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Hollywood Films as Social Studies Curriculum

Advancing a Critical Media Literacy Approach to Analyzing Black Male Representation

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Abstract

*Critical media literacy approaches to teaching are a pedagogical imperative in twenty-first century education. It is increasingly important educators rethink what constitutes media and extend this conceptualization to Hollywood film as directors and producers also communicate sociopolitical messages. This article explores the intersection of critical media literacy, Hollywood film, and Black males through the lens of Black cultural projection. We use prior research to argue Black males are portrayed as endangered in school curriculum, namely social studies, and this portrayal parallels what students encounter when watching Hollywood films. The significance of this multimodal distortion of Black males is crucial to consider as films are increasingly used in social studies classrooms. We offer a critical analysis of the Hollywood film *The Blind Side* as an example of Black cultural projection; then conclude with a call for critical media literacy to be applied towards the use of film in social studies classrooms.*



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As there are increased calls for teachers to use film in social studies instruction, it is important that films, especially Hollywood films, are critically scrutinized, as should any other source introduced in the social studies classroom. This is especially important to consider given that film is often used in social studies classrooms, not as a source to critique, but rather as a source of information (Russell, 2012). We contend that Hollywood films are excellent sites for students to engage in critical thinking skills as they are ripe with cultural productions of race. When students are asked to think critically about Hollywood films they can come to understand how films are often framed within particular racial ideologies and how historical events are often distorted or omitted to make films more engaging for viewers (Hawkman & Shear, 2017; Russell, 2012; Scheiner-Fisher & Russell, 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to encourage teachers to adopt a critical media literacy approach toward the use of Hollywood films in their social studies classrooms. More specifically, we call upon social studies teachers to pay particular attention to the way Black males are framed in Hollywood films, as failure to do so can reify harmful portrayals presented in social studies curricular materials across the various disciplines (e.g., civics, history, geography, sociology, etc.). In this article, we first draw parallels between the representation of Black males in social studies textbooks and Hollywood films through the theoretical framework of Black cultural projection. We then turn our attention to the popular Hollywood film, *The Blind Side* (Hancock, 2009), as an example of the negative depictions of Black males in Hollywood film. Lastly, we offer critical media literacy for social studies teachers to incorporate film as pedagogy into their social studies classrooms. While social studies is often restricted to history, our hope is that the use of critical media literacy extends social studies curriculum to include the often overlooked courses such as human geography, civics, government, and sociology.

Critical Media Literacy

Critical media literacy is not an addition to what teachers are already teaching, but rather embodies a pedagogical approach to deconstructing the ideological messages that are communicated through various forms of media, including but not limited to: print and web-based news articles, broadcasted news shows, school textbooks, literature, Hollywood films, documentaries, print advertising, commercials, video games, social media, plays, music, music videos, pictures, magazines, cartoons, and TV shows. Importantly, critical media literacy repositions students from being passive consumers of texts to active agents who deconstruct messages embedded within written and visual texts.

Hence, critical media literacy differs from traditional modes of media literacy. Whereas media literacy is mainly directed towards news outlets in the form of periodicals, cable television, and internet sources, critical media literacy examines questions of hegemony, power, and ideology. Consequently, students are pushed to consider not just the message itself, but who is being portrayed in a particular message, how they are portrayed, the purposes as well as the potential effects of this portrayal, and who and what is being left out of this portrayal (Choudhury & Share, 2012; Gainer, 2010; Share, 2015; Todorova, 2015). Broadly, critical media literacy “brings an understanding of ideology, power, and domination that challenges relativist and apolitical notions of

media education in order to guide teachers and students in their explorations of how power and information are always linked” (Share, 2015, p. 14).

Moreover, it is important to consider how racist messages are reiterated over multimodal forms of communication, which can extend from Fox News and MSNBC to print media, Hollywood films, documentaries, and even K-12 curricular materials such as standards and textbooks (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2013; King & Womac, 2014; Loewen, 2007; Todorova, 2015). Regardless of the mode of media, it cannot be overstated that these mediums have a significant influence on how people, and students in particular, perceive a particular topic or group of people. According to Khanna and Harris (2015) both White students as well as students of color embrace hegemonic projections of race in media without opportunities to analyze evidence to the contrary. Dominant ideological constructions of Black males in particular—the population we focus on in our analysis—are no doubt shaped by what people read in textbooks, hear in classrooms, and see in motion pictures.

Drawing from critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000), critical media literacy “requires a democratic pedagogy that involves teachers sharing power with students as they join together in the process of unveiling myths, challenging hegemony, and searching for methods of producing their own alternative media” (Share, 2015, p. 22). The implementation of critical pedagogy in K-12 classrooms is not a novelty by any means. Such pedagogical practices have been detailed in a variety of books, some of which include: *Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades* (Cowhey, 2006); *The Art of Critical Pedagogy* (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008); *Critical Literacy in the Early Childhood Classroom: Unpacking Histories, Unlearning Privilege* (Kuby, 2013); *Raza Studies: The Public Option for Educational Revolution* (Cammarota & Romero, 2014); *Growing Critically Conscious Teachers: Social Justice Curriculum for Educators of Latino/a Youth* (Valenzuela, 2016); and *Critical Literacy Across the K-6 Curriculum* (Vasquez, 2017).

Increasingly, teachers are using critical media literacy in their classrooms to examine how issues of power and justice, and in particular, issues of race and racism are embedded in the everyday media youth consume (Cammarota, 2011; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Gainer, 2010; Share, 2015). When used in the classroom, critical media literacy aims to reconceptualize a monolithic, Eurocentric curriculum as well as transform traditional pedagogical approaches that conceive of the teacher with unilateral power and knowledge. With these goals in mind, we can see how critical media literacy extends from Freire’s (2000) concept of critical literacy—an active, analytical process in which one reads not only the word, but the world—in an effort to realize and transform the asymmetrical power relations that define our social contexts. As we illustrate in our example analysis, critical media literacy helps us understand and bring attention to how racist ideologies, and in this case racist ideologies that apply to Black males, are often produced implicitly, and as such, are often not discernable by the passive, uncritical consumer of texts. Through our critical media literacy analysis of the motion picture, *The Blind Side*, we show how even the seemingly positive, innocent, and saintly, portrayals of Black males are problematic and further the ideological values that define blackness in a racist society. In our critical media literacy example, we use Black cultural projection as a framework to conceptualize the several saintly tropes that emerge in *The Blind Side*.

Black Cultural Projection

Black people are often defined in media and school curricula—be it factual or fictional—by Whites. This is commonplace given the hegemony of Whites with regards to control over publishing houses, curriculum and testing development centers, as well as media outlets ranging from film studios to news outlets. White authored narratives of Black people’s lives and the distinct act of Whites appropriating the voices and experiences of Black people, otherwise known as “racial ventriloquism” (Garcia, Young, & Pimentel, 2014, p.1), often reproduce and project distorted, harmful stereotypes about Black people that consumers of these texts may consequently perceive as true (Garcia, Young, & Pimentel, 2014). In his analysis of various historical essays, illustrations, and photographs that depict slavery, imperialism, and conquest, Hall (2014) illuminates how these texts derive from “The Winners” perspective and fail to consider other points of view. In these visual and written texts, even when White people are not the subject matter, the White perspective nonetheless shapes how the text is constructed. Hall (2014) elaborates that in these cases, “The ‘white eye’ is always outside the frame—but seeing and positioning everything within it” (p. 43). Further, Hall states that “the absent but imperializing ‘white eye’” is an unmarked position from which narratives “are made and from which, alone, they make sense” (p. 43).

Similar to Hall’s (2014) conceptions of the ‘winners’ and ‘white eye’ perspectives, problematic representations of Black males in film also speak to the European apparatus of colonialism (Nadell, 1995). From literary works to film, Eurocentric discourses about diverse groups reinforce stereotypes, and when taken as truth, serve as colonized commentaries on life (Said, 1994). Meanwhile, absent from portrayals of Black males in film are discourses of “Euro-American racist capitalism” (Nadell, 1995, p. 447) in addition to other ways in which White colonialism has negatively affected the lived experiences of Black people. Merelman (1995) describes this construction of Black people and culture by Whites as Black cultural projection—the method by which Black culture is presented to others that sorely fails to represent the entirety of a group’s culture, struggles, and agency. Black cultural projection as theory not only seeks to highlight the hegemonic constructions of Black culture, but also presents new images of Black people that challenge dominant group’s efforts to ensure that the projection becomes “common sense” (Merelman, 1995, p. 6). Hence, Black cultural projection and critical media literacy praxis are interrelated as it pertains to Blacks in film as curriculum.

It is safe to say that most school-aged children encounter cultural projections of Black people in at least two forms: school curricula and mass media. Black cultural projection in official school curricula, especially social studies textbooks, often parallels Black cultural projection in Hollywood films. Consider that social science curricula for years has defined Black males as being in a consistent state of crisis, and as a result, Black males are presented as (1) absent and wandering, (2) impotent and powerless, (3) soulful and adaptive, and (4) endangered due to criminal inclinations related to violence (Brown, 2010, 2011). Because these themes saturate academic materials and media, students should be encouraged to deconstruct and recognize these distorted images of Black people across media sources. Figure 1 identifies examples of Black male projection in textbooks and films that students should be encouraged to analyze.

Table 1*Projection of Black Males in Textbooks and Film*

Social Studies/History Textbooks	Hollywood Film
Absent and Wandering	Black Saint
Impotent and Powerless	Gentle Giant
Soulful and Adaptive	Magical Negro
Criminally Inclined	Thug/Violent

Several studies have found these projections of Black males and Black masculinity to be present in social studies textbooks (Brown, 2010; Cridland-Hughes & King, 2015; King, 2015) which is disconcerting considering that this “common sense narrative” (Brown, 2011, p. 2071) of Black men goes untroubled by a discourse of invisibility (Ladson-Billings, 2003) that subjugates critical views in favor of privileging White, hegemonic narratives of citizenship. Questioning this linear and distorted representation of Black males is urgent especially for millennial students who “have grown up amid a media drumbeat” that “progressively touts” a post-racial society (Mueller, 2013, p. 172).

With this being said, students should be encouraged to identify the parallels of Black male projections in textbooks and Hollywood films. For the most part, Hollywood film is excluded from various social studies classrooms as texts to be critiqued, and in most cases, is used as a supplementary text to teach history content (Marcus & Stoddard, 2007). We suggest that educators incorporate Hollywood film into the social studies curriculum, because it can serve as a research site where students identify racial ideologies and engage in discussions about complex matters of race (Busey, 2014).

Take for example Stoddard and Marcus’ (2010) case study of Ms. Clark (pseudonym) who used *Huckleberry Finn* to discuss with students blackface, racial stereotyping, and race relations. Although the teacher in their case study used historical Hollywood fiction to engage students in contemporary discussions about race, we posit that it is equally as important for feature films with contemporary settings to be used to discuss race issues with students. Cammarota (2011), for example, discussed how a social studies teacher in Tucson, Arizona applied critical media literacy to the movie *The Blind Side* to have students examine and deconstruct the White savior trope that guides the narrative throughout the film. In an effort to build upon this critical work, we suggest that *The Blind Side* can also be used in a social studies classroom to examine how Black male cultural projection invokes several saintly Black tropes within the film. Our analysis provides an example of how students and educators can employ democratic pedagogy to critically deconstruct Black male cultural projections that are produced in not only *The Blind Side*, but a wide variety of Hollywood films. Before we present our illustrative analysis, we first define the saintly Black tropes we identify in *The Blind Side*.

Saintly Black Tropes and Representations of Black Males in Film

To be clear, distorted constructions of Black males in feature films have been commonplace since the inception of feature films (Barnett & Flynn, 2014). Multiple researchers have found that Black males are portrayed in Hollywood films either as irrationally violent (Agosto, 2014; Nickel, 2004), uncle Tom's who are good, dependable Blacks who do not question White authority (Woodman, 2001), or the magical negro (Appiah, 1993; Glenn & Cunningham, 2009) whose noble, gentle-spirit assists White characters through a crisis.

Saintly Black tropes, including the magical negro, have a long history in Hollywood film. Hall (2014) reasons that saintly Black characters are simply variants of the imagined slave figure: "dependable, loving in a simple, childlike way—the devoted 'Mammy' with rolling eyes, or the faithful field hand or retainer, attached and devoted to 'his' Master" (p. 43). These saintly figures were prominent in some of the earliest of Hollywood films such as *Gone with the Wind*. Possibly with good intentions, liberal filmmakers of the early twentieth century may have been trying to counter the overwhelming negative images of Black men who were commonly portrayed as either hapless buffoons or pathological sexual predators who would, provided the opportunity, harm children and rape White women. In stark contrast to these negative portrayals, several White-authored conceptions of blackness emerged from Whites' sensibilities of sanitized Black characters, including the noble savage, mammy, and Uncle Tom (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Hughey, 2009). Rooted in these constructions of blackness that were more palatable to Whites, the 1950s and early 1960s ushered in several innocent, saintly tropes for Black characters in film, which included the gentle giant, the Black saint, and the magical negro.

The late 1980s and early 1990s illustrated a shift from the saintly trope towards the Black male in film as irrationally violent. More specifically, a genre of films, referred to as "hood films" contextualized the social and political conditions of Black men in urban communities (Leal, 2013). Despite being produced by Black men, "hood films" such as *New Jack City*, *Boyz n the Hood*, and *Menace II Society* reproduced, albeit on the surface level, racist ideas of the Black male as violent and "no good" (Kendi, 2016, p. 447). However, these films were also rooted in anti-racist social commentary pertaining to issues of racial discrimination, poverty, interracial relationships, and the root causes of drug and racial violence (Dyson, 1992; Kendi, 2016; Nadell, 1995). While there was some pause in the production of saintly tropes in the 1970s and 1980s in exchange for violent portrayals of Black men, the saintly trope reappeared over the last several decades with some regularity. In our analysis of *The Blind Side*, we specifically focus on three saintly Black tropes: the gentle giant, the Black saint and the magical negro. Following are brief descriptions of each of these saintly Black tropes.

The gentle giant is characterized by a large Black man who might be frightening in size and disposition, but really has a kind heart, is childlike, simple-minded, self-sacrificing, and very protective, especially towards White people. The Black saint, while not necessarily a large man, is an innocent, super kind, self-sacrificing, asexual friend to White people (Bogle, 2001)—a character that was largely solidified by actor Sidney

Poitier in the 1950s and 1960s. Lastly, the magical negro, is usually a low-socioeconomic, uneducated Black person who possesses supernatural strength, magical powers, spirituality, and/or folk wisdom, which are used to protect White characters or assist White characters to achieve morality or overcome any number of problems (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Hughey, 2009). While consumers of Hollywood films may initially perceive images of saintly and magical Black characters as positive—both indicating a powerful Black character and a close-knit Black/White friendship on screen—and even facilitating the idea of racial integration, we want to make it clear that saintly Black tropes are problematic for multiple reasons.

At a basic level, saintly Black tropes are an example of Black exceptionalism. Black exceptionalism (Johnson, 2014) refers to the act of holding Black stereotypes firmly in place while carving out a single exception to the otherwise devious Black masses. Wise (2009) refers to the exceptional portrayal and even acceptance of singular minority members from all others who embody stock negative characteristics as “enlightened exceptionalism” (p. 23). According to Wise, enlightened exceptionalism is a form of racism “that allows for and even celebrates the achievements of individual persons of color, but only because those individuals generally are seen as different from a less appealing, even pathological black or brown rule” (p. 9). These exceptional characterizations may seem innocent enough, but they are actually dangerous as they do little to challenge racial ideologies or transform a racialized society. In effect, Black exceptionalism allows a White hegemonic society to advance a post-racial rhetoric by producing and celebrating sanitized images of blackness or spotlighting exceptional instances of Black success, all the while ideological productions of blackness as pathological, thug, criminal, uneducated, among many other stock narratives, remain firmly in place.

In addition to these underlying workings of Black exceptionalism, saintly Black tropes are problematic in a number of other ways. Saintly Black tropes result in: 1) monolithic productions of Black characters who lack depth, multidimensionality, and humanity 2) the portrayal of contrived Black/White relations that are produced in utopian, non-racial, ahistorical terms, 3) Black agency that exclusively advances/improves/protects White characters; and 4) the distinct absence of Black agency that serves to address Black struggles and advance Black people’s social positioning in a racist society. Clearly, Black male cultural projections that result in saintly Black tropes leave much to be desired in terms of producing fully-developed, multidimensional Black male characters in film. Despite these shortcomings, Hollywood films often employ saintly Black tropes in their portrayal of Black men in particular, and *The Blind Side* is no exception. In the following section, we provide a brief overview of the film under scrutiny: *The Blind Side*.

The Blind Side

The Blind Side is an award-winning, Hollywood film that features the real-life, rag-to-riches story of NFL Super Bowl winner, Michael Oher. The film narrative was adapted from Lewis’ (2009) New York best-selling book, which bears the same title. Whereas Lewis’ book focuses more on the evolution of the left tackle position, making specific references to Lawrence Taylor and Michael Oher, the movie script centers more

on the Tuohy family—the White, upper-class family who took Oher in during high school and eventually adopted him. Leigh Anne Tuohy, the mom, is played by A-list actress Sandra Bullock and Michael Oher is played by newcomer actor, Quinton Aaron. The film was wildly successful at the box office and film award venues, garnering special recognition to Sandra Bullock’s performance as Leigh Anne Tuohy. The movie received the following awards: an Academy Award for Best Actress, a Golden Globe for Best Actress, a Critics’ Choice Movie Award for Best Actress, a Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Leading Role, a People’s Choice Award, a Teen Choice Award for Choice Movie in the Drama and Actress Categories, and a Best Sports Movie ESPY Award.

Even though this film received a positive public reception, that is not to say that critical scholars have not brought attention to the problematic White framing of the film. In other critical analyses, specific attention has been brought to the following problematic themes the narrative espouses: The White savior syndrome and false generosity (Cammarota, 2009), White redemption and charity (Montez de Oca, 2012), and Black character underdevelopment, embellishments, and omissions (Oher & Yaeger, 2011; Pimentel & Santillanes, 2015). From these critical analyses, we learn that even though Oher is touted as the protagonist in the film, he is virtually voiceless, underdeveloped, agentless, childlike, embellished, and completely underestimated. Indeed, Oher was so dissatisfied with the filmic portrayal of his life, especially in regard to how it represented his athletic and intellectual abilities, he responded by writing his own memoir, *I Beat the Odds: From Homelessness to The Blind Side and Beyond* (Oher & Yaeger, 2011) through which Oher’s voice and words are featured as he chronicles his life experiences and trajectory to the NFL. One of the main goals of his book is to respond to the distorted story presented in the film. Oher does so by providing a comprehensive, first person narrative that goes back as far as he can remember, as he highlights the major players who contributed to his path to the NFL (most of whom were Black people). As he states in his book, he hopes to set the record straight and “separate fact from fiction” (p.xvi). Oher’s book certainly succeeded in providing readers an insider’s perspective to his life, as his book gained coveted recognition as a New York Best Seller Book. While Oher and others have brought attention to the embellishments and critical omissions in *The Blind Side* narrative, our illustrative analysis sets out to identify how the film invokes several saintly Black tropes.

Black Male Cultural Projection in *The Blind Side*

To start off, *The Blind Side* clearly exemplifies the Black cultural projection of Black exceptionalism. Throughout the film, audience members see that Oher is unlike any other Black character we see in the movie. Even though Oher was raised in the same housing project (Hurt Village) as were his Black peers, he is the antithesis to everyone else we see living there. In contrast to the ultra aggressive, sexual predator, and general distasteful demeanor displayed by the other Black males at Hurt Village, Oher is produced as a saint. Distinct from the other Black male characters, Oher is not violent (except in rare cases when he needs to protect his White family), he does not use curse words, does not carry a gun or any other weapon, does not drink or use drugs, is not a sexual predator, and in fact displays no sexual desires whatsoever. Furthering Oher’s

innocent, gentle giant portrayal, he is produced as being passive, simple-minded, and childlike. If it was not for Oher's large 6' 4", 300+ pound frame, he could be mistaken for a 7-8 year-old, socially awkward child. In fact, it is Oher's innocent, childlike demeanor that convinces not only the Tuohy family, but the larger viewing audience, that Oher is "adoptable material". Consider that it is not even fathomed that the Tuohys adopt any of the other Black males we see occupy Hurt Village. Through Oher's innocent portrayal, he is clearly the exception to what Blackness otherwise signifies in this movie. Thus, Oher stands out as the sole Black male from Hurt Village who is worth "saving".

As we dig deeper in our analysis, we find that Oher's character is projected as a gentle giant and a Black saint throughout the movie. From the very first images audience members see of Oher, his large body is the focal point. A voiceless Oher is visually displayed walking down the sidewalk at Hurt Village as Sandra Bullock—playing Leigh Anne Tuohy—provides a voiceover: "Big, wide in the butt, and massive in the thighs, he has long arms, giant hands, and feet as quick as a hiccup". After audience members become familiar with Oher's physical attributes, the very next scene introduces the audience to Oher's subdued mental demeanor. In this scene, Oher is in a lawyer's office where a lawyer is delivering a battery of questions to him. In this scene, Oher is visibly nervous with slumped posture, inarticulate speech, is pathologically rubbing his hands on his legs, and is unable to defend himself from the lawyer's line of questioning. In many ways, this scene resembles a young child who is being scolded by his parents. Yet Oher is not a young child. He is a full-grown, young man who is exhibiting these behaviors. As a result, audience members are to infer that Oher may be lacking in mental capacity, and possibly because of this, has found himself in trouble with the law. Exactly what Oher is being accused of in this scene, and whether or not he is guilty, are suspended throughout the film. Yet the seed is planted in audience members minds: Oher is in an "odd predicament" and is unfit to defend himself against the ambiguous charges being brought up against him. Fitting the gentle giant trope, this scene alludes to Oher's innocent, childlike nature, as he faces charges he does not fully understand. With these opening scenes that depict Oher's big frame, yet guilty, childlike demeanor, his character resembles that of Lenny Small from *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1993) or John Coffee from *The Green Mile* (Darabont, 1999) much more so than an up and coming college student and professional athlete.

The gentle giant portrayal (simple-minded, low intelligence, and childlike personification) continues to unfold as the movie narrative develops. When Oher transfers to a private, predominantly White, Christian high school (Wingate High School) teachers read off his 0.6 GPA as well as discuss his well below average intelligence score—both of which are "indicators" of Oher's school achievement that are provided to the audience, yet are decontextualized from the failing school system Oher was schooled in and that he elaborates on in his book:

Mine [My teachers] pretty much didn't care if I was there or not. They just kept passing me so that they didn't have to deal with me anymore, or answer questions as to why I was failing—and it wasn't just me. That was true for so many kids. We would just be held in the classroom for the period and the teacher would go over the material, but nobody (including the teacher) seemed to care if it stuck or not. No one checked for

homework or book reports or even gave many tests. When no one around you, at school or at home, seems to think learning is important, it's pretty hard to think that it is important yourself—especially when you're a teenager (pp. 82–83).

Stripped from the reality of Oher's early schooling experiences, audience members can easily naturalize (i.e., it's in his nature) to fail in school. This notion is solidified for audience members when they observe Oher in a classroom setting at Wingate High School, where it is implied that Oher does not know the first thing about how schools work. For example, audience members see Oher awkwardly remain seated in a classroom well after a dismissal bell rings and all of the other students have left the classroom. When it comes time to take a science exam, Oher avoids answering any of the questions and instead draws a childlike boat on the back of the test. Oher is also portrayed as socially awkward, rarely speaking, and playing with a hesitating curiosity with White children who are a fraction of his size and half his age. In one scene at this predominantly White high school, audience members see Oher scare two young White girls (7-8 years old) at the school swing set, and it takes S.J., Leigh Anne's 10-year old son to explain to Oher that in order for him to not be scary, he only needs to smile.

The child-like demeanor of Oher is further developed through the foregrounding of Oher and SJ's evolving relationship. Through several scenes, audience members see Oher and SJ become best buds as they play together, dance together, sing together, eat together in the school cafeteria, and cuddle in bed together as Leigh Anne reads them bedtime stories. Furthering the gentle giant trope, S.J. progressively assumes a patronizing stance in his relationship with Oher. In these scenes, SJ undermines Oher's agency, as SJ serves as Oher's personal trainer and coach—teaching him the fundamentals of football. SJ also counsels Oher as to where his top picks ought to be for college football and attends all the recruitment meetings with Oher where he not only negotiates with football coaches to get Oher the best contract, but he also manages to negotiate special perks for himself. From all these scenes, audience members see a simplified, childlike, Black cultural projection of Oher—a version of Oher that is incompetent across many academic, athletic, and social skills, and clearly benefits from the guidance of a young child.

Perhaps more demeaning is the film's personification of Oher as a gentle giant on the football field. In these scenes, where we might expect Oher's character to exhibit some mastery and overall athleticism, Oher is completely incompetent. During a football practice when Oher is playing on the offensive line, we see Oher do everything besides block. He “bear hugs” a player, picks up and throws a player over his shoulder and carries him across the field, and even goes out to receive a pass from the quarterback. Then, Oher suddenly stops in the middle of the drill to look up to the sky. As a five-year-old might be, Oher is mesmerized by balloons floating in the sky, which he takes the time to observe and then point to. The football coach, Coach Cotton, is in disbelief of Oher's incompetent and childlike behavior on the football field, and assertively addresses Oher, “They're balloons! Quit looking at the balloons!” After seeing that Oher has no football skills or knowledge whatsoever, Coach Cotton solidifies Oher's personification as a gentle giant through several comments he makes to another coach: “Well at least he'll

look good coming off the bus. They'll be terrified until they realize he's a marshmallow. Looks like Tarzan, plays like Jane!"

In other scenes throughout the movie, Oher is unlike teenagers his age. Whereas it is expected that teenagers take on some degree of independence, assume some adult responsibilities, and come to terms and even experiment with their newly discovered sexuality, Oher is void any of these pubescent qualities. He is produced as someone who is asexual, socially awkward, and childlike. The film is careful to point out, for example, that Oher is traumatized and has nightmares for weeks when college recruiters take him to "titty bars" during his college campus visits. In an effort to preserve Oher's innocent nature, Leigh Anne informs a University of Mississippi football recruiter of these incidents and warns that she wants a different experience for Oher's visit to the University of Mississippi. As she addresses her concerns to the University of Mississippi recruiter, Leigh Anne provides a laundry list of things that need to be done with Oher during his visit to the University of Mississippi, much like a mother would leave a to-do list with a babysitter for a young child: "Feed him Italian, he likes fettuccini alfredo, and I want you to take him to a movie, not *Chainsaw Massacre*, cause he'll just cover his eyes, and get him to bed by 10pm".

In addition to the portrayal of Oher as a gentle giant and saintly negro, there are also many examples of Oher's character exemplifying the magical negro trope. The defining quality of a magical negro is that the Black character has some sort of magical or extraordinary ability he uses to help/protect the White characters in the film. In *The Blind Side*, Oher's extraordinary ability is a protective instinct. We first learn of Oher's "protective instinct" when teachers are going over Oher's scant school records. Ironically, while Oher's school records are, for the most part absent, one thing his new teachers at Wingate High School are able to mine from his school records are test results that report his ability to protect. Apparently, what Oher lacks in IQ and academic achievement, he makes up for with a 98th percentile on a test for protective instincts. Fitting the magical negro trope, Oher uses his special, presumably innate ability, not to protect his Black family and friends from circumstances such as drug addiction, unemployment, homelessness, poverty, or academic failure, but to protect the Tuohy family (the epitome of economic and racial privilege) from a variety of dangers, but primarily from the presumed danger Black males pose to White people.

For example, when Oher and Leigh Anne Tuohy visit Hurt Village for the first time, Oher protects her from the preying Black men sitting on the sidewalk who throw kisses to intimidate the White, petite, helpless Leigh Anne Tuohy. In this scene, Oher stops Leigh Anne's innocent and naïve motion to open the car door to step out into this savage territory. Never mind the power locks on her late model BMW, Oher reaches over her seat to secure her by physically putting the lock on her door and tells her she must stay in the car. Moments later in the film, Leigh Anne and Oher are shopping for "Big and Tall" clothes for Oher in the Black part of Memphis. Once again, Oher is seen protecting Leigh Anne from Black people. This time, Leigh Anne does not step out onto the "dangerous" streets without naïve trepidation. Rather, as they approach the store, she stays close to Oher, grabs his arm, and asks Oher, "You're going to take care of me, right?", to which Oher responds, "I got your back".

In a later scene, Oher returns back to Hurt Village by himself to look for his mother, where once again Oher protects Leigh Anne and her family even though they are not physically there with him. In this scene, the ultra-aggressive Black men at Hurt Village antagonize Oher for quite some time. However, it is not until one of the men starts talking about Leigh Anne's daughter, specifically asking if Oher has "tapped that" and then proceeds to state that "I likes me some of that mommy-daughter action", that Oher physically retaliates. Despite the over-the-top gangster toughness that these young men exhibit throughout the movie, or even the fact that they outnumber Oher and are carrying guns, Oher manages to single-handedly take down each and every one of them. This construed "danger" of Black males (other than Oher of course) is decontextualized from the historical and ongoing racialization of Black males that results in, among many things, the physical assault and murder of Black males (e.g., recent cases include Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Eric Garner, and Walter Scott). Disconnected from this reality, blackness is to be feared in *The Blind Side* and Oher uses his magical ability to protect Leigh Anne and her family from the dangers of Black people, and Black males in particular.

In another scene, Oher's protective instinct literally saves one of the Tuohy's lives. When Oher is involved in a car accident with underweight S.J. sitting in the front seat of his truck, Oher uses his bare arm to stop the airbag from hitting and possibly killing S.J. In this scene, while Oher's arm is deeply bruised and injured, SJ walks away from the accident unharmed. Realizing Oher's protective instincts, especially towards herself and her family, Leigh Anne capitalizes on this ability to "teach" Oher the game of football. In this scene, we see Coach Cotton become completely frustrated when Oher does not know the first thing about blocking and fails to follow his directions on how to block. After witnessing this, Leigh Anne is able to break down the game of football into a language Oher presumably understands: protect the Tuohys. Witnessing Oher's failure to block or follow the coach's directions, Leigh Anne marches out onto the football field in her high heels and designer dress clothes and breaks it down for him: Protect these players as if they are your family and then she proceeds to designate each offensive player as one of the Tuohy family members he needs to protect against the defensive line. After this 30-second speech, Oher magically gets it. He goes from being a "marshmallow," as the coach refers to him, to blocking with the utmost of precision and strength. Of course, this scene is a creative detour from reality. When we hear from Oher (2011) himself, he explains that he knew the game of football inside and out by the time he met the Tuohys. From a very young age, Oher saw sports as his way out of a bad situation. Since the age of 7, Oher worked hard on perfecting his basketball and football skills with the hope of becoming a college and/or professional athlete.

To the larger viewing audience, Oher's childlike, innocent, magical, and otherwise exceptional portrayal might be read as a much-needed break from the stereotypical angry, violent Black characters who we see in *The Blind Side* and in the majority of media. However, the saintly portrayals of Oher, especially in sharp contrast to all the other Black males in the film, communicate that there are two types of Black males: 1) The Thug (ultra aggressive, violent, criminal, and sexual predator) and 2) The Black magical saint (passive friend and protector to White people). Given these extreme versions of Black cultural projection, and noting the level of success Oher achieves in life, audience members can easily assume that progress and overcoming hardships

(economic, educational, social) are achieved by means of assimilation and learning to conduct oneself on white terms. In the movie, audiences see that Oher's exceptional and magical demeanor pay off while those Black males at Hurt Village remain trapped in a permanent underclass. Needless to say, these saintly Black tropes fail to bring light to, let alone transform, the deeply ingrained racialized society that structures opportunity, privilege, power, and worth across racial groups.

Taking *The Blind Side* and Critical Media Literacy into Social Studies Classrooms

The saintly, magical, and childlike qualities of Oher in *The Blind Side* clearly lack depth and fail to represent Oher's actual lived experiences. To point out these social injustices in a social studies classroom, students could read Oher's book and juxtapose how an insider's versus outsider's perspective affects the narrative form. When students read Oher's book, they will realize that in contrast to the dumbed-down, childlike, and magical portrayal of Oher in the movie, he actually took on and solved complex problems as a child. He faced circumstances that forced him to grow up and take on adult responsibilities early in life. As he explains in his book, he was one of twelve siblings who were raised in severe poverty to a father who abandoned him and a drug addicted and neglectful mother. As a result, Oher was often left alone to fend for himself as well as for his siblings. He often had to find food on his own, which sometimes meant stealing food from the neighborhood grocery store or asking neighbors for food. He also had to find shelter from time to time, which often meant staying over friends' houses for extended amounts of time. He also cared for his younger siblings and had to find work on the street. In his book, he explains how he had a job selling newspapers on the streets where he was once mugged and nearly killed. Needless to say, the movie fails to capture any of these events, which clearly demonstrate Oher's maturity, initiative, and responsibility at a young age, not to mention the ambition and dedication he had for sports and life in general.

Of course, critical media literacy does not only apply to the story of Michael Oher in *The Blind Side*. We provided this analysis only to illustrate how Black cultural projections inform this particular movie script. There are actually many Hollywood feature films that invoke saintly Black tropes that could also be the subject of scrutiny in critical media literacy projects in social studies classrooms. While not an exhaustive list, Hughey identifies 26 Hollywood "magical negro" feature films, some of which include: *The Green Mile*, *Meet Joe Black*, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Blade*, *The Matrix*, *Bruce Almighty*, and *Evan Almighty*—films that could serve as texts for critical media literacy projects. Most recently, the film, *The New State of Jones*, serves as a Hollywood narrative that is ripe with Black cultural projections, including the magical negro trope. Additionally, critical media literacy projects could be performed by identifying many other problematic racial tropes in film. Students could analyze Black exceptionalism in films such as *Finding Forrester*, *Akeelah and the Bee*, and *Django Unchained*; White savior tropes in films such as *The Free State of Jones*, *The Help*, *Freedom Writers*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Finding Forrester*, and *Hard Ball*; Black pathology in films such as *Precious*; and Black thug and criminality stereotypes in films such as *Get Hard* and *Training Day*.

From our specific analysis and suggestions, we find that critical media literacy is a fundamental component to twenty-first century democratic education (Stoddard, 2013). This is especially important to consider as research indicates that teachers are increasingly likely to use TV, video, and film as media sources more often than print media sources such as magazines and newspapers (Marcus & Stoddard, 2007). Critical media literacy pushes students and educators to “read” these media sources as more than informational. In conjunction with the analyses students can perform on Hollywood films, students should also be encouraged to examine notions of Black cultural projections in history books, literature, and other curricula they commonly encounter. Critical pedagogies such as the use of cultural and political vignettes (Darvin, 2011) are also useful in placing students in decision-making roles such as a film producer, script writer, or author, to have them think critically about racial stereotypes. Much like mass media, school curriculum is littered with misrepresentations of Black people and often serves as a source for contemporary racial violence against Blacks.

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