Hollywood depictions of Black male teachers stick to stereotypes, tropes, analysis shows

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Morgan Freeman has given many powerful, memorable performances. His role as Mr. Clark, a New Jersey-based high school principal known for dispensing authoritarian discipline in "Lean on Me," is certainly memorable, but that depiction and many others of Black male teachers are based on prejudiced tropes about Black families that were generated from 20th-century social science research—a form of racial knowledge that reified an anti-Black epistemic order of knowledge, according to a new study published by Daniel Thomas III of the University of Kansas. In fact, the scripts of the most popular Hollywood films depicting Black male teachers from late '60s onward are all derived from anti-Black social science scholarship's depictions of Black fathers.

"The bodies of Black men and boys are discursively rearranged within movie scripts to quench America's thirst for pathological representations of Blackness," Thomas said. "Both non-Black viewers of color and white moviegoers have such a limited sense of Black existence that they come to believe they have actually had an 'authentic' Black experience with film. In reality, these viewers are lured into a deeper state of delusion where their myths and stereotypical fascinations and fears of Black men and boys are presented as truths."

For the study, the authors analyzed "To Sir, with Love," "Cooley High," "Hard Lessons," "Lean on Me," "House Party 2," "Menace II Society," "Major Payne," "Higher Learning," "To Sir, with Love II," "Nutty Professor" and "One Eight Seven." Black male teachers were scripted to remain confined to four anti-Black tropes generated from social science research that constructed Black fathers as: absent and wandering, impotent and powerless, soulful and adaptive, and endangered and in crisis.
As a result, the authors organized their findings into the following four themes: There's no script without absent or powerless Black fathers; (un)natural saviors and motivators; saviors from death; and deviance and motivating the lazy and irresponsible.

Before illustrating how the films fall into the aforementioned tropes, the authors summarize how popular culture converged with social science's utilization of prejudiced and methodologically inaccurate research since the early 20th century to depict Black families in America. The Moynihan Report of 1965 was disturbingly influential in casting Black households as dysfunctional due to a matrifocal structure, the authors wrote.

Studies have disproven the Moynihan Report showing that there was no statistically significant difference between Black and white families regarding the presence of fathers, and a current study from the Pew Research Center found that Black men were the most involved fathers.

"The stereotypical assumption has still been adopted in subsequent academic research and the 'popular public pedagogy' of Hollywood films," Thomas said.

In fact, the first trope is reflected in the fact that fathers are absent in 10 of the 11 films. In only two of the analyzed films are fathers of main characters portrayed. The only film that didn't fall into the trope was "Nutty Professor," which depicted the Black male teacher as having a highly competent white research lab assistant.

The trope of "taking their (un)natural place" runs through the films by showing teachers being completely comfortable and highly effective in situations such as teaching in largely white schools, but the films frame the characters as being out of their natural element.

Morgan Freeman's Mr. Clark character is shown early in "Lean on Me" as a comfortable, impactful teacher, but out of place working with white students. That, and other cases of unnatural fits, never address Black male educators' content knowledge, counter-hegemonic pedagogical approaches or their interpersonal skills; they simply

Once the teachers take their place in filling the void created by absent Black fathers in the films, they often fall into the third trope of saviors from death and deviance, the authors wrote. Teachers in "Hard Lessons" and "To Sir, With Love II" are shown attempting to save Black youth from gang-related deaths. In other films, the teachers are shown attempting to keep young men away from drugs and jail, but they are never shown reading, designing lessons or teaching in a typical classroom setting.

The final trope revolved around teachers motivating lazy and irresponsible youths to achieve. Laurence Fishburne's Professor Phipps character in "Higher Learning" exemplified the trope when he critiques a student for being lazy and thinking the world owed him something, saying, "It is laziness that has kept Black people down in this country."

While movies are not reality, they are part of the public consciousness, and Hollywood is part of a global economic machine, Thomas and co-authors wrote. The public portrayals reinforce stereotypes, fundamentally alter standards and expectations, and are reflected in public education policy as education laws are driven by either contempt from conservative lawmakers or pity from liberal approaches.

Building off themes explored in the paper, Thomas is designing a class tentatively called Black Men and Boys in Education. The course will examine how contemporary experiences of Black men and boys are a byproduct of historical discourses that have situated the essence of Blackness as a problem since the 15th century, Thomas said. Considering that historical construction from that starting point until the 21st century will offer a look at the uninterrupted framing of the population as problems within the realm of education, which is reflected in Hollywood films as well as the American education system.

"The films continue being made because they have proven to be popular and profitable, but also because they reiterate false notions produced by academic fields within academe that have been
able to portray these stories as authentic precisely because they emerged from an institution with the power to legitimize truth," Thomas said. "Not only has the intersection between this research and Hollywood films misconstrued the image of Black families, fathers and boys on national and global scales, but they also fail to address the intellectual, political and ideological depth of Black male teachers due to these stifling constraints."

"I cannot think of a single example of a Hollywood movie that counters these ubiquitous narratives," Thomas added. "Hollywood will probably not release a film that that addresses the systemic, sociohistorical origin story of racialized educational inequity encountered by Black folks. It's terrifying to know that people leave the theater after watching these films thinking, "All we need is magical Black male teachers, they can fix it." We have to stop utilizing Black families, fathers and Black male teachers as scapegoats for centuries of anti-Black policies."


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