

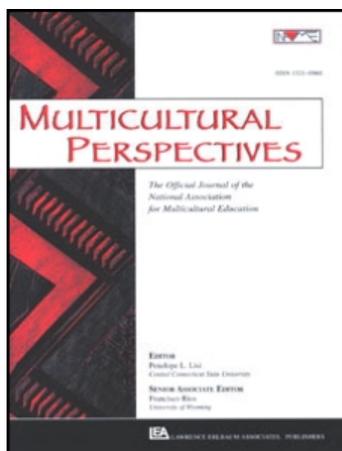
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Akeelah and the Bee: Inspirational Story of African-American Intellect and Triumph or Racist Rhetoric Served Up On Another Platter?

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The term “post-racism” has increasingly emerged in the media and national discourse. Many point to Barack Obama’s election as the 44th President of the United States as proof that this country has moved beyond the ugly legacy of racism (Wise, 2009). With this historic milestone of electing the nation’s first African-American president, the “post-racism” rhetoric encapsulates two major accomplishments at the hands of African-Americans in particular, and U.S. Americans in general: (1) African-Americans can indeed achieve anything they put their minds to—a testament of sorts to African-Americans’ intellect, hard-work ethic, leadership abilities, etc., and (2) The ability of U.S. Americans to look past color and judge on merit alone.

Despite this optimistic appraisal on the state of racism in the United States, we argue that racism is alive and well and often lurks in unsuspecting places. In this article we look into the inspirational movie, *Akeelah and the Bee*, a movie that highlights some of the same themes that emerge from Obama’s election to presidency: The story of an African-American who goes against all odds to achieve success in grand proportions. Described as an “inspirational family film” and a “successful feel-good movie” (Turan, 2006), *Akeelah and the Bee* proved inspirational to many viewers, as it highlights Akeelah’s intellect, tenacity, and determination to ultimately win the Scripps National Spelling Bee. While this movie seems innocent enough, we perform a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Huckin, 1995) of this movie to expose what we perceive as numerous racial overtones, undertones, and more particularly, several racist discourses that underpin and permeate the entire storyline to construct African-

Americans in terms of deficiencies, abnormalities, and disfunctionalities.

CDA

We use Huckin’s (1995) articulation of CDA as a framework to identify and analyze the dominant racist discourses that are often embedded in text, dialogue, images, and video graphics. CDA is an ethical approach to analyzing texts with the goal of uncovering power imbalances that are embedded within texts and images that work to (re)produce racial constructs, and in extension, the status quo. Pimentel and Velázquez (2009), in their CDA of the animated film *Shrek 2*, describe CDA as the analysis of “written and spoken texts to reveal discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced, and transformed within specific socioeconomic, political, and historical contexts” (p. 8). Important here is that racist discourses are dialogically constructed and consumed in real-world contexts. That is to say, the racist discourses in the movie *Akeelah and the Bee* do not appear in isolation to an otherwise non-racist society, but rather are a reflection of the historical and ongoing racialization of African-Americans. These racist discourses as they appear in *Akeelah and the Bee*, as well as other venues, are repeatedly consumed and eventually serve to solidify the disillusionment of African-American inferiority. In all, we have identified four racist discourses in the motion picture, *Akeelah and the Bee*: (1) African-Americans represent an academic and social underclass that needs to be rescued; (2) African-American communities are wrought with violence and crime; (3) African-Americans rarely achieve success unless through sports; and (4) Successful African-Americans must flee their communities—a notion that is underpinned metaphorically through the concept of flight.

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African-Americans Represent an Academic and Social Underclass that Needs to be Rescued

There are several underlying racist discourses that construct African-Americans as an academic and social underclass who are in need of being rescued: (a) African-Americans are impoverished; they are destructive and degrade their communities, (b) African-Americans are unintelligent, or (c) African-Americans do not possess skills to succeed on their own and look to others for provisions.

Our analysis of these racist discourses begins with the title of the movie, wherein Akeelah is framed right from the beginning as an academic underdog. The title, *Akeelah and the Bee*, makes it clear that Akeelah (an African-American youth) and the Bee (an arena for academic intellect and competition) are not one in the same or even complementary. Rather, this title insinuates that Akeelah is pitted against the bee, much like two fighters in a boxing championship (e.g., De La Hoya vs. Camacho). In the movie, *Akeelah and the Bee*, however, Akeelah is not up against an equal match, such as the case when two boxers fight within their own weight division. Rather, Akeelah is framed as the underdog—someone who is clearly disadvantaged and must continually fight and almost miraculously overcome all odds to win. Indeed, the producer and director of the film, Doug Atchinson (2006) in his commentary of the film, discusses how he wanted to create a film that reminded viewers of “Rocky” where we get to cheer for the academic and social underdog as she goes through several stages of training to ultimately win the Scripps National Spelling Bee.

The racist discourse that African-Americans represent an academic and social underclass continues to manifest in the opening scenes of the movie, which focus in on the streets of Crenshaw. Within these initial scenes, viewers see graffiti-covered walls, chain-linked fences topped with barbed wire, bars on windows, shopping carts filled with aluminum cans, street vendors, trash, including beer cans and bags of garbage on the ground, and an African-American man drinking a beer out of a brown bag while asking Akeelah and her friend for spare change. These initial scenes provide a window into which viewers, many of whom are not African-American, can see the lives of African-Americans unfold—lives that are marked by homelessness, poverty, criminality, unemployment, and remnants of gang activity.

Within the very first scene, we are introduced to Akeelah, and in keeping with the theme that African-Americans from this community represent an academic and social underclass, Akeelah’s character would only make sense if she was introduced as an anomaly to

her community. Indeed, Akeelah is introduced with her voiceover in which she says, “Ya know that feeling of no matter what you do or where you go, ya just don’t fit in?” She continues walking while brainstorming words to capture her seeming misplacement in her community: alienation, estrangement, incompatibility. . .

In the very next scene, the focus shifts to a Crenshaw Middle School classroom. In step with the racial assumption that African-Americans are unintelligent and lacking academic skills, we see students sleeping at their desks while an African-American teacher distributes scored spelling exams. Inked boldly in red, the scores begin with the first paper being 71 percent and the scores digress from there. The only exception is Akeelah’s paper. Almost with disdain, the teacher queries Akeelah about her study habits and returns her exam. As if she is ashamed, Akeelah furtively views her paper that is marked 100 percent. Again, this scene depicts Akeelah as an anomaly—a sort of intelligent outlier who must be saved from a failing community.

Further into the movie, Akeelah is accosted by two African-American girls who ridicule her for her intelligence. Calling her a “brainiac,” the girls ultimately demand she resign to completing their homework. As if the depiction of the girls being incapable of learning isn’t enough, a white principal, Mr. Welch, rounds the corner with an affluent African-American UCLA professor, Doctor Larabee. Inevitably, the two save Akeelah from her classmates.

This theme of Akeelah, as well as other African-Americans in her community, needing to be rescued permeates the film. The bee itself serves as a means to rescue Crenshaw Middle School from its undesirable status as an under-resourced, low-performing school. While Dr. Larabee serves as Akeelah’s coach, he metaphorically represents her savior from the black ghetto. He underscores the need for Akeelah to assimilate to white cultural values through his emphasis for her to learn the European (e.g., Greek and Latin) roots of the spelling words. He never once questions the absence of spelling bee words that have African or other non-European roots. Moreover, he defines her use of African-American English Vernacular (AAEV) as a deficient form of the English language, and is found repeatedly telling Akeelah to leave the ghetto talk at home. In the process, he discredits the socio-cultural and linguistic research that defines AAEV as a legitimate and complex language code that should not be viewed as inferior (Smitherman, 2006). In essence, from the perspective of Dr. Larabee’s character, legitimate forms of intelligence can only be achieved through a Eurocentric perspective, thus advancing the message that Akeelah must be rescued from her African-American ways of knowing, in order to be considered intellectual.

African-American Communities are Wrought with Violence and Crime

Yet another racial discourse that essentializes African-Americans in this movie is one that portrays African-Americans as naturally violent and their communities as hotbeds for crime. This racial connotation is based on beliefs that: (a) African-Americans lack intelligence and therefore resort to violence in order to secure that which others obtain through hard work, (b) African-Americans are a threat to civil society and are best contained in institutional environments, or (c) African-Americans are lazy and resort to illicit gains for success.

Again, the second scene of the movie is the most telling representation of this racial discourse. The scene shows Akeelah's two classmates resorting to violence when they physically assault her for trying to avoid completing their work. The scene underscores that African-Americans lack intelligence and drive to excel academically, and to compensate for their inadequacies, they resort to force.

Perhaps the most ominous scene that serves as a indicator for young, African-Americans' futures is the one in which students in Crenshaw Middle School are climbing a stairwell to their classes. Ironically, chain fencing is draped around every opening. It leaves one to wonder whether the students are being protected from their community, or whether the students are simply being contained. Notwithstanding, the sound effects of police sirens and an occasional search helicopter throughout the movie serves as a stark reminder to the audience that African-American communities are inherently plagued with violence and criminality.

The notion that African-Americans are lazy and resort to illicit gains for success is exemplified in the character of Akeelah's brother, Terrence. During one scene when Akeelah and her older brother, Devon, are eating dinner, they discuss the other brother's activities and express their dismay that he is "hanging out" with "T", a neighborhood gangster. In the following scene, the brother in question enters Akeelah's bedroom wearing a red jacket and matching ball cap, with the bill slung to one side. The attire is indicative of that worn by "Blood" gang members. Still, in a later scene, police officers return Terrence to his home and release him to his mother. Akeelah's mother lectures her wayward brother about his criminal affiliates, and goes on to demand that he remove an expensive, gold watch from his wrist. Through an omission of any explicit language about Terrence's activities or why the cops have returned him to his home, audience members are encouraged to assume Terrence's guilt and assume he stole the watch. These scenes, and several others throughout the movie, leave the viewer with the impression that Terrence is involved in gang and drug activities—yet another example of the racist belief

that African-American males are lazy and resort to illicit activities to obtain monetary gain and success.

African-Americans Rarely Achieve Success Unless Through Sports

The common racial connotation that African-Americans are incapable of achieving success except through sports is possibly one of the most prevalent racial discourses in contemporary America. Albeit African-Americans comprise a large percentage of professional athletes on sports teams, the reasoning behind how or why extraordinary athletic ability resides within a large segment of the respective group is sorely misinterpreted. The common misconception can be linked to several racial connotations including: (a) African-Americans do not possess academic skills to succeed; (b) African-Americans' priorities are misaligned and thus the community discourages academic excellence; or (c) unlike other races, African-Americans are anatomically geared toward athletic and rhythmical superiority.

A clear example of the common misperception that African-Americans lack academic skills to achieve success and thus rely on sports to succeed is depicted in a segment of the film during which Akeelah and other students compete in a spelling bee at Crenshaw Middle School. Although Akeelah ultimately wins the competition, an African-American boy steps up to compete. Before receiving his spelling word, Chucky Johnson, an 8th grader, inquires about school basketball nets, a subtle insinuation that in his world, sports take precedence over academics. Consequently, the moderator dismisses Chucky's comment about the sporting issue and redirects his attention to the academic task at hand. The word she delivers for Chucky to spell is "grovel", one that inexplicably conjures the perception of a lowly, beggarly, unintelligent individual. Chucky mistakenly relates the word "grovel" with "gravel", fails to correctly spell the word, and responds with, "who cares?". Inexplicably, Chucky's demeanor elevates Akeelah to an uncommon status and thrusts the storyline forward.

Another example of how the film insinuates that African-Americans succeed only through sports can be seen shortly into the film during a segment in which Akeelah's mother berates her for missing physical education classes, as opposed to commending and encouraging her for pursuing excellence in spelling. Further evidence of this discourse resides in the assumption that the sports network "ESPN" is the preferred network in African-American homes. In a scene toward the beginning of the movie, Akeelah discovers the Scripts National Spelling Bee while tuning into ESPN. She watches curiously as if the occurrence of a spelling bee is an anomaly—an

event contrary to what is commonly aired on the sports channel.

In a following segment during a meeting between Mr. Welch and Akeelah in the principal's office, Mr. Welch encourages Akeelah to compete in spelling bees. Mr. Welch states that Akeelah rarely misses spelling words, and then proceeds to ask her if she has ever heard of the national spelling bee. She admits having seen the Scripts National Spelling Bee on television the week before. Mr. Welch says, "Yes, they show it on ESPN every year." Unlike other groups of young adolescents who possess interests in a vast spectrum of activities and entertainment, the movie indisputably narrows the African-American adolescent's scope of interest to sports.

The movie further emphasizes the racial discourse that African-Americans can only achieve success through sports by linking the very essence of Akeelah's phenomenal ability to spell to her rhythmic abilities. Not simply in one or two, but in several scenes throughout the storyline, Akeelah is shown tapping her fingers against her leg to count syllables while spelling challenging, multi-syllabic words. In fact, close-up shots in several frames focus on Akeelah's hand tapping against her leg. In one specific scene during a study session in Dr. Larabee's backyard, Akeelah taps rhythmically against her leg as she spells a word. Dr. Larabee asks, "Now what is that you are doing with your hand?" He informs Akeelah that her rhythmic tapping is her mnemonic device—her trick for counting syllables in words. In response, Dr. Larabee encourages Akeelah's rhythmic abilities by presenting her with his deceased daughter's jump rope. In yet another scene, while on stage attempting to spell a difficult word, Akeelah actually pretends to jump rope and successfully spells the word, thus progressing to a higher level of competition. Notably, none of the other competitors resort to such obvious techniques to spell words. This simply leaves one to conclude that the glaring difference between Akeelah and the other children competing in the spelling bees is her reliance on athletic and rhythmic abilities to succeed in an academic forum.

Successful African-Americans Must Flee Their Communities

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the flawed perception that African-Americans can only achieve success by escaping the confines of their African-American communities. This racial connotation can be linked to (a) African-Americans who are successful leave their impoverished neighborhoods, (b) African-Americans who possess skills to succeed must rely on others for help in escaping their ill-fated communities, and (c) African-American communities obstruct promising African-Americans from achieving success.

The most telling scene in support of the racial assumption that successful African-Americans leave their neighborhoods is during a conversation between Akeelah and Mr. Welch at Crenshaw Middle School. Mr. Welch tries to convince Akeelah to contact Dr. Larabee for coaching and tells her that the professor lives close to the school. Akeelah's baffled response is "He lives in this neighborhood?" Her response leads the audience to believe that it is uncommon for successful African-Americans to reside within the boundaries of African-American neighborhoods, such as Crenshaw.

Even though the movie depicts Akeelah as one who possesses exemplary intelligence and the ability to succeed, it nonetheless leads the audience to believe that her only hope to escape an inevitable fate is with the help from her white principal and his associate, Dr. Larabee. Other than the first Crenshaw bee, Akeelah must travel to consecutive competitions located in affluent areas, such as Beverly Hills and Woodland Hills. Mr. Welch accompanies Akeelah to the various competitions and eventually, Dr. Larabee decides to coach her to victory. However, the fact that Akeelah resorts to covert trips to study with her newly acquired friends in more affluent communities leads viewers to assume that it is a rarity for one to find success from within the African-American community. The framing of academic intellect as a rarity in Akeelah's community is capstoned toward the end of the movie when Akeelah's success at the spelling bees brings her whole community (e.g., gang members, mailman, teacher, an Asian shop merchant, her peers at Crenshaw Middle School, and the drunk man who was introduced at the beginning of the movie) to join forces and help prepare Akeelah for the national bee. This message trivializes the severity of division that can sometimes plague communities (not just African-American communities) along racial, economic, and gang lines. This framing of Akeelah's success at spelling bees is framed as so astounding and out of the ordinary that it would bring an entire community to join forces in order to prepare and encourage her.

The idea that one cannot be successful in their African-American community is exacerbated by the message that African-American family or community members will only serve as an obstacle to their success. On separate occasions during the movie, Akeelah's mother is depicted as an obstructionist to Akeelah's success. In a scene near the beginning of the movie, Akeelah's mother refuses to allow her daughter to participate in any further spelling bees because of Akeelah's tendencies to skip physical education. Later in the movie, Akeelah's mother arrives unexpectedly and pulls her from the stage during a regional bee. Had Mr. Welch and Dr. Larabee not overtly and covertly "saved" Akeelah from her mother's obstruction, Akeelah was sure to fail. Yet again, the movie succeeded in depicting Akeelah's mother as an

African-American obstructionist who threatened her daughter's success.

Metaphor of Flight

The movie further accentuates the notion of fleeing through a metaphor of flight that emerges throughout the movie. By embedding the notion of flight strategically within the script, this movie advances the subliminal message that African-Americans flee their communities in order to find success in a world far from the oppressive clutches of their own. Although there are numerous scenes that insinuate the notion of flight, the following three are most notable.

The first scene occurs during an initial segment of the film, in which the author depicts Akeelah's older brother, Devon, as an air force cadet. This characterization distinctly bundles Devon's career choice and chances of success directly with the notion that only through flight will he escape the African-American community. Perhaps Devon's position as an airman—a position that takes him far away from his family and community—offers the clearest evidence of the author's metaphorical use of flight to emphasize how African-Americans leave their communities in order to achieve success.

In a subsequent scene, Akeelah's best friend, Georgia, insists that her career choice is that of a flight attendant. While walking down a dismal street in Crenshaw and as the girls talk, Georgia expresses her insatiable desire to be a flight attendant. Georgia also references Devon as a future pilot and insists she will be his flight attendant some day. Lastly, and most significantly, the producer folds the fate of all of the film's main characters into a final segment, in which Dr. Larabee distributes airline tickets to Akeelah's family and her friend to Washington, D.C. In the segment and during the conclusion of the film, Akeelah finds success by winning the Scripts National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C., a place far from Crenshaw District and far from the crippling clutches of her African-American community. Whether intentional or not, the producer's metaphorical use of flight in this instance clearly emphasizes the racial misconception that African-Americans who demonstrate the promise to be successful must rely on others for help in escaping their ill-fated communities.

Conclusion

The impact of racist discourses that emerge in films like *Akeelah and the Bee* are not trivial or isolated events. In 2009 alone, several feature films emerged from the Hollywood scene that centered on the theme of African-Americans needing to rise up or be rescued from their impoverished, abusive, and/or dysfunctional families and

communities: *Precious*, *The Blind Side*, and *The Princess and the Frog*. Repeated exposure to racist discourses that construct African-Americans in terms of deficiencies and in need of being saved or escaping their communities shape what our larger society and educational institutions imagine as appropriate educational services and resources for African-Americans, and furthermore, appropriate representations of African-Americans in academic settings.

We only need to look at the recent racial events at the University of California, San Diego to get an idea of how racist discourses shape the imaginations of the largely white student body, a segment from which threw a ghetto-themed block party, known as the "Compton Cookout". In their fashioning of how they could celebrate Black History Month and embody the African-American Compton community image into the theme of their celebration—they did not center on African-American intellect, beauty, or achievements—but rather, they perpetuated dominant, racist discourses by encouraging their attendees to dress and act "ghetto". The Facebook invitation to the party, which mirrors the racist discourses that are manifested in media, asks attendees to speak ignorantly, come strapped, start fights, drink 40s, and so on (KTLA-TV, Los Angeles, 2010).

As evidenced in the Compton Cookout, as well as other manifestations of race across the country, it becomes clear that the dialogic nature of racist discourses in our society continue to spiral. Our hope in this analysis is to shed light on how seemingly innocent and inspirational films play a much larger role in our society than sheer entertainment. Through CDA, we want to make it clear that *Akeelah and the Bee*, as well as most of the media we are exposed to, reinforces racist constructs, and thus the continuation of a racialized society.

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