

The Cinematic Incarnation of Frazier's Black Bourgeoisie: Tyler Perry's Black Middle-Class

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Published online: 29 July 2011
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Abstract Images of Black Americans in modern cinema often depict negative stereotypes of working- and lower-class Blacks. Yet, with the rise of the Black middle-class and the increasing inclusion of Blacks in positions of power within the mass media, more images of middle-class Blacks have begun to appear, particularly through the work of Tyler Perry. We find that Perry's images largely reflect E. Franklin Frazier's characterization of middle-class Blacks in *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), where Perry frames them as (1) materialistic and status-obsessed, (2) dysfunctional and abusive, and (3) disdainful of working- and lower-class Blacks. We also argue that he is creating new controlling images like the "Emasculated Black Gentleman." In these ways, Perry's images may have detrimental consequences including perpetuating Black stereotypes, reinforcing existing class and gender tensions in Black America, and impeding the life chances of middle-class Blacks by suggesting that they are unsuitable for assimilation and integration.

Keywords Tyler Perry · Black middle-class · Black bourgeoisie · Controlling images · African Americans

Images of Black Americans on film have been somewhat rare and in recent modern cinema, they have been fairly negative. For instance, in the 1990s, a sort of "neo-

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blaxploitation” film became popular, exemplified in movies like *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), *New Jack City* (1991), *Menace II Society* (1993), and *Baby Boy* (2001). These films “either deliberately or unwittingly glorify the figure of the violent gangster” (Benshoff and Griffin 2009: 95) and depict a Black America that is largely lower-class, inherently dysfunctional, criminal, and incapable of functional relationships (Bogle 2004; Collins 2005; Guerrero 1993). While racism and a lack of structural opportunity for poor and working-class Blacks may be largely to blame for the residents’ negative outcomes in these films (Bogle 2004), for uncritical audiences, the films may reify the belief that Blacks are simply unfit for assimilation into a White-dominated society (Collins 2005). After all, as Collins (2005) states, “Who wants to live next door to a thug or sit next to one in school?” (159). Nevertheless, these kinds of films have remained widely popular. Still, “while many urban black filmgoers (as well as white suburban teen males who responded to the films’ hypermasculine aesthetics) made these films into box office hits, other more middle-class black audiences were frequently appalled by them” (Benshoff and Griffin 2009: 95).

With the rise of the Black middle-class and the increasing inclusion of Blacks in positions of power within the mass media, more images of middle-class Blacks have begun to appear. In the 1990s, films like *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *Soul Food* (1997), *Love Jones* (1997), and *The Best Man* (1999) brought images of professional Black Americans with careers and comfortable lifestyles, living far from the shadow of the ghetto and its supposed pathologies. Entman and Rojecki (2000) refer to this period as a “utopian reversal” (152) where in this decade, over 70% of Black characters held professional or management positions. These portrayals offered Americans a view of a more affluent Black America that was previously invisible on film. In the millennium, however, it is the work of writer, director, and producer Tyler Perry that accounts for most of the present-day film portrayals of middle-class Blacks.

Perry’s professional success is undeniable. Many of his films began as stage plays on the modern-day “chitlin circuit” with Perry selling low-budget video copies of his plays from the trunk of his car. What he lacked in financial support, however, he made up for with a consistent following of predominantly Black, churchgoing audiences. Over time, Perry rose from plays in small venues to making movies for mass audiences, and eventually owning his own multi-million dollar studio (Tyler Perry Studios) in Atlanta, Georgia in 2008. To date, he has written or produced over 20 films (several of them derived from his stage plays), and as of January 2011, his films had grossed over \$430 million (imdb.com 2011). As such, Perry is arguably the pre-eminent Black filmmaker in America today who has “reached mainstream markers of success” (Taylor 2007: 635) and “has a near monopoly on the depiction of American black life on screen” (Svetkey et al. 2009: 26). Journalist and blogger David Seaton even goes so far as to say, “There is no doubt in my mind that he is the most totally in control auteur in American cinema, perhaps in American cinema’s history” (Seaton 2010:1). In these ways, he has become both successful and influential, with Black and White audiences alike flocking to see his films which reflect the themes of family, forgiveness, and religious inspiration. Most of his films center on a character named “Madea,” a working-class, old-school, gun-toting grandmother,

notorious for her sharp tongue and “take-no-prisoners” attitude. However, Madea’s larger-than-life presence and madcap antics in these films can distract from Perry’s portrayals of middle-class Blacks and the audience’s ability to examine these portrayals in a more critical fashion.

We argue that it is necessary to take a critical look at Perry’s images of middle-class Blacks for several reasons. First, his images represent refashioned versions of old stereotypes of Blacks on film, which depict them as violent, criminal, and even hypersexual. Second, Perry’s images also appear to be a cinematic incarnation of E. Franklin Frazier’s rather scathing 1957 characterization of middle- and upper-class Blacks in his seminal work, *The Black Bourgeoisie*. Like Frazier, Perry frames them as (1) materialistic and status-obsessed, (2) dysfunctional and abusive, and (3) disdainful of working- and lower-class Blacks. Third, we argue that Perry creates new controlling images like the “Emasculated Black Gentleman,” a representation that ultimately upholds a patriarchal discourse. These stereotypes employed in the past and employed by Perry in the present essentially depict middle-class Blacks as unfit for assimilation and suggest that even Blacks who have been successfully integrated into the mainstream lead lives filled with dysfunction behind closed doors. Moreover, these images may carry additional weight for the audience because they have been written, produced, and directed by a Black man who serves a predominantly Black audience.

In this study, we examine four of Perry’s films that are among his most popular and that were written, produced and (with the exception of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*) directed by him.¹ In *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (Grant 2005),² Helen reluctantly leaves an abusive relationship with her wealthy husband Charles and must set on a quest to find a new love in her life. In *Madea’s Family Reunion* (Perry 2006),³ Lisa must find the courage to leave her wealthy fiancé Carlos, while her working-class sister Vanessa must find the courage to love again as a victim of childhood sexual abuse. In *Why Did I Get Married* (Perry 2007), four professional couples embark on their annual weekend retreat, where secrets and lies threaten the couples’ relationships. Finally, in *Madea Goes to Jail* (Perry 2009), Josh must choose between his lawyer girlfriend and the real love of his life, Candace, a prostitute who befriends pistol-toting matriarch Madea while both are in jail. We find that these films offer largely negative portrayals of middle-class Blacks which ultimately reify old stereotypes of Blacks on film, even while creating new ones.

In the next sections, we briefly discuss the complex lives of actual middle-class Blacks and compare this to the controlling images of them in the mass media. We follow this with a discussion of Frazier’s unsympathetic characterization of this racial-class from over 50 years ago and how his work has essentially been given a new life through Tyler Perry’s films.

¹ We purposely excluded Perry-produced films like *Precious* (2009) and *For Colored Girls* (2010) from our analysis as neither were originally written by Perry. While he enjoys a writing credit for *For Colored Girls*, the film is based on Ntozake Shange’s play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975).

² Hereafter, we often refer to *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* simply as “*Diary*.”

³ Hereafter, we often refer to *Madea’s Family Reunion* simply as “*Family Reunion*.”

Middle-Class Blacks in Truth and in Portrayal

Estimated at anywhere from a quarter (Attewell et al. 2004) to a third (Pinkney 2000; Sue and Sue 2003) of the Black population, middle-class Blacks compose a fairly small yet powerful segment of the population. Much time has been spent determining how to define the term "Black middle-class." Often, occupation has been used as the indicator of Black middle-class membership where individuals who have a white-collar job (broadly defined as a professional, managerial, or clerical job) are included in this category (Landry 1987; see also Feagin and Sikes 1994; Higginbotham and Weber 1992; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). More recently, however, Lacy (2007) identifies a "core" Black middle-class with household income between \$50 and 100,000, and a population of "blue-chip Blacks" who have occupations requiring more than a bachelor's degree and with household incomes over \$100,000. With regards to Perry's Black middle-class characters specifically, their managerial and professional occupations and lives of opulence suggest that they easily fit the Black middle-class distinction and, in fact, lean toward Lacy's "blue-chip Black" distinction.

Scholars have offered stirring accounts of the myriad challenges these Blacks face in negotiating White-dominated workplaces (Collins 1997; Cose 1993), neighborhoods (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Lacy 2002; Tatum 1999), and public spaces (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Lacy 2007). These accounts detail the ways in which social class fails to protect upwardly mobile Blacks from the dictates of racial discrimination. Furthermore, they must navigate these waters while simultaneously trying to maintaining ties to the larger Black community. Despite some sense of ambivalence (Harris 2011; Jackson 2001; Pattillo-McCoy 1999), research shows that they do in fact maintain functional relationships with lower class counterparts, many of whom are relatives (Cose 1993; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Higginbotham and Weber 1992; Jackson 2001; Lacy 2007; McAdoo 2006; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Pinkney 2000). Nevertheless, negotiating life in the Black and White world proves exceedingly difficult.

Media images of middle-class Blacks fail to encompass these complexities and tend to flatten them into stereotypes, while also eliminating the racial context in which they must survive. While there has not been much research on Black middle-class archetypes in the mass media, Patricia Hill Collins identifies and deconstructs some of the controlling images of this group that serve to justify their exploitation and domination. In *Black Sexual Politics* (2005), she maintains that while previous controlling images of Blacks were images of lower-class Blacks (Collins 2000), the new racism necessitates the creation of controlling images of middle-class Blacks: "the mass media has generated class-specific images of Black women [and men] that help justify and shape the new racism of desegregated, colorblind America" (147). By way of example, Collins offers the image of the "Black Lady," perhaps best embodied by the character of "Claire Huxtable" on the groundbreaking *Cosby Show*. Claire was a wife and mother who was "beautiful, smart, and sensuous" and lacked lower-class signifiers: "No cornrows, gum chewing, cursing, miniskirts, or plunging necklines existed for the character of Claire Huxtable" (Collins 2005: 139–40). She rarely raised her voice and symbolized the elegance and sophistication of Black middle-class women. In these ways, she represents an assimilationist image (see Ott

and Mack 2010) that suggests that as long as Blacks behave this way, they remain good candidates for integration. Still, while Claire was a lawyer, she was rarely shown at work (Collins 2005), which eliminates the complicated racial context within which most professional Blacks must navigate.

In contrast to the “Black Lady” image that represents how middle-class Black women “ought” to be, the “Educated Black Bitch” represents a beautiful Black woman with money, power, and a good job who wields her sexuality like a weapon (Collins 2005). Unlike the Black Lady whose sexuality is confined to marriage, the Educated Black Bitch controls her own body and sexuality. Collins (2005) uses the Robin Givens character, Jacqueline, in *Boomerang* as an exemplar of this controlling image. Because the film has a virtually all-Black cast, we never see the racialized and gendered context in which she likely had to claw her way to the top. Instead, we see how she manipulates Marcus for her own sexual pleasure and is demonized for it by the end of the film. According to Collins (2005), images like the Educated Black Bitch justify the continued exploitation of Black middle-class women in the workplace. They are also used to explain why so many Black women cannot find a man: they are married to their careers, refuse to support him emotionally, or have other character traits that make them otherwise unappealing.

We find that The Black Lady image is very much present in Tyler Perry films. However, the women who represent this image are often presented as weak and ineffectual, like Lisa in *Madea's Family Reunion* who is being beaten by her fiancé, or Patricia (played by actress/singer Janet Jackson) in *Why Did I Get Married?* who uses her child-like voice to counsel her friends on their marriages while her own is falling apart. Nearly all of the women in the four films that we discuss are married or engaged, are well educated or accomplished, and appear to have a great deal of class and elegance. In these ways, from the outset, they appear to be Black Ladies. However, frequently they turn into Educated Black Bitches as they engage in manipulative and cruel tactics or have “bad attitudes” that emasculate the men in their lives. In these ways, Perry presents a patriarchal reading of Black middle-class women as ineffectual, unstable, manipulative, emasculating, and far from desirable or sympathetic.

Black men fare little better under Perry’s pen. According to Collins (2005), Black middle-class men have historically been portrayed as “Black buddies” who are friendly, deferential, loyal to mainstream values, non-threatening, and “defined neither by his sexual prowess nor by any hint of violence” (167). In many ways, they are modern-day Uncle Toms. Collins (2005) says that “there is little danger of Black buddies stealing the silverware, reverting to Black English, or raping the wife” (168). She argues that Bill Cosby’s character, “Cliff Huxtable,” in *The Cosby Show* is the embodiment of this archetype. Cliff displayed all of the above qualities while confining his sexuality safely within the sanctity of marriage (Collins 2005).

We find very little evidence of the Black buddy stereotype in Perry’s films. Instead, we find representations that position Black middle-class men as cruel to women and myopically preoccupied with status and money like the abusive Charles in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* or the equally as abusive Carlos in *Madea's Family Reunion* (both are discussed in more detail below). These characterizations harken back to a caricature of Black men that was established as early as 1893 (see Smith 1893)—“the Black Brute.” According to Bogle (2004), Black Brutes are portrayed

as "big, baadddd [sic] niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied" (14). They are destructive, criminal, sociopathic, and physically and emotionally abusive. Frequently, the men in Perry's films are hypersexual as well like Mike in *Why Did I Get Married* who has a mistress and Charles in *Diary* who has fathered two children outside of his marriage. These images of Black men are usually reserved for poor and/or working-class Black men (Collins 2005), but as we will show, in Perry's films, these stereotypes apply to middle-class Black men as well. This suggests that no matter how far a Black man might travel up the class ladder, he will still be a Black Brute.

We also find a second common portrayal of Black middle-class men, which is slightly more positive, yet negative in other ways. This portrayal consists of the Black middle-class man as caring, sensitive, intuitive, and nurturing, yet persecuted at the hands of a woman. We call this image the "Emasculated Black Gentleman." Most of the men in *Why Did I Get Married?* fit this description as does Brian the lawyer (played by Perry himself) who is featured in both *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* and *Madea's Family Reunion*. For instance, in *Diary*, Brian spends a good deal of time worried about his wife who has become a drug addict and has left him to raise their children on his own. Any other time the audience sees Brian, he is struggling to defend his Aunt Madea in court, whose antics make his job impossible. More examples abound in each of the other three films. Essentially, according to Tyler Perry, Black middle-class men either control women (sometimes violently as in the case of the Black Brute) or are controlled by women (as in the case of the Emasculated Black Gentleman). In both cases, these portrayals may be a veiled response to the ways in which real-life Black women continue to outshine Black men in the realms of education and the workplace.

In addition to upholding these long-standing stereotypes, we find that Perry's images also reflect one of the most biting critiques of middle-class Blacks in scholarly literature—Frazier's, *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1962 [1957]).

Echoes of Frazier

Originally published in 1957 (and re-released in 1962), sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's book, *The Black Bourgeoisie*, accused middle- and upper-class Blacks of being so obsessed with assimilation, prosperity, and White acceptance that they lost their roots in the larger Black community. His account chronicles the middle-class' experience from slavery to Jim Crow America and their journey to assimilation. Frazier argues that along the way, middle-class Blacks lost a sense of cultural and community rooting: "As the result of the break with its cultural past, the black bourgeoisie is without cultural roots in either the Negro world with which it refuses to identify, or the white world which refuses to permit the black bourgeoisie to share its life" (Frazier 1962: 24). He further argued that they have "a deep-seated inferiority complex" that causes them to retreat into "a world of make-believe in which [they attempt] to escape the disdain of whites and fulfill [their] wish for status in American life" (Frazier 1962: 24–25). In this make-believe world of socialites, status, and striving for White acceptance, they end up living "in a cultural vacuum" with lives "devoted largely to fatuities" (Frazier 1962: 112).

This unflattering characterization of a frivolous, status-obsessed, and delusional Black middle-class who reject the larger Black community was received with contempt by Blacks and Whites alike, surprising even Frazier himself (see Frazier 1962: 1). Middle-class Blacks, in particular, saw the unflattering account as a threat to their economic interests and their attempt to integrate White workplaces. Some working-class Blacks, however, appreciated his work and stopped Frazier on the street and shook his hand “for having performed this long overdue service” (Frazier 1962: 2). Despite its controversy, the book would go on to win the prestigious MacIver Award from the American Sociological Association (ASA) and Frazier became the President of ASA and also of the International Society for the Scientific Study of Race Relations. *The Black Bourgeoisie* remains a sociological classic and has paved the way for several studies on the Black middle-class ever since.

We argue that in many ways, Tyler Perry's films present a cinematic depiction of the privileged Blacks described in Frazier's work. While we have no data or evidence to suggest that Perry has read Frazier's book, his commentary on middle-class Blacks is as striking as Frazier's and indeed reflects many of the key claims of his book. Perry presents Black middle- and upper-class characters as frivolous and mostly concerned with their opulent world of large mansions, fancy cars, and designer clothes; all the while, their relationships suffer and their morals are compromised. However, a point of difference between Frazier's characterization and Perry's is that Frazier attributes the Black middle-class' alleged insecurities to their precarious status in the American social structure, while Perry's characters exist absent that context, thus inviting audiences to demonize them.

In the analysis section, we begin each part with a quotation from *The Black Bourgeoisie*, followed by a description of how Perry's images reflect that theme. Before moving on to the analysis, however, we discuss how we conducted our research on Perry's films and identify the major themes and coding schemes we used to analyze each of the four films.

Data and Methods

Both authors had previously viewed all four films before the undertaking of this project. For this research, however, we re-watched them several times on DVD in order to take note of the portrayals of middle-class Blacks in particular. We decided to focus on three themes: (1) middle-class Blacks as materialistic (and/or status-obsessed), (2) middle-class Blacks as dysfunctional, and (3) middle-class Blacks as disdainful of working- or lower-class Blacks. All are themes reflected in Frazier's (1962 [1957]) work. In terms of “materialism,” we looked for scenes where middle-class Blacks were portrayed as preoccupied with wealth and status (sometimes to their own detriment). Thus, when we saw a character compromising their physical or emotional health or their morals for the comfort of an opulent lifestyle (for example), we coded it as “materialistic” or “status-obsessed.” Regarding “dysfunction,” we looked for scenes where middle-class Blacks were depicted as (1) physically and/or verbally abusive, (2) tangled in unhealthy relationships, or (3) involved in criminal activity or corruption. In short, when we saw behaviors from characters that signaled an extreme loss of personal control, a blatant disregard for commonly accepted

norms of individual and/or group behavior, or a clear disregard for the law, we placed it in this category. Finally, for the third theme, we looked for evidence of verbal and physical behavior among middle-class characters that expressed disdain for working- or lower-class Blacks or that cast them as inferior. We specifically looked for instances where middle- and upper-class Blacks positioned themselves as being above their poorer counterparts or exhibited behavior designed to oppress them. Relatedly, we found that when these scenes occurred, the working-/lower-class was positioned by Perry as being the voice of reason (despite their own dysfunction) and the emotional compass for the middle-class Blacks in the film.

We coded each film individually on our own, then thoroughly compared notes, and reached consensus on any discrepancies. Before moving on to the results of our content analysis, it is important to acknowledge the way in which Tyler Perry establishes Black middle-class status for the characters in his film. Fairly often, his movies open with an indication that the film is going to be a different type of “Black” movie—one absent of inner-city violence and anti-social behavior. Black middle-class characters are frequently introduced first, where class membership is indicated by aesthetics. For example, in *Diary*, immediately before we are introduced to Helen and Charles McCarter, the audience is treated to the beauty of the Atlanta skyline (i.e., the business district) at night. In *Family Reunion*, the film opens with day shots of the city’s prominent governmental and educational landmarks. Showcasing these buildings rather than some of the more run-down, poorer neighborhoods of Atlanta appears to be an attempt to establish his protagonists’ status.

The use of the city of Atlanta, in and of itself, is a signifier of elevated class status. Atlanta is one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the country and has colloquially been termed, “The Black Mecca” (Dixon 2005; Gallagher and Lacy 2003; Whitaker 2002). Since the mid-1990s, roughly 500,000 Blacks have moved to the city, thus giving Atlanta the sixth largest Black population in the country (Gallagher and Lacy 2003). As Gallagher and Lacy (2003) state, “the high rate of black migration supports the claim that Atlanta is ‘the black Mecca’ or a ‘modern day Harlem.’” Others caution against this notion of Atlanta as Black Mecca, citing that it has the same problems as other big cities (Whitaker 2002), including the fifth highest rate of child poverty (Dixon 2005). Moreover, several researchers warn that the city has not been a place of opportunity for *all* Blacks. For example, Atlanta’s suburbs are highly stratified along both race and class lines where middle-class Blacks have formed their own suburbs, away from the Black poor (Gallagher and Lacy 2003). Whitaker (2002) claims that the city’s Black middle-class “stubbornly refuses to help open up the doors of prosperity to other segments of the black community” (3). In this way, Atlanta well reflects the ongoing class tensions between middle-class and lower-class Blacks that exist throughout the country.

Nevertheless, according to demographer Roderick Harrison, Atlanta is still constructed as “a place of opportunity where educated blacks can enjoy the fruits of the post civil rights era economy” (cited in Whitaker 2002: 1). Indeed, in the opening scenes of each film, the city’s backdrop and the juxtaposition of luxurious images and smooth jazz playing in the background (instead of rap or hip-hop) all become signifiers of the middle-class status of many of Perry’s main characters. In

this way, it might seem to the audience that they are going to get a completely different perspective on Black life than what they have seen in previous films—one that presents Blacks as stable, functional, and capable people who adhere to mainstream values and orientations. However, as Helen so astutely states in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, “What looks one way on the outside can be a totally different matter on the inside.”

In what follows, we present an analysis that details the ways in which Perry’s portrayals of middle-class Blacks frequently fail to stray very far from previous pernicious portrayals of Blacks on film or from Frazier’s characterization of over 50 years ago. While the media often present propertied Black people as being ready for racial integration (Collins 2005), the middle-class Blacks in Perry’s films are depicted as being far from ready for full integration into White mainstream society. Moreover, they are also cast as not fully integrated into Black society, mainly by choice, as their supposed disdain for lower-class counterparts keeps them from having fully functional relationships across class lines. In these ways, middle-class Blacks are constructed as a problem—to both White society and also Black society.

Analysis: Tyler Perry’s Black Middle Class

In our analysis, we identify examples of how middle-class Blacks are portrayed as materialistic, dysfunctional, and disdainful of their lower-class counterparts much like Frazier framed them in 1957; we also offer a sociological analysis of these themes.⁴ Additionally, where applicable, we identify and deconstruct stereotypes of working- and lower-class Blacks as well. We start with the theme of materialism where middle-class Blacks are depicted as preoccupied with wealth and status, usually to their own detriment.

The Black Middle-Class as Materialistic and Status-Obsessed

The black bourgeoisie have an intense feeling of inferiority, constantly seek various forms of recognition and place great value upon status symbols in order to compensate for their inferiority complex (Frazier 1962: 129).

In all four films, middle-class Blacks appear to be more concerned with status than their personal relationships or even their own safety and well-being. For example, in *Why Did I Get Married?*, preoccupation with status and upward mobility appear to hinder the couples’ ability to protect and nurture their marital relationships. One character, Diane, has been neglecting her marriage and is often accused by her husband Terry of being a neglectful wife and mother. She is so busy with her career as a litigator that she barely gets off the phone during the couples retreat. Diane even has a tubal ligation surgery performed without Terry’s knowledge in order to prevent her from having more children that might get in the way of her career. It also comes to light later in the film that Terry was considering a paternity test for their only child because, due to Diane’s busy schedule, they had sex so

⁴ Often, these themes intersect and exist simultaneously.

infrequently that he believed it unlikely that the child was biologically his. In these ways, Diane plays the Educated Black Bitch to his Emasculated Black Gentleman and is more concerned with her high-status career than her marriage to Terry. Ultimately, she is villainized for not enacting traditional gender roles, which upholds a patriarchal discourse.

While Diane is rather passively letting her marriage die as a result of her ambition, in the same film, Angela is actively destroying her marriage by constantly throwing her success and ambition in her husband Marcus's face and ridiculing his inability to "measure up." She spends nearly the entire film emasculating him in these ways. The Angela character essentially skips the Black Lady characterization altogether and immediately presents as the Educated Black Bitch who cheats on her husband, loudly berates him, and curses him out regularly in front of his friends. Furthermore, she frequently brags to him about her accomplishments of opening her own beauty salon and starting her own hair care line. At one point in the film, he gently reminds her that the start-up money for her hair care line actually came from his professional sports career, but that he does not throw in her face that his money started the line. Still, throughout much of the movie, Angela loudly criticizes this Emasculated Black Gentleman in front of their friends because she believes that he lacks her level of ambition and success. In these ways, Perry presents middle-class Blacks as incapable of both pursuing status *and* maintaining functional relationships. He also presents Black middle-class women as cruel and manipulative toward their submissive male partners, which invites the audience to demonize them.

In both *Diary* and *Family Reunion*, status and material wealth come at the expense of women's physical and mental health. In the first few minutes of *Diary*, while watching her husband accept an award at the gala, Helen muses to herself, "I don't know this stranger I sit next to. All I know is with every dime from every case, he has changed." One of the changes to which Helen refers are changes in his attitude and treatment toward her. Charles is breathtakingly cruel, condescending, and abusive toward her; in many ways, he is the ultimate Black Brute. Yet, Helen has been so enamored of her designer clothes and million-dollar mansion that she does not realize her husband is cheating on her and has fathered two children with another woman during their marriage. Charles eventually throws her out of the house, but she ultimately seizes an opportunity to reconcile with him when he is shot and she moves back into the mansion to take care of him. She does this despite the fact that she has started a new, healthier, and serious relationship with a blue-collar man, named Orlando. At a family dinner, her mother and aunt ask about Orlando and she says she is too busy taking care of Charles to be "bothered" with him. Thus, it seems that even though "every room [in the mansion] holds a painful memory" and even when a better relationship is available to her, Helen chooses material comfort with the abusive Charles over a healthier relationship with Orlando. Helen and Charles' storyline reifies Frazier's depictions of middle-class Blacks as obsessed with status and material wealth.

Madea's Family Reunion presents a similar story to *Diary*, but more strongly highlights the Black middle-class' supposed obsession with status and materialism at all costs. Early in the film, the audience learns that Lisa is being physically abused by her live-in, investment banker fiancé, Carlos (another Black Brute). While lunching at a country club, she tells her mother Victoria about the abuse and her

reluctance to marry him. The Victoria character is frequently decked out in expensive outfits and immediately presents as a Black Lady but is soon revealed to be an Educated Black Bitch,⁵ particularly after her response to Lisa's disclosure:

Well, you must stop doing what you're doing to make him angry ... Women sometimes have to deal with things to be comfortable ... Now it's time for you to grow up. Of course, you're going to marry him! What else are you going to do?! Work in a bridal shop like your sister? Now just be a good wife. Do what the man says and you won't have any problems.

Victoria clearly explains to her daughter that material wealth is far more important than her physical or emotional well-being and that sacrificing these things are part of what it means to be a mature woman. Furthermore, if she does not accept her fate, she will end up like her more working-class sister, Vanessa, whom Victoria classifies as “pathetic,” despite the fact that she has a job and is a wonderful mother to her two children. While clearly Victoria is presented as the villain and Perry takes pains to establish her point of view as immoral, he still paints Black middle-class women as being willing to accept abusive treatment in exchange for material wealth. Even more disturbing, these texts may also suggest that these women were “asking for it” because they are choosing material comfort over physical safety (Sheppard 2009).

Finally, in *Madea Goes to Jail*, the audience bears witness to several conversations concerning the importance of status and ambition among the young Black lawyers in the group. One of the lawyers, Tanya, emphatically declares that although she grew up in the “ghetto,” she makes no apologies for being able to make it out and that she has never looked back. While Tanya's professional achievements are to be commended, especially in light of her less-than-privileged background, bragging about “not looking back” suggests that middle-class Blacks privilege status and achievement over maintaining ties to one's history and background—much like Frazier suggests in *The Black Bourgeoisie*. Moreover, as we detail in the next section, Linda (arguably the film's antagonist and another Educated Black Bitch obsessed with class and status), proves that she will go to extreme lengths in order to elevate her standing at the firm and maintain her status. This is one of the many ways in which Perry suggests that in the pursuit of material wealth and upward mobility, middle-class Blacks are willing to engage in dysfunctional, violent, or criminal behavior—these are examples of the “conflicted” behavior among middle-class Blacks that Frazier warned of 50 years ago.

The Black Middle-Class as Dysfunctional

Since the world of make-believe cannot insulate the black bourgeoisie completely from the world of reality, the members of this class exhibit considerable confusion and conflict in their personalities. Their emotional and

⁵ While Collins describes Educated Black Bitches as having good jobs, neither Victoria nor Helen (Diary) actually work and Perry indicates that they do not have formal education. Instead, they appear to be “kept women” who have gained their money and status off of their husbands' backs. Still, they present as highly educated, sophisticated, and powerful women who have used their sexuality to get ahead.

mental conflicts arise partly from their constant striving for status within the Negro world, as well as in the estimation of whites (Frazier 1962: 25–26).

All four of the films depict middle-class Blacks as highly dysfunctional, meaning corrupt, violent, or abusive. However, in *Madea Goes to Jail*, a good deal of the dysfunction comes from the activities of working- and lower-class Blacks, namely the criminal activity of the title character who is imprisoned after shooting at guests who are in her house for a party that her live-in brother Joe has thrown without her permission. The other main character of the film is a drug-addicted prostitute named Candace. Much of the film focuses on how Madea's and Candace's dysfunction causes their imprisonment, but it also showcases Black middle-class dysfunction as well. For example, the audience learns that two of the attorneys featured in the film, Linda and Chuck, have been participating in deviant activities in order to boost their careers: Linda has been padding her cases in order to increase her conviction rate, while Chuck cheated on his bar exams. Here, as Frazier implies above, middle-class Blacks are so concerned with upward mobility that they are willing to employ socially and morally illegitimate means to obtain it.⁶ In another example of a corrupt attorney in the Perry films, we learn that Charles in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* acquired most of his wealth through drug money from a shady character named Jamison. Jamison eventually blackmails Charles into defending him after he shoots an undercover cop. In these ways, from felonies to unethical practices, Perry once again presents an overall image of middle- and upper-middle class Blacks as corrupt, deviant, and dysfunctional, particularly when it comes to acquiring status and material wealth. As Frazier suggests and Perry depicts, it is as if middle- and upper-class Blacks become conflicted and confused about their values and lose sight of what is important on their journey to upward mobility.

In Perry's films, middle-class dysfunction is not limited to their activities in the workplace—it also extends to their personal and familial relationships. Perhaps the most disturbing example of this is in *Madea's Family Reunion*, where the audience learns that when Vanessa was a little girl, her mother Victoria allowed her wealthy stepfather (and Lisa's biological father) to rape her in exchange for continuing their marriage and living off of his wealth. Victoria says: "If we were going to be comfortable, I had to make some hard, hard decisions. He would have walked off on us and left us destitute. You should be happy that you were able to save our family ... Sweetheart, you were my only option." At death, the stepfather did not leave much money to Victoria, but left a trust fund for Lisa from which Victoria has been pilfering for a number of years. Vanessa reveals this fact to Lisa along with the fact that the money is nearly gone. As such, Victoria is anxious for Lisa to marry the abusive Carlos because he has agreed to finance Victoria's lifestyle if she can coerce Lisa into marrying him. When Lisa expresses her disdain for the choices Victoria has made, Victoria's position is clear: "I have taken care of you like a little Princess ... now it is time for you to take care of me!" In this film, an upper-middle-class woman physically and sexually exploits both of her daughters for her own material gain.

⁶ In his book, Frazier actually accused middle-class Blacks of deriving much of their income from "playing the numbers" and discusses at length their supposed penchant for weekend-long "poker orgies" that are paused only long enough to attend church (see Frazier 1962: 211–212). In this way, like Perry, he intimates that middle-class Blacks pursue status and income through illegitimate means.

Such a sordid story suggests again that for middle-class Blacks, status and upward mobility take precedence even over mother–daughter relationships. In other Perry films, they also take precedence over romantic relationships.

In *Why Did I Get Married?*, four married couples come together for their annual retreat. As the audience follows each couple's journey to the cabin, red flags and signs of trouble immediately appear on the horizon. Over the first day and a half, tensions build, culminating in the climactic “dinner table scene” where secrets are revealed that range from infidelity to questions of paternity and disclosures of sexually transmitted diseases contracted from extramarital relationships. Very quickly, college-educated, upper-middle class professionals begin to yell, curse, pound the table, and even get physical. At one point, Angela is choked by her husband Marcus and yet another violent interaction occurs between Sheila and her husband Mike. To this point, Mike has spent nearly the entire film ridiculing his wife's weight. He goes so far as to watch her be removed from a plane because of her weight, thus forcing her to drive across country by herself while he continues to travel with their mutual friend, Trina, who is actually his mistress. Mike essentially becomes the embodiment of the hypersexual, violent Black Brute. Upon hearing the revelation that her friend Trina is Mike's mistress, Sheila smashes a bottle of wine over his head. Through scenes like these, Perry suggests that middle-class Blacks only know how to solve their marital problems through infidelity, silence, dishonesty, and violence.

Violence in love relationships is the dominating theme of both *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* and *Madea's Family Reunion*. We have already detailed above the abuse that Lisa suffers at Carlos' hands in *Family Reunion*. At one point in the film, he even attempts to throw her off the balcony of the high-rise in the middle of the night because she tries to leave him. Similarly, violent scenes abound in *Diary* where both Helen and Charles take turns physically abusing and torturing each other. In the beginning of the movie, when Charles tells Helen he wants a divorce, she refuses to go quietly. In response, he physically drags her out of the house as we watch Helen kick and scream in her designer dress, while he drags her across the floor and tosses her on the front steps, barefoot in the night. When Charles is shot and Helen moves back in to take care of him, she remembers these scenes and so many others consisting of verbal or physical abuse and decides to exact her revenge. For many weeks, he is helpless and confined to a wheelchair, unable to move any of his limbs, while she takes that opportunity to starve him and leave him sitting in his own filth for days. She even hurls him out of his wheelchair and into a bathtub full of water, where she gleefully watches him begin to drown before she finally jumps in to pull him out. Thus, Helen spends the first half of the movie as a Black Lady being abused by her husband and the second half of the movie as an Educated Black Bitch who abuses him out of revenge. Perry depicts these Black romantic relationships as immensely dysfunctional, the spouses as disloyal and cruel, and middle- and upper-class Blacks as incapable of addressing and solving problems with maturity and dignity. He projects the notion that even Blacks with the highest educational and socioeconomic statuses are simply not capable enough to lead healthy lives, communicate in effective ways, nor maintain healthy, functional relationships. And as dismissive and cruel as they are to each other, they are equally as dismissive and cruel to their lower-class counterparts.

The Black Middle-Class as Disdainful of Working or Lower-Class Counterparts

The black bourgeoisie constantly boast of their pride in their identification as Negroes. But when one studies the attitude of this class in regard to the physical traits or the social characteristics of Negroes, it becomes clear that the black bourgeoisie do not really wish to be identified with Negroes (Frazier 1962: 215–216).

A third recurring theme in the films we watched is the disdain that the middle-class expresses for working- and lower-class counterparts. As indicated above, Frazier was particularly concerned about the ways in which he believed privileged Blacks distanced themselves from the rest of the Black community. Perry brings this dynamic to life in all four films. For example, in *Madea Goes to Jail*, Linda is from a wealthy family and several statements she makes throughout the movie reflect her privileged upbringing and desire for material wealth. As such, she has difficulty relating to her fiancé Josh's compassion for his troubled childhood friend, Candace. At one point, during lunch with friends, Linda says to Josh, "You shouldn't be hanging out with the likes of those people." Linda often becomes frustrated with his willingness to help Candace and soon presents Josh with an ultimatum—to choose her or Candace. In this way, he becomes the Emasculated Black Gentleman to her Educated Black Bitch. Linda justifies her ultimatum by saying, "it's her own fault that she didn't make something of herself," particularly when Josh also grew up in the ghetto but was still able to become successful. Initially, Josh chooses Linda over Candace, but his friendship with Candace proves too strong to ignore, thus resulting in increased tension between he and his fiancée. In order to finally eliminate Candace as a threat, Linda (her court-appointed lawyer) trumps up charges against Candace in order to have her imprisoned. Here, middle-class Blacks are portrayed not only as unsympathetic and dismissive toward lower-class Blacks, but as purposely using their status to oppress them.

Most of Perry's movies, however, do not go this far and basically consist of a middle-class that has a generalized contempt for working- and lower-class Blacks. For example, in *Why Did I Get Married?*, Marcus has children from a previous relationship with a woman named Keisha, where Keisha and his wife Angela do not get along. They often argue with each other, with Marcus finding himself in the middle. Angela describes Keisha as "ghetto" and looks at her with complete disdain not only because of Keisha's former relationship with Marcus, but also because she is of a lower socioeconomic status. While Angela is a major character in that film, even minor characters in Perry's films express this level of disdain toward poorer Blacks. For instance, in *Family Reunion*, Lisa's wedding planner becomes annoyed with the bride's tardiness which ultimately forces her to deal with Lisa's lower-class relations. She expresses her annoyance by saying: "This is why I can hardly work with Black people now. Always late and ig'nant [ignorant]!" In these ways, middle-class Blacks appear to always be turning down their noses at lower-class counterparts.

Diary of a Mad Black Woman discusses the class tensions that occur in cross-class romantic relationships. Helen ultimately finds love with a man named Orlando, whom she happened to meet while he was working his second job as a mover

assigned to move her things out of Charles' house. (His day job appears to be welding at a factory.) Before she falls in love with him, she is beyond disdainful toward him. While in the moving van together, she makes him drive around for hours because according to her, she has nowhere to go as Charles has alienated her from her entire family and even made her put her mother in a nursing home "because she didn't fit into his 'American dream.'" Orlando finally insists that he has to drop her off somewhere so that he can go home and she throws him out of the truck and leaves him on the side of the road in the middle of the night. When she meets him for the second time at a cookout at Madea's, she throws water on him when he accuses her of being "another bitter Black woman" and asks for an apology for throwing him out of the truck. Their third encounter consists of her behaving fairly frosty toward him when he is sitting at a table in the section of the restaurant where she waitresses. He behaves complimentary toward her and she mostly ignores him.

It takes a fourth encounter before Helen finally warms up to Orlando, but not before more hostilities ensue. While she is in the rain waiting for the bus after work, Orlando pulls up next to Helen and offers her a ride. She turns down his offer and he says, "Why you being so mean woman?" She responds with, "Why you being so nice, man?!" He says, "Alright, suit yourself." It begins to thunder and lightning comes down before she finally capitulates and gets in. In the car, he tries to talk to her and she blatantly ignores him. He offers her a salmon dinner at an expensive jazz club. She refuses (although she confesses she loves the food there) because she cannot afford it at the present time. Orlando confidently says to her, "I got it." Incredulously, she says, "You got it?" and then insultingly asks, "And what do you do? Because I don't hang with drug dealers."

Helen's attitude toward Orlando positions middle-class Blacks as snobs; in this case, it is particularly ironic considering that Helen's separation from Charles means that she is no longer middle-class and is now a member of the working-class with few marketable skills, who must waitress for a living. In the car scene, both of them are in uniform which suggests that they are now of an equal class status. Still, Helen has trouble accepting this decrease in her status, which is further evident when she attempts to turn down Orlando's invitation to dance because she is embarrassed about being in uniform while in the restaurant. In short, before she finally allows herself to fall in love with Orlando, Helen rebuffs all of his advances, which appears to be, in part, a function of his lower status. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, at the first opportunity, she temporarily leaves Orlando who has just proposed to her, in order to attend to an ailing Charles and reclaim her old life in the mansion. In these ways, upwardly mobile Black women are portrayed as angry, bitter, and too hung up on status to give a working-class man a chance to love them. Luckily, however, whenever the middle-class steps out of line, there are working- and lower-class characters in Perry films who are there to show them the way.

Working- and Lower-Class Characters as the Voice of Reason

Frazier's work largely suggests that when Blacks reach middle- or upper-class status, they lose their roots to other Blacks and lose their sense of morals. In this way, he implies that upward mobility corrupts Blacks and that they would have a greater sense of self had they not arrived into the middle-class. Similarly, in these four Perry

films, working- and lower-class Blacks often act as foil to the shenanigans and frivolity of middle-class Blacks who have supposedly lost their way. Frequently, the “voice of reason” or emotional compass is Madea, who is featured in three of the four films we examine. Madea lives in a fairly modest home in a working-class section of Atlanta—one that is distant from the mansion and high-rise homes of her nieces, Helen and Lisa. Despite her own legal troubles and infamous violent outbursts, in both *Diary* and *Family Reunion*, it is Madea who takes in Helen and Lisa and counsels them on leaving their abusive mates, while demanding that they find their courage to stand on their own two feet. Perry positions his most popular working-class character as the moral center of her family, even though her behavior (e.g., illegal gun use, marijuana smoking, propensity for violence, extensive arrest record, etc.) is anything but exemplary of a matriarch.

In *Madea Goes to Jail*, Madea is once again preoccupied with her own legal and moral issues. Instead, Perry uses Candace (the drug-addicted prostitute) to serve as the ethical barometer for the film. Having grown up in the ghetto with Josh, Candace reminds him of his “authentic” self—caring, compassionate, and honest. Similar examples of these kinds of characters abound in *Diary* and *Family Reunion*, where other working-class or poorer characters serve as the emotional compass for middle-class Blacks. In *Diary*, it is Orlando the welder and part-time mover who returns Helen back to herself, thus compelling her to leave the status Charles offers for happiness with Orlando. In *Family Reunion*, it is Aunt Myrtle, a working-class elderly relative, who illustrates to Lisa that true love should not hurt and who singlehandedly stops the entire family reunion to preach to all of her relatives about the need to conduct themselves as proper young Black men and women.

In *Why Did I Get Married?*, Perry again uses the working class to represent the core values that have become lost on the middle-class. The local sheriff, Troy, serves this function⁷ through his affinity for all things natural—appreciation for the land as well as appreciation for Sheila's natural, curvaceous body type. Even his profession serves as a symbol for his ability and, more significantly, his desire to distinguish right from wrong. In conversations with Sheila, he clearly disapproves of the way she has been treated by her husband, Mike, and reminds Sheila of her inner strength. Perry uses this character to symbolize dignity, values, and “true” class. When reflecting on the relationship between middle-class and working-class characters in Perry's films, it seems that a consistent message is that while middle-class Blacks may be successful in White mainstream society, they have nevertheless lost their way and thus need their working- and lower-class counterparts to serve as their emotional and ethical compass.

Discussion and Conclusion

Ultimately, Perry's constant images of middle-class Blacks as violent, corrupt, dysfunctional, or incapable of healthy familial or romantic relationships may alter

⁷ While it could be argued that Troy, the local sheriff, is middle-class, he is likely more representative of the core middle-class (which sometimes consists of blue-collar workers) who have household incomes of \$50–100,000 and not the elite middle-class (e.g., those with occupations requiring more than a bachelor's degree and whose household income is likely over \$100,000) that Sheila and her friends represent (see Lacy 2007 for these distinctions).

White and Black viewers⁸ perceptions of real middle-class Blacks. Coined by George Gerbner (1969), cultivation theory maintains that one's attitudes about the "real world" are "cultivated" or nurtured by media images, where media texts blur people's distinctions of reality and blend them into one common cultural mainstream. Furthermore, "repeated, intense exposure" to constructed images of reality "leads to perception of [that] 'reality' as normal [where] the result is a social legitimization of the 'reality' depicted in the mass media, which can influence behavior" (Gerbner 1973: 37; see also Gerbner 1977; Gerbner et al. 1980). Moreover, the long-term effects of media content are small, gradual, indirect, but cumulative and significant (Gerbner 1977). Thus, Perry's images may nurture or cultivate a simplistic, one-dimensional understanding of middle-class Blacks that endures over time and that simultaneously reflects old controlling images even while creating new ones. All the while, these images can crystallize into a version of "reality," and thus impact attitudes and behaviors toward middle-class Blacks who already occupy a precarious position in the American social structure and the Black and White social worlds.

The implications and effects of these images may differ significantly with the social characteristics of the audience. Reportedly, Whites compose 5% of Tyler Perry's moviegoing audiences (Skenazy 2009). To date, however, there is no existing empirical research on White audiences' perception of his films. Nevertheless, in a society still marked by racial segregation and institutional discrimination, White viewers (particularly those with little access to middle-class Blacks) may develop perceptions of middle-class Blacks based on these exaggerated images. With Whites frequently serving as gatekeepers to societal resources and rewards, these images can be particularly detrimental as they have been shown to affect attitudes toward hiring policies like affirmative action—a policy historically benefiting middle-class Blacks (Fujioka and Tan 2003; Pan and Kosicki 1996; Sniderman et al. 1991; Tan et al. 2000). On the other hand, research shows that Whites interpret both positive and negative images of Blacks in ways that confirm their pre-existing pro- or anti-Black prejudices (Armstrong et al. 1992; Vidmar and Rokeach 1974), thus suggesting that "the media play a relatively minimal role with respect to influencing individuals' personal racial attitudes apart from reinforcing them" (Coover 2001: 14). Still, research shows that positive images of Blacks may eventually lessen Whites' racial prejudices (Bodenhausen et al. 1995; Power et al. 1996). Therefore, media play a critical role in "filling in the blanks" of Whites' racial knowledge, which means that it is important to analyze critically the images of Blacks that they consume.

It is entirely possible that White audiences view Perry's images positively. After all, in a society attempting to bill itself as "post-racial," the images of an upwardly mobile Black America may reinforce many Whites' belief that racism is indeed a relic of the past, thus rendering institutional remedies for inequality unnecessary. Whites may also simply find his images entertaining. For example, after renting *Madea's Family Reunion* and *Madea Goes to Jail*, Lenore Skenazy, a writer for

⁸ While we concede that Perry likely also has viewers of other races and that their perceptions are also important, we focus on White and Black audiences here because as Sears says (2008), "the color line separating Blacks and Whites is more rigid and impermeable than the category lines separating Whites from any other minority groups" (141) and Blacks have long been the most visible racial minority group and until recently, the largest.

Advertising Age (2009), started her article on Perry's work with the words, "I just got back from a wildly popular place I've never been to before. If you're white, chances are you haven't either: Madea Land." She goes on to characterize these films as "fun and fresh" and also remarkable considering they are made "without a single white protagonist." She ends the article with the statement, "Throw in a cross-dressing, pistol-packing grandma, and you just can't lose" (11). Skenazy's statements represent some White Americans' fascination with aspects of Black culture with which they are unfamiliar, thus reflecting Patricia Hill Collins (2009) concept of "voyeurism," where the lives of people of color are used for entertainment value and "the privileged become voyeurs, [or] passive onlookers who do not relate to the less powerful, but who are interested in seeing how the 'different' live" (104). bell hooks (1992) refers to the same as "eating the other," where Whites literally consume images of racialized others in order to feel pleasure and "on the assumption that exploration into the world of difference, into the body of the Other, will provide a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one's familiar racial group" (hooks 1992: 24, cited in Ott and Mack 2010: 145). In these ways, Skenazy's statements may reflect Whites' uncritical objectification of Black culture.

However, other Whites might view these images with a more critical eye, like David Seaton who, upon viewing youtube.com clips of Perry's films, seemed to be taken aback and even puzzled by the derogatory nature of the stereotypes and their acceptance by much of the Black audience. Nevertheless, he explains this away by saying: "[N]owadays black people are doing the laughing, not white people, and black people are making Perry rich, not white people. Perry proves that African-Americans enjoy seeing themselves stereotyped by an African-American in ways that would not be acceptable in white hands" (Seaton 2010: 1). Alarming, Seaton comes to the conclusion that while Perry is perpetuating stereotypes, it might be acceptable because he is Black and Blacks seem to enjoy it.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's work offers some explanation for Black audiences' acceptance of the questionable images presented in Perry's films. In *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (2006), Bonilla-Silva describes how the notion of "color-blind racism" explains "contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics" (2). Further, he argues that there are four discursive ideological frames that significantly contribute to a cognitive dilemma with regards to the ways Blacks understand and process their experiences with racist events: (1) *abstract liberalism* (e.g., an emphasis on "equal opportunity," individualism, and lack of government intervention in social policy), (2) *naturalization* (e.g., explanations that allow Whites to excuse racial phenomena as natural occurrences), (3) *cultural racism* (e.g., reliance upon cultural explanations for minorities' position in society), and (4) *minimization of racism* (e.g., a discourse suggesting that racial discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances). According to Bonilla-Silva, these dominant racist ideologies that have been woven into the fabric of American society cause Blacks to accept certain cultural, racist premises about Black people (e.g., "Blacks people are lazy") on one hand, while believing that racism is a central factor of the current social status of Black people on the other (158). The large, loyal following by Black audiences of Perry's work may well illustrate this kind of cognitive dissonance described by Bonilla-Silva. While Black audiences may normally reject

negative, stereotypical images of themselves, the socialization that occurs as a result of dominant ideologies (especially when espoused by other Black people) creates a complex, even confusing, situation where "knowledge" or "awareness" insidiously becomes acceptance.

The box office success of Perry's films suggests that Blacks are particularly heavy viewers of his images. According to cultivation theory, heavy viewers who invest more time in consuming mass media are more influenced than those who spend less time engaged in this pursuit (Gerbner 1973). Thus, for example, when Perry presents stereotypical gender roles and promotes messages that ultimately reify a patriarchal discourse, Black viewers may internalize this as a sort of guidebook to Black gender roles and attitudes. Additionally, the messages that mostly serve to demonize middle-class Blacks, much like Frazier did 50 years before him, may become accepted without critical analysis and consideration of the images produced.

Black audiences are also particularly vulnerable to internalizing Perry's images, in part due to what cultivation theory refers to as *resonance* or an amplifying "double dose" effect that occurs when the viewer's everyday life experiences are congruent with the images presented (Gerbner et al. 1980). Moreover, when the viewer's physical environment is similar to that which is presented through the media (for example, the working-class or middle-class symbols/signifiers in Perry's films), the cultivation effect is argued to be strongest. The Black audience may also be vulnerable because research shows that media effects are particularly detrimental to those whose sense of racial, social, and cultural identity as well as self-esteem are underdeveloped or distorted, as a result of alienation and marginalization (Davis and Gandy 1999). All of this suggests that these viewers may adopt Perry's images as an authentic representation of Black life.

To be sure, this is no small matter. For example, the messages about gender are particularly problematic if accepted as accurate representations of Black men and women. In each movie, women's primary concern is getting and keeping a man—a theme reflected in many of the 1990's "women's films" like *Waiting to Exhale* (Benshoff and Griffin 2009). Moreover, many of Perry's films send mixed messages to both Black women and men about the roles of women. Cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal (2009) claims: "Perry films have publically admonished black women who dared to be too ambitious, particularly in their careers. As Courtney Young recently wrote in *The Nation*, "Each of his films advances nearly the same message to his audience. Be demure. Be strong but not too strong. Too much ambition is a detriment to your ability to find a partner and spiritual health. Female beauty can be dangerous. Let a man be a 'man.'" These contradictory and demeaning messages are an updated, internal reproduction of the historical stereotypes applied to Black women by a White, patriarchal Hollywood structure (Benshoff and Griffin 2009). In this case, these stereotypical images are being reproduced by a Black man, which may at last lend them credibility.

In addition to the problematic depiction of gender roles, the essentialist portrayals of Black male–female relationships are equally as problematic. In Perry's films, Black middle-class men and women are natural adversaries who are routinely pitted against each other. The images exist despite research suggesting that middle-class Blacks are indeed capable of functional romantic relationships (Hill 2005; Hopson and Hopson 1995). Yet, to be sure, Black male–female relationships have always

been fraught with complexity. Living in the context of a racist social, political, and economic structure that has systematically undermined Black love relationships for centuries, that has often favored Black women over Black men, and that has held all Americans hostage to the dictates of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality has significantly complicated the nature of Black male–female relationships (Collins 2005; Hill 2005). However, Perry ignores these structural factors and makes it appear as if these dynamics are merely born out of “bad attitudes” and other individual personality defects. Moreover, he makes it seem as if intraclass relationships between Black middle-class men and women more often than not devolve into serious dysfunction and abuse. In fact, the most functional relationships presented appear to exist *across* class lines like Helen’s relationship with the more working-class Orlando in *Diary*. Even this is an oversimplification as it suggests that all Black middle-class women could be happy if they dated “down” and fixed their “attitudes.” In these ways, Perry simultaneously blurs and essentializes the complex interactions of race, class, and gender. Furthermore, his portrayals may lead his Black audience to believe that having functional romantic relationships is nearly impossible, while causing White audiences to further pathologize the lives of Black Americans if educated Blacks appear incapable of maintaining healthy romantic relationships.

Finally, Perry essentializes the relationships between middle- and upper-class Blacks and their lower-class counterparts. Here, in particular, Frazier’s characterization of the Black bourgeoisie jumps off the page and onto movie screens for the consumption of millennium era audiences. This depiction has not been lost on Black scholars like Todd Boyd, professor of critical studies at USC School of Cinematic Arts, who notes that Perry projects “plantation-era attitudes about class” as his images reflect the schism between educated, middle-class Blacks and working-class Blacks that reaches back to the days of “house” and “field” slaves and when light- and dark-skinned Blacks were pitted against each other (Svetkey et al. 2009). These become points of separation, misunderstanding, and animosity between Blacks. Indeed, the images portrayed in Perry’s films do little to illuminate the complexities of Black middle-class life and instead portray them as little more than morally-bankrupt buffoons obsessed with the requisite trappings of success and ignorant of the value of familial and romantic relationships. The images also reify old stereotypes of Blacks as violent, unintelligent, and incapable of functional relationships. Additionally, Perry suggests that values such as honesty, empathy, and moral fortitude are challenging to find in members of the Black middle-class and thus they require the lower classes to help them find their moral center and restore them back to themselves. In an age where middle-class Blacks still do not enjoy the same level of success as their White counterparts but must still compete in a White-dominated world, such characterizations may hinder their efforts toward upward mobility. They may also further the class divisions already present in Black America and chip away at any sense of group unity that may be necessary for Black sociopolitical survival.

While Perry positions working- and lower-class characters as morally superior, they ultimately fare little better under his pen. Madea is Perry’s central working-class character. However, based on her outrageous and unruly behavior (including, but not limited to, driving her car through a security gate, sawing furniture in half, destroying clothes, slapping, shooting warning shots from her pistol, and instructing

on how to scald someone with hot grits), the implication is that the working-class are also not to be taken seriously. Furthermore, even the wisdom of age seems elusive for Madea for as she gets older, she only finds herself in more trouble. Essentially, Madea believes in old-fashioned, eye-for-an-eye justice that simultaneously casts her as unstable, yet somehow the voice of reason among foolish and frivolous Black middle-class women.

Still, Perry's images exist and continue to flourish particularly in the absence of other images of Blacks on film. His version of Black America presently dominates the screen due to the lack of Black directors, writers, and producers currently working in Hollywood. Hollywood's exclusion of Black talent behind the camera and their reluctance to produce quality films that tell the stories of Black people have left the door wide open for Tyler Perry: "With his plays, Perry tapped into the black church demographic that had been largely forgotten and ignored by major advertisers ... [delivering] the same audience to Hollywood; an audience advertisers have not been able to reach for decades" (Neal 2009). In this way, he is able to easily reproduce the same troubling, yet profitable images created by White Hollywood, even as he exploits the Black audience's thirst for any images of themselves on screen. While Blacks may take issue with some of these portrayals, they also recognize that there are few (if any) options for films that both entertain and somewhat reflect Black experiences (Park et al. 2006). Moreover, they may forego engaging in critical analysis so as not to spoil the joke or ruin the enjoyment of the viewing experience (Brigham and Giesbrecht 1976; Watts and Orbe 2002). In addition, Perry's Blackness gives him a certain level of credibility and currency among Blacks who may be reluctant to criticize the portrayals of one of the few Black filmmakers working in Hollywood today. All of this has created the perfect entrée for Tyler Perry's casts of Black characters, symbols and signifiers of the Black Church, images of "Black love," and familiar, stereotypical comedy that is frequently reminiscent of minstrelsy.

For Perry's part, he consistently maintains that he is merely giving voice to the stories of his community and providing entertainment to a consumer base that has long been ignored. Additionally, he maintains that "these characters are simply tools to make people laugh ... And I know for a fact that they have helped, inspired, and encouraged millions of people" (Svetkey et al. 2009: 26). While it may indeed be true that the characters and stories inspire some members of his audience, it may also be true that these same characters lack dimensionality and are dissonant with the lives of real Blacks. This brings two important consequences. First, in an age of Black exceptionalism where the color line is drawn more sharply for Blacks and leaves them behind while other groups of color get ahead (see Sears 2008), and in the context of a contracting economy and increased competition for jobs, discrediting Blacks in this way may continue to obstruct their opportunities in White-dominated spaces. Essentially, while previous images of gang-life and thuggery give White Americans pause about living next door to poor or working-class Blacks, images of violent, corrupt, and dysfunctional middle-class Blacks might give them pause as well. Second, as stated earlier, the images may compromise Black inter-class relationships.

The power of film lies not only in its entertainment value but also in its ability to either reify or debunk popular myths. Film, and media texts in general, carry important sociopolitical implications for the people whose stories are told on screen.

While we salute the extraordinary inroads that Perry has made in terms of filmmaking and the entertainment industry, it would be irresponsible to ignore the problematic themes in his films that certainly sell well to the masses, but may do little to serve the needs of his Black audience. Future empirical research should examine exactly how Black and White audiences internalize and make meaning of these messages. Yet, upon critical reflection, it seems his message is this: Black people, regardless of class, are simply not intellectually, emotionally, or socially equipped to assimilate into mainstream society. They do not have the intelligence and work ethic to become successful and when they ultimately do become successful through illegitimate means, they privilege that success over and above their relationships with others. In other words, they have lost touch with reality, and perhaps more importantly, with themselves and their community. They are the living embodiment of Frazier's Black bourgeoisie and they are not to be taken seriously.

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