BLACK STEREOTYPES IN AMERICAN MOVIES

Smaranda ŞTEFANOVICI[1]

Abstract

Public education, and society at large, repress exceptional individuals under the guise of not leaving weaker ones behind, pushing every student through the meat grinder at the expense of the gifted. This creates the paradox of an education system in which intelligent students are sentenced to be overlooked by teachers and ostracized by their peers. My paper presents two movies showing young African Americans who are smart and able to succeed overcoming some of the negative stereotypes of popular media**.**

Keywords: acting white, African Americans, black stereotypes, education, movies.

> "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same."
> Marianne Williamson

Stereotypes are standardized and simplified conceptions of people based on some prior assumptions; biases support the status quo of power relations – they will always benefit whoever controls the culture. My paper is focusing on two North American movies, *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006) and *Finding Forrester* (2000), showing young African Americans who are very smart and capable to succeed in overcoming the negative stereotypes of popular media**.**

Eleven-year-old Akeelah Anderson is a really good speller, apparently good enough to win the national championship. But she is also desperately afraid of being ridiculed as a "braniac" by her classmates at their Southern Central Los Angeles inner-city school. Akeelah has inherited her love for words from her deceased father, and she memorizes difficult words as a means of coping with the pain of losing him. She is encouraged, and ultimately, threatened to excel by her teachers, her principal, and her new mentor, UCLA professor Dr. Joshua Larabee. She decides to participate in a spelling bee in order to avoid detention for her many absences. Akeelah tries to hide her talents, but much to her surprise and embarrassment, she wins the school and local spelling bees. Eventually, she realizes that she wants to win the national spelling bee; she wants to succeed, against all prejudice. She will have to overcome her insecurities, her distracting home life, and the knowledge that there is a field of more experienced and privileged fellow spellers. Prof. Larabee becomes a father figure for her: he helps her study and she can lean on him, but on the other hand, Akeelah also helps him confront his past – the loss of his young daughter, and succeeds in changing his attitude towards the future: he leaves his solitary confinement and goes back to teaching at UCLA.

[1] Assoc. Prof.PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureş.
Acknowledgements to Dan Bianca Emilia, MA student, for the contribution to this article.

BDD-A8127 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:05 UTC)

Jamal Wallace is an African-American inner-city kid from the Bronx projects who has an outstanding talent at basketball and a genius at writing. While always a C student, Jamal comes to the attention of a prestigious New York preparatory school when he scores highly on his standardized tests. While Jamal is given a heavy load at his new school, both he and the board know that the real reason they took him on is for his prowess on the court. Befriended by fellow student Claire and helped along by Pulitzer-prize winning author and recluse William Forrester, Jamal pursues his dreams both on and off the court while overcoming obstacles placed by his bitter literature teacher, Mr. Crawford. As Jamal is shaped by Forrester, he realizes that he is changing the old writer as well, forcing him to confront his past – the loss of his brother, and determining him to face his future – he has got cancer and is afraid to come out of his hiding place and confront the world.

Akeelah and Jamal are both victims of stereotyping, coming from poor inner-city neighborhoods and being African-Americans. They are not expected to succeed academically, despite their amazing intelligence, because the average black students put little effort into schoolwork and despise academic success as "acting white." Their struggles of self-definition are shaped by their own desires and dreams and also by the messages they receive from significant others: family, mentors, teachers and friends. They fight against stereotypes with their amazing capabilities and intelligence, and their accomplishments are overwhelming and well deserved.

Black Stereotypes

Racial stereotypes have existed in the United States of America since the colonial years of settlement. The early ethnic stereotypes depicted black slaves as joyous, naive, superstitious, and ignorant. They were often portrayed as servile, primitive and simpleminded. Their perception was closely tied to their social strata and even today they are perceived as lazy and very religious. Even after slavery ended, the intellectual capacity of black people was still frequently questioned. In 1916, Lewis Terman stated that black and other ethnic minority children "are uneducable beyond the nearest rudiments of training. …There is no possibility at present of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusual prolific breeding." (21)

Furthermore, the media, and more predominantly the newscasts, portray black people as less intelligent than the white ruling class, showing a disproportionate number of African-Americans living in slums, committing crimes, and in dire need of help from the community. In most films, blacks are shown as morally inferior, using vulgar profanity most of the time, being physically violent and performing acts of offense against the law.

Finally, as a positive trait, blacks are portrayed as excelling in sports. However, by highlighting their natural athleticism, the suggestion of white superiority in other areas is implied – intelligence, for instance. It has been noted many times that American basketball teams are mainly comprised of young black players, whereas their coaches are

BDD-A8127 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:05 UTC)

predominantly white men, always wearing a suit. John Hoberman states that the prominence of African-American athletes encourages a de-emphasis on academic achievement in black communities. He argues that blacks achieving wealth and fame in sport are still prisoners in a gilded cage created for the profit and entertainment of the white power structure. (23)

As a result, most black kids are encouraged to develop their natural athletic skills, to the detriment of attaining a higher level of education. This is the case of Jamal Wallace, a real genius at writing, an intellectually gifted child, who is encouraged to pursue his outstanding talent at basketball instead. Attempting to convince him of his lack of talent, his frustrated English teacher accuses him of plagiarism, causing tremendous problems for Jamal, a lower-class black student who dared to confront and ridicule his prep school teacher. Also, the members of the school board try to persuade him to do his best on the court and win a very important game, promising him a quick solving of the plagiarism accusation issue. Proving once again his ethnic roots, Jamal refuses the promised help with a quiet stubbornness and pride specific to his race, purposely missing two decisive shots and losing the game.

On the other hand, Akeelah refuses the help from her tutor, professor Larabee, due to a dispute over her lack of commitment and punctuality. She proves to be very stubborn and proud in refusing to apologize for her many missed appointments with the professor and for using slang in repeated occasions – an unforgivable mistake in the eyes of Larabee, who repeatedly forbade her from using vernacular English. She prefers to leave furtively to a spelling club located at a great distance from her neighborhood, and later she involves all her friends and acquaintances in helping her learn hundreds of words.

The use of informal speech, native slang, stubbornness and excessive pride are all considered characteristics of the black race, and both Jamal and Akeelah reinforce their appurtenance to their ethnic group through their speech and actions, and also through their reactions and resilience. Their broken families living in poor neighborhoods, the lack of a father figure and their single, struggling mothers, are also common black stereotypes in the American popular culture of our century.

Education

In the United States, public education and society repress exceptional individuals under the guise of not leaving weaker ones behind, pushing every student through the meat grinder at the expense of the gifted. This creates the upsetting paradox of an education system in which intelligent students are sentenced to be overlooked by teachers and ostracized by their peers.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is an education bill enacted in 2002 by President George W. Bush during his first term in office. It tries to make states more responsible for providing good-quality education. Because of its focus on regular testing, NCLB has proven to be highly controversial. Teachers are increasingly only teaching "to the test"

BDD-A8127 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:05 UTC)

due to the widespread fear that if their students perform badly, it will result in their termination; many students fail to receive a creative, personally relevant and well-rounded curriculum. All students are held to the same achievement standard, as dictated by their state, regardless of their ability level, socioeconomic status and native language.

Akeelah and Jamal come from poor, inner-city, broken homes – most black families consist of single working mothers trying to raise their children. Akeelah's mother is a widow, struggling to support her children and a fatherless grandchild, while Jamal's mom is divorced. Their siblings and friends, who are not interested in education, ridicule and bully them for being very smart and for excelling at standardized tests. Rap music, street violence and the rejection of school and authority are most teenagers' techniques of standing against the domination of the white, ruling class. Akeelah and Jamal try to hide their outstanding capabilities by doing badly in school, their tactics consisting of accumulating many absences, and never doing their homework. They are only doing this in their desperate attempt to fit in – black kids don't believe that they can be proficient in school, it's only the white kids who study, and they are very careful to avoid being categorized as "whites". This reinforces the stereotype of blacks being intellectually inadequate and lazy, although many of them are very talented and capable students.

Acting White

Minority students suffer from the negative prejudices of their ethnic peers, African-Americans being most frequently accused by their fellow students of "acting white", which refers to a person's perceived betrayal of their culture and ethnicity by assuming the social expectations of the ruling class – in this case, the white society. Success in education in particular can be seen as being disloyal to one's culture and ethnicity. A black student trying to achieve high educational success may be seen primarily as trying to make him or herself appear superior to others.

The black students are pressured in schools to use Standard English over black vernacular English. The children speak their ethnic slang, or dialect, in order to differentiate themselves from the other ethnic groups, especially from the whites. For the purpose of accentuating their ethnicity, and to avoid being compared to the white ruling class, both Akeelah and Jamal use slang. Their mentors, Professor Larabee, who is black, and respectively, Forrester, a white writer, continually reinforce the rule of using proper English while the children are with them, by prohibiting them from using slang in their presence. Akeelah is actually forbidden to return to her mentor's house for tutoring, due to her constant use of slang, while Forrester imposes the rule of compulsory use of Standard English inside his apartment.

Furthermore, both Akeelah and Jamal resort to attending classes in white, rich schools, their choice suggesting that you can only get real, meaningful education in upper-class private preparatory academies. Akeelah, not being able to continue her tutoring with Professor Larabee, sneaks out to a spelling club belonging to a mostly white school in Woodland Hills, a well-to-do neighborhood at the other end of the town. She makes

BDD-A8127 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:05 UTC)

friends with a few upper-class students, to the dismay of her sister, who feels uncomfortable among wealthy white kids. On the other hand, Jamal is accepted into a private preparatory school in the wealthiest and most exclusive Manhattan neighborhood, due to his outstanding test results. Furthermore, he becomes friends with some of the "two coma kids", as he calls them, especially with Claire Spence, the white daughter of an extremely wealthy school board member. This budding romance is seen by his friends as a betrayal of his race, because poor black kids are not supposed to befriend rich, white kids. In the end, however, both Akeelah and Jamal obtain outstanding results, making their communities extremely proud of them and showing the world that being smart does not mean that they were trying to emulate their white colleagues. Consequently, they realize that receiving an education is empowering, and they have the responsibility of excelling in order to strengthen their families, themselves, and therefore, to enhance the emancipation growth prospects of their communities.

Conclusions

Stereotypes are simplified conceptions of people based on some prior assumptions and they will always benefit the dominating race. Popular black culture, epitomized by rap music, is the leading-edge of black discontent that rejects education for getting ahead in America. Living dangerously and shunning education has become a hollow means to stand against the assumed white dominators. Jamal and Akeelah prove that aspiring to an education is not acting white, but it is rather taking the right course, by preparing to go forward on infinite pathways to self-determination and success. Education is self-empowerment and children have this responsibility to their communities and to themselves. The differences between the races are far more than skin deep, and one cannot and should not characterize a child by making use of preconceived, racist ideas.

Primary Sources:

[1] *Akeelah and the Bee*. Dir. Doug Atchison. Perfs. Keke Palmer, Laurence Fishburne, and Angela Bassett. 2006. DVD. Lions Gate Films, 2006.
[2] *Finding Forrester*. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Perfs. Sean Connery, Rob Brown, Anna Paquin and Busta Rhymes. 2000. DVD. Columbia Pictures, 2001.

Works Cited:

[1] "Acting White". *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. April 7, 2012.Web. April 11, 2012.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acting_white?vm=r>.
[2] Dyson, Michael Eric. *Reflecting Black. African-American Cultural Criticism*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993. Print.

BDD-A8127 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:05 UTC)

[3] Goldsmith, Susan. "Rich, Black, Flunking (Education Study)". *freerepublic.com*. May 23, 2003. Web. April 20, 2012.
http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/fr/916557/posts
[4] Hoberman, John Milton. *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race*. Mariner Books, Boston, 1997. Print
[5] "Stereotypes of African Americans ".*Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. April 7, 2012.Web. April 10, 2012.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotypes_of_African_Americans>
[6] Terman, Lewis. *The Measurement of Intelligence*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston,1916. Web.
<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=148134>
[7] Vera. "Stereotypes about Minority Groups in American High Schools". *blogspot.com*. 28 May 2009. Web. 8 April 2012.
<http://thisisvera.blogspot.com/2009/05/stereotypes-about-minority-groups-in.html>
[8] Wang, Lishing et al. "Controversies of Standardized Assessment in School Accountability Reform: A Critical Synthesis of Multidisciplinary Research Evidence". *ernweb.com*. November, 2006. Web. April 29, 2012.
<http://www.ernweb.com/public/892.cfm>
[9] Williams, Robert L. *Racism Learned at an Early Age Through Racial Scripting*. Author House, Bloomington, IN, 2007. Print.
[10] Williamson, Marianne. *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles"*. Harper Collins, New York, 1993. Print.

BDD-A8127 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:05 UTC)