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From the Selected Works of Theodorea Regina Berry

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Zooming social justice: A teacher educator’s hopes and dreams for her students

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During the 74th Annual Academy Awards presentation show, actors Halle Berry and Denzel Washington were awarded Best Actress and Best Actor awards for their roles in *Monster's Ball* and *Training Day*, respectively. It was the first time in the history of the award that an African American female earned such an award and the second time for an African American male.

African Americans have won awards for acting in previous years. Sidney Poitier was the first African American to win the award for Best Actor in a Leading Role in 1963, the year of my birth, for his role in the film *Lilies of the Field*. It took the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science over 38 years to decide that another African American male was worthy of such an award. What does that tell us, teach me, the public?

No African American woman had ever been awarded Best Actress in a Leading Role prior to Berry’s award. Two African American women, Whoopi Goldberg and Hattie McDaniel, earned awards as Best Actress in a Supporting Role. McDaniel, who earned her award in 1939, was the first African American to be awarded an Oscar.

Three African American men have earned awards as Best Actor in a Supporting Role: Louis Gossett, Jr., Denzel Washington, and Cuba Gooding, Jr. Gossett was the first of these gentlemen to acquire this award, winning his Oscar in 1982 for his role in the film *An Officer and a Gentleman*.

Although significant as a matter of public discourse and curriculum, the number of awards earned by African American actors from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences throughout the years of its existence is not the issue of this article. Rather, this article aims to examine the implications of the roles portrayed by these two actors and the messages and lessons the media and the industry convey in its awarding of such roles. What does the selection of the award-winning roles tell us, teach us, the public?

First, I will address historical relationships between the role portrayal and award presentation. In this section, I will specifically address characters played by African American actors who won the Oscar in previous years and discuss historical trends in relationship to race and curriculum. Next, I will discuss the roles portrayed by Halle Berry and Denzel Washington in their respective films. Following this will be an exploration of what these roles may teach the public.

Black curriculum theorizing . . . is inextricably tied to the history of the Black experiences in the United States.

William H. Watkins, 1993, p. 322

As noted earlier, African American actors have earned Oscars for their film performances, primarily in supporting roles. In 1996, Cuba Gooding, Jr. won an Oscar for Best Actor in a Supporting Role for his performance in the film *Jerry Maguire* starring Tom Cruise. Gooding played a football player whose career is in trouble until his new agent (Cruise) enters his life. Gooding’s character, though college educated, is portrayed as an individual lacking substantial communication skills and strong self-confidence. In 1989, Denzel Washington wins an Oscar for his supporting role in the film *Glory* starring Matthew Broderick. *Glory* is an epic Civil War film that highlights the formal entry of African American soldiers in the United States military. The film brings to the forefront the significance of African Americans in one of the most important historical points of the United
States. Washington portrays a formerly enslaved person who joins the famed Massachusetts regiment. In the film, Washington’s character is consistently warned and punished for his rebellious, non-conformist acts. Louis Gossett, Jr. is the first African American male to earn an Oscar for his performance as an Actor in a Supporting Role in the film An Officer and A Gentleman in 1982. Gossett plays a Navy drill sergeant assigned to train Navy officers.

Female actors Hattie McDaniel and Whoopi Goldberg earned Oscars for their performances as actresses in a supporting role in the films Gone with the Wind and Ghost respectively. McDaniel, the first African American to earn an Oscar, portrays the housekeeper of a southern belle (Vivian Leigh). Goldberg, who won her Oscar in 1990, portrays a “fake” psychic who is able to communicate with Demi Moore’s late boyfriend (Patrick Swayze).

With the exception of McDaniel, all of the award-winning actors earned their awards in the late twentieth century, post-civil rights and post-feminist (women’s lib) movements. Yet, all of these actors chose roles whose characters were subservient to or dependent upon their White counterparts. McDaniel and Washington portrayed roles in what is known as a period film, a film that depicts a particular historical period. Many might view their roles as logistical based on the fact that African Americans were considered subservient to European Americans during the Civil War period of United States history. Edward Guerrero (as cited in Holtzman, 2000) would categorize these films as stereotypes of the plantation genre and contemporary revisionist images of slavery, respectively.

The 1939 classic Gone with the Wind spanned the historical period of pre-Civil War, Civil War, and Reconstruction and once again portrayed the happy and loyal slave and servant. The Black characters—Mammy, Prissy, and Pork—had no doubt where they belonged during and after the Civil War. While each of their personalities reflected different stereotypes, it was their extreme loyalty to their “masters” that these characters shared (Holtzman, 2000, p. 236).

The portrayal of these characters perpetuates or re-tells one story of African American life during the Civil War period. Although Glory reveals or presents other stories of African American life during this period of history through the portrayal of other significant characters in the movie, the portrayal that is awarded is the one most widely accepted by the American public regarding African Americans of the Civil War era: subordinate. By limiting the stories of African American life through American films, what messages or lessons are learned? How does a curriculum impact the public at large?

Whoopi Goldberg earned an Oscar for her supporting role in the film Ghost as a “fake” psychic conveying messages for a man who has met with his untimely demise. In this film, Goldberg’s character has established a reputation for extorting money by making her client believe she can communicate with loved ones in the after-life. She “discovers” her ability to genuinely communicate with the dead through the efforts of the lead male character and is subsequently used by this character to communicate the truth about his untimely death. Guerrero would categorize this type of film as a Hollywood backlash film.

Films with African American characters shifted from African American themes and casts to the use of isolated superstars. The popularity of Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Whoopi Goldberg was on the rise. Films that appealed to Black and White audiences, so-called “crossover films,” became the norm. These shifts took place in the context of Reaganism and the political backlash aimed at feminism, the civil rights movement, and affirmative action. During the 1980s, the film industry steadily became part of the larger conglomerates in which movies came to be viewed increasingly as “product.” The combination of the political climate and the changes of the corporate structure of the industry swept Hollywood into the conservative political backlash. By using the combination of new film technology and conservative ideology, the industry began to produce films that emphasized the triumph of the White working class, of individualism and of the American Dream (Holtzman, 2000, p. 238).

Goldberg, Murphy and other superstars of this era often portrayed characters designed to amuse or to be used by their White counterparts. Louis Gossett, Jr. in his award-winning performance in An Officer and A Gentleman was also subjected to the Hollywood backlash. Gossett’s character is a hard-nosed drill sergeant who lacked depth and complexity in his character. His primary purpose was to prepare an officer candidate for what promised to be a successful Naval career. The irony lies in the fact that the drill sergeant was preparing the officer candidate (portrayed by Richard Gere) to supersede him in rank and position. Gossett’s character was, subsequently, used to make Gere’s character look like the hero. What is the public curriculum of such a movie genre?

This overview points out a deliberately historical public curriculum through the medium of film. Historically, African Americans have been awarded/rewarded for their role selection and portrayal of characters whose purpose was to subserviently aid and uplift the position of
their White counterpart.

"Free black (wo)men know love".

bell hooks, 2001, p. 153

HALLE BERRY AND MONSTER'S BALL

Berry portrays Leticia Musgrove, the wife of an (subsequently) executed death row inmate Lawrence Musgrove (Sean John Combs) with a school-aged son, Tyrrell Musgrove (Coronji Calhoun). As a result of her spouse’s incarceration, Berry’s character is struggling to make ends meet while working two jobs as a waitress and she and her son are on the verge of being evicted from their less than humble, single family rental home.

Hank Grotowski (portrayed by Billy Bob Thornton) is one of the prison guards in charge of Lawrence Musgrove’s execution and the leading male character of the film. The character is a second-generation prison guard within three generations of prison guards in his family. Thornton’s character becomes well acquainted with the spouse and the child. However, what happens to Hank and Leticia isn’t all that and a single family rental home.

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Leticia shares her life experiences with Hank and expresses a range of emotions: grief, sorrow, joy, anger, etc. While in conversation, Hank learns that Leticia is the wife of (recently) executed Lawrence Musgrove. But, he does not reveal this knowledge. In an effort to “feel good,” Leticia engages in a graphically revealing sexual act with Hank.

From this point onward in the movie, Hank is the knight in shining amour, the cowboy in the white hat, and every other cliché of the White man coming to the rescue. This is not to say that the sexual encounter shared by Hank and Leticia wasn’t all that and a bag of chips. Early in the movie, we see that Hank’s sexual encounters before Leticia are non-emotional, business-like contacts with the local prostitute. So, we won’t dismiss the possibility that Leticia was able to “move” him in a way Hank had never experienced. But, what does that tell us, teach us, the public? What does this tell us, teach us, the public? Leticia departs from the house angrily. As she departs, she encounters Hank and tells him that she does not want him in her life. Shortly thereafter, we see that Hank has placed his father in a nursing home. Hank then visits Leticia at one of her work sites to explain what has transpired. Leticia is not willing to accept his explanation or apology and offers to return the car Hank has given to her and, much to Hank’s dismay, Leticia tells Hank to leave. The next day, Leticia is evicted from her home.

The movie ending leaves Hank as the hero personified. Leticia has moved into Hank’s home and he allows her to make herself comfortable. While on an errand to his recently acquired gas station and convenience store (named after Berry’s character), Leticia discovers drawings made by her late husband of Hank and his son, Sonny. Leticia realizes that Hank has kept the knowledge of their acquaintance and the circumstances therein a secret and proceeds to ransack the room in an
If ... one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools so that [African Americans] learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you would be liberating not only [African Americans], you'd be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history.

James Baldwin, 1971, p. 8

There are many questions about the public curriculum the movie industry is attempting to convey in relationship to African Americans. And the roles African American actors choose to portray in films are an integral part of the delivery of the public curriculum. While independent deep exploration and examination of role selection by African American actors is well deserved, interpretation will focus on such role selection among the award-winning performances of Berry and Washington in connection with the public curriculum. Interpretation and discussion will specifically focus on the following questions:

• What does each role potentially teach the general public about African American women and African American men?
• What does each role potentially teach the general public about White women and White men?
• What does each role potentially teach the general public about each actor’s interest in race in relationship with self-love?
• Is there a relationship between patriarchal thinking (hooks, 2001), race, and self-love?

First, let’s define some terms. White, in terms of race for the purpose of this article, is equivalent to European American. hooks (2001) would define self-love in terms of adoration and appreciation of our whole selves and how we are represented. It is about caring and nurturing ourselves and each other rather than self-sacrifice and deprivation. “To choose love, we must choose a healthy model of [female] agency and self-actualization, one rooted in the
understanding that when we love ourselves well ... we are best able to love others” (p. 41). Patriarchal thinking, according to hooks (2001), leads people to believe that “the tending to the house and home, to the needs of children, is woman’s work” (p. 129). Patriarchal thinking leads men to be “emotionally unavailable” (p. 129). “Patriarchal thinking still encourages women and men to believe that paternal contribution to parenting is never as important as that of mothers” (p. 141).

The first four questions of the discussion were borne out of Baldwin’s quote. It is in the best interest of both African American and White people in the United States to engage in a curriculum, academic or public, that informs all about everyone so that all may be liberated. Therefore, it is not possible to address implications of role selection made by Berry and Washington solely based upon its impact on perceptions of African Americans; we must also examine its impact upon perceptions of European Americans. There is no “Black” without “White,” according to Pinar (2000). And although we co-exist in educational and public spaces, African American people are disadvantaged by the limited knowledge of self as White people are limited by their substandard knowledge of those labeled as “other”. White people are uninformed unless they are “knowledgeable and knowing of those they have constructed as ‘different,’ as ‘other’” (p. 330). “One of the challenges in dealing with racial issues ... is for whites ... to think of ways in which racism has been a limiting factor in their lives” (Osajima as cited in Pinar, et. al., 2000, p. 327).

The public curriculum of film perpetuates the dichotomy of knowledge construction. The roles selected by Berry and Washington are no exception. Berry’s character is a woman, an African American woman, struggling to survive. She takes on self-sacrifice and deprivation, as described by hooks (2001), as badges of good motherhood and wife-dom. Her husband and father of her child is absent from the home after being convicted of a crime. She enters into a relationship with a White man as she seeks the power, through him, to feel after her husband is executed and her son is killed. In the process, she relinquishes her power, emotionally and physically, to him. This role perpetuates African American women as hopeless, helpless, weak individuals who use sex as solutions to problems. Regardless of her ability to endure the trials and tribulations she has faced (at the expense of her African American husband), the graphically depicted sexual act scripted at the beginning of the film is, at minimum, distracting. This role perpetuates African American women as sex fiends with an appetite that is ever ready and un-quenchable. This role perpetuates exactly what Buck Grotowski and every White American male like him believes about African American women.

In contrast, the role also delivers/reinforces a public curriculum about White women. This role teaches/reinforces what American society believes White women should not be. This role teaches/reinforces what life is not for White women.

But, there is an interesting paradox. Although Berry’s role teaches many things to the public about White women, there are two story lines within the film that teach other lessons. First, there is a local prostitute. This White woman is familiar with both Hank and Sonny and their lives. This White woman engages in sexual acts for profit. Upon viewing the movie, it becomes clear that the familiarity is based on frequent contact rather than relationship building. This White woman deals with these White men as a business transaction only. She is not giving up anything emotionally and she barely gives up any-thing physically. The sexual act is not personal or intimate.

Lastly, there is the absence of women in the Grotowski household. As the movie continues, the audience learns that the women of the house depart in unconventional ways. Buck’s wife committed suicide, leaving Buck to describe her as “weak.” Hank’s wife simply left; it is implied that her departure occurred during Sonny’s childhood years. This leaves Buck and Hank with very little regard for women and a strong dislike for anything they perceive as weakness.

This movie perpetuates the notion of women, all women, standing by their man no matter what. Buck and Hank imply that their wives should have stayed with them no matter what. Berry’s character, Leticia, supports this belief. For reasons left unstated in this movie, she never leaves her convicted husband in the eleven years he was in jail. And, no matter what problems she encounters with Hank, she stays with him. Even, in the end. In the end, African American women need a man — no matter what.

Training Day and the lead characters in this film, Alonzo Harris (Denzel Washington) and Jake Hoyt (Ethan Hawke) deliver a strong public curriculum on African American men, white men and morality. Initially, the movie sets out to portray Harris as the teacher, guide, mentor to the inexperienced, naïve, young rookie, Hoyt. But, not far into the movie, Washington’s character resorts to the old white patriarchal notions of African American men: sly, conniving, immoral individuals prone to trickery and deceit. Hawke’s role as naïve rookie supports the upstanding morality of White men as perceived in American society. They are dichotomous characterizations where the White man’s role, however naïve, plays to the
detriment of the character of the African American man.

The last two questions are borne out of hooks' (2001) *Salvation: Black People and Love.* In it, hooks examines the media—film, television, music—and its impact on the way the general public and, more specifically, African Americans view themselves. hooks is concerned about how much love we, as African Americans, have for ourselves and each other based on the images and sounds we consume and produce. Her concerns have caused me to question how much love and care Berry and Washington possess for themselves and the African American community in relationship to these roles they selected. What questions did these actors ask themselves when determining suitability for these roles? What concerns, if any, were raised by the actors about these roles in relationship to race? How did they believe the general public, including the African American community, would perceive them based on these roles? How do they perceive themselves in relationship to these roles? The actor’s interest in race in relationship to self-love based on the roles they selected seems limited, at best.

- What does each role potentially teach the general public about African American women and African American men?
- What does each role potentially teach the general public about White women and White men?
- What does each role potentially teach the general public about each actor’s interest in race in relationship with self-love?
- Is there a relationship between patriarchal thinking (hooks, 2001), race, and self-love?

Maybe I am making too much of this. Maybe these are just two people trying to make a living doing the thing they most enjoy doing. Maybe, they were focused upon career recognition and professional development as actors. And, maybe, these roles were only jobs with no relationship to race, gender and self-love.

But, as an African American woman who is a consumer of the public curriculum, I liken the public curriculum of the film industry to a casserole. It’s difficult to pick out and discard the ingredients you don’t want to eat. Race, gender, and self-love are, indeed, integrated parts of the public curriculum of film. Everything we view—the roles selected and portrayed, the setting and scenery, the score and soundtrack—is teaching us something about race, about gender, and about self-love.

REFERENCES