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Acting Black: An Analysis of Blackness and Criminality in Film

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ACTING BLACK: AN ANALYSIS OF BLACKNESS AND CRIMINALITY IN FILM

by

Blake Montel Edwards

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Criminal Justice, Forensic Science, and Security
at The University of Southern Mississippi
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ABSTRACT

This thesis will attempt to answer how films deal with blackness and crime, specifically when intersecting with the concepts of exploitation, appropriation, whiteness and the criminality of the black body. While not entirely the root of the negative perceptions of African-Americans in the United States, the manner in which African-Americans are portrayed in motion picture media influences how their presence is seen in society. This thesis will examine specific films that include elements dealing with the listed factors and what effects they may or may not have.

Key words: blackness, criminality, white privilege, racism, film, cultural appropriation

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother whose love and support kept me going even when I thought I could not continue. You are much loved and appreciated.

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Issues of Race in America

The relationship between the police and African-American communities in the United States has become one of the most engaging discussions of the political and social landscape in the last twenty-five years (Berg, 2016). While some social scientists and observers claim that the United States has entered a “post-racial era” of permanently moderated racial tension, and despite improvements in race relations since the Civil Rights movement of the 1950’s-1960’s, contemporary altercations between the police and African-Americans casts doubt on the idea of a “post-racial era” (Bert et. al., 2016; Joseph, 1991; Bonilla-Silva, 2015).

Evidence indicating persistent and disparate contacts between the police and African-Americans, along with high-profile episodes such as Michael Brown and Freddie Gray popularized through various forms of media, fuel race-related confrontations and claims of abuse of authority by the police (Carbado, 2017, USDOJ, 2011; USDOJ, 2016). From the Baltimore police shooting of Freddie Gray, to the shooting of Michael Brown by Ferguson (MO) Police, to the shooting of a fleeing Walter Scott by North Charleston police, many African-Americans have lost trust in police officers, and believe that they have an active racist political agenda resulting in violence (Ibe et al., 2002; President’s report, 2015). In the summer of 2016, Charles Kinsley, an African-American male behavioral therapist in North Miami, Florida, received a gunshot wound from a police officer despite having complied with commands to lay down, put his hands in the air, and identified himself as a therapist trying to help one of his patients (Silva, 2017). Charles Kinsley’s interaction with the police officer, along with other interactions with the police

in the “post-racial era”, demonstrates that race still plays a role in how African-Americans are treated in their dealings with the police (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

These policies and practices are evidence of the lingering effects of police enforcement of drug war policies which embodied inherent racial overtones (Meehan & Ponder, 2002). While not as overt within the last ten years, racism still plays an active role in the system white America established and has strongly impacted the lives of African-Americans (Burke, 2017; Nighaoui, 2017 & Schueths, 2014). While much of the mistreatment of African-Americans is based on the history of race relations in America, media representation also has played a role (Robinson, 2014; Dixon, 2007; Dowler, 2004; Russel-Brown, 2006) .

Taslitz (2006) attests that depictions of African-Americans and blackness in the media contributes to the negative perceptions and mistreatment of African-American groups which are not strictly limited to the police but are reflective of the overall criminal justice system. According to Taslitz (2006), this negative view is based on unscientific, biased media depictions of blackness and has led to “disproportionate and wrongful convictions” of African-Americans. For example, data gathered in 2001 by the Innocence Project revealed that 57% of exonerates were black. Another finding of that study was that in 2005, 90% of juvenile criminal convictions were of African-American and Hispanic decent; 85% of the confessions by these two groups were false (Gross, Jacoby, Matheson, & Patil, 2005).

Bias against African-Americans is further supported by a study conducted by Bratina, Cox, and Fetzer (2016) on racism and the death penalty. Their study showed that white jurors hold racist beliefs and not only support higher incarceration rates for African

Americans but also for the death penalty when the defendant is black. According to Mastro (2015), the portrayals of “uncivilized” African-American communities in the media have reinforced the stereotypic view of how African Americans “behave” by constantly depicting them in poor, inner city locations with little or no proper social structure (Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, & Johnson, 2006) .

African-American Depictions in Film

While many media outlets have displayed this negative perception of African-Americans, film also has been a venue for how groups of people are characterized. Hollywood has long exerted a powerful influence on American ideology (Crane, 2017). Films can be used for multiple purposes including spreading a message or bringing awareness to certain social issues (Stoddard, 2010). Theodoric Manley analyzed scenes from movies in which different racial groups interacted and found that films such as *Do the Right Thing* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* promoted understanding among diverse groups (Manley, 1994). However, films often exaggerate traits among different ethnic/racial groups. This leads to an over-generalized, and often insulting, perception of minority groups (Schmader, 2015). For example, the film *Birth of a Nation*, presented African-American men as uneducated, savage brutes who preyed on innocent white women. It framed African Americans in such a critical way that the stigmatization of this portrayal haunts the black community to this day (Hughey, 2009).

Black characters in movies are often portrayed in stereotypical roles (thugs, pimps, gangsters) which supports the criminal label African-Americans and their culture have been given (Chochran, Dhillon, Rabow, Vega, & Yeghnazar, 2012). Chochran, et al. (2012) found that African-American protagonists were less liked than their white

counterparts despite having the same importance in the same movie. Moreover, an element of criminality remains a constant character trait often associated with these characters (Noakes, 2003). This perpetuates long-held beliefs that African-Americans are manifestly criminogenic in and of themselves, and further fuels prejudices the white majority maintains against African-Americans (Fujioka, 2005).

In addition to films that have promoted negative stereotypes of African-Americans, the United States' historical relationship with the concept of blackness has also contributed to the negative perception of African-Americans (Dixon, 2007). Smiley and Fakunle (2016) claim the origins of this misconception of blackness stems from the times of slavery in America when the people of the African diaspora were considered nothing more than beasts of burden or brutes. Zimring (2015) also writes that Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson helped construct the idea of blackness by observing enslaved African-Americans. The concept of racial superiority began to take hold as more slaves were brought to America to help with the increased agricultural workload and more African-Americans were viewed simply as possessions rather than human beings (Smiley, 2016).

While blackness has historically been an issue in the United States, whiteness has never faced such controversy (Rich, 2010). Zimring (2015) makes the argument that there is a link between garbage and unwanted people in American society by illustrating how society equates whiteness to cleanliness and godliness. He grounds this argument by focusing on the living conditions of white people versus the living conditions of African-Americans. Neighborhoods and living areas populated primarily by African-Americans and other minority groups are often near waste companies or garbage disposal areas.

Poor, unsanitary conditions are frequently shown in films depicting the living conditions of African-Americans (Zimring, 2015).

Appropriation and exploitation of African-American culture is also evidenced in film depictions of African-Americans. White America has often fixated on the allure of African-American culture, both the material and immaterial. Films such as *Malibu's Most Wanted*, *Get Hard*, and *White Men Can't Jump* manipulate African-American culture for a predominantly white audience. This is done by placing a white character in a stereotypical black environment and telling the story through the lens of the white character using generic, stereotypical actions, imagery, and dialogue so the white character blends in with the black populace. Ultimately, this makes the white character an adaptational expert when dealing with the African-American community (Hughey, 2010; Hughey, 2012; Mollie & Harris, 2018). Despite the racism African-Americans have experienced in this country, the material culture (slang, vernacular, music) has proven quite popular among Americans of all races and ethnicities here and across the globe (McArthur, 2015; Han, 2015; Mook & Miyakawa, 2014).

The media, particularly film, has not been negligent in exploiting the practices and customs often associated with African Americans. This is evident in the Blaxploitation film genre of the 1970s (Robinson, 1998). Despite African-American culture being popular amongst a wide range of audiences, there is still a discrepancy between “acting” black and “being” black (Ogbu, 2004). In her book *Social Death* (2012), Cacho asserts that America has associated blackness with criminality to such a degree that we cannot identify a crime without a black body. She explains this is due to the presumption that white people are not committing these crimes. Thus, if a black body

is necessary for crime to be recognized, African-Americans cannot truly escape the criminal identity because of their inherent blackness. However, it appears (given the context of films above) white Americans can adopt the black identity without the negative labels associated with blackness such as criminality. In turn, this gives rise to the issue of white privilege which Stewart (2012) describes as “an illegitimate advantage Whites have in America” such as appropriating a “criminal” culture while not being classified as “criminal”.

Thesis Purpose

This thesis attempts to answer the following question: How are blackness and criminality depicted in recent films, specifically when the concepts of whiteness, black exploitation, expropriation of black culture, and the black body intersect? Several films will be analyzed for relationships between the previously listed factors as well as the criminalization or degradation of African-Americans and their culture. Furthermore, elements of cultural appropriation, white privilege/criminality, and the exploitation of African-American culture will be analyzed in their relationship to blackness and crime. Language and the environment in which the film takes place will also be included in the analysis.

This thesis critiques how, even in modern times, the poor representation of race remains an issue with modern media (especially in cinema). As previously stated, movies can influence viewers’ opinions about current social issues and be regarded as fact without proper research. In a study conducted by Przemieniecki (2005), young movie-goers and police officers were interviewed and admitted to being influenced about gangs by what they saw in gang-related films. The gang films contributed to

gang/delinquent behavior and how police officers viewed individuals based on behavior from movie portrayals of gangs. This study highlights that film can, and does, have a substantial impact in how Americans view criminality and its relationship with blackness and the black body.

The reason why this thesis is being conducted is due to the lack of research associated with this topic. While there have been studies which have focused on portrayals of ethnic groups in various forms of media, research has been slim in terms of analyzing race on a criminal level based on popular media. Specifically, this thesis argues films are being used in order to keep the status quo of white supremacy through covert means. In this era being “color blind” to different racial and ethnic groups has, in actuality, been used to desensitize racial and ethnic stereotypes while keeping the status quo of a white dominant society. The lack of research given to criminality, racial identity, and popular media is disturbing as this type of media has made impacts across American society.

It can be argued that there is a hidden agenda when it comes to the current representation of African-Americans as well as other minority groups. Between the lines of humor, satire, and ?, there is an unspoken dialogue which perpetuates the criminalization of African-Americans. The popularity of film means this message is spread across the globe, and with little research being done to refute these statements, it is believed to be fact rather than opinion. This thesis attempts to give its readers a different perspective when it comes to films and, by extension, popular media as a whole. Hollywood has always had a strong impact on American society. Its influence has spread across the nation and has even influenced the media of other countries across the world.

Due to this massive web of influence, images and portrayals can become permanently ingrained into society. This can be detrimental if these portrayals are negative as African-Americans have found out the hard way.

According to Eberhardt et al. (2006) in their article *Looking Death Worthy*, the stereotypical depictions of African-Americans are key factors in they are treated in the criminal justice system. The more typically “black” the suspect looked, the more likelihood they would face the death penalty; this was especially true if the defendant was black and the victim was white. This coincides with the criminalistic media representation of blackness which partially influences jury decision (Eberhardt, 2006). Ultimately the images shown in films have an impact in how individuals are treated when it comes to the law and the courts.

As stated earlier, the influence of Hollywood imagery has spread to every facet in American society including the workforce; this influence also extends to law enforcement. While this thesis is, in essence, theoretical, there can be practical use for it. Specifically, due to the fact that film can be influential, studies can be done to see how much influence film has in law officers’ lives. This is important as it could gauge whether or not officer decisions are based off of actual training or are influenced from non-peered reviewed sources. As race relations between the African-American community and law enforcement have become a major topic of discussion in social and political talks, this could potentially lead to an improved understanding between law enforcement and the African American community.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

Media, Race, and Film

Past research has studied the phenomena of how impactful media can be on society. Cobbina (2008) conducted a content analysis of how crack cocaine and methamphetamines were covered in print media between 1985-1987 and 2001-2003 to see if race and social class had any impact on their portrayal. After analyzing 124 newspaper articles, Cobbina documented that 45% of the articles covering crack cocaine regularly mentioned African Americans and associated its use with violent crime. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Cobbina noted that 45% of newspaper articles covering meth portrayed users as poor whites and framed the use of methamphetamines as a public health issue with only 10% of the newspaper articles linking the drug with violence. Cobbina pointed out that meth use was not criminalized to the same degree as crack cocaine. She further states that, while crack cocaine and its users were vilified and characterized as menaces to society, meth users were shown not to be as dangerous to the public. Ultimately, Cobbina concluded that the major discrepancies in media coverage of the two drugs supported her hypothesis that race and social class were factors in how drug use is covered in the media. “As a result, the notion of whites as non-criminals remains unchallenged.” (Cobbina, 2008, p. 159).

Cobbina’s study on the coverage of crack cocaine and meth serves as an important example of how race is commonly portrayed in the media in the United States. Russell-Brown (2006) states that the American media takes advantage of the negative image of black people (specifically black men) and spreads it through multiple media outlets. This constant exposure to the stereotypical criminal black man has essentially

become the standardized norm when discussing the image of African-American men. Other races also fear becoming victims of black perpetrators (Russel-Brown, 2006). This finding is supported by Wilcox (2005) who determined that when it comes to African Americans, the media frames the guilt of the crime not only towards the individual but also towards the entire African American community, depicting even law abiding black citizens as potentially dangerous criminals (Wilcox, 2005).

Misrepresentation commonly occurs when depicting African Americans in the media (Dowler, 2004). Robinson (2014) states that research supports the idea that dominant, negative portrayals of minority groups, particularly African-Americans, has a large impact on how crime is perceived in the United States. Effects include poor self-esteem and a constant criminal label being attached to the groups' image. The context of media portrayal, such as the situational characteristics of a story, is also a factor in how minority groups are depicted during a broadcast (Bjornstrom, Kaufman, Peterson, & Slater, 2011). Studies by Robinson (2014) and Russell-Brown (1998) support the notion that intense negative portrayal of African-Americans, in concert with being constantly mislabeled, has led to blacks and other minority groups being the victims of racial hoax-crimes designed to place blame on a person of another race or when a victims blames another person of a race for their victimization (Robinson, 2014; Russel-Brown, 1998). Russel-Brown (1998) states most racial hoaxes are invented by a white person claiming they were accosted by a black person, usually a male; about one-third of the hoaxes involve white women. While the most common media outlets are typically television and radio, film has also been a significant factor in the depiction of African Americans in the United States.

Commonly believed to be up to date on current trends and social issues, movies have often been looked to as a source of knowledge of what is current in American culture and society (Stoddard, 2010). Hollywood and the American film industry are believed to present a literal representation of the values established in this country with many movie goers taking the works presented on the big screen as absolute truth (Crane, 2014). This phenomenon has extended globally, with people from different countries also viewing movies made in America as the “truth” of how American society operates (Crane, 2014; Jin, 2012). For many people who have never been to this country, these movies serve as a gateway to vicariously experience American culture (Ibbi, 2014). Movies may be the only way some will ever experience life in the United States. If so, film functions as a means of communication in which people from around the world can witness the American lifestyle that permeates the global community (Jin, 2011).

Despite their importance, movies can mislead viewers by presenting fictional scenarios, such as the depiction of haunted houses as factual occurrences. Terms such as “based on a true story” often leave viewers with the impression the events on the big screen actually occurred as depicted in the film (Valesia, Diehl, & Nunes, 2017). Hollywood contributes to this misdirection via marketing strategies hyping quasi-reputable evidence to back their claims of “factual” proof (Saab, 2001). This misrepresentation can have detrimental impacts on African-Americans and other minority groups (Robinson, 2014).

Race, Crime, and Film

As stated previously, movies have become an integral part of American culture and society. With so much influence, Hollywood can sway the opinions of movie goers across the globe. Unfortunately, this reach has also influenced how the world views different groups within the United States. Throughout its history, film in the United States has depicted minority groups, specifically African-Americans, in a variety of negative ways (Schmader, 2015). Minstrel shows, stereotypical depictions, and blatant offensive portrayals of African-Americans are examples of the poor representation of black people in American cinema (Hughey, 2009, Schmader, 2015). Due to limited exposure, these films are as close to diversity that certain groups will experience (McCarthy, 1998). Unfortunately, these depictions are based on stereotypes and have a limited social range, leaving audiences with a sense of resentment and social unrest due to the increased perception that the white majority power structure is threatened by the unruly culture of African-Americans (McCarthy, 1998). Even in satirical contexts, African-Americans continue to be stigmatized by how they are portrayed on the big screen (Dixon, 2007). That negative portrayal on the big screen follows African-Americans into their daily lives even after the credits have rolled.

African-American representation in the United States can trace its roots back to times of slavery, with blacks being regularly equated to livestock (Paz-Fuchs, 2016). With the passage of time, African-Americans gained their freedom and additional rights but there was still a need to control the black population. Movies helped maintain this control by portraying black people in negative, stereotypical ways. A prime example of this type of media control is the 1915 film classic *Birth of a Nation*, which had white

actors in blackface portraying African-American men as little more than violent savages looking for white women to rape and glorifying the Ku Klux Klan as saviors and heroes (Cochran, 2012, Griffith & Aitken, 1915). It is also worth noting that this was the first motion picture shown in the White House (Olund, 2013).

From then on, movies typically had African-Americans as background or secondary characters, usually in roles where they were subservient to whites or portrayed in a stereotypical manner (Olund, 2013). For example, in minstrel shows white actors wore blackface and ridiculed African-Americans by portraying them as lazy, ignorant, and displaying what is typically described as “coon behavior” (Hughey, 2009). This type of representation could be viewed as the foundation for the criminalization of blackness in cinema, with the film *Birth of a Nation* being the most controversial film in its depiction of African-Americans which can still be seen today (Griffith & Aitken, 1915). It did not help that white actors in blackface were used to portray African-Americans in such a negative view, essentially validating how the white majority in the United States viewed African-Americans. These portrayals also depicted African-Americans as potential threats to the well-being of whites across the nation (Carter, 2014, Cochran, 2012).

Thanks to this cinematic representation, black people and black culture were considered undesirable and used in conjunction with negative connotations of being unwanted, dirty, and criminal (Carter, 2014). While some movies such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* did portray African-Americans in a more progressive and positive light and even attempted to address certain social issues in the United States (Kramer, 1967), these films were overshadowed by the poor representation of African-Americans and

were seen as highly controversial, even fringe representations (Urwand, 2018). Police in these movies were typically depicted as white males having a general disdain for African Americans or anything associated with blackness (Noakes, 2003). Interactions between white police officers and black people were usually portrayed as antagonistic and often asserted the role of white dominance as an acceptable way of living in America. This type of cinematic representation would continue until the end of the Civil Rights Movement (Urwand, 2018).

The end of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's marked a turning point in the representation of African-Americans in American cinema. Unity amongst the African-American community declined, and an individualistic attitude began to emerge (Kraszewski, 2002). This "new" black experience redirected the focus of African-Americans to being self-reliant and achieving personal success while also emphasizing style (Hayle, 2016). The new way of thinking also led to a splintering of the African-American community across the nation with blacks disregarding the unified, traditional customs and beliefs with which they were originally portrayed (Symmons, 2015). Robinson (1998) describes this new movement as a type of black liberation as many African-Americans sought to redefine themselves and focus more on the individual rather than the community. However, Robinson (1998) remarks this type of "liberation" was, at best, a misguided illusion that led to even more misrepresentation of African-Americans and additional conflict with law enforcement.

As the mindset of African-Americans changed, the portrayal of African-American culture changed, too. While blacks were originally depicted as meek, defenseless, and victimized, this new image of African-Americans was the opposite. The "new" black

experience depicted black Americans as loud, tough, street smart, and with a flair for style and being “cool”. According to Bausch (2016), the identity of African-American men went through a dramatic change from being subservient and meek to boisterous and proud and even depicted blacks as being enforcers of the law like the character Shaft from the movie with the same title. Black women were given more roles like their black male counter-parts, often taking on more action-based roles and even starring in their own movies such as *Foxy Brown* while their on-screen sexual appeal increased as well (Robinson, 1998). However, while the cinematographic appeal of African-Americans appeared to be increasing, their social standing was doing the exact opposite.

Images of violence, crime, and tendencies to rebel against authorities can be seen in numerous artistic works of African-Americans with film being a major component (Worgs, 2006). While the origins of their portrayals are largely attributed to whites by using film to depict African-Americans as criminal (Robinson, 2014), African-Americans also have poorly represented themselves as productive members of society with black celebrities inadvertently validating prejudiced and old time beliefs. In a study of how Richard Pryor’s comedy affected the nation, Evan Cooper (2007) states the immense popularity of Pryor’s comedy, which used many prevailing, stereotypical black depictions, was considered the norm by both whites and blacks. Even in a more modern setting, black entertainers often bolster the notion that African-Americans are simply rash individuals who regularly engage in criminal activity (Cooper, 2007).

Pryor’s brand of comedic entertainment has continued to the present time. Many black entertainers use stereotypical and satirical material as a source of comedy and storytelling. However, this type of amusement, while seemingly harmless, may reinforce

stereotypes of black people as many of the jokes' content consists of sex, vulgarity, poor living conditions, lack of social skills, and violence (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2003). Furthermore, with the large web American film encompasses across the globe, cinematic black criminality has spread to other countries whose movie goers view these movies as representing the truth. This is reinforced through crude and ignorant uses of blackface and characters who attempt to "act black" while portraying negative and insensitive images (Han, 2014).

"Hood movies", or movies in which a setting takes place in poor inner-city neighborhoods inhabited by blacks, do little to eradicate the perceived stereotypical criminal activities in black neighborhoods. Movies such as *New Jack City* (Peebles, McHenry & Jackson, 1991), *Menace II Society* (Hughes Bros. & Scott, 1993), and *Friday* (Gray & Charbonnet, 1995) frame the image of the black experience filled with strife and facing insurmountable odds as the films' protagonists attempt to overcome these obstacles usually through questionable and amoral means as in the movie *Training Day*. While these movies were filmed and directed by African-American to bring awareness to an issue amongst a certain group of people, the films' intense portrayal of the violence, death, and degradation of a community overshadow the symbolism the movies attempt to show. Instead, focus is on the disarray in black communities (Massood, 1996, Denzin, 2003). Hood films are mostly set in urban environments released during a time in which urban youth, predominately African-American males, were dubbed as "super predators" by the news media which may have influenced how African Americans were viewed by society (Moriearty, 2012).

Exploitation, Appropriation, Whiteness, and the Black Body

The increased interest in African-American culture due to financial exploitation and cultural dominance rather than a genuine acknowledgement and acceptance (McDaniel, 1990) . Littlefield (2008) states that this attention to the culture of African-Americans was not meant to include them but rather to use the culture to benefit the film industry while at the same time further alienating African-Americans from the larger American society. Littlefield supports this view by pointing out that America's social construction is largely based on a white patriarchal system which undermines the advancement of African-Americans by promoting Anglo-dominated rhetoric while dehumanizing the experiences of black and other minorities.

Littlefield also notes the extremes to which African-American youth are exposed in the media when it comes to depictions of African-Americans, most of that exposure revolves around money, sex, and violence. Wright and Younts (2009) share this sentiment: that exposure to negative media representation such as drug trafficking and poor, single mother households further criminalizes African-American youth and even increases criminal activities among black youth groups. These “values” can be seen in the Blaxploitation era of film. Many movies in this genre had copious amounts of violence, characters whose sole ambition was to make money, and hypersexualized depictions of African Americans, especially African American women (Brody, 1999). Roach (2017) supports this view of black women using sexuality and eroticism to gain authority, a method she dubs “black pussy power” (ex. *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy*). Ultimately, the first Blaxploitation era did little to curb negative perceptions of African-Americans. The representation of African-Americans during this era was highly contested: many heralded

it as a means for the discovery of the new black identity. Others simply found the genre to be misleading and not factual especially when compared to films that were more in tune with black people and the degradation of their culture like the 1972 film *Sounder* (Symmons, 2015).

Since the Blaxploitation era of film, black identity has often been portrayed as criminal across multiple genres of film. The erroneous portrayals of black culture and black identity in film and other media outlets led to the very idea of blackness as criminal (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie & Davis, 2004; Cacho, 2012). The new image the black experience displayed shifted from black empowerment to drugs, sex, and violence. Black masculinity was shown as a major component in the depiction of crime, especially in inner city environments. James (2009) states that, while masculinity is a fluctuating social construct, masculinity in African-American males is typically seen as hyper-aggressive and exaggerated and often portrayed in films as inhabiting an inner city environment with harsh living conditions. While many African-Americans do live in the harsh environment of inner cities, the black community has many different social classes with some being amongst the super elite in American society (Robinson, 2010). Similar to white households, African-Americans can find themselves in different living conditions based on their socio-economic level with some households making more than white households (Robinson, 2010). However, the politicization of blackness, as well as the expectations American society has given blacks, often over-looks these facts (Holroyd, 2015).

The constant negative portrayal of black people in film has done little to alleviate these perceptions. While films such as *Boyz n the Hood* and *Juice* show the unpleasant

issues and conditions poor inner city African-Americans face, they simultaneously inject a misguided insight into the lives of African Americans. To a non-black audience, the representation in these films is not allegorical but rather as a glimpse into the “real” lives of African-Americans (Potter & Marshall, 2009). The characters in the films are not seen as representations of the vices which plague the African-American community but rather as vices themselves. This inability to relate and empathize with the characters or the situations they find themselves in leads to a form of miscommunication and ultimately misdirection (Kennedy & Shapiro, 2015).

Thus, a character such as Darrin “Doughboy” Baker (Ice Cube’s character in *Boyz n the Hood*) is not seen as a black urban youth who becomes a victim of the poisons afflicting his neighborhood, but rather as a contributing factor in the continuing desecration of the African-American community. Doughboy’s character becomes a victim by being labeled a thug; his character becomes less of a messenger and more of a stereotype of typical blackness. Even though the message is society failing him rather than he failing society, the character’s blackness and portrayal overshadows the meaning the movie attempts to convey (Tannenbaum, 1938). The message is lost in translation due to the audience focusing more on the delinquent behavior of the character and ignoring the macro-level issues portrayed in the movie (Burke, 2017). In the long run, the audience leaves with the impression that the culture and communities associated with African-Americans is negative, destructive, and undesirable.

Despite the perceived bias and negative portrayal shown on the big screen, African American culture has cultivated a huge fan base in spite of the harsh criticisms against it and has become a cornerstone in American culture (Belle, 2014). The urban

lifestyle lived by black Americans is a key feature in American popular culture. Once considered destructive and obscene, African-American culture is now viewed as “hip” and attracts young Americans of any race who wish to participate (Banjo, 2011, Condry, 2007, Kennedy & Shapiro, 2015) However, like many African-American topics, even their cultural contributions have faced controversy as they have gained momentum in the American mainstream media, particularly in film.

Blackness

The influence of black culture can be seen in several forms of media across the United States including television shows, printed media, and other outlets of popular culture (Kennedy & Shapiro, 2015). That influence is especially evident in music. In 2017, hip hop, a predominantly black music genre, became the most popular genre of music in this country surpassing rock and roll (Mench, 2017). Movies have also incorporated a flair for African-American culture in their presentations, often as a source of humor or even as a moment of bonding between characters of different backgrounds.

However, despite the increased popularity of black culture, there is still a measure of disproportionate treatment between those of the culture and those simply “passing through” (Mook & Miyakawa, 2014). There are major discrepancies in depictions of African-American culture. This doesn’t stem from *what* topic is being presented but *who* is presenting the topic. Cacho (2012) demonstrated that crime in America cannot be taken into consideration without having a black body to serve as a type of comparison. Cacho uses pictures during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as examples. These pictures show both black and white people scrounging for items in buildings and in different areas. Cacho draws attention to the fact that while the photos showed the two

groups engaging in the same activity, pictured black people were depicted as being looters while the pictured white people were salvaging the remains of their homes.

The description of these pictures by the media presents a disturbing outlook on how America views blackness and the black body. Cacho does not deny that there weren't any black looters in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. She highlights the fact that black people in the pictures were automatically assumed and described to be looting while white people were depicted as saving what they could from their damaged homes despite possibly engaging in looting themselves. The major discrepancies in the coverage and depiction of black people is problematic and highlights the complex relationship black culture has with mainstream American culture and what is deemed appropriate or criminal.

One example of the misrepresentation of African-Americans can be seen in films involving diverse casting. Movies such as *Boyz n the Hood* and *Juice* have deep, subliminal messages within the graphic depictions of growing up in poor, predominately black neighborhoods. However, these movies either garner a cult following catered to a specific niche of people or are largely ignored by the greater American society (Denzin, 2003). Not only do the movies suffer from typecasting, they are unfortunately seen as “windows” into the world of another culture despite the fact not all people of the culture live or behave in a similar fashion (Logan, 2014). These films are not relatable due to the targeting a specific audience, the characters (who are black), and the circumstances of their situations (i.e. opposite side of the law, poor living conditions, etc.) (Potter, 2009). Even if a white audience member shares a similar experience (e.g. being destitute or poor economic standing), the differences in experiences between races and ethnicities and

the cultural experiences they bring with them do not fit the “one size fits all” approach which makes movies generalizable to a broader audience. (Carter, 2014) .

However, when the culture is presented through the lens from a white perspective, the film is viewed differently. Movies such as *Malibu's Most Wanted* and *Get Hard* manage to appeal to a more mainstream audience because the protagonist is white and thus more “relatable” to a wider audience. The protagonist plays the role of an out-of-touch, naïve white person who meets a black person who “teaches them the ropes” of black culture and the black experience. The black person is considered a *de facto* expert in all things relating to, and about black people, while the white protagonist is inexperienced and trusting, taking everything the black “teacher” says as fact (Banjo & Fraley, 2014). With this type of characterization, white audiences are given a chance to better understand “the struggle” African Americans go through while also being able to place themselves in similar predicaments since the main character is white. They can now fully visualize themselves in a black setting because the body experiencing the trials and tribulations is white (Banjo & Fraley, 2014).

The characterization presented in these films is flawed in numerous ways. While the intention of these films is to bring two cultures together, they undermine the allegorical tone and messages these culture films attempt to portray in favor of a white washing of the original message of the film. The situation is moot since the character is white and inherently devoid of the same predicaments as black characters. Against the backdrop of the privilege due to the whiteness of the character, the threats targeted towards African-Americans are incomprehensible due to the more “traditional” depictions of crime (crime committed by blacks) (Steinberg, 2018). The films send a

message that the only type of reprehensible crime is that committed by blacks. It does not dispute the fact that the white characters are committing crimes but rather that the level of blackness associated with the crime is the reason the act is criminal (Cacho, 2012).

Privilege is a major factor in how crime is depicted in film. Webster (2008) states the white ethnic group is portrayed as invisible in terms of how to deal with crime. A study conducted by Pepin (2016), which analyzed, intimate partner violence (IPV) among celebrities showed that, of 330 articles analyzed 67% of the articles involving black celebrities were placed into what she describes as “criminal framing” (compared to 34% of articles covering white celebrities involved in intimate partner violence (Pepin, 2016). Pepin further notes that articles involving white IPV moments were two and a half times more likely to be framed in a way that excused or justified their behavior. Heitzeg (2015) gives further support of white privilege by stating how white culpability is more likely to be viewed as an individual problem or as some sort of mental disorder due to “regular whiteness” being viewed as the norm while blackness is continuously linked with crime. While Webster (2008) notes that poor whites also may experience a type of discrimination due to their low socio-economic status and do not fit the “proper” term of whiteness, Cacho (2012) refutes this by stating these groups of whites are still seen as not completely criminal since they do not occupy the black body.

The supposed superiority of white culture is often reflected in movies involving race and crime. According to Hughey (2015), whiteness, specifically white masculinity, is seen as being better from a socio-economic stand point. Most movies make use of this trope and exploit it to better cater to a wider audience as well as passing on a message to

the viewers whether intentional or not. This issue is especially evident in movies that have a focus on social issues with *Malibu's Most Wanted* being a clear example of how whiteness and white masculinity is positively displayed in film despite the criminal activities present in the film (Hughey, 2012).

Theory

The literature review for this thesis finds support in multiple criminological and sociological theories of crime. One theory referenced extensively is labeling theory. Labeling theory states that offenders are not inherently criminal; it is the reaction society has towards the individual that dictates criminality and deviance (Fitch, 2002). Labeling theory asserts that laws are socially constructed and ultimately serve as a means for society to deem certain actions as criminal while others are not, making those who are labeled “criminal” victims of the law (Kenney, 2002). According to Cullen, Agnew, and Wilcox (2014), labeling theory not only transforms the identity of a person, but also their social relationships. African-Americans have had numerous labels attached to them as a people, mostly criminal. This label has provided a considerable challenge to how African-Americans form relationships with other racial groups as well as how they are depicted in the media (Littlefield, 2008).

Black characters are often written into a criminal trope which strengthens the idea that the label accurately fits the description of African-Americans (Corredera, 2017). This has resulted in not only the African population being labeled as deviant but also black culture. This labeling extends to the representation of blackness as non-black characters who exhibit these characteristics are also considered criminal, though not as completely as black characters (Cacho, 2012). As mentioned earlier, it is not until the characters

“code switch” into their “normal” racial backgrounds and leave the element of blackness alone that they break free from the criminal label (Anderson, 2000). The unfortunate consequence of the labeling of blackness is that the criminal label is permanent to both the individual and the culture. On the opposite end of the spectrum, whiteness is commonly labeled as good and is seen both as infallible and incorruptible (Zimring, 2015). The labeling of blackness as “criminal” faces the same problems in which incarcerated individuals have the label of “convict” attached to them (Alexander, 2010). Stigmatization is not easily broken as African-Americans still fall victim to issues of labeling including, but not limited to, racial profiling by police, discrimination, and at times social rejection (Tannenbaum, 1938). Films have done little to diminish these allegations and may exacerbate them.

Critical race theory states that the laws of American society are the result of the desire to keep the white dominant group in power (Mills, 2009). Critical race theory suggests that racist rhetoric is rooted in American society and creates a self-sustaining system of promoting white dominance (Bracey, 2015). Numerous forms of media participate in keeping the established white power structure as the most influential and authoritative force in the country. Laws relating to regulations and harsher punishment of certain drugs like crack vs cocaine, favor the white power structure (Hurwitz & Peffley, 2010). The failing of industrialized cities such as Detroit due to corporate greed falls under the umbrella of critical race theory as numerous jobs are taken out of inner city locations, the residence of many African-Americans and other minority groups (Wilson, 2009).

Many types of media have attempted to depict African-Americans and other minorities as ferocious and unappealing (Eschholz, Bufkin, & Long, 2002). For example, political cartoons during World War II depicted the Japanese as savage fiends, cleaning products that can “wash away the black,” the classic *Reefer Madness* which was propaganda film to demonize marijuana use, and *Birth of a Nation* which glorified the KKK and portrayed African-Americans as savages (Coleman & Daniel, 2000; Masuchika, 2013). This type of propaganda and media representation of minority groups lends support for a white dominant society. Even today, films continue to uphold these types of entertainment despite raising controversy. Films which contain the topic of blackness in its relation to the rest of society portray African American culture and mannerisms as inferior, criminal, and morally questionable. Many critical race theorists describe this as internalized racism and justify institutional racism in the country through means of popular trends and comedic effect (Perez-Huber & Soloranzo, 2015). Critical race theory serves to analyze the deeper meaning behind certain messages and practices which could potentially have hidden agendas against minority populations.

Several other theories are also referenced in the literature. Racial threat theory, also known as minority group threat theory, declares that the racial majority known as the “in-group” has a poor view towards the minority group known as “outgroup” due to the outgroup’s increase in population relative to the majority (Brooks Dollar, 2014). Thus, the in-group feels threatened and enacts more laws and rules to better maintain control of society. In the United States, the in-group is the white population while the outgroups are the different ethnic/racial minority groups, especially African-Americans (Fisher, Oddsson, & Wada, 2013).

Media, especially in the pre-Civil Rights Movement era, has a history of portraying minority groups in negative ways, likening them to beasts, savages, and other grotesque beings harmful to society. Examples of these types of media representation include propaganda like political cartoons depicting African Americans as threats to the wholesome white society (Norio Masuchika, 2013). Also, films have been used to incite fear amongst the white American populace and even in other minority groups other than African Americans (Min Sik & Ulmer, 2000).

Racial threat theory coincides with Marxist theory in that the proletariat and ruling class come into conflict. It also supports conflict theory where two groups view each other's motives and reasonings as deviant (Nilson, 2009). Movies involving African-Americans frequently show conflict with law enforcement in the United States (Hayle, Wortley, & Tanner, 2016). This conflict further stigmatizes African-American groups and places them in a criminal role despite being law abiding citizens having legitimate grievances.

Numerous studies have examined whether the media has any impact on how African-Americans are portrayed. While not confined to film, the studies do support the notion that media, and by extension film, are key factors in black representation (Bjornstrom et. Al., 2010). As stated earlier, Cobbina's study focused on how crack use and meth use were described in printed media. Crack use was often associated with African-Americans and violence while meth use was found to be associated with poor whites and noticeably less criminalized (Cobbina, 2008). Another study conducted by Dixon (2007) had participants view crime stories in a newscast. The study found that when the race of the suspect was not identified, participants initially believed the suspect

was black and the officers were white; heavy news viewers were more likely to hold these sentiments (Dixon, 2007).

A study conducted by Dowler (2004), in which a content analysis was done on 400, 30-minute episodes of crime stories, found that the characteristics of the story presentation, such as the suspect being handcuffed, was used as a predictor of a suspect's race using racially based stereotypes (Dowler, 2004). Yet another study conducted by Bjornstrom et. al. (2010) examined news reports from 2002-2003 and found that presentation and racial privilege effected how racial groups were presented (Bjornstrom et. al., 2010). This study examines film rather than news or television to determine the way in which blackness and criminality is represented through the lens of whiteness, black exploitation, black expropriation, and the black body.

Summary

Movies can have important societal impacts as well as reflect society's current views. A popular medium of entertainment, movies can influence and change their audience's perceptions about society. Berrettini (2004) notes that black characters in films face numerous obstacles primarily centered around their race. This is commonplace when black characters are featured. This demeaning representation in movies reveals an unaddressed inherent problem America has with its black populace (Halroyd, 2015). The negative portrayal of African-Americans and their culture has made them victims being labeled as "criminal" with no way of escaping that brand despite abiding by American society's laws and rules. African-Americans constantly face a world in which their very state of being is stigmatized (Cruthfield, 2010, Hayle, 2016, Kamalu, 2016).

The implications of these agendas can crucially sway the perception of many Americans toward blacks. As Carter (2014) points out, simple trends such as an increase in interracial marriages does not equate to a progressively accepting society. The systematic racism established since this country's early days still lingers. Consumers of cinema indulge in these unpleasantries, with movies using new and different means of discrimination such as colorism and socio-economic standing to push biased ideologies on the audience (Cochran, 2012). Ultimately, these films still perpetuate long held beliefs about African-Americans through the criminalization of their culture, promoting ideas that blacks and even brown skinned people are natural violators of the law and pose the biggest threat to American society (Capers, 2014). Films have purveyed this callous perception of criminalizing blackness by automatically establishing the black characters as guilty or in need of some form of redemption when there is none found or required (Gibson, 1978).

Nichols-Pethick (2012) contends in his book *TV Cops* that portrayals of law enforcement officers and suspects on both the big and small screen create a bond amongst viewers through shared principles and morals. He states that these media venues allow consumers to come together as a type of community and bond over the experiences told in the film and act as windows to view another way of living (Nichols-Pethick, 2012). This can lead to a toxic atmosphere if the portrayals on the screen give undesirable representations of individuals. Zook (1999) supports the idea that the criminalization of blackness is a consciously made decision: 1990s films and shows opened ways to discuss black culture and important issues in the black community in more positive and constructive ways.

Furthermore, the reinforcement of white privilege through film still presents a problem for many movie viewers. Gallagher and Twine (2017) assert that the promotion of whiteness is itself an extension of white supremacy. Movies such as *Gran Torino* still promote ideas that for blacks and other minority groups to succeed and become productive members of society, they must embrace white nature and abandon their own cultural heritage and beliefs (Kinney, 2015). This perpetuates the issue of making whiteness good and wholesome while further criminalizing blackness via its adverse representation in film.

Ultimately, the decision to criminalize the black body and blackness is left to those who wish to keep African-Americans at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Capers, 2014). The problem is not identifying racism but rather attempting to casually explain it away to maintain some form of neutrality among consumers who may hold bigoted views (Burke, 2017). While films such as *Get Hard* are used to portray race as almost inconsequential and even humorous through the lens of color blindness, these actions have only furthered the agenda of white superiority and the criminalization of blackness. By promoting stereotypes and negative imagery and claiming it as a means to “heal” society through the use of color blind racism, more damage has been done to the already tender issue of race relations in American society (Mueller, 2017). Attempting to explain the problem as simple white ignorance only opens the doors for more issues regarding race and ethnicity to permeate media outlets.

A Brief Note on “Culture”

There should be some clarification when it comes to the usage of the word “culture.” Culture can best be described as “man-made patterns for thinking, feeling, and behaving that are socially transmitted to an entire society or to segments of the society” (p. 21, Table 2.1). Shephard states this perception of culture should be broken down into two parts: material and immaterial. As described by Shephard, the material aspect of culture consists of tangible objects that are physically present. These include movies, music, and literature. They are physically present in world and make an impact due to their presence and being able to be seen. The immaterial aspect of culture focuses on the intangible concepts of culture. These include commonly shared ideas, beliefs, and ideals amongst a group of people that, while not being physically present, still have an influence in how people think and behave. Therefore, the use of the word “culture” in this particular thesis will be carefully used to specify the material and material aspects of culture rather than casually making use of the word (Shephard, 1974).

CHAPTER III -METHODOLOGY

This thesis will attempt to address how blackness and criminality are depicted in film by Hollywood. A purposive sampling method will be used for the selection of the films. Films will be selected if they deal with three major themes: race, criminality, and identity. These themes will serve as an umbrella in which the four factors discussed earlier (whiteness, black exploitation, cultural appropriation, and the black body) can be examined. It should be noted that the term “modern film” is not used since that refers to a specific genre of film not pertinent to this study. Instead, “recently released films” will be used as that fits the time frame in which the movies selected fit.

This study’s time frame is between the year 2000 to the present, the supposed “post-racial era” of racial cohesion. The argument is that older depictions of blackness and African Americans still plague the movie industry. Thus, movies are being selected due to being released during this period of supposed racial cohesion in order to answer the questions proposed by this thesis.

Three films will be selected for analysis: *Malibu’s Most Wanted* (2003), *White Chicks* (2004), and *Get Hard* (2015) because they deal with issues of race, racial identity, and the criminality of blackness and the black body. The films rely extensively on crude humor grounded in racial/ethnic stereotypes pertaining to African-Americans and their culture. Blackness in these films is often associated with criminal activity and is seen as questionable and undesirable by the characters in the film. Each movie has a particular view of blackness in its relationship to whiteness which makes for greater analytical possibilities.

Movies

The first movie, *Malibu's Most Wanted*, gives a generic stereotypical view of blackness from the perception of a white person. The movie shows common stereotypical depictions of how African-Americans are believed to behave. Moreover, these stereotypes are presented by a white protagonist. This movie will allow for a common analysis on how blackness is viewed and portrayed in Hollywood films in order to appeal to a wide audience. The second movie, *White Chicks*, was selected for its atypical depiction of blackness. Not only does the film take the perspective of two black protagonists but views blackness in its relationship to whiteness and masculinity. This cross-section can provide details of how blackness is compared to whiteness as well as adding gender-based concepts of how black masculinity is viewed when compared to white femininity. The third and final movie, *Get Hard*, provides a deeper look into the concept of blackness and criminality. While the previous movies deal with criminal elements, *Get Hard* allows an opportunity for a more thorough examination of the criminal identity and the black body. The nature of the movie displays a specific view crime and how deeply rooted race is in American societal views of race and crime even during the "post-racial era."

Analytical Methodology Approach

The approach used by Tzanelli, Yar, and O' Brien (2005) when analyzing criminality in film will guide the analysis of three movies to observe how their themes are presented and their interaction with the four factors. This careful examination of the different issues and representations of films while highlighting and discussing their hidden messages and meanings. Within the language of the film, interpretations of

criminality, in this case the criminalization of blackness, can be examined and discussed different components of the film. This method of analysis examines the various ways the social and political satire are conveyed within the film, or as the authors put it, “offers some conceptual and analytical anchors for interpreting film work so that other popular representations might be more easily situated within criminological analysis.” (Tzanelli et. al., 2005, p. 97)

The films will be analyzed in five steps:

1. Three movies will be selected based on the content of the movie. Each movie will be viewed in its entirety. Notes will be taken during the movie. If necessary, the movie will be watched again in order to achieve the best possible analysis.
2. Once the movie has been viewed, scenes will be selected in which fit the content of the thesis. Attention will be given to any instance in which the concept of race, identity, and crime conflict with one another during the course of the movie. Scenes will be selected based on the interactions of the multiple variables listed (whiteness, blackness, etc.) with scenes having the most interactions being selected. The scenes will have a time beginning and time ending. If there are an abundance number of scenes, random sampling will be done to reduce the scene selection.
3. Once the scenes have been selected, an interpretation will be conducted. Dialogue, character tropes, character presentation, and movie setting will be analyzed through a critical analysis lens. Character interactions, including verbal and nonverbal cues when issues of race arise, will also be accounted for

when analyzing movie scenes. The concepts of whiteness, exploitation, and the blackbody will be discussed as well.

4. Examples will be selected from the scene in order to support the analysis. This will be done in order to provide support for the analysis, so as to have a visual representation for a comparison.
5. The final step will be an overall analysis of the movie in its entirety. Specifically, details of the movie's production, cast, crew, and its development behind the scenes will be viewed to determine if an element of exploitation of African American culture. This will also serve as an analysis of why the movie could even be produced in the first place despite having controversial content.

Conceptual Definitions

Due to the interpretive nature of the study, specific definitions for terms will be supplied. For example, since there is no set standard for measuring whiteness, a specific definition is needed as a guideline for how it would be characterized in the movies. The definition of "whiteness" in this research will be based on the definition Philips (2017) used in her study in the *California Law Review*. She describes whiteness as "the demonization of non-whites so that by comparison whites are deified." (Philips, p. 2017). Building upon that definition, the term "whiteness" in this thesis will be defined as "tropes and practices culturally associated with white people which makes those of African-Americans appear uncivilized and criminal in comparison" (Philips, p. 1857, 2017). Some liberty has been taken with the initial definition used by Philips by adding personal conditions to better facilitate and specify what counts as whiteness when

analyzing films for this study. As stated previously, the term “recent film” will be used instead of “modern film” as the former term refers to a specific genre of film not associated with this study. “Recent film” will be defined as “movies released between 2000 and the present-the supposed post-racial era.”

The term “black body” will be used as Cacho used it in her book *Social Death*. Specifically, for the purpose of this thesis, the term “black body” will be defined as “individuals who have sub-Saharan African ancestry and identify as such” (i.e. African-Americans). The term blackness will also be based on Cacho’s description in *Social Death*. For the purpose of this thesis, the term blackness will be described as “actions and cultural practices often associated with African-Americans”. Another term being defined is exploitation.

The term exploitation will be defined as “unfairly benefitting from another group’s culture and/or experiences.” Cultural appropriation will be defined as “the taking of another group’s culture by a dominant group and making it their own.” The terms, definitions, and their sources can be found in Table 1 below. This will serve as a more streamlined guide to the terms and how they are being used in this thesis as well as the sources where the definitions were obtained. It should be noted that these definitions are not verbatim to the sources but rather act more of a guideline in which the definitions draw their meaning.

Table 1

Term	Definition	Source
Whiteness	tropes and practices culturally associated with white people which makes those of African-Americans appear uncivilized and criminal in comparison	Philips, <i>California Law Review</i>
Blackness	actions and cultural practices often associated with African-Americans	Cacho. <i>Social Death</i>
Black Body	those who are identified as having descended from Sub-Saharan African ancestry	Cacho, <i>Social Death</i>
Appropriation	the taking of another group's culture by a dominant group and making it their own	Robinson, <i>Race and Class</i>
Exploitation	unfairly benefitting from another group's culture and/or experiences	Robinson, <i>Race and Class</i>
Recent Film	movies released between 2000 and the present-the supposed post-racial era	Self-made

CHAPTER IV – FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

Each movie was viewed a total of five times. Thirty-two scenes were selected and analyzed for each movie based on the criteria established earlier herein. Scenes were selected based on the intersectionality between all five variables (whiteness, blackness, black body, appropriation, exploitation). While not every variable had to present, whiteness and some form of black (blackness or the black body) had to be present for analysis. Scenes which may have contained elements of whiteness, but no blackness or the black body, were excluded as being relevant to this research. A start time and an end time were included in the tables as a reference for when the scene begins and ends. The order in which the movies were viewed were *Malibu's Most Wanted*, *Get Hard*, and *White Chicks*.

Malibu's Most Wanted

Thirty-one scenes were analyzed in first movie, *Malibu's Most Wanted*. Film run time was 1 hour, 26 minutes, and 11 seconds. The total scene analysis was 34 minutes and 22 seconds. All scenes analyzed contained scenes of whiteness and blackness. Twenty-seven scenes contained elements of the black body (the lowest out of all the movies analyzed). Seventeen scenes contained elements of appropriation. Nine scenes contained elements of exploitation.

Table 2

Scene	Start Time Scene	End Time Scene	Scene Length	Scene Description	Whiteness	Blackness	Black Body	Appropriation	Exploitation
Scene 1	0 min 0 sec	2 min. 35 sec	2 min 35 sec	Bradley (Jamie Kennedy) describes his "hood" which is completely different from an actual ghetto (Malibu); also introduces his "ghetto" friends	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Scene2	2 min 36 sec	6 min. 36 sec	4 min	Bradley attempts to boost his dad's campaign trail with a rap performance; uses "black" vernacular on campaign signs	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Scene 3	8 min 9 sec	9 min	51 sec	Shows how Bradley fell in love with black culture	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 4	10 min 15 sec	11 min	45 sec	Tom (Blair Underwood), head of the campaign team, attempts to exploit the dangerous nature of the hood to deter Kennedy (scare the black out of him)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Scene 5	12 min	14 min 32 sec	2 min 32 sec	Introduces the "kidnappers" Sean (Taye Diggs) and PJ (Anthony Anderson); they show stereotypical traits of whiteness as well as being Uncle Toms (including Tom)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 6	15 min 45 sec	16 min 20 sec	35 sec	Bradley is being served by his black maid and makes a reference to "our people" despite his privileged nature	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Scene 7	16 min 35 sec	18 min 46 sec	2 min 11 sec	Sean is practicing street slang as if it is a foreign language; practice being thugs; can't relate to being an oppressed black man (ironic)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Scene 8	18 min 55 sec	19 min 8 sec	13 sec	As Shondra (Regina Hall) steps out the car, a pair of white girls make a disgusted face	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

Scene 9	20 min 16 sec	20 min 57 sec	41 sec	Bradley attempts to flirt using slang	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Scene 10	22 min 32 sec	23 min 22 sec	50 sec	Bradley tries to defend his "downness"	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Scene 11	24 min 45 sec	25 min 12 sec	27 sec	Bradley's friends engage in a roasting competition; the insults show how privilege they really are	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Scene 12	25 min 23 sec	25 min 49 sec	26 sec	Bradley refers to himself as a brother and validates his blackness by saying he watches BET; the actors tell him a "hood" narrative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Scene 13	26 min	26 min 17 sec	17 sec	The previous scene is subverted due to little girls inviting Shondra to come look at newborn puppies	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 14	28 min 12 sec	29 min	48 sec	Bradley says he is being his true self (stereotypically black) as Regina tries to convince him to be white	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 15	30 min 27 sec	31 min 44 sec	1 min 17 sec	The actors give Bradley instructions to rob a Korean store	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 16	34 min 25 sec	35 min 6 sec	41 sec	Sean says he's "scared of Koreans"; Bradley acts black to pretend like he robbed the store (he didn't)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Scene 17	35 min 49 sec	36 min 50 sec	1 min 1 sec	Bradley "reverts" into being white until the actors take him to a scary movie; his reaction is a typical "black" reaction during horror films	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Scene 18	38 min 25 sec	39 min 10 sec	45 sec	The actors bribe the club promoter to let Bradley rap at an open mic night event	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 19	40 min	40 min 30 sec	30 sec	Bradley "steps up" to Shondra's exboyfriend only to be manhandled	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 20	41 min 20 sec	45 min 30 sec	4 min 20 sec	Bradley chooses to "prove himself" by rapping; gets boo'd by the crowd; slips and says the n word and gets thrown out	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Scene 21	47 min 25 sec	48 min 14 sec	49 sec	Bradley mopes after his disastrous performance; Regina tries to console him	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 22	52 min 58 sec	54 min 27 sec	1 min 29 sec	Bradley embraces his "inner blackness" and goes from being a joke to a (humorous) threat	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Scene 23	55 min 2 sec	55 min 30 sec	28 sec	Bradley gets confronted by Shondra's exboyfriend; a shoot out occurs with Bradley being the ring leader	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 24	59 min	59 min 30 sec	30 sec	Bradley's father's campaign team seeks to exploit the kidnapping situation to boost approval ratings ; confronts gang leader	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Scene 25	59 min 47 sec	1 hr 7 sec	20 sec	Bradley gets into a standoff with the gang leader (Regina's ex)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Scene 26	1 hr 2 min 38 sec	1 hr 3 min 15 sec	37 sec	Bradley gets inducted into the gang; begins to realize the situation is more dangerous than he thought	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 27	1 hr 4 min 30 sec	1 hr 5 min 42 sec	1 min 12 sec	Bradley's father gets into an argument with his campaign manager	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 28	1 hr 6 min 6 sec	1 hr 7 min 18 sec	1 min 12 sec	Bradley's friends gear up to rescue him from South Central	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Scene 29	1 hr 9 min 45 sec	1 hr 10 min 1 sec	16 sec	Shondra tries to convince Kennedy that the situation he is in is real	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 30	1 hr 14 min 10 sec	1 hr 15 min 10 sec	1 min	Bradley and his father make amends with one another; the "no black father around" trope is brought up	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Scene 31	1 hr 17 min 17 sec	1 hr 18 min 1 sec	44 sec	The actors try to gain sympathy by spinning their story to the news and finally "acknowledging" their blackness; it doesn't work	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

Malibu's Most Wanted stars Jamie Kennedy as Bradley "B-Rad" Gluckman, a white, wannabe rapper who aims to make it big in the hip hop scene. Influenced by black culture at a young age, Bradley believes he has found his true identity. However, his father Bill Gluckman, who happens to be running for governor in the state of California, believes his son is simply going through crisis, and wishes his son to be "normal". Tom Gibbons (Blair Underwood), who is Bill's campaign manager, comes up with a plan to make Bradley "white" by hiring two actors to act as thugs and take Bradley to the ghetto to show him the hard life of "the hood". What follows is a number of misadventures in which Bradley's self-identity will be called into question as his personal views on life are challenged by the realities of the world.

Bradley, a rich, white male from an affluent, political family, becomes enamored with black culture at a young age. Despite coming from a well-off family, Bradley constantly seeks to emulate "hood" culture and increase his street credibility even going so far as to become a rapper. However, despite his insistence that he is of the culture, Bradley avoids many of the negative aspects the black characters face from not being harassed by police to not facing any punishment for being a participant in a blatant shoot out (Scene 25).

In essence, the character himself represents the epitome of cultural appropriation and exploitation. Not only is Bradley written as a type of "culture vulture" (Mook & Miyakawa, 2014) but he is also written to openly exploit the mannerisms and hardships many African-Americans face growing up in poor, inner-city environments. Bradley exploits the tough language, attitude, and perception of African-Americans by comparing

their real world problems with issues that are laughable and demeaning. For example he compares nine iron golf clubs to actual nine millimeters or the different, harmless cliques as gangs, and even describing his luxurious mansion as “not much” (Scene 1). Gang violence and poverty are serious issues in urban communities in which African-Americans reside, and yet Jamie Kennedy creates a narrative of this film which makes light of the issues for comedic purposes which is, in and of itself, a variation of white privilege as well as exploitation and appropriation (McCarthy, 1998).

Bradley seems to be applauded rather than reprimanded for his actions. His whiteness allows him to circumnavigate the issues the black characters face in the movie as he is portrayed as too “innocent” to commit any of the crimes largely due to his whiteness rather than his social ignorance. Bradley’s whiteness essentially acts as a repellent when it comes to the issues faced by the African-Americans characters in the film (as seen in Scenes 2, 15, 22, & 25 all of which are scenes that would play out drastically different if Bradley were black). Despite not knowing him on a personal level, numerous characters make the assumption that Bradley is rich and is aware of his possible monetary value.

In stark contrast, Blair Underwood’s character shows a complete devotion to whiteness and detests anything associated with blackness or black culture although being black (in both Scene 4 & 5 Blair Underwood’s character makes a habit of being extremely critical of black culture making plans to “scare the black” out of Bradley and outwardly mocking black culture). Despite his devotion to what Hughey (2015) would

call true whiteness, he is still vilified and rejected even among his white peers who went along with his plan to antagonize Kennedy's character.

This reveals two factors in terms of black criminality and white privilege. First, while both characters committed deviant acts, Underwood's character was perceived more reprehensible despite Kennedy's character being involved in more violent and questionable activities. Kennedy obtains a free pass because his whiteness inherently prevents him from being considered a criminal. The attempted robbery, the shootout, and the massive brawl are all swept away because Kennedy cannot be seen doing any of the acts; his whiteness makes it unthinkable that he would do such things, and his privilege allows him to avoid facing consequences for his actions (Cacho, 2012). Kennedy can shed the criminal identity and still be considered a decent person unlike the black characters who cannot due to the criminal/deviant features being inherently associated with blackness and black people.

Second, despite being amongst the white group and playing up his own variation of whiteness, Blair Underwood is still viewed as a despicable character even though he is a law-abiding citizen. Underwood's character never gets in any violent actions and remains mostly a hands-off antagonist yet faces the greatest scrutiny when reaching the film's resolution (Scene 27). Underwood is an example of the black body attempting to escape the criminality often associated with blackness but ultimately is still rejected (Cacho, 2012). The film continues to perpetuate the idea of black being inherently wrong and white being justifiable and deserving of redemption (House, 2017). Thus, Kennedy manages to find his redemption and justification while Underwood does not experience

the same outcome. The movie reinforces the idea that the black body cannot, and will not, be accepted amongst the white masses even if abiding by the established rules (Cacho, 20102).

As for the issue of culture, in both its material and immaterial aspects, Kennedy's character negatively reinforces common stereotypical beliefs about black people. Sagging clothes, large chains, and slang are abundant in Kennedy's portrayal of "blackness" in a white body. What's more, Kennedy's character constantly preaches about acceptance yet constantly benefits from occupying a white body (Scenes 1, 2, &3). *Malibu's Most Wanted* completely ignores the very message it is trying to present by maintaining a positive slant on whiteness and how it benefits the characters in the movie. The friends of Kennedy's character are also representatives of the stereotypical culture often associated with black people and blackness. Of particular interest is Haji, the dark olive skin toned friend of Kennedy with a Middle Eastern sounding accent who, despite being a minority, is still considered a "white" character and above reproach of criminal activities (while most of the activities he engages in would be seen as unwanted, Scene 28 strongly implies Haji may have connections to terrorist groups in the Middle East with his "strap" being an rpg he got from his uncle). While there is an implication that wealth allows Haji to assimilate into the upper echelon of white society, it should be noted that he too engages in acts of blackness yet lacks a black body. The only time anything criminal or deviant is reprimanded in the entire movie is when a black body is occupying the space.

Over all, the movie attempts to take on issues of race in a comedic style from a different point of view with the white character being “educated” by his black “brethren”. What begins as a movie attempting to spread understanding and acceptance through comedy instead engages in stereotypical depictions of African-Americans and their culture. The tropes Kennedy uses as a means to spread a message of understanding is a one-way street. Instead of acknowledging the blatant racial mockery that Kennedy’s character (and to a larger extent white America) has about African-Americans, he opted to create a white apologist film in which white ignorance is seen as excusable, forgivable, and even tolerable under specific circumstances to the detriment of African-Americans and their culture. In this movie (and the two other movies that follow) African-American characters are rarely seen as sympathetic; more often they are as reprehensible as their white counterparts. Films produced with these specific “tweaks” written in the character development highlight how Hollywood and America views blackness and the black body.

Get Hard

Thirty-one scenes were analyzed in the second movie *Get Hard*. The film runs a total time of 1 hour, 48 minutes, and 18 seconds. The total time of scenes analyzed was 24 minutes and 43 seconds. All scenes analyzed contained elements of whiteness, blackness, and the black body. Eighteen scenes contained elements of appropriation. Twenty-five scenes contained elements of exploitation.

Table 3

Scene	Start Scene Time	End Scene Time	Scene Length	Scene Description	Whiteness	Blackness	Black Body	Appropriation	Exploitation
Scene 1	2 min 56 sec.	3 min 17 sec.	21 sec.	Darnell (Kevin Hart) tries to buy a better house using "white talk"	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Scene 2	3 min. 53 sec.	4 min 22 sec.	29 sec.	Scene shows the type of school Darnell's daughter attends	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 3	4 min 23 sec.	4 min 46 sec	23 sec.	James (Will Ferrell) engages in ethnic exercise/martial arts training	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 4	6 min 51 sec	7 min 5 sec	14 sec	Scene shows the disparity between those with and without money focusing on Hispanic workers and a homeless black man; those with money are shown as white	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Scene 5	7 min 56 sec	9 min 4 sec	1 min 8 sec	Shows the conditions of James' job (affluent, yes-man, predominantly white) compared to Darnell's job (poor, slight insubordination, black)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 6	11 min 47 sec	12 min 8 sec	21 sec.	James displays stereotypical fear of black people when Darnell gives him the keys to his car after washing it	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 7	12 min 16 sec	12 min 23 sec	7 sec	James awkwardly explains he would have reacted to Darnell's sudden appearance even if he (Darnell) was white	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 8	12 min 39 sec	12 min 50 sec	11 sec.	Darnell takes on a stereotypical black con-man persona and tries to get James to buy an "exclusive" car wash deal for \$30,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Scene 9	13 min 15 sec	14 min 3 sec	48 sec	James awkwardly "explains" how he got to his social status through hard work and refers to non-white races as "miscellaneous"/also acts as a miser when tipping Hart	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Scene 10	18 min 54 sec	19 min	6 sec	James' reaction on watching a show on what prison will be like; most of the inmates shown are black men fighting one another	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Scene 11	22 min 20 sec	23 min	40 sec	James uses statistics to explain to Darnell how he knows he has been to prison	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Scene 12	23 min 5 sec	23 min 42 sec	37 sec	Darnell explains what is going to happen to James in prison; James' responds in an atypical manner	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Scene 13	24 min 26 sec	24 min 47 sec	21 sec.	James and Darnell have an awkward handshake after striking a deal with James stating he "only knows two" handshakes (black handshakes)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 14	25 min 4 sec	25 min 23 sec	19 sec	Darnell explains to his wife why James hired him to "train" him; it's because he was "being black"	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 15	25 min 44 sec	26 min 21 sec	37 sec.	Darnell demonstrates to his wife how he can act like a thug; calls his wife out her name (while pretending) and quickly drops the image as she hits him	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 16	27 min 54 sec	28 min 24 sec	30 sec	Darnell talks to his cousin (who has been incarcerated) over the phone to find out what prison was like; cousin calls out Darnell's white image	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 17	30 min 8 sec	30 min 33 sec	25 sec	James uses "white comedy" to compare his struggles to those who are in prison; Hart is not amused	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 18	31 min 20 sec	31 min 41 sec	21 sec.	Darnell shows James a "mad dog" face; James reverts to a stereotypical cowardly white man	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 19	33 min 2 sec	33 min 47 sec	45 sec	James tries to show he can fight by demonstrating his lackluster Brazilian martial arts skill to Darnell; he fails	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 20	35 min 40 sec	37 min 13 sec	1 min 33 sec	Darnell tries to teach Ferrel how to be brave in prison by making him fight strangers; James picks the black guy and ends up getting beat up	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Scene 21	38 min 1 sec	40 min 47 sec	2 min 46 sec	Darnell roleplays various demographics found in prison mocking black, Mexican, and gay inmates in an attempt to get James to face confrontation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 22	47 min 20 sec	48 min 14 sec	54 sec	Darnell asks James to demonstrate his trash talk	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 23	53 min	54 min 11 sec	1 min 11 sec	Darnell freaks out as he drives James to his wife (who is a nurse) to remove a shiv after a simulated prison riot goes wrong	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scene 24	54 min 26 sec	55 min 4 sec	38 sec	James has dinner with Darnell's family after removing the shiv and eats as if he is in prison	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Scene 25	55 min 50 sec	57 min 33 sec	1 min 43 sec	Darnell explains how he got "locked up" and uses a scene from the movie <i>Boyz n tha Hood</i> as his story; James believes him	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 26	59 min	1 hr 49 sec	1 min 48 sec	James assumes Darnell wants him to act black (blackface) and dresses stereotypically black in order to impress Hart's cousin	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 27	1 hr 2 min 4 sec	1 hr 3 min 13 sec	1 min 9 sec	James and Darnell go to his cousin's neighborhood where James is greeted with a less than warm welcome due to his appearance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 28	1 hr 5 min 16 sec	1 hr 6 min 22 sec	1 min 6 sec	James befriends "the hood" by introducing them to stocks and bonds	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 29	1 hr 17 min 19 sec	1 hr 17 min 54 sec	35 sec	Darnell tries to "act black" in order to intimidate a hitman	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 30	1 hr 19 min 13 sec	1 hr 21 min 33 sec	2 min 20 sec	James goes back to the hood to hang with the homies after finding out Darnell lied to him; breaks up a fight between friends and seems to hav assimilated into their society	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scene 31	1 hr 22 min 49 sec	1 hr 23 min 28 sec	39 sec	James is shocked that he almost killed to be apart of a gang but also states that they made him felt welcome; compares the gang's leader to a young Ronald Reagan	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

Scene 32	1 hr 31 min 17 sec	1 hr 31 min 25 sec	8 sec	James rejects the advances of his ex fiance and claims she has a "white girl's ass" implying he has caught jungle fever	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
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The film *Get Hard* stars Kevin Hart as Darnell Lewis and Will Farrell as James King, two people from the opposite ends of the social spectrum. Darnell is a down on his luck car wash owner who wants the better things in life for his family and himself. James is an up and coming wealthy stock broker who has everything he could ever want. When James gets accused of embezzlement and faces a harsh prison sentence, he turns to Darnell to teach him how to survive in prison under the impression that Hart's character has been incarcerated due to his race. However, Darnell is the exact opposite of James' expectations. Thus, the movie documents how Darnell gives James questionable advice in order to obtain monetary compensation for his efforts.

The very premise of *Get Hard* plays upon the criminalization of blackness and black people. While depictions of the interactions between James and other black characters are laughably exaggerated, the basis of these interactions are not. These exaggerated interactions are an attempt to portray just how little James is acquainted with African-Americans. However, this serves as poor mechanism to cover up the realism behind the comedy. This is illustrated in Scene 6 when Darnell attempts to return James' car keys after washing his car. James shows extreme anxiety, fear, and panic when he believes Darnell is a thug attempting to mug him. This disapproving reaction towards blackness and black people is not unfounded as Ansolabehere and Stewart (2009) described in their study that many non-Hispanic whites did not vote for President Barack Obama during the 2008 and 2012 elections. Goldman (2017) supports their findings with evidence from his study; he found that fear of blackness stemmed from a perceived notion of racial favoritism and fear of political retribution due to past misdeeds. So, despite Ferrell giving an extreme over-exaggeration of white people and their whiteness, the essence of his

interactions and reactions towards the black characters is not founded on false allegations. Instead it is a systematic fear of black people, grounded in a societally reinforced stereotype which depicts black people as being dangerous, aggressive, and criminal.

Darnell plays an interesting role when it comes to the intersectionality between blackness, whiteness, and criminality. While not stating it in such patently obvious manner, Darnell shows disdain over the “blackness” that surrounds him despite himself occupying a position in that category (Scenes 1 & 2 show how Darnell dislikes his current status in life). He despise his family’s living conditions and wants to move up in the socio-economic ladder. The opening scenes of the film show Darnell attempting to smooth talk his way into purchasing a house in a neighborhood which is vastly different from his current residence (Scene 1). He shows admiration for James, who epitomizes whiteness, and sees him has the ultimate source of success and security while aspiring to become just like him. Darnell displays negative views towards blackness and, to an extent, the other black characters in the film. The only positive interactions Hart has with black people are his wife and daughter. While this may seem to be comical writing, it has consequences. Hart’s character, a black man occupying both the blackness and the black body, negatively reinforces the idea that these concepts are both frowned upon and unwanted.

In essence, Darnell validates the ideas white America has about blackness and the black body by his negative exchanges with most of the black characters in the film. It should also be noted that, excluding Hart and his immediate family, all of the black characters in the film are depicted as gang bangers who revel in the idea of committing criminal activities (as seen in Scene 28 where James is shows them stocks and bonds and they discuss with humor and enjoyment about their gang lifestyle), lazy workers who do

not want to achieve higher standing (as seen in Scene 5 where Darnell's employees are lounging about with little or no motivation to work), or are poor and homeless (as depicted in Scene 4 during a montage which shows the different living conditions of the Los Angeles populations; the people with the money are predominately white while African-Americans are shown in poorer living conditions). This imagery strengthens the criminalistic tropes often associated with African-Americans (Brooks, 2014).

Appropriation and exploitation are also depicted in this film. Again, Darnell is central to the intersectionality between these ideas and criminal activity. As previously stated, Darnell is hired by James to teach him how to survive in prison. The catch is that Darnell has never seen the inside of a prison let alone committed any heinous crimes. However, desperate for money, Darnell takes it upon himself to "teach" James the ways of the prison subculture. Darnell exploits the mannerisms and customs of inmates for his own gain, essentially embodying his own function of whiteness. After being mistaken for an ex-convict by James, Darnell adopts the identity of a person who is fresh out of prison. Darnell slowly transforms James' home into a makeshift prison and "trains" James with ideas and imagery he either obtained from his cousin (who actually went to prison) or through what he had seen in the media like everyone else. In addition, Darnell also depicts the mannerisms of not only black inmates but also Hispanic/Latino inmates, the issues of racial tension between these two groups in prison, and even prison homosexuality.

These are serious issues when it comes to the environment and culture of the prison system in the United States, yet Darnell downplays them as nothing more than trivial shortcomings that James will face. The issue of validation also presents itself with Darnell once again playing the role of a validator. Essentially, with this concept of validation,

Darnell gives Ferrell a “pass” with his actions due to him passing himself off as a representation of the culture he is emulating. Darnell essentially “poses” as someone who has experienced prison culture first hand. He uses his inherent blackness and his occupancy of the black body to obtain profit. By proxy, this gives James a metaphorical “green light” to also engage in these actions despite their offensive and degrading nature even when Darnell does these actions. In addition, this validation serves as a method of confirmation, as Darnell, being black and exhibiting blackness gives these portrayals and reaffirms long held stereotypical beliefs about African-Americans.

Prisons have often been associated with black people due to the disproportionate incarceration rates of African-Americans when compared to their white counterparts. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (2018) African-Americans made up 38% of the prison population in the United States despite only being 13% of the country’s population. Darnell’s mockery of the inmates is, by extension, a mockery of those inmates inside its walls, especially the black inmates. This lends further credence to the idea of equating blackness and the black body with crime with Darnell acting as a cosigner. This differs from James’ appropriation of black culture when he interacts with the black characters.

While initially despised for attempting to be a “poser”, James is quickly accepted into the fold of the black gang members and even manages to win the affections of one the ladies in the gang. Similar to Jamie Kennedy’s character from *Malibu’s Most Wanted*, James’ transition into the gang and into blackness as a whole accomplished with greater ease than Darnell attempting to leave the confines of his blackness. The film implies this is due to James’ innate whiteness, making him unique and different among the typical

interactions the gang has with other people. Thus, despite James making a mockery of blackness through appropriation and exploitation, he is, once again, saved by the grace of his whiteness, with the film glorifying it rather than admitting that it contributed to the overall problem.

White Chicks

Thirty-two scenes were analyzed in the movie *White Chicks*. The film runs one hour, forty-eight minutes, and forty-four seconds. The total time of the scenes analyzed was 22 minutes 13 seconds. All scenes analyzed in the movie contained elements of whiteness and the black body. Thirty of the analyzed scenes contained elements of blackness; nineteen contained elements of appropriation. Twenty-seven of the analyzed scenes contained elements of exploitation.

Table 4

Scene	Start Scene Time	End Scene Time	Scene Length	Scene Description	Whiteness	Blackness	Black Body	Appropriation	Exploitation
Scene 1	1 min 35 sec	3 min 22 sec	1 min 47 sec	Two FBI agents/brothers Kevin Copeland and Marcus Antony Copland II (Shawn and Marlon Wayans) are undercover as Hispanic merchants and use over exaggerated tropes; white dealers seem uncomfortable	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 2	7 min 32 sec	7 min 52 sec	20 sec	Two other FBI agents (white) mock the brothers for messing up their bust	yes	Yes	yes	no	no
Scene 3	12 min 19 sec	12 min 43 sec	24 sec	The heiresses arrive at the airport and make assumptions when seeing the brothers	yes	Yes	yes	no	yes
Scene 4	12 min 50 sec	13 min	10 sec	One of the brothers is put in the trunk with the rest of the luggage in favor of the dog sitting in the front	yes	Yes	yes	no	yes
Scene 5	14 min 49 sec	15 min 35 sec	46 sec	One of the brothers tries to apologize for an accident that occurred; the girls don't take it well	yes	Yes	yes	no	no
Scene 6	17 min 23 sec	18 min 47 sec	1 min 24 sec	Montage scene where the brothers transition into white girls	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 7	19 min 18 sec	19 min 52 sec	34 sec	The brothers (while in disguise) get hit on and revert to being "manly" (ghetto)	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 8	19 min 56 sec	20 min 11 sec	15 sec	The brothers "embrace" their white status and make derogatory marks towards the Hispanic agent	yes	No	yes	yes	yes

Scene 9	20 min 44 sec	21 min 48 sec	1 min 4 sec	The brothers act how they think the girls would act when asked for a credit card and i.d.	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Scene 10	23 min 29 sec	23 min 56 sec	27 sec	The brothers meet the friends who notice a few different things (mainly the lips "Cameron Diaz to Jay Z")	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 11	24 min 10 sec	24 min 22 sec	12 sec	Two rich white guys comment on the brothers' disguises noticing their physical features (Wilt Chamberlin sisters)	yes	Yes	yes	no	no
Scene 12	26 min 15 sec	27 min 11 sec	56 sec	The brothers get into a "yo mamma" fight with another group of rich girls; there is a clear difference	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 13	31 min 8 sec	31 min 44 sec	36 sec	Two black men Latrell (Terry Crews) and his friend play up the Uncle Tom chasing after white women trope	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Scene 14	32 min 8 sec	32 min 20 sec	12 sec	Latrell brings up the old "once you go black" trope while hitting on one of the brothers	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 15	33 min 28 sec	34 min 55 sec	1 min 27 sec	While riding in the car the brothers attempt to sick a "white" song; they begin to jam when rap comes on; encourages friends to say n word during song	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 16	36 min 50 sec	37 min 24 sec	34 sec	The image of sexual attraction between black and white culture is highlighted	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Scene 17	40 min 45 sec	41 min 31 sec	46 sec	A chase occurs when a thief steals the one of the brothers' purse; his athleticism (while in disguise) is noted	yes	yes	yes	no	yes

Scene 18	42 min 22 sec	42 min 33 sec	11 sec	Displeased with their sitting arrangements one of the girls blames the brothers for their black behavior	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 19	45 min 14 sec	46 min 18 sec	1 min 4 sec	There is a celebrity charity event which happens to be an auction for going on dates with women	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 20	48 min	49 min 21 sec	1 min 21 sec	The brothers host a slumber party in their room; one of the friends is getting her hair braided cornrow style; comments that her friend may have been black in a past life	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 21	51 min 49 sec	52 min 7 sec	18 sec	One of the brothers "forgets" to be white when he gets upset about a prank pulled on him and the girls	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Scene 22	55 min 51 sec	56 min 30 sec	39 sec	The wife of one of the brothers gets notified of insufficient funds due to excessive spending of her husband being undercover; invokes the angry black woman trope and the cheating black man trope	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 23	57 min 31 sec	59 min 14 sec	1 min 43 sec	Latrell picks up one of the brothers for his auction date; exemplifies stereotypical subservient black man to a white woman behavior (Uncle Tom)	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 24	59 min 20 sec	59 min 39 sec	19 sec	Latrell becomes territorial when he thinks another black man is picking up his date	yes	Yes	yes	no	yes
Scene 25	1 hr	1 hr 44 sec	44 sec	Latrell and the brother go on their date; numerous innuendos are made involving race	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 26	1 hr 11 min 4 sec	1 hr 11 min 45 sec	41 sec	Latrell spikes a drink to get lucky further emphasizing the predatory black man stereotype	yes	Yes	yes	no	yes

Scene 27	1 hr 14 min 34 sec	1 hr 15 min 51 sec	1 min 17 sec	The brothers get into a dance battle with the rival group of girls	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 28	1 hr 30 min 25 sec	1 hr 31 min 39 sec	1 min 14 sec	The brothers walk a runway and pose in a gangster fashion	yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes
Scene 29	1 hr 36 min 30 sec	1 hr 36 min 39 sec	9 sec	The black women make stereotypical comments about getting ready for a fight	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Scene 30	1 hr 38 min 38 sec	1 hr 39 min 3 sec	25 sec	Latrell finds out his "true love" isn't what he expected	yes	Yes	yes	no	yes
Scene 31	1hr 42 min 7 sec	1hr 42 min 17 sec	10 sec	Implied that Latrell gets with the real sisters; uses old time tropes to flirt with them	yes	Yes	yes	no	yes
Scene 32	1hr 42 min 56 sec	1hr 43 min	4 sec	The brothers still remain friends with the real sisters' friends	yes	Yes	yes	yes	no

The final movie of this analysis, *White Chicks*, stars Marlon and Shawn Wayans as brothers Kevin and Marcus Copeland. In the film, the two brothers are undercover FBI agents who are trying to protect two sisters who are heiresses to a vast fortune. However, when an incident occurs which upsets the sisters, the brothers go undercover as them to avoid suspicion of their sudden absence. What follows is a misadventure about two black men being out of their element in elite white society as two white women despite coming from vastly different cultural backgrounds.

Like the other two movies, *White Chicks* is a comedy that focuses on the interactions between blackness and whiteness. However, unlike the other movies, *White Chicks* also incorporates the themes of the intersectionality black masculinity and white femininity. From the beginning, the brothers are portrayed as inept at their job. While not stated overtly, there is a strong implication that the brothers routinely botch their assignments in their attempts to “play it cool” while on the job. This is apparent in the interactions the brothers have with their non-black coworkers when their street knowledge is regarded as childish at best (Scene 2). As with the previous movies, *White Chicks* also has a black character who epitomizes everything that stands against and shames blackness. Terry Crews’ character, Latrell Spencer, plays the age old stereotypical Uncle Tom trope.

Similar to Hart’s performance in *Get Hard*, Crews’ character adds validation to the negative portrayal of black people. Crews plays the generic black athlete prying on white women. In fact, Crews’ entire role in the movie is to successfully “go hunting” for a white woman to take home. As the movie progresses, Crews’ actions appear

increasingly as he heinous attempts blatant date rape to satisfy his carnal needs. This predation upon “innocent” white women is a key element in the modern description of blackness, especially with respect to criminal and deviant activity (Scene 26). Crews’ character even expresses a complete and total loathing of blackness and the black body when he discovers his “love interest” is actually a black man. Instead of being offended by the crossdressing, Crews completely ignores it and goes directly for the race of the undercover agent instead, expressing shock, disgust, and using old term racial slurs (jiggaboo) that somebody black would try to be with him (Scene 30).

It should also be noted that many of the “black” activities/features shown in the film are either viewed as unwanted, deviant, or blatantly criminal. In multiple scenes, the brothers “revert” to their blackness when they become angered or annoyed (as seen in Scenes 7 & 12). These scenes display blackness in an unflattering manner usually displayed as unnecessarily hostile (Scene 7 shows both brothers “going ghetto” when they get hit on by other men). This “reversion” into blackness suggests a sense of inferiority when compared to the whiteness in the film. It also implies that the default personality of a black person is comprised of aggression and violence and these are shown as an “acceptable” means of blackness (Perez-Huber & Solorzano, 2015). This is especially true of black women in the movie. Throughout, Marcus’ wife is shown as being easily agitated and aggressive in her demeanor and constantly accuses Marcus of being unfaithful to her despite his occupation as an undercover agent. This can be seen in Scene 29, as Marcus’ wife and her friend engage in an altercation with some guests at a party due to her belief that he is cheating on her. This is especially problematic since

Marcus' wife and her friend are the only representations of black women in the film. When compared to their white counterparts which, while spoiled and rude, are still shown as dainty and womanly, the only two black women in the entire film are shown as violence prone and belligerent, which reinforces the "angry black woman" stereotype, which is also seen as deviant behavior.

Almost all the white characters in the film occupy a position of privilege. While the setting of the movie takes place in upper white society, all the black people in the film are depicted as inept and in lower social-economic levels. Of the few black characters introduced in the film, all are deeply flawed and presented in unsympathetic or stereotypical ways (the brothers being inept at their jobs as seen in Scene 2, Latrell being a stalker/potential rapist as seen in Scene 26, the overly aggressive black women as seen in Scene 29). While the white characters are also greatly flawed due to their affluence and privilege, the film depicts them as being redeemable and void of any major consequences of character growth.

Brittney and Tiffany, the rich socialites the agents are meant to protect, do not go through any type of character development and continue to maintain their haughty attitudes. Even their friends, whom the brothers end up becoming close friends with, do not really mature as the movie reaches its resolution; they maintain a mindset they had at the beginning of the film. This static character development even effects how the agents are depicted in the film. While the movie initially tries to conceptualize how the brothers are going to manage their disguises due to the extreme difference in cultures, the narrative slowly transitions (similar to the other two movies) into a white apologist film

that attempts to downplay the disparity between whites and African-Americans. Once again, comedy is used to cover white ignorance and even make it excusable (while the whole movie itself serves as a message for this, Scenes 15 & 16 make it even more apparent with the girls using racial slurs during rap songs and address it in a manner of little concern and even poking fun at the image of black beauty with negative remarks). The brothers themselves become less of a vehicle to bridge understanding between the two groups and fall into the trope of the Magical Negro; instead of learning and resolving any issues between the two groups, they become embroiled in the mishaps of the white characters and focus on their problems (specifically Scenes 12, 20, & 27 show the brothers using their blackness such as winning a “yo mamma” fight, braiding cornrows in the girls’ hair while discussing their love life, and winning a dance in order to up the social standing of the white girls to make them look cool). The critique of the film is apparent (white privilege, affluence, corruption, etc.) but becomes second nature by the end of the film due to the focus of the story shifting away from these themes and more towards a generic, gender bending comedy (by the end of the movie as shown in Scene 32, the only issue resolved is the money heist, the girls do not learn anything from each other and are still implied to be woefully ignorant of black culture which, at this point, has been mostly stamped out).

In terms of gender disparity, *White Chicks* does not adequately convey the social issues amongst the two main groups. All the white women shown in the film are presented as snobbish, childish, petty, and immature. While these characters are purposely written in this vein as a critique of upper class, white society, it becomes

invalidated when the main characters willingly indulge and even promote behavior that engage in ignorance without any real consequences to them. The women engage in all manner of deviance including assault, battery, and even indulging in racist rhetoric without being shown the severity of their actions. This is in stark contrast to the brothers who face reprehension and termination almost immediately when they blunder.

This depiction of black characters in the film leads to a criminalistic view of blackness. This caters to the schtick that within the United States there is an unspoken racial heirarhy in which these women, despite living in a male dominant society, still occupy a sphere of influence superior to that of a black person, regardless of their standing or occupation.

Ultimately, while *White Chicks* attempts to address cultural and gender issues between two groups of people, it actually reinforces the negative societal ideas about African-Americans as a whole. All elements of blackness depicted in the movie are seen as undesirable and criminal. From having “black” features (Scene 16) to Crews’ outright disgust of it, blackness is viewed detrimentally rather than being culturally significant. The brothers seem to be reaching out to better understand the complexities of white society rather than whites acknowledging their faults and their own deficiencies. Also, the inclusion of an Uncle Tom sellout black character, subverts and takes away from the idea of what the movie attempts to convey to its audience. Instead of pointing out the absurdity and unfairness of the cultural issues at large, it simply becomes a case of negating the blame by having someone of the same group engage in these activities. This

proves to be problematic, as the audience focuses more on the comedy rather than the overall message.

Discussion

In each movie, blackness was negatively portrayed. Each movie took the concept of blackness and depicted it in different ways with each depiction being accompanied with stereotypical “black” behavior. *Malibu’s Most Wanted* had blackness depicted in a buffoonish nature. Characters like Bradley show a cliché example of blackness such as speaking in a slang vernacular and dressing in typical “black” attire featuring sagging clothes and excessive jewelry. Both the material and immaterial aspects of black culture were portrayed as undesirable. A majority of the characters in the movie evinced a disdain of blackness or anything associated with black culture. In this regard, the filmmakers are acknowledging that there is an inherent apprehension when it comes to how blackness is seen in the United States. Blair Underwood’s character, Tom Gibbons, has an almost immediate dislike for anything associated with blackness, deeming it as crude, undesirable, and inferior to “proper” society which coincidentally happens have a majority white population. His name, Tom, is also a play on the phrase “Uncle Tom”, a term to describe an African-American who has “sold out” their own people.

In *Get Hard*, blackness was also seen in a negative perspective as Kevin Hart’s character (Darnell) is shown to be firmly against anything dealing with black people or their culture. His overall goal is to escape the confines of the blackness in which he is surrounded to live a better life which he equates with whiteness (in Scene 8 Darnell attempts to get James to buy an extremely expensive carwash membership while even

stating he wishes to have the same type of success as James). Darnell gives confirmation to the negative imagery associated with blackness due to his willingness to be separated from that culture. The only occasion when he exhibits any form of “proper” blackness is when he is impersonating black inmates or attempting to appear as a thug to validate himself to James (Will Ferrell). During these demonstrations Darnell is relying strictly on the stereotypical imagery of blackness, even giving the same performances in which he denounces himself as a black man (specifically Scene 12 shows Darnell get angry at how James generalizes black people; in Scene 21 Darnell goes and acts out different personifications of prison life which are extremely stereotypical despite that earlier he showed disgust at James’ generalization). This imparts a sense of self-loathing since blackness is unwanted amongst African-Americans.

In *White Chicks*, blackness is shown in a more aggressive manner. The two FBI agents, Kevin and Marcus Copeland (Shawn and Marlon Wayans respectively), typically displayed their blackness with aggressive behavior. Whenever issues arise as the brothers try to properly assimilate into upper white society, it is usually due to their ineptitude at properly blending in, blackness being the key reason for their exposure rather than they are two men disguised as women. This is manifested in behavior that is abrasive and belligerent. When other men attempt to flirt with the undercover agents, their immediate reaction is to reestablish their masculinity by “acting black” as a means of protecting their identity. This creates the impression that blackness and black identity are partially constructed via violence and conflict. This is also shown with Marcus’ wife Gina, as she constantly assumes that Marcus is cheating on her with another woman. Her

reasoning is in part attributable to the belief that black men tend to cheat on their spouses more than men of other racial groups. This gives a false, deceitful perception of blackness. Gina and her friend also handle the supposed cheating in an aggressive way which again “certifies” their blackness.

Overall, blackness was depicted as violent, ignorant, and undesirable among the characters in these films. Even when blackness was presented without a black person, it was in a controversial manner. While these movies are comedies and meant to be satirical, these depictions show a general consensus of how blackness is viewed in this country. The blackness shown was written to consistently be flawed and inherently deviant and criminal depending on the scene. In essence, blackness was intentionally written to be the standard by which civility was measured in these films. The more black characters in the movie, the more crass, criminal, and uncivilized the characters are portrayed. Subliminally, this conveys an image of blackness being on the lower end of the social scale with anyone or anything associated with it being viewed like manner.

In the movies analyzed, the black body was represented by individuals who identified or were noticeably of black/African-American origin. In most scenes, the black body was presented in conjunction with blackness. Given the nature of the films, the black body appeared in many of the scenes analyzed (91 scenes total). In *Malibu's Most Wanted* the black body served as a physical representation of difference between the characters' races/ethnicities. As such, the black body was often seen as an indicator in which the cultural differences were established by the characters in the movie. The

black characters were often treated with distrust or apprehension by both white and black characters.

In terms of differences, the black body was treated the same in all three movies with no distinct differences in the films. A common theme in these movies was that a black person was automatically considered a threat and intimidating. These tropes even applied when the black characters were not portraying criminal characters. For example, in *White Chicks*, even though the brothers disguised themselves as white women, numerous references to their physique and strength ranged from admiration to fear. In *Malibu's Most Wanted*, the two actors were chosen to portray thugs because they “looked the part”. In *Get Hard*, James (Ferrell) asks Darnell (Hart) to teach him how to survive in prison based solely on the fact that Darnell is black (James even uses statistics to justify his reasoning) and expresses a stereotypical fear of his person in the beginning of the film.

These portrayals suggest that the general population is aware that black people may also view themselves in an intimidating and often criminal manner from simply being present. This inherently physical manifestation of crime based on appearance is what Cacho describes in her book *Social Death*. In essence, the black characters are perceived as criminal, deviant, and inept due to simply *being* black rather than their actions in the movie. Blair Underwood's character in *Malibu's Most Wanted*, Tom Gibbons, and Terry Crews' character in *White Chicks*, Latrell Spencer, are both examples of this trope. Tom is the ideal model of a token minority; well spoken, well groomed, and very intelligent. However, Tom is still cast as the overall antagonist in the film.

Despite his ethically questionable actions being a driving force behind the plot of the film, Tom is vilified in a manner which seems excessive especially when compared to the actions taken by Bradley (Kennedy) which include an attempted robbery of a convenience store and a public shootout. As described earlier, Bradley seems to escape persecution because of his physical whiteness whereas Tom's black body seems to enhance his unfavorable qualities.

Latrell, in the movie *White Chicks*, occupied a similar situation as did Tom in *Malibu's Most Wanted*. In his case, Latrell gets a "pass" into the upper strata of white society because he's a wealthy athlete despite being black. Latrell's overall goal throughout the film is to have a relationship with a white woman. Latrell views white women in an almost deific way, listing numerous positives about white women and white society. He shows a complete and utter disdain for anything associated with black people including their culture and their physicality, going so far as to use old time racial slurs to describe black people. Latrell is written as a satirical take on black athletes who obtain wealth and affluence when they become successful and then attempt to distance themselves from their own culture and people. While Latrell's character is meant to serve as a parody and highlight the hypocritical nature of black athletes and their political affiliation once they "make it out", the film subliminally implies that this is a common occurrence amongst rich , black athletes.

Throughout the film, Latrell engages in actions that range from slightly deviant to downright criminal, including date rape. These actions are also done by white characters in the movie, yet they seem to be overemphasized when Latrell partakes in them.

Whenever the white characters engage in the action, the scene is lighthearted and even whimsical; whenever Latrell does the same, the scenes assume a more serious tone (Scene 26). The message: black characters are meant to be more criminal even though their attitudes may be otherwise. *White Chicks* attempts to subvert these tropes yet in the end reinforces them. The way the characters are written underscores an implicit understanding that the black body, in and of itself, is considered a threat simply based on face value. Ultimately, in all three films the black body was considered faulty, unwanted, and inherently criminal; the films do little to change these portrayals.

Appropriation was another common theme found in all three movies. Each movie had a different take on how appropriation was portrayed. *Malibu's Most Wanted* featured the most blatant form of appropriation with its main character, Bradley's misconceived notion of black culture (Scene 3 shows how Bradley was initially introduced to black culture by listening to a maid's cassette player playing hip hop music while Scene 12 shows that most of his knowledge of black culture comes from watching BET). Of particular interest in this movie is the relationship between the culture shown and how it is being appropriated. *Malibu's Most Wanted* shows black culture explicitly in a stereotypical, old fashioned way (being from "the hood", becoming a rapper, poor inner-city living conditions, etc.). The protagonist, Bradley, takes these worn-out portrayals of black culture at face value and parades them about in a means of self-expression. His belief that he somehow "relates" to black people, despite only being exposed to a significantly small portion of it, is a poor excuse to attempt an assimilation into the lives of African-Americans which does not consist of drugs, gangs, and violence.

Scene 17 in particular has the two actors who pose as the kidnappers PJ and Sean (Anthony Anderson and Taye Diggs respectively) take Bradley to a horror movie to see if they successfully scared him white, playing on the old trope that black people “scream and holler” during scary scenes. Bradley ultimately fails the test, but the scene highlights how simple-minded Bradley is in his attempt to relate to black people. It also demonstrates how misleading the movie actually is in its attempt to relate to black people through the appropriation of their culture.

Malibu's Most Wanted's appropriation of black culture shows how limited its scope is when it concerns the identity of African-Americans and their culture. The tropes used in the film only serve to further stigmatize black people due to the misrepresentation of black culture through white appropriation. Taking *Malibu's Most Wanted* at face value only displays a criminalistic portrayal of black culture since the majority of the black characters are committing a crime or are implied to be connected to criminal activities. The film's subpar method of appropriation condemns black culture to be affiliated with criminal activity, willful ignorance, and violence. These qualities are further exasperated by the protagonist being white and affirming these beliefs due to his appropriation of a small area of a criminalized culture.

Get Hard takes the appropriation of black culture and applies a unique twist: the person largely doing the appropriation of black culture is a black person. Darnell (Keven Hart) is the movie's primary source of appropriation in terms of black culture and how it is viewed and represented in America. As stated before, Darnell is hired by James (Will Ferrell) to teach him how to be a thug in order to survive his prison sentence with James

simply believing Darnell is a thug because he is black. In actuality, Darnell has little or no experience with thug life being relatively “white” himself. Thus, Darnell appropriates black culture and attempts to pass it off as “thug” culture in order to help James survive prison.

What makes this appropriation unique is that Darnell essentially acts as a validator to the negative images associated with black culture. He essentially confirms what James (who represents the white majority in this movie) believes to be the lifestyle of black people. Darnell dons typical “black” clothing and even calls his cousin, who actually is a thug and has been to prison, for tips to sell himself as the ideal image of a black gangbanger. Darnell further affirms the stigmatization of black people (and Hispanic-Americans) by making a mock scenario in which he engages in a trope-filled rendition of what prison life will be like for James, replete with stereotypical depictions of inmates and the prison’s social structure.

Similar to *Malibu’s Most Wanted*, the culture being appropriated in this film is the gangster lifestyle commonly attributed to black people in real life. The idea becomes further muddled when it is shown that Darnell’s appropriation of stereotypical black culture makes him even more of an oddity; his personality and mannerisms being treated as different from the norm when it comes to the lifestyle of “common” black people. In time, James also engages in the appropriation of black culture, and while he is initially mocked for doing so, he eventually is accepted into the fold but not Darnell.

Exactly why Darnell’s appropriation of black culture is more reprehensible than James’ is never fully explained. Hints allude to the fact that Darnell is black and is

engaging in stereotypical displays of black culture, ultimately making a mockery of not only himself but also the black community. However, James does the same thing in the film yet finds himself on the friendlier end of the black spectrum. The movie presents James' appropriation as a means of understanding between himself and the black community while Darnell does it simply for personal gain. However, both representations are laced with negative imagery, being neither conducive or informative of the real issues associated with mislabeling and the criminal nature often associated with black culture. Ultimately, the film attempts to create a bridge of understanding between two cultures but is filled with suggestive tropes which serve to further stigmatize black culture; the misappropriation of one of its main characters happens to be a member of the disenfranchised group he mocks.

White Chicks reverses the concept of appropriation, with Kevin and Marcus (Shawn and Marlon Wayans respectively) being black men who work for the FBI going under cover as white women in order to prevent a heist. Thus, *White Chicks* acts as a surrogate for its black audience members by its portrayal of upper class white society. Typically, the appropriation the brothers engage in is meant to highlight the absurdity of how white culture is treated in terms of its privilege and how white culture is readily accepted in societal terms when compared to black culture. Black culture is usually talked about in hushed whispers and treated as a type of foreign commodity. When white characters do appropriate white culture, such as when the girls sing along to rap music and use the n-word or when a dance battle happens in the club, it is treated as a spectacle rather than a cultural expression.

White Chicks had the least amount of appropriation of the three films analyzed. This is mainly attributable to the main characters being undercover for the majority of the film and the white characters unaware they were interacting with black characters. Interestingly, by engaging in the appropriation of white culture the brothers get away with more deviant actions than if they went as themselves. These actions include fighting, engaging in violent outbursts, and general misconduct, giving credence to the phrase “if it’s all white, it’s all right” (the cast of the movie is predominantly white due to the setting of the film). Until the end of the movie, the agents do not receive any form of reprimanding even when their disguises are uncovered. Nor did they face any long term punishment due to their engagement and brief assimilation of white culture.

White Chicks was meant to be a critique of white culture through the lens of an outside perspective. The framing of the movie seemed to indicate that the plot was going to be a huge culture shock and question gender roles between two groups vastly different in terms of culture and sex. While the movie does attempt to bring these concepts to the foreground, it’s not enough to justify its message. By the end of the movie, the white characters do not seem any more knowledgeable about the differences in genders and racial groups than they did at its beginning. Furthermore, Kevin and Marcus transition from being a surrogate audience viewpoint to the magical negro trope, as the second half of the movie focuses on them helping the white women, who are friends of the women they are impersonating, with their problems. There is a distinct lack of outreach for the white characters who are portrayed as terribly flawed and in need of guidance instead of being called out on the misconduct of their culture. Instead of being a comedic parable

between different groups, *White Chicks* becomes more of a white apologist film which uses a reverse form of appropriation to excuse ignorance and privilege.

The final variable, exploitation, is another concept that occurs in the films. The exploitation remains largely consistent among all three films. The general scenario of the exploitation of black culture is usually for the benefit of a particular person or group and is usually, but not always, to the detriment of the person's culture they are exploiting. In *Malibu's Most Wanted* main character Bradley constantly exploits black culture to make him look "cool". His friends, who front themselves as street toughs, also engage in the exploitation of black culture by referring to their affluent neighborhood as "tha hood" and their outlandish weapons as "straps", a common slang term for a firearm. Bradley personally attempts to exploit the black, gangster lifestyle to increase his chances of becoming a famous rapper.

Interestingly, the most exaggerated form of exploitation in the film comes from the black characters themselves. Tom (Blair Underwood) wishes to exploit the dismal living conditions of the poor, inner-city black population in order to scare Bradley white. This is especially jarring considering that Tom is a member of this disfranchised group yet shows no hesitation to use their plight for his own gain. Sean and PJ, the black actors hired by Tom to scare Bradley, also exploit the lifestyle of the black inner-city populace. As Tom paid them a generous amount of money to complete their job, the actors exploit the environment in order to frame their "kidnapping" as an experience that will hopefully scare Bradley away from the lifestyle he himself is exploiting for his own personal gain. This brings up two interesting observations: black people also engage in the exploitation

of their own culture and this serves as a means of deflection from the fact that Bradley and his friends are also indulging in the exploitation of black culture. The exploitation shown in the film is written to be more of a “cultural experience” when attributed to Bradley but as taboo when committed by the black characters. Fundamentally, this becomes an excuse for Bradley to use his exploitation as a crutch and as a means to drive the plot.

Get Hard follows a similar structure as *Malibu's Most Wanted* in that a significant portion of the exploitation comes from the black character, Darnell. The premise of the movie is actually built around the entire concept of exploitation. Darnell uses his stature as a black man to sell James on the idea that he is the perfect example of an ex-convict/thug. Darnell changes his entire wardrobe, vernacular, and mannerisms to prepare James for prison life. As seen in *Malibu's Most Wanted*, exploitation is driven by monetary consideration. Darnell wants to move his family from their current neighborhood to one that is more affluent and safer. It could be argued that Darnell is simply using the detriments often associated with his race in order to gain some manner of positivity from an already bleak scenario.

Darnell's attitude and overall reasoning seems to indicate that, as a black man, he is entitled to gain from his exploitative actions. However, his means of obtaining these gains draws attention to the duplicitous nature of benefitting from one's own culture. Just like the two actors from *Malibu's Most Wanted*, Darnell uses exploitation by promoting negative imagery commonly associated with blacks in America. He perpetuates a stereotype in order to achieve his own ends without considering the short or

long term consequences of his actions. Darnell's exploitative portrayal of black culture to James, an affluent upper class white man, only confirms what James believed about black people in the beginning. James, in essence, is meant to be physical representations of the commonly held, uninformed beliefs white people have about black people and their culture (even quoting statistics to validate his bigoted beliefs).

Eventually, James too engages in the exploitative nature of black culture, only he seems to find acceptance while Darnell was outwardly mocked. This is another common trope featured in *Malibu's Most Wanted* where the white character is openly accepted when appropriating or exploiting the other groups' cultural norms. In the film, James is accepted because he introduces gang members to the concept of stocks, and they take an immediate liking towards it. While this may seem like a cultural exchange between two different groups of people, it should be noted that James is still exploiting the stereotypical desires of the black gang members as James words cast stock exchange as a means of obtaining wealth by stealing it from other people. The film operates under a false pretense in which these types of exploitative methods are being written as genuine means to bridge understanding between two groups.

White Chicks cleverly manipulates the concept of exploitation as Kevin and Marcus utilize their temporary status as white women (while disguised) to help achieve their goals. Unlike the other two movies, the exploitation found in *White Chicks* is mostly beneficial with no lasting consequences. The undercover agents get away with numerous antics which, under normal circumstances, they would not. However, it should

be noted that the agents do engage in culturally “black” activities which are exploitive in nature.

These actions represent exploitation in an entertainment venue. The white characters become extremely enamored with the black activities the two “white” girls perform. These actions would normally be considered deviant and socially unacceptable in upper white society. However, when these actions are attributable to people whom they perceive as white, they become tolerable. This seems to indicate that black culture, when socially exploited by white people, is more socially admissible. This could be due to the person performing the (relatively speaking) foreign action as the same as themselves. *White Chicks* appears to confirm this observation by showing the undercover agents garnering praise when winning a “yo mamma” contest or competing in a dance battle using hip-hop/break dancing moves.

Latrell (Terry Crews) is also an exploitation character. Latrell attempts to use extreme black masculinity to win over white women during the course of the movie. Latrell uses his black body to satisfy carnal desires yet shows total contempt for anyone or anything associated with black culture. Latrell also engages in “reverse” exploitation himself by assimilating into the culture of the upper strata of white society, using his status as a wealthy athlete to gain a pass in order to remain amongst the people he admires most. This duplicitous depiction of exploitation serves to callout the double standard in which black culture is exploited. In one instance, a culture is looked down upon by the people who created it. In another instance, black culture is seen as normal and compliant if it is done by the majority, in this case by the agents who are perceived as

white. Perhaps there is a form of culture envy, where one group covets certain aspects of another group's culture while at the same time criminalizes the creators of it due to not owning or contributing to that culture's mass appeal. Regardless, the dual nature of the exploitation in *White Chicks* clearly shows the double standard of exploitation by black and white people.

Ultimately, the movies viewed were meant to have an allegorical framework in how race relations are perceived in the United States. However, due to the abundant overuse of stereotypical tropes, many of these moral lessons go largely ignored, and instead the film reinforces negative imagery rather than trying to build a bridge between two racial groups. The culture of blackness is shown repeatedly in a negative manner when compared to whiteness in the film ranging from simple deviant behavior to outright criminal actions. In addition the culture is even criticized and looked down upon by some of the black characters of the film which further enforces the idea that even black people do not find their own culture conducive in a non-criminal environment. Furthermore, these representations could possibly have negative side effects in how African-Americans are treated by the criminal justice system, as officers who have seen these films may influence their discretion when engaging with black people and even how African-Americans are treated in the criminal justice system as a whole. Due to the wide reach and influence of film, this seems to be more of a reality than some may believe. The continued negative portrayal of African-Americans and their culture can have disastrous outcomes in regards to how African-Americans are viewed by the criminal justice system as well as to the American public at large.

CHAPTER V – Conclusion

Introduction

This research analyzed to the depiction of blackness in films to assess whether that industry utilized latent, criminalized representations. An overall conclusion was that movies rely on stereotypical tropes that often compromise the integrity of the characters in the movie. The movies selected for this film largely dealt with interactions between African-Americans and white people. These movies give a sense of culture shock and attempt to bridge a cultural gap between these two groups by using comedy as a basis in which common ground can be established.

Ironically, the movies do the opposite by promoting negative imagery frequently associated with African-Americans. Their representation in movies relies heavily on old, stereotypical tropes that do little to nothing to assuage the stigma associated with black people and their culture. Rather, the films seem to promote these stereotypes via an implicit bias in which the white characters merely “stoop to the level” of the black characters while remaining aloof about their role in the social construction of race and crime. This raises the question of whether or not the representation of African-Americans is the resultant effect of public opinion based on what is depicted in film or simply highlighting the state of American society in its treatment of African-Americans. This research seems to indicate a cyclical process as the films analyzed are going based off what the writers of the film experience or know from their own interaction with blackness and black culture.

These movies serve as a lens in which modern American society views the relationship between black culture and the criminal justice system. Each movie analyzed dealt with some part of the criminal justice system. *Malibu's Most Wanted* focused on crime, *Get Hard* focused on corrections, and *White Chicks* focused on law enforcement. The interactions between the different variables, viewed in conjunction with the selected component of the criminal justice system, displays a filter in which black culture is viewed by American audiences. In *Malibu's Most Wanted*, the interactions of the variables are shown in a less than desirable manner which usually leads to criminal activity. For example, the blackness variable is frequently shown in conjunction with deviant or criminal behavior. This is usually accompanied by the black body variable in which black characters are usually portrayed committing the crime in question.

Limitations

A few limitations served as impedimenta in the development of this research. One limitation this thesis faced was constructing definitions for the study variables. Whiteness, blackness, black body, appropriation, exploitation are difficult to measure since they are subjective concepts. Therefore, they required more quantifiable, objective definitions. Another limitation was the selection of the movies for analysis. A random sample of movies was not plausible due to the paucity of "black" films. While there were many types of movies from black and white films to horror films, they were not pertinent to this research. Therefore, three movies were deliberately selected to meet research criteria. Movie genre posed another limitation since only comedic films were used in this

study. Other factors such as economic stability and validation were not taken into consideration when developing the overall concept of this thesis.

Considerations for Future Research

This research was founded on the assumption that film influences societal perceptions on race, especially when discussing crime and criminal activities. Hopefully, this research shed some light on the overall question of racial portrayal in films. But, there are additional research avenues to pursue. For example, do movie depictions of African-Americans influence how police officers treat African-Americans? This line of research arguably could be extended to other minority groups as well. The same approach could be applied to different components of the criminal justice system such as parole hearings, how jurors approach their deliberations, or if judges hold any preconceived biases prior to sentencing. Differences in racial portrayals between movie genres can be studied to determine how the characteristics of blackness are treated and compared with each other. Finally, do police officers' perceptions of certain film genres influence their beliefs and attitudes toward African-Americans?

Conclusion

This research explored the relationship between the media and perceptions of crime in America. The specific media outlet selected was film. The literature review indicated that film has played an instrumental role in how certain groups, especially African-Americans, are viewed in this country. An unfortunate side effect of this portrayal is that certain qualities can be exaggerated, misrepresented, and taken as fact when the circumstances shown in the film are not considered as everyday occurrences.

These depictions of African-Americans not only stigmatize those who may live in the typical, inner-city “hood” environments but also those who reside elsewhere.

In large part, this inability to separate culture from actions was shown in the film. From the earliest shown film *Birth of a Nation* (1915) to the present, criminalized portrayals have continued to be associated with African-Americans. This research demonstrated that, even in movies released during the “post racial era” of America, old disingenuous tropes prevail. In terms of crime and criminal justice, this standard can have disastrous consequences. Movie portrayals of criminal blackness and black people fundamentally change the dynamic of how black people are treated by law enforcement officers. This dynamic can even extend to other parts of the criminal justice system including determining if, and when, inmates are granted parole and how jurors’ deliberations lead to verdicts. The importance of Hollywood influences on attitudes and behaviors must be recognized as important factors in how African-Americans are treated in the criminal justice system.

Currently, it appears blackness is going through a phase in which black culture and black people are being accorded greater positivity in Hollywood. Movies such as *Get Out* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), *Into the Spider-verse* (2018), and the recently released *Us* (2019) demonstrate that movies with black leads can not only receive critical acclaim but also be fiscally profitable. These movies feature black people and their culture in a manner considered relatively normal when compared to previous movies portraying black culture. This trend highlights the positive representation of black people and their culture in film. If this trend of unbiased representation of blacks and black

culture in movies continues, it will do much to change longstanding stereotypes of blackness in criminal terms to a more “normal” depiction.

The abovementioned movies show black characters in a positive light while simultaneously positing them as law abiding in the criminal justice system. While these movies highlight these aspects of blackness, it is a small niche and is overshadowed by the lingering stigma long associated with black portrayals in media. Thus, while the lens of black culture is beginning to show a nascent relationship between blackness and criminal justice in more positive portrayals, there is still much work to be done in showing interactions of blackness and the criminal justice system on the “big screen”. Much of the burden of change rests on Hollywood’s willingness to acknowledge the skewed representation of black people and their culture and making a conscientious effort to effect the appropriate changes.

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