim's comment.

J: It's broken.

Jim looks saddened.

E: Once again, I didn't ask you that. What the clock say?

J: Man, it don't say nothing at all! What is your problem, dude?

E: What's my problem, what's my problem? My first problem is that you interrupted my stories and that ain't

cool. My second problem is that I have been at Marcus Foster ever since this place was built and the first I hear of them tearing it down is right now. Oh, it's not like I didn't see it coming, but they could have given me a heads up you know. Get my point, 'cuz I am head of maintenance.

This dialogue, besides showing Elston's purpose for comic relief, also displays his importance as an allegorical character - he is a symbol of the effect of the 'hood. Things are there at the recreation center, but they are not serving any purpose, not because they do not have the potential to function, but because they have not been maintained by city officials. The broken clock in Elston's office does not have a time because it really would not matter even if it did. Time is not moving because things are not changing. The clock is merely a prop. This is a typical pattern of what happens in black neighborhoods. Many things are broken beyond repair, and what does work, has missing pieces, such as the wood panel Elston pointed out to Jim.

Jim: Yeah, you doing a hell of a job. Look where do I start?
Just tell me where I start.

E: Why don't you go ask the city! They the one's that hired you.

Elston slams the door on Jim angrily.

A lot of doors literally and figuratively close on Jim early in the film. This signifies the lack of options Jim has in the dilapidated Philadelphia neighborhood where the film takes place. On the other hand, years of dealing with neighborhood problems has made Elston numb to the devastation of 'hood life. Even though he cares so much about the refuge the Marcus Foster Center could offer to the youth in the area, he struggles to hold onto hope because it appears the city officials are not there to support him in his dreams. They are willing to let the Marcus Foster Center wither into obscurity with no thought for the lives that will be affected by its closing.

At another point in the film when things are starting to look up for the Marcus Foster Rec Center, Elston comments, "I might start a lacrosse team here." To which Jim says, "Brothers around here don't lacrosse." Elston smartly retorts, "Brothers don't swim either." Society constantly places limitations on the prospects of black people, especially those from the 'hood. Blacks are categorized as only being able to play physical, high endurance sports like basketball and football. The idea of blacks breaking into "white" sports is unfathomable and even more it is unwanted. Author William C. Rhoden explains the history behind this stereotype and its effect on sports culture and society in his book, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*. *Pride* being based on a true story of a black swimming team, has an even more

empowering message for its audience because they are viewing a dream that turned into a truth.

Sports play a key role in *Pride*. The premise of the story of *Pride* extends far beyond a group of black youth becoming great swimmers; it is more about a group of black youth gaining confidence in realizing their dreams. For many of the boys it seems they cannot have anything of their own and it is hard to find a place to hide in their surroundings. This is one of the motivations for Jim cleaning up the recreation center and working on fixing the pool. It is an oasis from the harsh realities that lie just outside the door and a place that can hopefully influence them and mold them into young adults who believe they can do anything they put their minds to.

The swimmers are very cognizant of the lack of resources in the 'hood. When they are walking down the street and see a maintenance man taking down the rim on the basketball court, one remarks, "They always messing with our neighborhood. Man what we supposed to do now, walk eight miles and play over at the Hudson Center?" Another boy says, "Get off me! This is bullshit" and throws a basketball ball angrily. The "they" in this quote is not expanded on, but it can be surmised that the boy is referring to the city officials, who are mostly powerful white men.

After school programs are constantly removed from neighborhoods or nonexistent. These extra-curricular activities would give the youth something to do and serve as a buffer away from dangerous and

potentially life-threatening activities in the area. Had it not been for Jim opening up the door to the recreation center, the paths the youth would have followed probably would not have led to good places. Even Jim having the rec center to offer the youth, was dependent on fighting the city to make the economic resources available. This demonstrates the importance of the city's support for the development of after school programs.

Jim opens the door to the recreation center and smiles at the boys. Their first instinct as they enter the new territory is to hold on to what they know, so they begin by playing with a basketball in the pool. At first, Jim looks at this as breaking the rules, but he begins to see the value of incorporating what the boys know into the new setting. He decides to use basketball and swimming techniques to teach the youth life lessons:

Jim: I think that was pretty low what they did to you outside. I'm going to let you all swim in here because theoretically ain't none of ya'll supposed to be in here. What does that sign up on the wall say?

Hakim, the boy he selects to read the sign, struggles to read it and his peers laugh.

Jim: Listen, this isn't a joke. It says, 'No clowning in or out of the pool.' Stay away from the deep end if you can't swim.

There is an irony in Jim asking what the sign on the wall says, since that was the first question Elston asked him when he entered his office in the rec center. Jim's reaction was one of confusion and sadness at the thought of the center not having a purpose and so much potential being wasted. This time when Jim asks Hakim the same question there are no letters missing on the sign and it is clear that there is a purpose to be met by Jim and these youth he is about to take under his wing. "No clowning in or out of the pool" refers to the need for these youth to take swimming and life outside the rec center seriously, because not doing either could lead to trouble. Additionally, this scene is significant because it demonstrates that Hakim has trouble reading, which will be expanded on in the "Stay in School... Why?" chapter.

During Jim's swimming lessons it becomes apparent that swimming is a metaphor for life. The boys live in an area filled with temptations to do the wrong thing. Drug dealers lurk on almost every corner and seeing people struggling is an everyday occurrence. These youth learning what it means to carry oneself with dignity is key to them escaping the 'hood and being successful in society. At various times throughout the film, Jim will have to correct them on their clownish actions in and out of the pool. There are moments when they do not seem to understand

the gravity of the situation they are embarking on, especially in traveling to areas where white swimmers think they are better simply because of the color of their skin. Jim reinforces this point when he says, “Stay away from the deep end.” The deep end symbolizes the dangers that exist everywhere.

Jim continues on to say, “The line is there to keep you from messing everybody else up.” He says this as a few of them bump into the dividers of the swimming lanes. Similarly in life, there are rules and boundaries, some of which can seem like they are there for the sole purpose of restricting people from doing what they want to do and from getting to their destination as fast as they want. But as Jim says, these rules are there to keep them from messing up. Instead of lashing out at these boundaries, the youth can learn to respect them and conform as necessary. Learning to work within a set of rules can work to one’s benefit in society. This is not to say that they should not fight against injustices and rules that are purposefully set out to keep them from advancing. Being from the ‘hood initially makes this concept a hard one to grasp since many of the rules seem to be in place to work against them, and in many cases, are.

During the same lesson, Jim says, “You can’t run across the water.” This swimming lesson is meant to enforce the idea that things do not change overnight and one cannot just leap across

barriers; rather, one has to learn to work around whatever the barrier is in order to advance past it. This lesson alludes to the idea that there are obstacles in life that one has to face and cannot avoid.

Jim also tells the team, “See coming together is just the start of it. Staying together, winning together that’s success.” This lesson also speaks to black communities at large. There has been a tendency for blacks to temporarily come together in times of turmoil and find common ground, but this cohesiveness slowly disbands over time and injustices prevail (Rhoden 2006: 265).

Jim is not immune to the temptations of the ‘hood, and all can fall victim to its callings. When Elston sees Jim letting the kids into the pool he asks, “What you call yourself doing?” to which Jim responds, “Just surviving.” Elston calmly says, “Just remember, no clowning in our out of the pool.” Elston’s reminder to Jim not only foreshadows some of the film’s future events, but also works in humanizing Jim and showing the audience he is growing along with the swimming team. In fact, Jim had his own share of encounters with the limitations of dreams for blacks, one of the biggest being racism.

In the beginning of the film, Jim appeared to be a big dreamer, but he could not escape the realities of racism. The film opens with Jim at a swim meet as a college student in North

Carolina in the 1960s. As soon as Jim steps to the pool's platform and rinses some water on his face he hears instant boos. People scream, "Go back where you came from!" The race begins and Jim jumps in the pool and nobody goes in after him. Someone shouts, "Get out of my nice clean pool!"

Coach: Come on, Jimmy. They don't want us to swim here that's fine. We're a team.

Jimmy: Coach, I worked so hard to get here.

A white cop approaches.

Jim: What am I getting arrested now?

White cop: Start moving towards your bus and calm your black ass down.

Jim: Why don't you shut your white ass up and let me exercise my first amendment because this is wrong.

A tussle breaks out and Jim punches the white cop.

A crowd of white cops wrestle Jim to the ground as

he cries, "I know my rights! I got rights!"

This experience shows that 'hood realities exist outside of the 'hood as well. Skin color is not a cloak one can conveniently shed.

Stomp the Yard

Violence in 'hoods is another inescapable element of the black coming-of-age film, which *Stomp the Yard* demonstrates. The film begins in a rough area of Los Angeles, at a dance competition DJ and his younger brother, Duron have entered. The danger of the area is depicted through the graininess of the video footage. The gray and black hues give a perilous tone to the visual sequence and the feeling of an impending threat looms over the dance competition. The graffiti on the wall, and the anger depicted in the wardrobe of the dancers, is another indicator of the troubles of 'hood life. Many of the dancers have on face paint like one would expect to see on a soldier preparing for battle. The choreography is telling a story of competitiveness and a need for survival - it is a battle of the fittest. The battle dancing in the film is a metaphor for surviving in the 'hood - many feel that they have to protect and claim their territory. When the leader of the losing dance team approaches DJ about going "double or nothing" it is obvious to the audience it is a bet he should not take him up on.

It is a fight right after this dance competition, which leads to the death of DJ's brother, Duron. After an interlude at a juvenile facility for his role in the fight that killed his brother, DJ's mother decides to send him to the safety of his aunt and uncle's home in Atlanta. It is here that DJ begins attending college and struggles to let go of his hood persona. DJ, like the

other 'hood characters in the coming-of-age films, has trouble seeing the benefit of getting a good education.

CHAPTER 2: Stay in School... Why?

ATL

In *ATL*, it is senior year for Rashad and his boys. Except for Esquire who attends an elite prep school on the other side of town, school is not a big concern for the boys. Rashad, for the most part, appears to be coasting through his last year of high school. He explains, “We were five weeks from graduation and I had all of my credits and all I had to do was cruise for the next month and I would be straight.” It is not made clear what type of grades Rashad has, but his focus seems to be on just getting by in the classroom, not excelling. His first scene in the classroom at Mechanicsville High shows him doodling in his notebook while the teacher lectures. His capabilities may have been much higher than the effort he was putting in and unfortunately, this is not a rare occurrence for a lot of black high school males in the ‘hood. This also does not necessarily mean they are to blame.

Viewers cannot discount Rashad’s academic ability just because he does not like school. Like many black youth, the potential is there, but the lack of resources and interest from members of the school system itself makes it almost impossible for students to put all of their effort into learning and even more into believing in the education system. Rashad does not like school, but he also wants to do the necessities to get by and get his diploma. He is essentially what sociologist Prudence Carter (2005)

would call a noncompliant believer. Noncompliant believers “believe in the worth of education” yet:

...they are not necessarily high achievers. Generally, their school performances range from average to low. Ideologically the noncompliant believers are critical of the systematic inequalities that they perceive the school to uphold; yet the term noncompliant does not necessarily signify either an antischool mentality or distaste for high achievement, which most oppositional culture frameworks suggest. Culturally, the noncompliant believers choose to embrace their own class and ethnospecific styles, tastes, and codes and opt not to conform to the mainstream (marked as “white”) middle-class ways of being.

Rashad has obviously been doing something right if he has all of his credits in order and is on track to graduate. He also does not appear to be anti-school. Rather, he is a victim of the education system, who does not think that an education is a guaranteed way out of the ‘hood and only a select few can make it. Rashad’s support for friend Esquire going to a “white” school and his belief that younger brother Ant can make it out of the ‘hood point to his tepid pro-school belief.

Convincing Ant that he can excel in school however is a tough battle. Ant’s dislike for school is evident and sometimes appears beyond repair. In the next scene, Ant exemplifies Prudence Carter’s idea (2006) that “... some black and Latino students may believe their teachers’ evaluations of them are based on the degree to which they embrace particular dominant ‘white’ cultural codes that these students perceive as ‘other’ and not ‘them.’” Even though Mechanicsville High is a

predominantly black school, teachers still expect students to adhere to “white” values.

Ant is in the classroom with his fellow classmates who are busy tossing balled up pieces of papers across the room and listening to music. When the teacher, Ms. Jackie, a middle-aged black female, finally calls attention to the circus-like classroom she says, “Year almost over... Thank ya Jesus. Ya'll slackers better figure out what you're doing for the summer.” Ant is already predicting he will be hustling, “I know what I am going to be doing this summer- I'm going to be getting paid.” A student in the back of the class with headphones on is sweating profusely and asks Ms. Jackie to cut on the air conditioner because he says it feels like “a slave ship up in here.” Ms. Jackie replies that “air conditioning is for honors classes, kids who want to make something of themselves.” Ant sarcastically asks Ms. Jackie, “Were you in honors classes? 'Cuz you ain't got no AC either.”

Upon making this comment, Ms. Jackie sends Ant to the principal's office. Author Rebecca S. Payne (1994) found that even black teachers tend to group their black students according to teachability, socioeconomic characteristics, and adaptability to bureaucratic school norms. She goes on to say that:

Such preconceptions impair the psychological processes through which student motivation and achievement are shaped. (This confirms previous conceptions that) ... dominant cultural biases against LSES (lower socio-economic status) minority students have had a detrimental effect on these students' motivation and achievement.

This finding also suggests that being of the same race as a student does not automatically preclude a teacher from forming stereotypical presumptions about their students. Payne grouped the teachers interviewed into two categories: significant and insignificant. Significant teachers had heartfelt emotions towards their students and empathized with their tough socio-economic situations. Insignificant teachers, on the other hand, “made comments that were equivocal and discounted some students as unreachable.” For example, one nonsignificant teacher clearly expressed this group's viewpoint:

And there are some, you know, that you never want to see, you just hope they won't show up and that's just being realistic. There are some kids you shouldn't want to meet anywhere.

Though the study did not provide a specific account of how many of the eleven black teachers observed fell into the “insignificant” teacher category, Ms. Jackie’s treatment of her students and Ant certainly places her in the same group as far as views and opinions of students go.

Inner-city schools tend to have the hardest time recruiting well-qualified and dedicated teachers. Even those who really do want to help the students do not have the resources to help create change and put the students on the right path. Another problem is that teachers may simply lack confidence in the students ability to learn and therefore do not teach. Instead, they write off the students as unmotivated and even go as far as to mock their situations such as Ms. Jackie did to Ant.

Though it is obvious that Ant is a bit of smart Alec, he also makes a strong point in his retort to his teacher. Why should students who are able to do better in the school be treated as better individuals? If anything, this disparate treatment causes students who are struggling not to try as hard and to lose faith in the school system. Many, like Ant, probably feel that there is no point in staying in school if the teachers, whose purpose is to foster their education, are not even putting an effort in to guiding them. The teachers lack confidence in the students and form the incorrect generalization that students from the 'hood do not want to try hard in school. This assumption hurts the relationship between the student and teacher. The students are forced to deal with lackluster teachers and the teachers get snapped at by frustrated students. The recipricocity of this stressful relationship is due in large part to life in the 'hood and the lack of options it provides. Ms. Jackie's reaction tells viewers that she probably has lost her passion for teaching (if it ever existed), and she is taking out this frustration on Ant. Many black youth are truant from school, not because they are incapable of learning, but because they have lost their desire to learn.

Acting "White"

Esquire acknowledges the importance of education, and this is not to say that his peers do not, but he was able to access a better education at the elite high school he attended on the good side of town. His peers

supported him by driving him to school. During a car ride, Ant and Esquire discuss his acceptance into an ivy-league college. Esquire says, “Check out this brother just a grinning through campus running with a white girl.” He lifts up a university brochure to show a photo of a white woman and black man jogging across the quad together. Ant responds, “Uh huh, probably running from them crowd of white boys on the opposite page.” Ant’s philosophy on the importance of school at this point in the film is markedly different from Esquire’s who is intent on going to college. Ant demonstrates a lack of interest in school and though his comment was an exaggeration, it is a true account of race relations on many college campuses, especially where blacks are in the minority. Ant is able to see the truth in everything, no matter how bitter it may be.

New New... Acting “Black”?

New New’s academic capabilities are not really expanded upon in the film. The viewers are led to assume that her academic record is impressive since her father plans for her to apply to Brenton, the prestigious university Esquire also wants to attend. Her socioeconomic status class plays a significant role in her likelihood of being able to attend the school.

Pride

Similar problems came with attending school in the 'hood in the 1970s. Like the Marcus Foster Rec Center, it is fair to assume the schools in the Philadelphia 'hood area suffered from a lack of resources. Hakim's reading deficiency is indicative of the schools not being able to provide the necessary skills for success to all students. Hakim's sister is his primary caretaker. In her capacity as city councilwoman, she takes personal offense to her brother's illiteracy. She prohibits Hakim from swimming. She assumes, as do the parents of many struggling children, that he does not have time for extracurricular hobbies.

In one scene, she comes to the basketball court to pick up Hakim:

Sue: Hakim! Hakim!

He looks back at her and tries to ignore her. She only gets louder.

Sue: Hakim!

Hakim: What?

Boy: Your sister is calling you.

Hakim: Man, shut up.

Boy: Past your curfew boy.

Sue: You're about to get very embarrassed.

Hakim: Can't you see me playing with the guys?

Sue: Get in the car!

Hakim attempts to argue with his sister, but to no avail. This time she orders him to get into the car. He folds his arms like a little child and looks over at his boys who are still over at the basketball court playing. One of the boys comments, “Your sister is crazy, man. She all about the books and stuff.”

Sue certainly is all about the books and fails to see the worth of the Marcus Foster Center recreation center staying open for a large portion of the film. In this scene, she walks down the hallway of the Marcus Foster Recreation Center and knocks on Elston’s office door. Elston tries to explain to her the value extracurricular activities have for youth in the ‘hood when she informs him she is shutting down the center:

Sue: Come on Elston you knew this was coming.

Elston: You couldn’t even call me and tell yourself. I had to find out from the damn clean-up crew.

Sue: I’m sorry about that Elston.

Elston: What happened to all the strings you supposed to be pulling Miss Sue. You my city representative, go down there and represent.

Sue: Elston, the city isn’t going to fund an institution that has no economic worth to it to the community it serves.

Elston: Let me tell you something Sue, worth should not be based on economics, you Hall people should know that.

Sue: ...Yes, I see them playing basketball outside, but they

could be playing basketball anywhere else. This place is a nesting ground for drugs and the lowest common denominator.

Elston: The lowest common denominator. Let me tell you something right now Miss Sue, if it wasn't for this place keeping you off the street you wouldn't have those pretty threads on your back right now and Miss Sue don't you ever forget that.

Sue: Elston, we are not going to keep this place open just for you.

Sue walks away.

“After-School Programs: How They Affect Black Male Development and Educational Progress,” (Allen et al.: 2005) reviewed several previous studies and concluded that having community-based after-school programs can have a positive affect on the social and personal development of African-American males. Conversely, the rates of delinquency correlated positively with students who were not engaged in extracurricular activities. Also, having a mentor at these recreation centers makes a difference in the development of the youth. In terms of academic achievement, the study found:

...most youth participants and teen/adult participants had career goals for high-status occupations... the percentage of youth participants who wanted to work in the entertainment industry or as professional athletes declined. The career aspirations of program

participants included middle- and upper-class professions such as law, medicine, engineering, and teaching. In addition... a significant increase occurred in the number of youth participants who reported their educational goal was to earn at least a college bachelor's degree.

Elston was making a salient point when he told Sue that she would not be who she is today were it not for her attending the Marcus Foster Recreation Center program.

Stomp the Yard

DJ is not happy to be in Atlanta living with his aunt and uncle. He is even more unhappy to enroll in college because he thinks college was his brother's dream and not meant for him. He does not feel he has the "college boy" mentality. Uncle Nate, though will not accept this.

Uncle Nate works as the director of physical maintenance for the university and takes a lot of pride in his work. DJ, however, does not find his uncle's work appealing. Nevertheless, Uncle Nate gives DJ his first job doing grounds keeping for the university.

His uncle also refuses to put up with DJ's nonchalant attitude about school. He assumes an authoritative role and lays down the rules for DJ over their first dinner:

Uncle Nate: You know I had to call in a favor to get you into this school. Don't make me look bad.

Aunt Jackie: Nate, please.

DJ: Nah, it's cool. I'm listening.

Uncle Nate: Good, 'cuz the rules are very simple. There's three things you going to have to deal with. First, you must keep your grades up at all times. Second, I'm in charge of your work-study program. But you will not be treated any differently nor will you behave any differently than my other twenty-six employees.

DJ: And third?

Uncle Nate: Oh, it's strike three you out. Period.

DJ looks up from his food. It is clear he is not thrilled about the rules that have just been set. The next day, Uncle Nate goes to DJ's bedroom to wake him up for class. But, DJ has decided to skip town upon hearing the strict rules of his uncle. The next scene shows Nate pulling up at the bus station and he finds DJ standing outside leaning against the wall with his suitcase:

DJ: I'm not going to sit here and act like I want to be here when I don't. This whole college boy thing is not for me, man.

He throws down his suitcase in anger.

Uncle Nate: You the only thing your mama's got left and there's no way in hell I'm going to let you put my sister through any more pain. So, you better make this college boy thing work out. Can you appreciate that?

Uncle Nate reaches down to pick up DJ's bag.

Uncle Nate: Get your black ungrateful ass in the truck.

DJ hesitates.

Uncle Nate: What I say man, get in the truck!

It is clear being told what to do is something DJ is not used to. This may be a way of letting the audience know that DJ's father has not been in his life. This is another representation of the idea discussed earlier of the role of parents in encouraging their children to pursue an education (Leary 2005: 159-163).

CHAPTER 3: Taste of the Good Life

Pride

Sometimes the characters were able to temporarily escape their 'hood surroundings. This taste of the good life left a sour taste in the mouths of some characters and for others solidified their thoughts that the 'hood was not for them. In *Pride*, a trip across town to the upscale area of Philadelphia showed the PDR swimming team what it is like not to struggle. A sharp contrast of the lifestyles was visually created by the framing of the scene. The point of view of the sequence is from inside of the dilapidated school bus the team is on. As they look through the windows at the majestic estates and luxurious cars the white people possess, they see a world that is, for a moment, just outside of their reach. The window serves as a sharp separation between the lives of the rich and the poor and the black and the white. The PDR team sees a few white boys playing on a nice basketball court - nothing like the beat-up one they used to play on in front of the Marcus Foster Rec Center.

At first, the team did not seem intimidated by the idea of going to a whole new world on the other side of town. In fact, they were excited to get a taste of the good life and by the chance to show the Main Line team that the "bad" life on the other side of town had something special to offer. But, two weeks before the meet, Jim finds the team relaxing in the rec center and he has a discussion with them about the importance of preparation for the upcoming meet:

Jim: You mean to tell me ya'll are sitting on your ass, and you got a meet with Main Line in two weeks?

Andre: I think Main Line has a meet with us in two weeks.

Jim: You know pride before crash.

Jim tries to instill in the team the importance of self-control and not being overly-confident. But the team continues to live in their own version of a fantasy world, even after arriving at the meet. Their confidence may actually have been a disguise for their fear of being shown up by the whites. Still, the self-assurance of the team continues when they get off the bus:

Boy: Hey, coach this place make Marcus Foster look like a damn outhouse.

Jim: What we going to try to do in there today is swim like a team 'cuz it's not where you swim, it's how you swim. And if we act like a team we might come out of here with some sort of decent placement.

Andre: Might? Ain't no might about it. I say we kick their white asses, eat their caviar, and roll back into the ghetto with a win, ya dig.

The team begins to give each other high-fives and laugh.

Jim: There ain't no need to be so damn cocky, this is your first meet.

Boy: We ain't cocky, we just good.

Their upbeat attitude quickly disintegrates though when they enter the arena and receive the boos, stares, and outright racist remarks from the all-white crowd. For the first time for many of them, they begin to see the importance of race in the separation of the lifestyles in the good life and the bad life. The reality of racism catches many of them off guard and their confidence plummets. One asks, "What's all these people looking at us like this for?" The crowd mocks them and makes insulting remarks, "I didn't know they swam. Must be some kind of protest march."

Bink is the head coach of the Main Line Academy team. Coincidentally, he is also the same person who turned down Jim for a job at the school in the beginning of the film despite Jim's impressive credentials. Bink has some choice words for the PDR team, who to him, are misfits in this venue, "We have 56 consecutive home victories. That's impressive. Some people can't even count that high." Bink implies that because the PDR team is black they are not well-educated. Elston gives him a hard and long stare. Even though Jim and Elston are older men the brutal racism is still unbearable and will later elicit a reaction from both of them. Bink goes on to say, "You have a girl on your team? You realize this is a boys' swim meet. No girls allowed."

Elston: Where does it say that? We missed the sign when we walked in here. Better yet, do you have a rules and regulations book on you?

Bink: What are you her lawyer?

Elston: Yeah, you can say I'm her mouthpiece. Wanna go to court?

Bink: I bet you know your way around the courtroom.

Elston: Yeah, I was born there.

Bink: Yeah, well enjoy your freedom while you can.

Bink starts to explain the format to Jim.

Bink: Well listen just so you understand the format today because it's complicated...

Jim: I know the format, Mr. Binkowsky.

Bink: You do know the format? You understand it?

Jim: I understand it.

Bink: Okay, because I'm here to help you if you need anything, any questions you need answered you talk to the Bink, okay?

J: Okay, thank you so much.

B: You bet.

Bink walks away and Jim turns to his team.

Jim: Pompous asshole. That's what I'm saying, this is what we deal with, stay focused.

The blank faces of the PDR team reflect their befuddlement and utter despair. They did not expect the trip to be so bad. Jim and Elston would have liked to think times have changed since the Civil Rights movement ten years earlier, but it is apparent that racism is very much alive. When the swim meet begins, one of the white male participants on the opposing team comments, "You mean you guys aren't the Harlem Globetrotters?" His remark obviously insinuates that the only sport black males are capable of playing is basketball.

The torture and embarrassment continue throughout the competition, which is not much of a competition at all. The PDR team loses all of their races and eventually stops trying. They begin to mock the buffoonery they were greeted with when they entered the park by acting like clowns and doing tricks in the pool and on the sidelines. Their peers laugh and the whites laugh. Elston and Jim are angry at the whites causing this and how their team is reacting to it:

Official: Keep your boys in line.

The use of word boys is reminiscent of slavery/post-slavery language.

Jim: I'm sorry. I apologize. Come on, I'm tired of embarrassing myself, let's get out of here.

But the team still has one more race to go, which is Andre's. The white boy standing next to Andre on the platform comments, "Well, just

be glad they took off the cuffs so you can swim, Brother." During the race, he kicks Andre in the head as he makes his turn in the pool.

Jim: He kicked him in the head, that's a disqualification.

You saw him!

White boy: No I didn't.

Andre starts to fight and Jim holds him back. Bink grabs Jim's arm and Jim screams, "Get off of me!"

Bink: You want respect in this game, you have to earn it...

Jim: Well, why don't you teach your kids some?

After the altercation, the team leaves and heads back home. They joke about the debacle on the bus, "I'm just glad to be out of them boonies, you know what I'm saying?" Instead of acknowledging the racism they just faced, the team chooses to ignore it. Jim and Elston attempt to teach them a lesson about laughing things off when they arrive home. They had just displayed the classic reaction to hurtful remarks – laughing it off so know one would know how deeply it affected them. Jim responds to their embarrassment:

Jim: What's so funny? I wanna laugh. Tell me what's so funny.

Boy: Nothing's funny. You know how it is, we just clowning.

Jim: No, Mr. Taylor, I don't know how it is to get my ass

whipped and then to get on my bus and act like it didn't happen.

Elston: Like it's your birthday.

Boy: Come on coach it was just swimming.

J: That wasn't swimming. You know what I saw? I saw a bunch of negroes who thought 'cuz they were black that they were better than the other people. Some white kids were there too and they thought the same thing. They thought that because they were white they were better than you and you know what. They were. They proved it today.

Andre: Yeah, but they cheated. You saw them kick me.

Jim: You know who I think cheated, Mr. Williamson? You did. You all cheated. Because here you have the chance to do something special, but you pissed the whole thing away because you wouldn't take it seriously.

Jim turns to Elston.

Jim: Say man, what's happening?

Elston: Nothing man.

They slap each other five.

Jim: But let me show you what's happening in a couple of months.

He points over to the area where the basketball court once was.

Jim: You know why? Because the people it was built for don't care about it. This is your house and I tell you something. My life is way too short for me to spend my time with people who don't care about nothing. So you see your little basketball hoop over there. Go play life without a hoop. Laugh it up. It's a joke. It's funny ain't it?

Jim attempts to essentially explain to the team, "The joke is on us." He leaves the team standing there dumbfounded. Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson describe this phenomenon of blacks participating in their own racism as a result of stereotype threat. The stereotype threat is how African Americans deal with negative stereotypes made by other people (usually of different races) about their abilities. The reaction, often times, of these African-Americans is to conform to the stereotype. The authors find that when, "a negative stereotype is particularly hurtful... stereotype threat can seriously disrupt the lives to those of whom it might apply" (1998: 401).

The next morning Jim wakes up to find the team practicing in the pool. They all have on their uniforms, which they had refused to wear earlier because they thought they were so corny. Jim wipes a tear from his eye.

ATL

The first taste of the good life the boys are all exposed to in the film is at the Shady Grove Golf Club where Esquire works. Rashad and the crew have come to pick Esquire up at the resort where the entire populace appears to be white people, all of whom are well-dressed and well-paid. Esquire is on the green playing a few games of golf. He was “hustling the rich kids,” as Rashad calls them. The shot opens with Esquire pondering his next putt. He is kneeling down on the green grass staring intently at the hole in front of him. He turns his khaki printed cap backwards, a purposeful reminder of his ‘hood roots. Esquire makes the shot and smiles widely as he rubs his fingers together, reminding the young white men to pay up.

Esquire’s friends, who are waiting in the parking lot for him, are in conversation with three rich white girls. The privileged girls flirt with the ‘hood black men and are visibly intrigued by their lifestyle. Brooklyn decides to recite poetry for one of his admirers, a poem obviously meant to get a laugh with its cliché rhymes. The girl, though, looks at him adoringly despite the cheesiness of the poem. They are enamored with the boys’ every word just because they are fascinated by their lifestyle, but they would never want to actually live it.

Teddy continues the debauchery by telling another intrigued white girl about “living with his mama.” He explains, “Don’t even trip if a lady answers the phone, that’s my mama. She is staying with me cuz she is

going through some things.” When Esquire finally gets to the parking lot, he shakes his head in disgust at how his boys were trying to “mack” the white girls. But, Teddy shows equal disgust for Esquire for forgetting he is ‘hood too. Esquire had just displayed his own ‘hood tendencies by hustling the white guys on the golf course. Teddy brings Esquire back to reality when he gives him a hard time about scooting over in Rashad’s car. Teddy explodes, “What the hell is wrong with you Tiger ‘hood? Black Nicklaus.” The spin on these famous golfers’ names are meant to remind Esquire that he is still one of them. His taste of the good life at the Shady Grove Club is temporary because he still must return home to the ‘hood.

But while he is at work as a waiter at the resort, Esquire always tries to take advantage of the opportunity to experience the upscale lifestyle he dreams of. He wears a maroon and black button down satin vest over a white-collared shirt and black dress slacks. The outfit is reminiscent of a house negro who works for a rich white family. When the audience first sees him in his uniform, he is making his way over to the bar to receive his next order of drinks. He says to the bartender, “Man, they working me hard out there.” The tired look on Esquire’s face and his body language further his embodiment of the house slave. The bartender tells Esquire his next order is for a Mr. John Garnett. The name evidently rings a bell because Esquire’s face lights up and he gussies up before heading to the rotunda where Mr. Garnett waits.

Judging by the majority of the visitors shown at the resort, the viewer would expect this Mr. Garnett to be a white man. The camera slowly pans the rotunda to reveal that John Garnett, who is dressed in a tuxedo and standing over a grand piano, is black. Esquire's interaction with John Garnett is like that of a slave to a slaveowner as he tries desperately to impress him. Mr. Garnett is a successful black entrepreneur and Esquire thinks that if he can convince him to write him a letter of recommendation, he will get a scholarship to attend Brenton University.

During their conversation, the camera juxtaposes Mr. Garnett with a painting on the wall of a general standing triumphantly over dead soldiers with the Confederate flag proudly displayed behind him. The viewer is visually being led to believe that Mr. Garnett is a traitor to his race.

Esquire had a change of heart when he realized the bifurcated existence he had long been harboring was harmful and negated his hood roots. After New New's real lifestyle is revealed to the crew, Esquire goes to visit John Garnett at his mansion where he is playing a game of tennis. Esquire tells Mr. Garnett that he came to return his letter of recommendation that he had written for him for Brenton University:

John Garnett: Did I make an error somewhere?

Esquire: No, I made the mistake. I should have been honest with you before.

John Garnett: What about?

Esquire: I live five blocks away from Cascade on the Southside. I use the club address because the school is in a better district.

John Garnett: You living a lie?

Esquire: My parents can't afford to send me to private school, sir.

John Garnett: So you knew Erin before you met me?

Esquire: Yes, I knew her, but I didn't know you were her father.

John Garnett: And you expect me to believe that? I got your game plan.

Esquire: My game? I don't play games, sir. That's one thing I do not do. I am too busy trying to get out. I figured you knew that coming up on the Southside. As far as the letter, I just thought it would give me a better shot. That's all.

John Garnett: We'll never know now, will we. You can let yourself out.

Esquire: You know, I read in this article where you said being a CEO didn't make you a proud man. Being a proud man made you a CEO. But a proud man doesn't hide where he come from.

John Garnett: Be careful.

Esquire: See, with or without that letter, I am going to make it. And I won't forget Mechanicsville, Georgia made me who I am. With all due respect sir - it made you who you are. It might help your daughter to know that too.

In this scene, Mr. Garnett has displayed a classic example of blacks forgetting or ignoring where they came from. This is often an effect of classism and one of the biggest dividers in black communities. Middle class blacks tend to look down on lower class blacks who are not able to meet white expectations of success as well as they are. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) explains:

Social mobility, or lack thereof, becomes recast in terms of the unwillingness of poor and/or working class Black people to shed their Blackness and the willingness of middle class Black people to assimilate. These respectable Black people must be denuded of Blackness- they should be seen not necessarily heard (178).

Mr. Garnett shed his blackness without hesitation it seems and does not have a problem neglecting or completely erasing those blacks who, like he once was, are suffering in the 'hoods.

This is also a key transitional point in Esquire's struggle to escape the 'hood. He has learned about Mr. Garnett's own past in Mechanicsville and in observing the man he has become – outside of his public persona- Esquire is no longer impressed. Rather than risk losing who he is, Esquire vows to always remember where he came from. This is how he gets rid of

his bifurcated existence and learns a valuable lesson about black people striving for success despite their class status.

School Daze

School Daze looks at a different aspect of the good life. Dap and his friends leave campus and go across town to a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. A fight almost breaks out over the salt between the college boys and another group of men who are “townies.” Samuel L. Jackson’s character, Leeds asks, “Is it true what they say about Mission men?” insinuating that they are gay. Dap tells all of his boys that they are leaving. The confrontation finds its way into the KFC Parking Lot:

Dap: What’s up brother? What do you want?

Leeds: You ain’t no kin to me and we ain’t your brothers. How come you college motherfuckers think you run everything? You come to our town year after year and take over. We was born here, going to be here, and going to die here and can’t find jobs because of you.

Dap’s friend: Can we go?

Leeds: We may not have your education, but we ain’t dirt neither.

Dap: Ain’t nobody said all of that, alright?

Leeds: You Mission punks are always talking down to us.

Dap: Hey, look brother I am real sorry that you feel that way, I’m really sorry about that.

Leeds: Are you black?

Leeds' friend: Take a look in the mirror man.

Dap: Hey, you got a legitimate beef okay. But it ain't with us.

Leeds: Are you black?

Dap: Hey man, don't ever question whether I'm black. In fact, I was going to ask yo country bamma ass why you got them drip drip chemicals in yo head and then come out in public with a shower cap on your head.

Dap's friend: ... like a fucking bitch.

Leeds' friend: Who you calling a bitch, bitch?

Leeds: I bet you niggas do think you white. College don't mean shit. Ya'll niggas and you gonna be niggas forever. Just like us, niggas.

Dap: You're not niggas.

It is ironic that Dap says this because he uses the word all the time in conversation throughout the film.

Dap starts to walk away.

Leeds: Gonna fuck you up. Get the fuck out of here before I bust a cap in yo young college ass.

The guys avoid a potentially dangerous situation and get in the car.

On the way back to campus they discuss what just happened:

Dap's friend #1: I don't wanna believe it, but do we really act like that?

Other friend #2: My name is Bennett and I ain't in it.

Dap's friend #1: But, no what the guys were saying back there...

Other friend #3: My name is Paul and that's just between ya'll.

Dap: Hey man, we're not wannabes.

Other friend #4: They were ignorant.

Dap's friends #1: I don't know guys. I don't think so.

Other friend #2: Look man, motherfuckers have got to start and try to better themselves man just like we're trying to do.

Dap's friend #1: Maybe they've tried it and they've just given up.

Other friend #3: That's the problem you think everything is so damn easy?

Other friend #2: Hell yeah, you work or starve. I want to eat sweet food.

Dap's friend #1: The guy was right. I told you.

The boys seem to have a limited view of their own taste of the good life and it was not brought to their attention until they went to the other side of the town and was reminded of the "bad life." Going to college is a privilege, especially for blacks, and some lose sight of those they left behind. The resulting bitterness can be harmful to one's well-being.

The Black Woman: Deconstructing Tyra

ATL

ATL, like the other coming-of-age films discussed, is a male-focused story, but women also play a pivotal role in the narrative. Most of the portrayals of women in the film are off-putting except for New New, who in most instances, is headstrong, independent, and exercises her agency. The rest, “The Bitch,” “The Fast Girl,” “The Neglectful Black Mother,” and “The Subservient Mother,” are all depicted in various negative ways. A number of the labels placed on these women come from black men and not other black women. This is an interesting trend and the effect it has on women and their interactions with each other is disturbing. In some ways, it limits their agency.

“The Bitch”

When the “bitch” comes into play in *ATL* it could almost go unnoticed if a viewer was not looking for it because, like many people in society, viewers have become numb to the denotation of the word. Perhaps what was most striking was whose mouth the word was coming from. Rashad, Ant, and the crew are hanging out at Brooklyn’s current place of employment on a typical day in the Mechanicsville ‘hood. They all notice a young woman dressed in jeans and a low-cut pink top leaving the nearby pizza shop and some of the guys make “cat calls.” Esquire sarcastically says, “I wonder what her career path is?” This comment

implies that he was judging her potential by her dress, something that is not uncommon in today's society.

Ant decides to approach the young woman. At first, Ant is a "relative" gentleman, saying to the woman, "Excuse me, gorgeous, can I get at you for a second?" Then he completely changes his approach and says as he opens her car door, "I got that, with your fine ass." Ant leans flirtingly into her car window and asks, "So where you going?" She replies, "Boy, you know you need to quit!"

The woman has trouble starting up her car and Ant asks, "Want to try that one more time?" Visibly annoyed, she tells him, "I got this. I'm good!" Ant continues, "I don't know if you that good, but..." The car starts and the woman gives Ant a sharp look. He in turn yells as she pulls off, "Man, be that way then. That's why you need a timing belt, bitch!"

This scene displays a blatant lack of respect for women by 'hood males that extends beyond age. Though Ant is only around the age of fourteen, he already has adopted and adapted to the dominant social values of women being lesser-than in society. This cannot be healthy for Ant's transition into manhood. Nor is it merely an unexplainable phenomenon. There is a reason for black males' harsh treatment of black women. It has to do with institutionalized racism and sexism, much of which is promoted in the Eurocentric school system. Blacks are deculturized by this "hidden curriculum" and males are encouraged to be aggressive while females are expected to accept their aggressiveness (Boateng: 1993). But there is a

huge difference in how this domination plays out with black men and women because of race:

...carrying out this stereotyped male sex role immediately presents a paradox for the African American male: being male in a male-dominated society and being an African American in a racist society that does not provide the African American avenues for the expression of this sexist notion of masculinity... Since he is not always able to find an avenue for the expression of this aggressive achievement defined as "masculinity" like his white counterpart, the African American male is forced to look for other alternatives that will reflect this masculinity in ways available under his typical circumstances. A number of studies have shown that these alternatives have proven to be dysfunctional and have contributed to a process by which African American males are programmatically eliminated from the community.

Thus, there is an explanation for Ant's rude behavior towards a black female who appeared to be ten years his senior. He is searching for a way to find power in a world where for the most part he is denied all possibilities because of white patriarchy. Sexual power for black males is the most easily attainable form of dominance because other types of power (financial, social) are not guaranteed in the racist world they inhabit.

“The Fast Girl”

There was an instance right before this where black women were portrayed as being easy, or promiscuous. The “fast girl,” in this case, was Tonya, Rashad's soon-to-be ex-girlfriend. Apparently, Rashad and Tonya had a falling out when she cheated on him with another guy. Now, in an effort to get him back, Tonya approaches him at his school locker:

Tonya: Guess you don't know nobody no more, huh?

Rashad: Nah, guess not.

Tonya: I'm saying Rashad, you know I didn't mean what I said.

Rashad: Man, look it don't even matter.

Tonya comes closer to Rashad.

Tonya: Look, my momma not home, you wanna give me a ride?

Rashad licks his lips then responds, "Man, yo momma ain't never home." He places his hand on her shoulder and says, "Take care."

It is fair to say this is quite a departure from the reality in the 'hood and even outside of the 'hood concerning relationships between black men and women. Usually, it is black women who have to resist the smooth talking ways of their cheating and deceitful male partners. Much like music videos, which portray women in compromising positions (Hopkinson and Moore: 2005), Tonya is depicted as a hypersexualized being in this scene. The conversation between Tonya and Rashad completely discounts the role of the black male in perpetuating the false ideal of hypersexuality amongst black women. This role reversal leaves Tonya essentially playing the part of the devious black male.

At Big Booty Judy's party, Tonya spots New New and Rashad slow dancing. She taps Rashad on the back of the head and rudely asks, looking at New New, "Is this you? I know this ain't the bitch that got you trippin on me." New New's demeanor quickly changes and she says, "Who you calling a bitch?"

Tonya: I'm calling you a bitch, bitch! You need to quit eyeballing me!

New New: Please don't get hurt you dirty trick.

Tonya: Trick? Who you calling a trick?

New New: You trick.

They try to physically attack each other and Rashad holds them back.

Tonya: Are you crazy? I got your trick.

Rashad: Hey man, watch out!

He turns to New New and says, "Calm down," like she is a little child.

New New (pointing to Tonya): Please get this groupie.

Rashad to Tonya: Man, what is you? Slow? Me and you already went through this. It's over.

Tonya: Nah. I'm not going to believe that.

Tonya still wants to hold onto Rashad even after how he treated her and is willing to endure public embarrassment for the sake of "earning" her man back.

Rashad: Aight, believe this.

He pushes by her with New New under his arm who mutters under her breath, "Thirsty trick." Rashad orders her to watch her mouth.

There are many problems with the depictions used in this scene. One problem is the use of the word “bitch” and “trick” by the females. Another problem is Rashad’s complacency, and possible enjoyment, in watching two girls fight over him. Finally, his orders to both young women to do as he says is indicative of a larger issue of dominance and subservience. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) finds that the use of the word “bitch” in black culture today is problematic. Even more disturbing are the justifications that have been made supporting the use of the word by black people themselves (123). The word is thrown around far too loosely by New New and Tasha in this scene and symbolizes an acceptance of the term used by black men to degrade black women as whores. In essence, by using the word these black women are participating in their own degradation.

“The Neglectful Black Mother”

Another woman introduced in *ATL* is the “neglectful black mother.” The only mother from the Mechanicsville ‘hood shown on screen in the film has one of the most stereotypical depictions. Twins, Veda and Star’s mother, Gayle, epitomizes the ghetto black woman often portrayed on primetime television sitcoms and reality television (Collins 2005: 83). She is loud and appears to be very young. When she first appears on screen, she is annoyed that her daughters have come to ask a favor of her. She cannot even distinguish which daughter is which and

confuses their names. She half-jokingly says, “You know what I mean” when they correct her on their identities.

“The Subservient Mother”

The “subservient mother” is the woman who follows her husband’s orders despite her own inclination of what is right. In *ATL*, New New’s mother, Priscilla fits this prototype. When New New and her father have an argument over which college she will be attending the following fall, her mother attempts to step in and alleviate the tension-filled situation. But she is quickly put in her place when New New’s father sternly tells her, “There is nothing more to discuss. End of conversation.”

The assertion of masculinity among black males appears in many forms. Most often it is through physical violence against their significant others and at times it is through verbal domination. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2005), many black men and women have constructed their relationships around classic slave images. She explains:

African-American men who crafted their understanding of Black masculinity around images of bucks, Uncle Toms, and rapists could come to resent any show of strength by African American women. Conversely, African American women who wished to claim the mantle of Black respectability often erased tell-tale signs of bitchiness or bad mothering by submitting to Black male dominance. Confusing male dominance with strength, and female submission with weakness, both felt that their capitulation to prevailing norms served the interests of the “race” (253).

Mr. Garnett and his wife’s relationship appears to fall into this category.

Conclusion

Using a theoretical framework revolving around racism, schooling of black youth, sexism, black masculinity, and classism, four emergent themes were uncovered in the analysis of these films. These themes were not only insightful into black culture, but the connections amongst them also speak to the many factors that affect black youth in society.

The first theme was that neighborhood surroundings play a key role in the opinions and development of black youth. The ‘hood characters introduced in these coming-of-age films did not have a universal reaction to their surroundings, but many did share similar emotions of despair and hopelessness. An analysis of these emotions provides a new perspective on the sometimes harsh reality many black youth face in the formative years of their lives. It seems that throughout all of the films there is an underlying desire either to escape from the ‘hood or to improve life in the ‘hood.

The second theme found in the deconstruction of these films was that black youth still question the role of education in getting ahead in life. For those youth who live in the ‘hood, excelling to greater heights is made difficult by their cumbersome surroundings. Characters like Ant, in *ATL*, struggled to see the value of education when teachers seemed disinterested in their well-being and academic development. A commonality to all the films is that the schools were reflections of the more pervasive issues occurring in black communities. The relationships between black males

and females in the school setting revealed issues of misogyny and subservience.

The third theme discovered in these films directly relates to black relationships. The misogynistic behavior black men displayed is modeled and reinforced by hip-hop music video images. Many of these hateful views of women being “less-than” also come from ideas that have existed for years in black communities. Images of the “fast girl” and the “subservient black mother” reveal the unsympathetic treatment many black women face in their interactions with males everyday in society. It is apparent that there are too many stereotypes of the roles black females should play in film and in black communities. In this case, the coming-of-age film acted as a mirror of the real troubles facing black women.

Finally, there was a theme of exploring the gains made towards eliminating classism during the Civil Rights movement that have eroded among black youth today. This has left room for a new element of classism to emerge based on one’s ability to acquire and display material goods. Classism, one of the major causes of contention amongst black communities, is viewed as a determining factor of self-worth. The result has been that many who live in the hood, such as the characters examined in these coming-of-age films, have a feeling of being unworthy and incapable of success.

The sociological lessons taught by the coming-of-age film are not to be underestimated. The value of the themes investigated in this analysis

of black coming-of-age films can affect the future research performed by sociologists about the issues plaguing black communities. If these issues receive more attention, especially as they are presented in popular culture formats, such as film, society can get closer to being the equal and rewarding system it was meant to be.

Besides their entertainment value, these coming-of-age films are also important to the viewers. Seeing how black identity is negotiated on screen teaches “outsiders” the peculiarities and particulars of black culture. An understanding of these black identities can help social relations across the world. This powerful medium of film has the ability to transform and transcend previously held stereotypical notions of black identity.

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WRITTEN SUMMARY FOR CAPSTONE PROJECT

This thesis examines and explores the black coming-of-age film. Coming-of-age has multiple meanings in the context of this thesis. Some of the films' characters are coming-of-age in that they have to deal with the troubles of their high school years in the 'hood, others are coming to terms with the realities of racism in the world, and still others are dealing with accepting or rejecting their identities in college. Through a critical analysis of four black coming-of-age films, *ATL*, *School Daze*, *Pride*, and *Stomp the Yard*, I explore these themes as they are presented through the medium. I examine the parallels among these themes and how they either reject, reflect, or interpret social realities for blacks in the United States, specifically young blacks.

I began by watching each of the four films multiple times then taking notes on the scenes which I found of importance. I then coded my notes using a Freemind software program. The notes were divided by the similar and dissimilar themes found amongst the films. These notes would go on to become the chapters of my thesis. The thesis is broken down into four clusters: an overview of 'hood life, an investigation of the school system, a comparison of those whose lives revolve around privilege in the suburbs and those whose lives are filled with suffering and despair in the 'hood, followed by an analysis of the multiple depictions of the black female in the coming-of-age film. Within these clusters, I examine how the youths in the coming-of-age film deal with their experiences. I look at

how the black male is treated by his peers for having dreams of attending college and how the black male deals with relations with females. There is also an examination of employment options, or lack thereof, for males and the lackluster school systems of the 'hood as it affects black youth. I also perform a cultural studies analysis of the films. I examine some of the overarching themes and how the films stress the importance of coming-of-age events in the lives of black youth. These chapters explore the music used in the films, the visual images used, as well as look at the role of physical activity in the growth and development of the youth.

Examples of a few of the chapters in this thesis include: "Hood Dreams: Ain't No Escape" focuses on life in the 'hood and how it affects the mindsets of the films' characters. Generally, the characters have a feeling of being locked in to their despair-filled and depressing surroundings. The result is a lack of hope that life can exist for them outside of this microcosm. The characters deal with the limits of 'hood life differently and in very interesting ways to say the least. In *ATL*, Rashad's character has a sense of embitterment, but holds onto hope for his younger brother Ant to escape the 'hood. He stays on top of Ant to do his school work and not get involved in hustling, or drug dealing. Esquire, Rashad's close friend, believes he can escape the 'hood, and is willing to do so at almost any expense. He utilizes all of his resources to get recognized as not being just another guy from the 'hood, even going as far as to lie about being from the 'hood. Meanwhile, New New desperately

wants to be a part of this 'hood life. She takes on the wardrobe, dialect, and what she thinks is authentic role of the "'hood girl'" to get this attention.

"Stay in School... Why?" focuses on how these coming-of-age characters deal with the education system. The two films that revolve around college life, *School Daze* and *Stomp the Yard*, provide a different perspective on the matter than the other films, *ATL* and *Pride*, where the main characters are still in high school. *Stomp the Yard* focuses on DJ who feels he is not cut out for the "college boy" role and is instead living his little brother's dream, which he believes was cut short by his negligence. He is, in essence, stuck between the 'hood mentality and doing the right thing in school. In, *School Daze*, the majority of the secondary characters the audience is introduced to are focused on their college studies and some explain that they are doing so in an effort to have more than their parents had. Dap's activist stance, and attempt to rebel against the institution, they worry, will drive them away from their dreams and prevent them from being successful. In *Pride*, the boys cannot imagine college. They go to school, but it serves no purpose other than to pass the time in the day. In *ATL*, the only one who sees the point in staying in school in the crew is Esquire. Meanwhile, Rashad, the one who perhaps lacks the most hope, ironically expects and makes his younger brother, Ant, focus on his studies even though he does not do the same for himself and just wants to get by.

“Taste of the Good Life” is a chapter that focuses on how these ‘hood characters get exposed to the upscale and privileged life they have only dreamed of. In *ATL*, Esquire gets his taste of the good life at the Shady Grove Golf Club where he works as a waiter at the exclusive restaurant. There is an interesting conversation between Teddy and Esquire in the club parking lot where Teddy brings Esquire back to reality and calls him “Tiger ‘hood.” This comment lets Esquire know that although he may have dreams of the good life, at the end of the day, he is still in the ‘hood. In *Pride*, the team’s bus ride to the white, middle-class area of Philadelphia shows them a life of estates and beautiful cars. It is in sharp contrast to their dilapidated bus and the lifestyle they are used to. The importance of race in the separation of the lifestyles is emphasized in *Pride*. Once they arrive at their meet in the rich area they are mocked and chastised by the crowd. Jim Ellis scolds them about laughing things off when they arrive home. His lecture emphasizes that what they experienced was essentially a form of new racism, in which the blacks subconsciously laughs at how they are treated by whites.

“The Black Woman: Deconstructing Tyra” discusses the multiple types of black women that appear in the coming-of-age films. Just as there are multiple Tyrones, or types of black men, there are multiple versions of the black woman, including the fast girl, the bitch, and the neglectful black mother. Most of the labels placed on these women come from black men and not other black women, which is symbolic of the

control black men have over defining womanhood. In *ATL*, Ant, a teenager, calls a grown black woman who refuses to give him her phone number “a bitch.” This is not only disrespectful, but also shows how men in many black communities attempt to subjugate women despite their age.

Through a sociological analysis of each of these themes, I will show how these films can and do “speak” to viewers. A negotiation of black identity takes place by the truths revealed and created through these films. As a black female college student, my own ideas and experiences undoubtedly fit into this analysis and influence my approach to these themes. I also realize how much these films have influenced my perception of my role in society today. I know that my peers are similarly affected and that it is important that they continue to be exposed to such films and understand how their identities are shaped as a result of such representations.

Backed by sociological research, this thesis can become a fundamental resource on the subject and bring what is otherwise a marginalized area of study, black coming-of-age film, to the forefront of American entertainment culture. It is my goal that this paper will be a valuable reference for both the academic community and the community at large who may not realize how much this medium influences their everyday lives, either positively or negatively, and how much they influence it.