

Re-membering Black Greeks: Racial Memory and Identity in *Stomp the Yard*

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Abstract

Critical sociological analysis suggests that the film *Stomp the Yard* immerses its audience in a myopic legend of African American fraternities and sororities. Combining historical photos of Civil Rights leaders, traditions of ‘stepping’, tales of meritocratic social uplift, and romanticized aspects of historically black college or university (HBCU) culture, *Stomp the Yard* reveals a hyper-individualistic, conservative, and politically blunted form of historiography. Specifically, five ideological mythologies ground the film’s construction of Civil Rights memory and racialized identities. These mythologies decisively fail to interrogate the complexity of black fraternities and sororities. In so doing, they invite a critical blindness to these organizations’ role in past Civil Rights struggles as well as their intersection with contemporary issues such as classism, hazing, and resistance to contemporary forms of racism and racial inequality.

Keywords

African American fraternities and sororities, collective memory, film, racial identity, representation

Introduction

Ideology is, in effect the imaginary of an epoch, the Cinema of a society. - Roland Barthes (1980) ‘Upon Leaving the Movie Theater’

The release of *Stomp the Yard* (2007, directed by Sylvain White, distributed by Sony Pictures) helped to usher African American fraternities and sororities, also known as ‘Black Greek Letter Organizations’ (hereafter ‘BGLOs’), into the mainstream. Opening at number-one with a first-weekend gross of just over \$22m, and produced on a budget of \$13m, the film grossed over \$61m in the USA and \$75m worldwide. Audiences flocked to witness the story of protagonist ‘DJ Williams’ (Columbus Short) – a street dancer turned college student at the fictional historically

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black college/university (HBCU) named 'Truth University'. Upon his arrival at Truth U., DJ pledges a fictional BGLO named 'Theta Nu Theta'. He brings his street and savvy style to the conservative, conventional, and careworn fraternity, and in so doing they both educate one another; Theta Nu Theta learns how to remain relevant in the present, while DJ discovers the deep historical connection between Civil Rights activism and BGLOs.

Clichéd Hollywood sentimentalism aside, the film brings to light a rather invisibilized fixture of American life – the black fraternal movement. Specifically, BGLOs become foregrounded through references to both the art-form of 'stepping' and the memory of Civil Rights activism (Branch, 2005; Malone, 1996). In the former, modern film technologies enabled the film to intimately reproduce many of the sights, sounds, and sophistication of stepping, what Elizabeth C. Fine (2003: 3) calls

a ritual performance of group identity. It expresses an organization's spirit, style, icons, and unity. Stepping also is a vibrant arena for the display of African American verbal and nonverbal art, because performers craft their routines from such black folk traditions and communicative patterns as call and response, rapping, the dozens, signifying, marking, spirituals, handclap games, and military chants, mixing them with tunes and images from popular culture into a relatively new performance tradition.

In the latter, and as a bookend to the popular culture emphasis on stepping, the film affords visual and verbal references to the intellectual and physical labor of BGLO members like Martin Luther King Jr, Rosa Parks, A. Philip Randolph, Fannie Lou Hamer, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Huey P. Newton. As one of the prescient examples of such historiography, the film ends with a still shot of the triumphant Theta Nu Theta fraternity as they celebrate a step show victory. The still shot slowly fades to black and white as the camera pans out to reveal that it is a framed picture alongside canonized photos of famous BGLO members on the walls of Truth University's esteemed 'Heritage Hall'. Underneath the photo, a plaque reads: 'Black Greek letter Organizations. You make the letters. The letters don't make you.' In this sense, *Stomp the Yard's* driving plot device is the commemorative use of BGLO Civil Rights activism to convince protagonist DJ Williams (and the audience) that BGLOs are more than elitist social clubs that 'step', but remain vehicles for valuable life lessons concerning responsibility, meritocracy, and the bonds of fictive fraternal kinship. Given this background, I argue that the film serves as a particularly rich landscape for mapping how collective memories of the racial past persist into the present – shaping and sanctifying the meaning of race in a supposedly 'post-racial' world.

While the aforementioned memorializing visual rhetoric might actually be found in any of the BGLOs' national headquarters, the film delivers a message to unsuspecting audience members that equate a step show victory with the labors of Dr. King's Poor Peoples Movement, Dr. Newton's Black Panther Party, and Dr. Du Bois's NAACP. The point is that commemorative history circulates through both popular film and official memorials alike. In fact, films act as catalysts for memorializing. Moreover, the symbolic exchange of meanings in the theatre resonate with dominant ideology and official, state-sanctioned memories. Such a dynamic remains at the heart of the social and collective practices of remembering, and these are hardly matters of individual valuation or construction. *Stomp the Yard's* images – especially the last frame of the black and white photograph in 'Heritage Hall' – are sustainable precisely because popular cinematic images are engineered for both the collective consolation of past struggles and present social cohesion. BGLO activists challenged society's laws, customs, and structure in ways that were often perceived as unpleasant and uncouth. Retelling their contributions on the silver screen anaesthetizes their actions and makes them into pleasant signifiers of non-confrontational racial victories that were won as easily as a step show.

In this light, film is a participatory public memorial that constructs both racial memories and racial identities. The film's cultural significance turns on the fact that it works as solace for marginalized peoples by canonizing BGLOs and their resistive elements within the scope of Hollywood cinema. *Stomp the Yard* reproduces many of the constraints that some might argue their writers, producers, and directors are attempting to displace; it facilitates an understanding of BGLOs and their significance in the struggles for equality and justice as blunted iconography. The film decontextualizes stepping's roots and cultural import so that it functions as a one-dimensional spectacle. Finally, it portrays racism, classism, and sexism as individual personality quirks or devices of fraternal rivalry, rather than as cultural or institutional problems endemic to the racialized society that spawned a separate BGLO and HBCU system, not to mention the Civil Rights movement, in the first place.

Race, Memory, and Film

Defined by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in 1902 as the 'dammed up force of our mysterious ancestors within us' (Schieder, 1978: 2), and refined in 1925 by Maurice Halbwachs in *Social Frameworks of Memory* (Halbwachs, 1992 [1925]), the term 'collective memory' serves to conceptually separate individual (psychological) and collective (sociological) memory (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 106). The concept relates to Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1995 [1912]), in which he articulated a theory of ritual and collective representations through an analysis of the social practices of commemoration. Control over historical events' meaning may seem incredibly distant from policy-making and race relations. Yet, history profoundly affects the meta-narratives and 'common sense' of our present culture (Bodnar, 2001). While some argue that collective memory is largely reproduced through the construction of memorials and national monuments (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Schwartz, 2000; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991), others note how visual media sustains memory through a continuous production of representations (Bodnar, 2001; Griffin and Hargis, 2008; Monteith, 2003; Morgan, 2006). In an era of increased digitalization, there is escalating participation in an economy of memories that trade on the production, distribution, and consumption of race. As Michel Foucault (1975: 25–26) observes:

Since memory is actually a very important factor in struggle ... if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles ... It's vital to have possession of this memory, to control it, administer it, tell it what it must contain. And when you see these films, you find out what you have to remember ... There's a battle for and around history going on at this very moment which is extremely interesting. The intention is to reprogramme, to stifle what I've called the 'popular memory'; and also to propose and impose on a people a framework in which to interpret the present.

More recently, Marita Sturken (1997: 1) refined the Foucaultian perspective. Rather than conceptualize memory as essentially oppositional, Sturken develops a concept of 'cultural memory' that neither celebrates nor castigates:

To define a memory as cultural is, in effect, to enter into a debate about what that memory means. This process does not efface the individual but rather involves the interaction of individuals in the creation of meaning. Cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history.

In this sense, it is germane to consider how film and culture intersect to see both *which* certain pasts are remembered over others, and *how* certain pasts are selected as worthy of remembrance in the present. David Grainge (2003: 3) writes, 'The balance of memory and forgetting in American culture – what is remembered, by who and for who – has in recent years become entwined in hegemonic struggles fought and figured around the negotiation of America's national past.' Conflict over interpretation of the past is an always present dimension of social life. And as the representations of marginalized people and traditions (like BGLOs) enter the public sphere in ways that convert them into harmless, blunted, and canonized icons, they become more usable in the present. They simultaneously serve as a roadblock to claims that history is biased in favor of specific groups and interests, and as a reservoir of 'authentic' meanings available to the marginalized. Verisimilitude is achieved not through force, but through consent (Gramsci, 1971). In this sense, consent is garnered when the representation of certain pasts have an appeal, or what Michael Schudson (1989) called an 'aura,' that resonates with the audience. A film's aura is 'entwined in hegemonic struggles' (Grainge, 2003) not only because of the properties of the film, but because of the film's mainstream positioning in society. In this sense, the film's implicit meanings of the past are taken for granted and audiences need not be coerced to accept their arrangement, but rather consent to their authenticity.

Given that cultural and political elites must make select elements of the past particularly memorable, emotionally charged, and consensually understood as useful for understanding the present (Griffin and Bollen, 2009; Pennebaker and Banasik, 1997; Schudson, 1989; Schuman and Rieger, 1992), the history of the African American Civil Rights movement is an emblematic example. The Civil Rights era is consistently named as one of the most important moments in American history (cf. Griffin, 2004; Griffin and Bollen, 2009; Griffin and Hargis, 2008; Schuman and Scott, 1989) and frequent commemorations continue to engrain its collective memory in the US populace: from museums and days on the calendar to the renaming of both streets (e.g. February 1st Place in Greensboro, NC to commemorate the Woolworth lunch counter sit-in of 1 February 1960) and state-sanctioned memorials (e.g.: the BGLO Alpha Phi Alpha's spearheading attempt to erect the 'Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial' on the national mall in Washington, DC). Such endeavors gain new relevance as we move into an era of supposed 'color-blindness', in which increasing amounts of people, particularly whites, claim that the nation has now moved past its prior fixation on race. In conjunction, some claim that racism is no longer a prevalent or systemic force in Americans' lives, whether in the private, civic, economic, political, or employment spheres – a claim vigorously opposed by many people of color and large segments of social scientific research (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Gallagher, 1995; Winant, 2004).

This cultural milieu has enabled film to emerge as a particularly powerful storyteller and Civil Rights historiographer of late.

The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed an increasing outcry for an end to Hollywood racism via more films that would headline positive characters of color ... Consequently, this time frame saw a proliferation of modern race films like Mario Van Peebles's *Panther* (1995), Rob Reiner's *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), and Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997), to a slew of unapologetic race films from black directors and writers, like John Singleton's *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), *Poetic Justice* (1993), *Higher Learning* (1995), and *Rosewood* (1997), and the ultra-racialized films of Spike Lee such as *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Malcolm X* (1992), *Clockers* (1995), *Get on the Bus* (1996), *4 Little Girls* (1997), *Bamboozled* (2000), and *A Huey P. Newton Story* (2001). (Hughey, 2009: 549)

Whether or not these films represent a revisionist program of alternative remembrance, they all garner powerful currency in the cinematic recollection and representation of race and resistance.

Thus, films help to promote a type of memory consensus. In this sense, William D. Rountt (2006) argues in *The Film of Memory*:

To put it baldly, I am saying that films, and especially popular films (for of all films, popular films are those made most surely for showing in public), constitute history. Not that they interpret history or substitute for it, but that they are history. Not the past, but history. And not the only history, but, if you like, in some sense the truest sort.

How consensus is derived from this 'truest' form of history is a key site for sociological inquiry.

The Import of Cinema

The widespread appeal of film makes the production, distribution, and consumption of film an important cycle for examining the meaning of race and racial memory in North America (Entman and Rojecki, 2001; Hunt, 2005). The US film industry generated over \$9.5 billion dollars in domestic box office revenue and saw over 1.4 billion customers in theaters in 2007 alone (Motion Picture Association, 2008). The average US resident spends about 13 hours a year at movie theaters, half of all adults watch movies at least once a month, and 60 percent of people ages nine to 17 watch at least one movie a week (Media Campaign, 2002). This rate is even higher for those born between 1965 and 1980 (Generation X), who watch an average 52 hours of movies a year, and remains even greater for those born between 1981 and 1999 (Generation Y), who watch an average 94 hours of movies a year. In addition to visiting theatres, more people watch movies at home. By 2006, 81.2 percent of all US households reported owning at least one DVD player, 79.2 percent owned at least one VCR, and 73.4 percent owned at least one computer (Nielsen Media Research, 2006). Also, 33 percent of US households have at least one high definition television (HDTV), devices which are increasingly marketed for in-home viewing of movies (Nielsen Wire, 2009). Movies are also now available online and through the mail via services such as CinemaNow, Movielink, NetFlix, and Starz! Ticket on Real Movies, and digital downloads of film (both legal and illegal) are growing at an exponential rate (Adkinson et al., 2004). The popularity of movies as a source of entertainment and cultural expression means that they reach further than many other discursive forms (Entman and Rojecki, 2001).

Black Greek Letter Organizations and 'Stomp the Yard': A Primer

The first US collegiate organization to adopt a Greek letter name was Phi Beta Kappa, founded at the College of William and Mary on 5 December 1776. In just a few short years, fraternities emerged across the eastern USA, and by 1860 22 of the present-day general fraternities were already founded. Yet this growth was stunted by the US Civil War (1861–65), and it would take 50 years before fraternities began to recover; both in the number of new organizations founded and in the spread of chapters of existing organizations (Hughey, 2006). Development was aided by the reopening of schools, the return of veterans as students, and westward expansion that led to the founding of new institutions of higher education (Skocpol et al., 2006).

Originally, fraternities served a certain demographic – a selective 'upper-crust' within the college and university population (white, male, Christian students from the 'right' families). But just before the turn of the 20th century, restrictions were challenged as non-whites and women began to gain access to formerly all-white institutions of higher learning (Hughey, 2008c: 538). Additionally, as a part of reconstruction endeavors, the establishment of the post-Civil War 'Freedmen's Bureau' led to the creation of hundreds of schools for freedmen in the South by 1870

(McPherson, 1969). These actions laid the groundwork for what are now known as 'historically black colleges and universities' (HBCUs). Today 14 percent of all African American students attend a HBCU, although HBCUs constitute only 3 percent of the USA's institutions of higher learning (Patel, 1988). Scholars maintain that HBCUs contribute to an overwhelming portion of today's black leaders (Constantine, 1995; Gasman and Jennings, 2006; Roebuck and Murty, 1993).

As a result of the changing make-up of the US college student population, many white Greek letter organizations incorporated racially exclusionary policies into their constitutions in order to retain both tradition and restrictive systems of social relations. This, coupled with the inception of highly successful HBCUs, laid the cultural and structural foundations on which BGLOs were established. Hence, in 1903 at Indiana University, Alpha Kappa Nu was founded as the first BGLO. Formed to 'strengthen the negro voice' at the university and in the city, Alpha Kappa Nu lasted only a few short years before being disbanded due to lack of continued membership. However, it paved the way for similar organizations to emerge (Kimbrough, 2003). Founded in 1904 in Philadelphia, PA, Sigma Pi Phi is the oldest surviving black fraternity today. Begun as a professional, non-collegiate organization, its aim was to provide a vehicle for men of upper-class standing to come together. Today, it boasts over 5000 members and has 112 chapters throughout the USA and the West Indies (Hughey, 2008b).

Over the next two decades many BGLOs would rise and fall, yet many exist today, such as Alpha Phi Alpha (1906, Cornell University), Alpha Kappa Alpha (1908, Howard University), Kappa Alpha Psi (1911, Indiana University), Omega Psi Phi (1913, Howard University), Phi Beta Sigma (Howard University), Zeta Phi Beta (1920, Howard University) and Sigma Gamma Rho (1922, Indiana University). BGLOs took on a vital role within various black communities. They were an integral part of what W.E.B. Du Bois fashioned as the 'talented tenth' – the top 10 percent of blacks that would serve as a cadre of educated, upper-class, motivated individuals who acquired the professional credentials, legitimated skills, and economic (as well as cultural) capital to assist the remaining 90 percent of the race to attain socio-economic parity with the rest of society. In addition to the burgeoning 'New Negro' ethos of the Harlem Renaissance that provided a spirit of intellectualism, brotherhood, racial uplift, spiritual foundations, and racial consciousness, BGLOs were influenced by literary societies, white fraternities and sororities, black benevolent and secret societies, the black church, and World War I veteran black soldiers.

Today, the aforementioned eight organizations (along with Iota Phi Theta [1963, Morgan State University]) are recognized as the key member organizations of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), the umbrella governing body of BGLOs founded in 1930 at Howard University in Washington, DC. These NPHC member organizations are international (but predominately USA-based) social-service collegiate and alumni organizations dedicated to the development of positive black diasporan identities, community uplift through economic and religious education, brother/sisterhood, and social justice (Brown et al., 2005; Kimbrough, 2003). Today, BGLOs have an estimated 1.5 million members worldwide, and over 6400 chapters. Eight of the nine member organizations of the NPHC are 'among the oldest black campus organizations on most predominately white campuses and are possibly the strongest nationwide social institutions in black America' (McKee, 1987: 27).

The inception of BGLOs proved critical to the advancement of African American higher education, providing both civic and academic support for their membership, and leadership and service to their respective communities (McKenzie, 1990). Each of the BGLOs created an array of effective nationwide service programs. These efforts continue today as they offer scholarships, housing and food assistance, academic support, and positive role modeling (Gadson, 1989). So also, scholars acknowledge that, aside from the black church and organizations like the NAACP, BGLOs

were the largest positive influence on the black Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. An exceptional and poignant example is offered by Walter Kimbrough (2003: 52):

A famous Associated Press photo shows, on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis prior to the assassination of Dr. King, four Black Greek men who were key figures in the Civil Rights movement: Martin Luther King Jr. (Alpha Phi Alpha), Jessie Jackson (Omega Psi Phi), Hosea Williams (Phi Beta Sigma), and Ralph Abernathy (Kappa Alpha Phi).

Moreover, by the early 1960s, Alvin J. McNeil (National Director of Education for the BGLO Phi Beta Sigma) told his fellow black Greeks that the

current world revolution is testing the leadership of the Negro elite ... [BGLOs must] shoulder the responsibility of leadership because they are the academically superior and privileged. Sit-ins, kneel-ins, and stand-ins are warnings that we must provide the sane leadership necessary to solve the many complex problems facing us. (Associated Press, 1961: 21)

Yet, many BGLO members were critiqued for their failure to live up to this calling. One of the most vicious chastisements stemmed from E. Franklin Frazier, a noted sociologist and member of the BGLO Alpha Phi Alpha. Frazier wrote in *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957: 94) that BGLOs were little more than elitist social clubs of a self-congratulatory nature:

[BGLOs] are especially important in molding the outlook of the black bourgeoisie. In the Negro colleges, membership in these organizations indicated that the student has escaped from his working-class background and achieved middle-class status. In their social activities these societies foster all the middle-class values, especially conspicuous consumption.

So also, Howard professor Nathan Hare began to label BGLO members as ‘Black Anglo-Saxons’ due to their perceived failure to identify with fellow blacks of differing socio-economic backgrounds (Smith, 1995).

Debates over BGLOs remain today. Yet, BGLOs are faced with a new quandary – burgeoning mainstream representation. For years BGLOs flew under the nose of much of mainstream white America. They were even unbeknownst to top American scholars. For example, the noted social movement scholar Douglas McAdam wrote, ‘I count myself as reasonably knowledgeable of black history, but I was almost entirely ignorant of the African American fraternal tradition and its surprising links to the broader freedom struggle’ (in Skocpol et al., 2006: back cover). In this vein, attention to BGLOs is now being drawn through the domain of sensationalized news coverage regarding hazing and financial scandals, the publication of various ‘unauthorized histories’, the for-profit industry that peddles BGLO paraphernalia, and most importantly the recent representation of BGLOs in visual mass media.

BGLOs’ insular worlds bear witness to only a handful of manifestations in major Hollywood productions. One such example is the rather innocuous and ancillary role in the 2002 *Drumline*, in which band members’ social cohesion on a HBCU campus was paralleled to BGLO references and visual allusions. Another representation is the 1984 *Revenge of the Nerds* in which a group of white ‘nerds’ joined the fictional black fraternity ‘Lambda Lambda Lambda.’ In this case, Tri-Lambda served only as a background device that allowed the plot and rising action to develop; their presence was invisibilized throughout the entire film until the very end, when they emerged to save their ‘nerdy’ white brothers. The most infamous cinematic representation of BGLOs remains Spike

Lee's 1988 indictment of the Black Greek system in *School Daze*, in which the fictional 'Gamma Phi Gamma' fraternity is portrayed as a cadre of loutish elitists and sexual prurients who maintain a host of self-hating, racial identity psychoses.

While not on the big screen, the introduction of the ABC Family's television show 'GREEK' aroused curiosity and anticipation as to how it would portray BGLOs. In the end, it chose to ignore their existence. Two of the show's seven writers, Carter Covington and Amy Rardin (members of the Delta Tau Delta and Alpha Delta Pi chapters at the University of Virginia) supposedly infuse their college memories into the show's plot:

U.Va. and its Greek system, after all, provide a large measure of the inspiration for the top-rated ABC Family show. Two of the show's writers ... infuse their college memories into the show's plot ... Covington and Rardin have a unique opportunity to share their Charlottesville experiences. 'It's really fun to sit in a room all day and reminisce about U.Va.,' says Covington. (Covington and Rardin, cited in: Mayhew, 2008)

Ironically, BGLOs have a large effect (and have had for some time) on the University of Virginia campus. They garner national media attention for their dedication and organizational cohesiveness, which contribute to the highest graduation rates for African American students of any public university in the USA (Associated Press, 1989; Olson, 2006). That Covington and Rardin are either ignorant of BGLOs and their effect at their alma mater, or that they chose to selectively remember only the 'white side' of Greek life, is instructive – BGLOs suffer from being collectively invisibilized not only among the larger mainstream, but also among traditionally white colleges and universities.

Stomp the Yard was released in early 2007. Much of the film's promotion centered on how the film's producer (Will Packer) was a veteran member of the BGLO Alpha Phi Alpha, and infused his experiences to make the film an 'authentic' representation. "I was on the set every day screaming about how everything had to be real," Packer says. "I went and put up all my old pictures, paddles and paraphernalia so that everybody could get a feel for this" (Alston, 2007). For many, the film offered the mainstream a unique opportunity to learn about BGLOs: 'Walter Kimbrough, author of *Black Greek 101* ... "Outside of [a hazing incident], black Greeks don't make the news," Kimbrough said. "We have to use stepping as a vehicle to get a message out" (Briggs, 2007). In many ways, the film attempts to counter the mainstream ignorance of BGLOs, outside of a rendering of them as little more than steppers, agents of hazing, and 'educated gangs' (Hughey, 2008a, 2008b). While *Stomp the Yard* aims to represent BGLOs through contemporary practices of stepping and a past connection to Civil Rights, it also selectively retells history and constructs a narrative that immerses its audience in a particular mythology of BGLOs, HBCUs, inner-city violence, and tales of educational redemption. Interrogating these representations is of great import.

Data and Methodology

I designed a content analysis of the film with the goal of using the strengths of traditional content analysis, inclusive of the ease of reporting numerical correlations, while attempting to mitigate the weakness that numerical categories do not capture the meanings encoded in a given image or narrative. In specific, I employed a four-tier approach. First, I carefully analyzed plot and character synopses of the *Stomp the Yard* script. Second, a research assistant and I cautiously analyzed the film and script over five times in order to obtain deeper insights into the plot, character development, and racial meanings of each film. Notes were taken during these sweeps of the data. Third, film and script notes were reviewed again and coded (November 2007 to January 2008) to determine the precise frequency of five thematic elements of the film (0 = no, 1 = yes):

- 1) Activities of BGLOs,
- 2) Activities of HBCUs,
- 3) History of Civil Rights,
- 4) Racialized and inner-city violence, and
- 5) Meritocratic morality tales.¹

These themes were coded judiciously, identifying one only when it was clear that the film was in possession of such a premise. Fourth, in order to access inter-coder reliability, a second independent research assistant coded the film after the completion of my and my first assistant’s coding. The second research assistant had no knowledge of our prior calculations. Agreement percentages and reliability measures were calculated (see Table 1). This form of qualitative content analysis aims for a flexible yet systematic analysis; my approach was structured by the reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation.

To examine how popular-film-as-history takes possession of the past by assigning meaning to it, I followed the approach of Søren Kierkegaard (1983) and Roland Barthes (1972 [1957], 1974, 1977). In specific, by suffusing a film with melancholy, romanticized nostalgia, and already established mythologies, the historical narratives encoded in a film are more likely to be read as natural and ‘common sensed’ representations. Hence, while a film such as *Stomp the Yard* may bring generally marginalized topics into the mainstream such as BGLOs, HBCUs, and Civil Rights leaders, it simultaneously sanctifies and masks references to their socio-economic, racial, and gendered causes, as well as the greater implications of those associations, educational institutions, and social movements. In this vein, I found five mythological themes ground the film’s construction of racial memory and identity. These mythologies effectively ‘re-member’ BGLOs – constructing them and their memory for popular consumption – and reflect a deeper cultural code about mythologies concerning racial identity and memory.

Step-by-Step Mythologies

Due to the racially segregated character of the USA, many within its borders spend little time interacting with people of different racial or ethnic groups (Massey and Denton, 1993). This point is particularly true for whites. ‘According to the 2000 census, whites are most likely to be segregated than any other group’ (California Newsreel, 2007). As a result, popular films about racialized

Table 1. Themes, theme frequency, and intercoder reliability

Themes	Theme frequency (number and percent)	Intercoder reliability measures			
		Number and Percent Agreement	Scott’s Pi	Cohen’s Kappa	Krippendorff’s Alpha
Activities of BGLOs	n = 102 (22.17%)	n = 118 (86.44%)	0.677	0.677	0.677
Activities of HBCUs	n = 21 (04.46%)	n = 23 (91.30%)	0.719	0.719	0.719
History of Civil Rights	n = 10 (02.17%)	n = 9 (90.00%)	0.946	0.946	0.946
Racialized and Inner-City Violence	n = 18 (03.91%)	n = 22 (81.18%)	0.686	0.687	0.687
Meritocratic Morality Tales	n = 36 (07.83%)	n = 31 (86.11%)	0.694	0.694	0.694

'subcultures' (like BGLOs and HBCUs) offer people, especially whites, narratives for experiences they will most likely never encounter. As social theorist George Lipsitz notes, racialized films 'probably frame memory for the greatest number of people' (Lipsitz, 1998: 219). Further, film scholar Daniel Bernardi (2007: xvi) writes:

Cinema is everywhere a fact of our lives, saturating our leisure time, our conversation, and our perceptions of each other and of self. Because of this, race in cinema is neither fictional nor illusion. It is real because it is meaningful and consequential; because it impacts real people's lives.

Roland Barthes's perspectives allow us to read popular media as full of meanings that constitute our everyday lives. Moreover, we can question whether such cultural texts are naturally and innocently capable of producing all sorts of supplementary meanings (or 'connotations' as Barthes preferred). While movies have a certain utility, Barthes wished theorists to bracket function to consider which specific mythologies assist audiences in viewing cinematic representations as innate and authentic, rather than as social creations that are tied to specific class, gender, and racialized interests.

Whether stemming from the nation's commitment to a narrative of 'improving' race relations, trends of capitalism that frame non-white difference as safe and consumable ethnic commodities, or Hollywood producers' and writers' recognition that they must combat their own history of racist filmmaking – cinema relies on particular mythologies to resonate with audiences. By applying this perspective, *Stomp the Yard* relies on a narrow form of commemoration in which black activists, institutions, and traditions that are commonly contested and problematic symbols in 'real life' find temporary resolution in 'reel life'. In what follows, I identify the five dominant mythologies that help to re-member racial history and identity.

The Miseducation of BGLO Stepping

Stomp the Yard compels the audience to identify with the supposed centrality of BGLO stepping within campus life. As soon as the film's protagonist 'DJ' (Columbus Short) settles into his dormitory room, he meets his roommate 'Rich Brown' (Ne-Yo), who casually extends an invitation to a bar-b-que hosted by 'some Deltas'. Although DJ initially declines, he soon ventures out to explore campus. Perhaps not unexpectedly, DJ runs into Rich in the center of 'the Yard' – a term for 'campus' that is commonly used on many HBCU campuses, especially in the south – where great numbers of students gather to watch a BGLO step show. As the Theta Nu Theta (TNT) fraternity emerges to begin its step routine, DJ looks puzzled and asks Rich in a defiant tone, 'What the hell are they doing, man?' In a quizzical tone of disbelief Rich replies, 'They're stomping the yard. Where're you from?'

As the reigning seven-year champs Mu Gamma Xi (the Mus) defiantly enter the show, DJ becomes embroiled in an altercation when he accidentally steps in between a line of Mu fraternity brothers (an action signifying extreme disrespect; any outsider to breach a line of brothers demonstrates weakness, lack of unity, and frailty on the part of that fraternity). The point is driven home only minutes later when DJ runs into one of the Mus named 'Grant': 'Oh yeah, I remember you. You're the idiot that tried to break our step-line.' Such an 'educational' narrative about the social BGLO scene, which propels campus life, is driven home in no more than eight minutes.

Immediately following the crash course on BGLOs and stepping, the writers and producers emphasize that winning step shows is the center of the BGLO and HBCU universe. In presenting a dormitory dialogue between 'Rich' (Ne-Yo), 'Byron' (Justin Hires), 'Noel' (Jermaine Williams), and 'Easy' (Oliver Ryan Best), the characters sarcastically engage the point that while fraternities may have 'history', 'tradition', and 'legacy', winning step shows is what really matters:

- Rich: Theta Nu Theta is gonna wipe the floor with Mu Gamma Xi.
 Byron: How's that?
 Rich: 'Cause I'm gonna join.
 Noel: Dude, why you pledging Theta anyway? They tired ... and they never win step championships.
 Rich: So?
 Noah: 'So?' What else is there?
 Rich: What about history? What about tradition? What about legacy?
 Easy: [laughing] Yeah, legacy of losing.

Even TNT, the rather 'good guy' and 'traditional' fraternity, buys into the logic that stepping, and little else, is the key to success for any BGLO, as illustrated when 'Sylvester' (Brian J. White) (president of TNT) approaches DJ to convince him to pledge:

- Sylvester: I'm here to talk to you about Theta Nu Theta.
 DJ: You're kidding right?
 Sylvester: No.
 DJ: What about it?
 Sylvester: Some of the members of my pledge committee, they feel that you would be an asset to the house.
 DJ: Naw, Mu Gamma has murdered your asses for the last seven years and you're here because you think I can help change all that.

However, the writers and directors seem painfully aware that the film – the first major Hollywood film on BGLOs in 20 years – cannot simply reduce the complexity of BGLOs to the tradition of stepping. In an attempt to temper this dilemma, agonizingly obvious caveats are sporadically thrown in the film. For instance, the character of 'April' (Meagan Good) broaches the subject of fraternities with DJ:

- April: So I heard the Mu Gammas are trying to recruit you, so you gonna pledge?
 DJ: Probably not, I don't wanna step.
 April: Being in a fraternity is about a lot more than just stepping.

Still, such admonitions fall short, as the great majority of the film's tone and timbre does in fact glorify stepping as the route to campus popularity, personal development, and brotherly ties. A large portion of the film's visual space is dominated by stepping. This in and of itself poses no critical dilemma. However, the portrayal of stepping as both hallowed method and revered goal is problematic. Issues of its circumstance, history, purpose, audience, the phenomenological experience of its participants, and the structural relation of its operations, are all secondary or non-existent in relation to the critical point of the film: stepping is what defines BGLOs and BGLOs define stepping. BGLOs' complexity, whether thought positive or negative, is severely diluted. BGLO community service is absent, practices of hazing are vaguely referenced (in one scene, DJ slowly sits down due to what appears to be a long night of 'paddling' on his posterior, at which the character 'April' gleefully laughs), and BGLO members' historic roles as campus leaders and scholars are neglected. As Tom Mould (2005: 78) writes,

step shows are the first and most frequent encounters with black Greek life. Many black Greeks find this problematic, fearing the reinforcement of racist stereotypes of blacks solely as entertainers as well as a

distortion of black Greek life. Stepping has been constructed over the years to portray only a small and idealized part of black Greek identity and therefore presents problems as a means of understanding the complexity of black identity.

The problem of representing BGLO stepping is by no means endemic only to *Stomp the Yard*, but is indicative of a larger cultural dilemma that BGLOs face. Such ‘naturalization’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2003), captured by the equation BGLO = stepping, is a frame that is particularly double-edged: BGLOs must celebrate the tradition of stepping without being defined by it.

Down South on ‘the Yard’: Depictions of Black College Life

Even though the film is set in the metropolis of Atlanta, GA, the film is littered with images of pastoral landscapes, white-pillared mansions, and off-the-beaten-path, smoke-filled pool halls. Whether through scenes of driving through campus, trips to DJ’s aunt and uncle’s large home and sprawling lawn, or jogs through a lush and verdant forest in the mid-afternoon to the top of Stone Mountain (site of the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan), the views are more evocative of those in *Gone With the Wind* (1939) than of a contemporary metropole. Atlanta’s geography is thus eviscerated by the film. And because the audience knows that DJ is headed ‘down South for school’, the setting captures claims to authenticity in ways that would be made problematic by the cinematic presence of high-rise buildings, concrete sidewalks, and Starbucks on every corner. ‘Cities’ are largely coded as ‘northern’, and ‘the South’ is portrayed as undeveloped, rural, and agrarian; a space far from the troubles of urban modernity and the nexus of ‘social problems’. *Stomp the Yard* draws on this cultural narrative to ground its location.

‘Truth University’ is thus presented as an isolated pocket of turbulence and competition within the milieu of Southern silence and bucolic beauty. Truth University’s inner turmoil is evidenced by a black administration that utilizes unscrupulous tactics to achieve its personal goals, a hierarchical system of wage-labor, and management that normalizes intra-black classism. The role of academics in student life is so submerged that it manifests itself only in regard to romantic liaisons with study partners and the bureaucratic ‘iron cage’ of class registration. The film contains sparse depictions of young men and women studying quietly in libraries, and such activities become back-drop settings that foreground dialogue about parties, stepping, pledging, and masculine rivalry. The audience receives the not-so-subtle message that the ‘real’ Truth University is not academic; rather, it is comprised of nocturnal extra-curricular activities that take place at dance clubs, in dormitory rooms, and at step show competitions. While such a dynamic is somewhat expected given the genre of college-based cinema, the story’s placement at an HBCU makes the ‘real’ story revolve around the quest to find an ‘authentic’ form of black racial identity that is closely allied with dancing, partying, and the ‘cultural racism’ frame (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) that project non-white behaviors as the product of cultural deficiencies. Even in the now dated *Animal House* (1978) or the more contemporary *Old School* (2003), the Greek-affiliated characters are concerned with appeasing the University administration. By stark contrast, *Stomp the Yard* focuses on discovering an essentialized form of blackness within the HBCU experience – southern roots, family ties, and ancestral linkages to famous black Greeks.

Such constructions of HBCU life rely on nostalgic fictions of black college life that turn on the implicit acceptance of stereotypical and essentialist renderings of black racial identity, the South, and adolescence. To borrow from Pierre Bourdieu (2002), these mythologies enact a certain ‘symbolic violence’ on HBCUs:

In the symbolic struggle for the production of common sense or, more precisely, for the monopoly of legitimate naming as the official – i.e. explicit and public – imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world, agents bring into play the symbolic capital that they have acquired ... those inscribed in people's minds or in the objective world, such as qualification. (2002: 72)

The production of that imagery effectively conflates 'real life' and 'reel life' while obfuscating many of the realities of HBCUs so that their unique contributions are negated. For example, in comparing black attendance at HBCUs with Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), more than twice as many African American students at HBCUs report that campus extracurricular activities reflect their interests (28% at HBCUs vs 12% at PWIs), while significantly more African American students at PWIs report that they 'hardly ever' participated in campus activities (31% at PWIs vs 23% at HBCUs) (Outcalt and Skewes-Cox, 2002: 331–347). Furthermore HBCUs award over 25 percent of bachelor degrees to African American students, with 35 percent of blacks earning a bachelor's in chemistry and the biological sciences, 37 percent in math, and a remarkable 61 percent in physics (Provasnik and Shafer, 2004). Also, black students completing their undergraduate education at HBCUs are more likely than those from PWIs to attend graduate school and to complete doctoral degrees in science and engineering (Turner, 2008).²

The aforementioned realities have no place in *Stomp the Yard*, as they do not fit with the narrative of HBCUs as spaces for the exoticism of black bodies. This absence gestures toward perhaps the most disturbing element of the film's representation of Truth University – HBCUs' intellectual contributions and co-curricular complexity are diminished while the corporeal aspects of black bodies (as dancers, steppers, and lovers) are naturalized and pathologized (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Imagery that is particularly violent toward the legacies of black centers of higher learning is used as capital to purchase the audience's belief that the images they view are both authentic and enchantingly different.

BGLOs and the Struggle for Civil and Human Rights

At key moments throughout the film, the audience is afforded references to the fact that BGLOs played a significant role in the struggle for civil and human rights throughout the 20th century. As Skocpol et al. (2006: 130–131) write:

African American fraternal groups played many roles in the lengthy struggle for equal civil rights in America that eventually culminated in the modern Civil Rights movement. ... If we posit black fraternalists as one of the institutional seedbeds for the values and norms that led ultimately to civil rights ... African American fraternalists, like African American churchgoers, helped to steel themselves for the collective struggles to move toward civic equality in America.

Relying on these notable facts, the writers and producers of the film employ photographic depictions of historic BGLO/Civil Rights leaders. In an attempt to add complexity to the one-dimensional story of BGLO stepping, the film converts BGLOs' legacy into a quick, plot-driving device for individual sentimentalism and wistful melancholy about the past struggles of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr (Alpha Phi Alpha), Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King (Alpha Kappa Alpha).

In this vein, the iconography of BGLO/Civil Rights leaders plays the over-romanticized role of fixing personal troubles rather than alleviating social problems. This mode of story-telling is not predestined. The film could present the social forces of racism and classism as more than

stumbling blocks that one overcomes by simply altering one's state of mind, but rather as patterned and systemic inequities that BGLOs battled in the past and continue to fight in the present. The film could introduce BGLOs as community servants or vehicles for social change (whether by working in local political campaigns, volunteering in homeless shelters, or mentoring high school children). While it is a truism that the 'personal is political', the film disconnects individuals' ability to challenge structural inequality through its insinuation that structural inequality no longer exists. Such neo-liberal cinematic constructions of Civil Rights memory domesticate and belittle the violence, struggle, and pain of not only the effects of white supremacy and a deepening gap between rich and poor, but also the Movement that resisted those tyrannies. As Sharon Monteith (2003) writes:

An obvious problem for filmmakers is 'receding concreteness', to borrow Adorno's phrasing. In (re)connecting with a disappearing history, civil rights film narratives are typically recursive, but what they actually suffer from is 'presentism', whereby the pressures of the present distort our understanding of the past. Character-led dramas ... promote a single monologic point of view to create what has ubiquitously come to be known as a 'useable past'. (2003: 124)

Filmmakers prioritize publicly available or 'useable' memories that resonate with audiences. Partial and personal stories masquerade as political and public facts. Human interactions, struggles, and dilemmas are thus reduced to individual dilemmas, confession, and disclosure. For example, when DJ walks into Truth University's 'Heritage Hall', he gazes solemnly at a wall covered in black and white pictures of famous BGLO members. During this 140 second stretch of film without dialogue, DJ's silent exposure to the hallowed halls of black Greekdom magically do the trick; he undergoes a hyper-individualized 'civil rites of passage', through which he suddenly understands that BGLOs possess a legacy that stretches far beyond step shows and parties. DJ then immediately pledges TNT, forgoing his previous beliefs and opinions about BGLOs as self-serving, elitist, social clubs.

Social Problems: Poor Culture vs Rich Personality

Stomp the Yard enacts a long-standing tradition of using black and inner-city 'ghettos' as foundations on which to build personal redemption stories that are easily translated into commodifiable objects for mainstream markets. As with many narratives that rely on a personal transformation by story's end, situating the character in the pathological milieu of the inner city is both a tried and a true device. As Bonilla-Silva (2003) argues, the post-Civil Rights era is a time in which the visual and linguistic manners of racism have changed to justify their manifestation. 'The new style of an ideology refers to its peculiar *linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies* (or *racetalk*) that are used to express its frames and story lines.' (Bonilla-Silva, 2002: 42, footnote)

Beyond replicating long-standing Hollywood white supremacist discourses and stereotypes that depict blackness in terms of violence, hyper-sexuality, and laziness, the film portrays a schizophrenic ghetto in which only individual and rational decision-making leads to positive choices, while simultaneously the 'culture of poverty' causes negative decision-making. Such a dichotomy is established from the film's genesis. The audience immediately locates the film's protagonist 'DJ' in a seedy underworld of Los Angeles 'krump dancing', in which gambling, the threat of violence, sexualized machismo, and masculine one-upmanship reign supreme. After DJ, his brother 'Duron' (Chris Brown), and the rest of his dance crew (named the 'Goon Squad') beat a local crew (called the 'Thug Unit') in front of their home crowd, DJ accepts a double-or-nothing rematch. From the onset, Deron (the college bound 'good' and 'cooperative' guy) is juxtaposed against DJ (the quintessential selfish rogue). Despite Duron's admonitions, they continue with the challenge and win, to which

the local crew responds by ambushing DJ and fatally shooting Duron (who was headed to Truth University that fall). In this light, DJ's 'ghetto-centric' qualities are framed as the impetus for Duron's murder. Rather than follow this story or the half-dozen other characters already introduced, the film dramatically alters tack. Almost immediately, the audience finds DJ on a train headed for Atlanta and Truth University, playing the reluctant stand-in for his brother. The rise of neo-liberalism and the hegemony of color-blind rhetoric have thoroughly infiltrated this film, rendering reference to, or analysis of, the state, racism, and capitalism nearly obsolete. By concentrating on the exception to this rule (as personified in DJ by film's end), the film dismisses structural patterns and reinscribes the 'cultural pathology' debate that inherent dysfunctions exist in the black lower class.

Once at Truth University, the film establishes an antagonism between the street thug DJ and the upper-crust boy 'Grant' of the seven year step-show champs Mu Theta Xi. While Grant, like DJ, has plenty of flaws, there is a critical separation between the two. Grant has 'character flaws' that are relatively unrelated to his upper-class life of privilege (demonstrated by his explicit status as a six-year combined undergrad/*juris doctorate* student, his father's status as a Wall Street insider, and his fraternity leadership). For DJ, audiences view a picture of a relatively 'good boy' who was corrupted by the inner city. DJ's (dis)placement in college and his reluctant decision to pledge a BGLO signify his slow salvation. The film shows that once DJ comes in contact with enough of the 'right' culture, he is truly convertible. By film's end, he is a caring brother in his fraternity, an outstanding student, a stepper *par excellence*, and a faithful boyfriend. Conversely, his cinematic nemesis Grant continually demonstrates an elitist and misogynistic narcissism that is disconnected from rampant materialism, entitlement, and conspicuous consumption. In appealing to populist sentiment, Grant is simply a 'bad apple': the writers and directors leave his cultural background unscathed. Upper-class privilege is unnecessary to 'escape', unlike inner-city Los Angeles. Rather, Grant's status is depicted as attainable and valuable in so long as one possesses the right individual characteristics.

Given this storyline, *Stomp the Yard* is complicit with an unfortunate genre of cinema. The commodification of gangster and ghetto narratives, coupled with the deployment of the sights and sounds of hip-hop, serves as a vehicle for reactionary politics that legitimate the status quo. The film becomes a story about the mythologies of individual choices and cultural pathologies. In so doing, the film not only reflects the conservative ideology that is constitutive of modern Hollywood, but it carries resonance with neo-conservative US populism that became dominant in the Reagan/Thatcher era of the 1980s. The film's widespread characterization of black men and women as party-going college students consumed with hip-hop and BGLO stepping denies recognition of a larger trend that extends beyond Hollywood. The film is a turn to 'reactionary throwbacks' that embody a 'national epidemic that deforms the discourse of race: denial' (Giroux, 2003: 42).

DJ and Grant: The Janus Face of the Meritocracy Myth

As highlighted in the previous section, the film is grounded by the antagonism between two central characters: DJ and Grant. The film relies on these characters to personify two aspects of meritocracy's dominant discourse. In the first, DJ is an incarnation of the victory of hard work over harsh circumstances. In the second, Grant is the manifestation of a conservative morality tale that dictates those with ethical failings will eventually become stripped of their undeserving success. Together, these two characters are the Janus-faced ideology of meritocracy in which upward social mobility is explained by the personal attributes of hard work and morality. In this light, the ideology of meritocracy is congealed in the personal characteristics of both characters – the film goes to great lengths to show which character is truly made of the 'right stuff' and thus entitled to success by the film's closure.

According to this particular ideology, often labeled the ‘American Dream’, the path of higher education leads to a land of limitless opportunity in which individuals can go as far as their merit takes them. According to this mythic *Weltanschauung*, one gets out of the system what one puts into it. Upward social mobility is based on individual merit, which is generally viewed as a combination of innate abilities, hard work, the right attitude, and high moral character. As countless scholars have outlined, most North Americans not only tend to think this is how the system should work, but also believe this is how the system does work (Huber and Form, 1973; Kluegel and Smith, 1982). Given this ideological framework’s dominance, the film complies with this Horatio Alger-style nationalistic narrative. Yet, as McNamee and Miller (2004) argue in *The Meritocracy Myth*, this assertion’s validity is not defensible empirically. That is, while merit does indeed affect who ends up with what, merit’s impact on upward mobility is vastly overestimated. Myriad non-merit factors suppress, neutralize, or even negate the effects of merit and create barriers to individual mobility. *Stomp the Yard* tells a different tale in the respective rise and fall of DJ and Grant.

For DJ, his personal struggles are couched in the lower-class environment from which he emerges. From this perspective, poor people are portrayed as anti-work, anti-family, anti-school, and anti-success. However, evidence suggests that poor people do not possess ‘deviant’ or ‘pathological’ values, but instead value work, family, school, and achievement as much as those with higher socio-economic standing (Swidler, 1986; Wilson, 1996; Wynn, 2003). Despite such evidence, the film presents DJ as overcoming his background of pathological inner-city thug culture in order to succeed. DJ exists as a personified site of struggle between abstract morality and a specific lower-class, black, urban background. Because DJ overcomes this environment, he provides ‘proof’ of meritocratic rule’s legitimacy.

A great deal of the film’s footage is dedicated to scenes of DJ working for his college education. Due to an understated dynamic of nepotism, DJ’s uncle gives him a job working for Truth U. in the Physical Maintenance and Landscaping Department. Various scenes show DJ planting flowers, mowing the lawn, and clearing brush – a type of labor that is framed as sincere and moral – ‘an honest day’s work’. The film’s repetitive representation of DJ engaged in such work effectively juxtaposes him against his fellow students who can afford to enroll at Truth University because of scholarships or their parents’ money. Unlike others in the film (which portrays no other student workers), DJ earns his education; nothing is given to him for free.

As a foil to DJ’s character, Grant (aptly named in that his parents’ socio-economic status confers on him high status) is portrayed as rude, insensitive, and lacking in ‘moral fiber’. Because of this persona, he quickly becomes the character that audiences love to hate. After April leaves Grant, Grant begins to exhibit more Machiavellian tendencies: from asking April’s father (a school administrator) to put pressure on April to dump DJ, to digging up DJ’s criminal past to have him suspended from school, and in directing his fraternity brothers to spy on DJ’s step-show practice to win the annual step-show competition. As he engages in more wanton acts of disrespect and underhandedness, he is primed to fall from grace. This dynamic makes *Stomp the Yard* a stock-in-trade conservative morality tale. In order for DJ to justly de-throne Grant, Grant must prove himself unworthy by losing the girl, losing the step show, and losing his hold on campus dominance. If Grant were not presented as a child of privilege lacking in personal scruples, the film would fail to resonate with the audience, as the clear moral protagonist would not be made manifest.

Conclusion

‘[The] disease of thinking in essences ... is at the bottom of every bourgeois mythology of man.’ -Roland Barthes (1972 [1957]) *Mythologies*

The beguiling morality tale of the rise of DJ and the fall of Grant, the destructive reduction of the Civil Rights movement into a tale of personal redemption and initiative, and the singular focus on BGLOs and their Greek-letter adorned bodies as manifestations of exotic and essentialized difference, all complement the prevailing ideological revisionism and political neo-liberalism of the film's 2007 release. Simultaneously, the film obfuscates such a connection by focusing on retrospective tributes to a past that never existed. Whether we are moved by the photographs in 'Heritage Hall' or DJ's ability to pull himself up by his bootstraps as he works his way through college to obtain Greek letters, the girl, and the grandeur of step show victory, we are encouraged to react with positive affectation.

However, we are neither allowed to glimpse the ways in which ordinary HBCU students navigate a world in which racial identity will significantly affect their ability to obtain employment after college (Pager, 2003; Pager and Grodsky, 2001; Pager and Quillian, 2005), nor are we able to gain access to BGLOs' modern-day struggles as they wrestle with hazing, homophobia, or interfraternity high jinks and hatred (DeSantis and Coleman, 2008). Such a cultural vacuum suggests that BGLOs are relatively free of such problems and that Civil Rights acts of self-collective determinism and confrontation are inconceivable in this day and age. If we take the film at its word, the Civil Rights movement only exists in history, framed in dusty black and white photos in a neglected college building. The struggles of the past are no longer needed and DJ feels no compulsion to change the world, he just wants to dance in it (Saltz, 2007).

In so long as we passively accept film as little more than entertainment, while also submissively ignoring the cinematic construction of 'truth' and 'history', we enter into a kind of 'spectator democracy' that encourages wholesale passivity to the exclusion of active consumerism (Morgan, 2006). Ultimately, the confluence of ideologies in which the resistive, impolite legacies of Civil Rights leaders and BGLOs are transformed into muted narratives, and the corporate media impulse to produce profit from larger and larger audiences that desire those narratives, reveals the troubling state of our public discourse about race, resistance, and remembrance.

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Notes

- 1 Such coding was operationalized via each unit of analysis. The unit of analysis served as 15 seconds of film. The film totaled 115 minutes (6900 seconds) or 460 segments of 15-second coded sections. It is important to note that some of the themes were present multiple times during any given 15 second span but were recorded only once per unit.
- 2 Two events fundamentally changed the rates of African American attendance at HBCUs. The first was the G.I. Bill, which increased by thousands the number of African American veterans able to attend college, while the second was the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that increased the opportunities of African Americans to select Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). However, it was not until the 1970s that more African Americans began to select PWIs and by 1980 only 20 percent of African American students in higher education were attending HBCUs. Despite these decreased numbers, HBCUs still continue to play a unique role in American higher education. HBCUs awarded '28 percent of black bachelor's degrees, 16 percent of the black first-professional degrees, 15 percent of the black master's degrees and 9 percent of black doctoral degrees' (Brown, 2004). Vernon Jordan finds that HBCUs are the undergraduate home of

'75 percent of all black PhDs, 75 percent of all black army officers, 80 percent of all black federal judges and 85 percent of all black doctors' (in Roebuck and Murty, 1993: 13).

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