Scripted Curriculum: What Movies Teach About Dis/ability and Black Males

VONZELL AGOSTO
University of South Florida

Background/Context: Tropes of dis/ability in the movies and master-narratives of Black males in education and society are typically treated in isolation. Furthermore, education research on Hollywood movies has typically focused on portrayals of schools, principals, and teachers even though education professionals are exposed to a broader range of movies. Analyses of dis/ability tropes in the media also tend to ignore how they work in multiples and intersect with narratives of other social identities such as race and gender.

Focus of Study: This article examines the complexity of portrayals of Black (dis/abled) males that are scripted through dis/ability tropes and master-narratives of race and gender. Trends in these portrayals are juxtaposed with literature on how Black, (dis/abled) male students are treated in schools and society.

Research Design: Critical media analysis is combined with the social model perspective of dis/ability to explore the lessons that movies provide audiences about Black (dis/abled) males. This analysis of several movies produced from 1990 to 2012 is informed by critical perspectives from critical dis/ability studies (CDS), critical race studies in education (CRSE), and curriculum studies and scholarship on education, social science, and popular culture.

Data Collection and Analysis: Data are drawn from major motion pictures produced and distributed nationally in the U.S. (1990-2012) that feature Black male actors in leading or major supporting roles characterized as having a physical dis/ability, impairment (restricted use of major limb or sensory organ), or a debilitating condition according to the Internet Movie Database. Data from media outlets and documents (movie scripts) support the analysis. CDS and CRSE, namely critical race theory (CRT), provide the theoretical framework.

Findings/Results: The narratives of Black (dis/abled) males in movies are more complex than typically described. Rather than operating singularly, dis/ability tropes interpenetrate and intersect with master-narratives of race and gender to portray Black (dis/abled) males through a narrative of intersectional threat coded in themes of marginalization, dysfunction, and miscegenation. The findings are further nuanced through a discussion of the constructs of presence through absence, embodied patriotism, and racialized space in order to illustrate
Movies are a form of popular culture that entertains and educates (edutains). They provide a societal curriculum (Cortes, 1979; Dalton, 2004) that educators can tap into in order to give their “students an opportunity to connect the theoretical discourses we engage in classes to a range of social issues . . .” (Giroux, 2001, p. 589). Movies, as a major source of narratives, play a key role in shaping beliefs and attitudes, and therefore continued examination of how they contribute to discrimination is needed (M. Mitchell, 2008). By engaging movies as curriculum, educators can also respond to the increasing demand for critical literacies (Silberman-Keller, Bekerman, Giroux, & Burbules, 2008).

This inquiry into what the movies teach about Black (dis/abled) males extends the research on Hollywood movies and education beyond plots focused solely on schools, principals, and teachers (Dalton, 2004; Ryan & Townsend, 2012; Yosso, 2010). It parallels recent examinations of the experiences of Black males in schools and society (Brown, 2011; Noguera, 2008; Prier, 2012; Silberman-Keller et al., 2008) and is informed by education literature focused on the marginalization of students who are labeled dis/abled, social science literature focused on master-narratives about Black males, and popular culture literature that speaks to narrative constructions of dis/abled (Black) males in similar fashion. By drawing on movies (film, cinema, major motion pictures) from popular culture and the scholarship from education, this article expands the scope of inquiry on dis/ability.

“Most contemporary accounts of dis/ability in the media are typically uninformed by history, literature, art, or any perspective other than psychology and medicine” (Ware, 2002, p. 144).

It has been found that over the past two decades (1990-2012), movies have repeatedly presented interpenetrating and multivalent dis/ability tropes and themes of dysfunction, marginalization, and miscegenation to the general public that situate Black, dis/abled males as posing an intersectional threat to the dominant social order, Whiteness, and America. This narrative provides a scripted curriculum that teaches the “same old stories” about Black males (Brown, 2011), and more specifically, those who are dis/abled. The discussion of findings through the constructs of...
racialized space, presence through absence, and embodied patriotism is juxtaposed with education and social science literature to suggest that similar narratives exist in schools with regard to the treatment of Black (dis/abled) males. The claim here is that movies operate among other cultural texts to promote a climate conducive to shaping/scripting individual behavior, public attitudes, and cultural understandings of where dis/ability is or should be located, who Black (dis/abled) males are or are to become, and how they should be treated. Educators, administrators, and researchers should ask how movies nuance, reinforce, or extend the understandings of dis/ability, race, and gender they bring to the viewing event and into their practice, as those understandings affect the treatment and membership of Black (dis/abled) males in schools and society.

CRITICAL RACE-DIS/ABILITY STUDIES OF MEDIA AND EDUCATION

Critical dis/ability studies (CDS) and critical race studies in education (CRSE), namely critical race theory (CRT), share the perspective that differences such as race and dis/ability are socially constructed to matter in particular ways relative to differential exchanges of power(s). Ferri and Connor (2005) argue that race and dis/ability should be understood as interactive social constructs rather than as biological markers. For instance, Thomson (1997) provides a normative description of dis/ability as “the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (p. 6). CDS and CRSE also share concerns about narrative constructions of (some) bodies as being in crisis or problematic. CDS is primarily concerned with disrupting notions of dis/ability as a medical condition situated in individuals and in need of fixing, curing, or managing (Goodley, 2007; Fisher & Goodley, 2007; Linton, 1998; Oliver, 1996). The medical model approach, present in literature across cultures, frames dis/ability as “a problem” in need of a solution. That leads to an emphasis on handling “the problem,” thereby raising the problem to the status of a “crisis” or a “special situation” (D. T. Mitchell & Snyder, 2006, p. 205). Similarly, CRSE has gleaned from DuBois’ (1903) sociological perspective on the problem of the color line between Blacks and Whites to interrogate the permanence of race and examine master narratives about Black males as being in crisis (Brown, 2011).

In contrast, through the social model dis/ability is understood to be (a) a socially constructed concept that (like race) transfers and retains varying shades of meaning across socio-cultural milieus and institutional contexts, and (b) a condition fabricated through dominant norms and relations of power rather than a condition inherent within an individual.
CDS and CRT can help to illuminate how social and cultural constructions of dis/ability, race, and gender overlap in practices such as tracking and segregation (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Both CRT and CDS are compatible with socially just approaches to understanding educational structures’ impact on students of color who are identified as dis/abled (Goodley, 2007). Accordingly, I use the forward slash in the term _dis/abled_ in order to acknowledge the efforts of activists to (re)appropriate the term in the struggle against ableism—the network of beliefs, practices, and processes that situate the body as perfectible and dis/ability as a diminished state of being (Campbell, 2001, 2008).

Constructs from CRT and CDS are utilized in the analysis. For instance, intersectionality helps to center the analysis on the multiplicity of social identities and roles people inhabit as they move within sites that are socially constructed (Crenshaw, 1991; Ejiogu & Ware, 2008). The concept of counternarratives reflects the idea that stories can counter or challenge master narratives (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998) which can be experienced as racial microaggressions—the daily expressions of race-related insults and attacks that people encounter from various sources, including the media (Yosso, 2010). Additionally, the principle of interest convergence (D. A. Bell, 1980) helps to raise questions about how racial Otherness is promoted through dominant master-narratives, and supports the analysis of “myths, presuppositions, and received wisdom that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down” (Delgado, 1995 p. xiv). Interest convergence suggests that White people in power tolerate or encourage racial advancement only when such advancement promotes their interests (Delgado, 1995).

Analytical tools provided by CDS help explain how master-narratives are constructed and how they operate. _Narrative prostheses_ refers to how dis/ability narratives utilize literary devices to forward multiple, shifting, unstable meanings of dis/ability tied to the unruliness of the body (D. T. Mitchell & Snyder, 2006). Dis/ability narratives in particular serve as narrative prosthesis by providing an artificial limb upon which audiences can hang their schema about difference and sameness, thus arming dis/ability narratives with inexhaustible uses (D. T. Mitchell & Snyder, 2006). Further complicating the exactness of their analysis is the fact that tropes of physical dis/ability are multivalent (they have multiple value, meaning, or appeal). Even when tropes of dis/ability interpenetrate with tropes of other social identities they still bear the mark of Otherness (Thomson, 1997).

The critical media analysis approach used here involves “a multiperspectival critical inquiry, of popular culture and the cultural industr[y],” addresses issues of social difference and power, and “promotes the
production of alternative counterhegemonic media” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 62). Although the analysis focuses on recent movies (1990-2012), references to older movies (prior to 1990) help demonstrate how narratives are recycled or recast depending on the tropes being forwarded. Descriptions of dis/ability primarily came from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and other media outlets (i.e., BBC Newsbeat, National Geographic). I selected the movies to be analyzed according to the following criteria: Major motion pictures produced and distributed nationally in the U.S. featuring Black male actors playing leading or major supporting roles in which they are characterized as having a physical dis/ability, impairment (restricted use of major limb or sensory organ), or a debilitating condition (i.e., osteogenesis imperfecta). These parameters excluded recent movies produced abroad and/or with dis/abled (White) characters (e.g., Rust and Bone, 2012) and/or supporting Black actors not characterized as being dis/abled (e.g., The Intouchables, 2011).

I reviewed the movies over approximately five years and used the following questions to guide the analysis: How are the attributes associated with dis/ability, race, and gender emphasized? What are the relationships between actors? What meanings are projected and reinforced through subtleties? Whose lived experience results from a sense of agency and/or from outside forces? How are the narratives of dis/ability similar or dissimilar to those presented in the educational and social science literature about Black males? Theoretical constructs served in the process of identifying narrative themes and dis/ability tropes in particular scenes or embedded throughout a plot. This iterative process of analysis involved multiple viewings to examine relationships to people and spaces, and revisiting the thematic literature, including analyses of the same and similar movies.

PROBLEMATIC PORTRAYALS AND PRACTICES

Problematic portrayals of dis/ability persist in the media (Enns & Smit, 2001; Longmore, 1987; Norden, 1994; Pointon & Davies, 1997; Rosa & Rosa, 2011). Metaphorically and literally, bodies often serve as surfaces around which dis/ability is inscribed as corporeal deviance and upon which cultural and political events occur (Foucault, 1972). Movies typically market and capitalize on normative corporeality through their scripts and narratives (i.e., patriotic soldier, civilian). Yet, “[o]ne cannot narrate the story of a healthy body . . . without the contrastive device of disability . . . in that the healthy corporeal surface fails to achieve its symbolic effect without its disabled counterpart” (D. T. Mitchell & Snyder, 2001, p. 28). By situating physical dis/ability in people media narratives can represent them in stereotypical tropes: pitiable and pathetic, objects of violence, sinister and evil, atmosphere or curio, super cripples, objects of ridicule,
own worst enemies, burdens, sexually abnormal, normal, and incapable of participating fully in community life (Barnes, 1992; Norden, 1994). For example, in British media during the 1990s, dis/abled people were rarely shown as integral and productive community members (i.e., students, teachers), an absence that fed the notion that they are inferior and should be segregated (Barnes, 1992). Without portrayals of well-rounded dis/abled characters, dis/ability is perceived as threatening and unusual (Hartnett, 2000). The same can be said of blackness.

Black males have been portrayed in the media as a violent, irrational, and dysfunctional subgroup (Hutchison, 1996; Jackson, 2006; Prier, 2012; Tucker, 2007). In movies produced by White film producers from the 1940s through the 1960s (e.g., Home of the Brave, Pinky, Lost Boundaries, Intruders in the Dust), Nickel (2004) found that by positioning Black males as objects of threat that had to be physically debilitated, desexualized, and medically managed, the movies coaxed White audiences into receiving the message of racial tolerance. Similarly in education, “the practice of isolation and the notion of ‘correction’ and ‘prevention’ have been the prevailing paradigms concerning the ‘treatment’ of children with dis/abilities, and these trends have perpetuated the hegemony of able-bodied culture” (Maudlin, 2007, p. 118). Such practices continue to manifest in the disparate experiences of Black (dis/abled) male students.

Black students are overrepresented in nine of 13 disability categories and are more likely than their White peers to be placed in highly restrictive (exclusionary) educational settings (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Disparities in special education coupled with the trend toward the re-segregation of Black (and/or Latino) students (Losen & Orfield, 2002) increases the probability that they will drop out of school (be pushed out), become ensnared in the penal system (Togut, 2011), or disappear from mainstream schools (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). The organization of students with regard to race and dis/ability has been attributed to deficit thinking about group ability (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011; Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002). Deficit ways of thinking are deeply embedded in every aspect of American life (Pearl, 1997). Related to ability is the concept of intelligence (i.e., intellectual ability) and the practice of intelligence testing. Both are historically grounded in deficit assumptions of racial inferiority, eugenic thinking, and racist ideologies (e.g., Cubberley, 1934; Terman, 1916) and predicated on Eurocentric knowledge and values (Kwate, 2001). They continue to inform decision-making about student placement and play a large role in the intractability of the racial achievement gap (English, 2002) and education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The marginalization or absence of Black (dis/abled) males from advanced placement classes or gifted/talented programs draws attention to the presence of cultural narratives about ability.
Given the overrepresentation of Black males in special education settings, attention to how race, gender, and disability are produced should be a part of the preparation of teachers and leaders (Ware, 2002). However, White educators have been critiqued for their investment in smartness as part of their identity (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011), as have areas of study (dis/ability studies, curriculum studies) for ignoring multiple marginalities, theoretical perspectives (anti-colonialism), or constructs (i.e., intersectionality) that attend to the identities and experiences of people of color (C. Bell, 2006; Ejiogu & Ware, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2006; Gaztambide-Fernández & Murad, 2011). These strands of literature illuminate how race, gender, and dis/ability intersect to portray Black, dis/abled males through narratives of pathology in education and narratives of dysfunction in the movies.

INTERSECTIONAL THREATS

Movies produced between 1990 and 2012 featuring Black, dis/abled males have portrayed them as both villains and heroes who are super, pathetic, and mad. The supercrip trope portrays the dis/abled character as remarkable achiever (Clare, 1999). Often the supercrip is combined with the trope of overcoming. The trope of the dis/abled character who “against all odds, triumphs over the tragedy of their condition” positions dis/ability as an obstacle to be overcome (Hartnett, 2000, p. 22). Another common trope is that of the pathetic crip in which a dis/abled character has exaggerated faults or failures (Barnes, 1999; Clare, 1999). The intersectional analysis illuminates how one character can serve as a carrier of multiple and multivalent tropes that can interpenetrate, operate across movies, operate over time (years, decades), and operate across institutions to support deficit thinking about Black (dis/abled) males. The interpenetrating dis/ability tropes that are most relevant among this sample of movies are the mad scientist, supercrip, noble warrior, and techno marvel in which technology and/or science is emphasized (Norden, 1994). As supercrips Black, dis/abled males have superpower to do good and/or evil (Hancock, Green Mile, Unbreakable). As pathetic crip they are often portrayed as being mad (Source Code, Unbreakable), abusing substances (Hancock), or having suicidal tendencies (The Bone Collector). Similar to Nickel’s (2004) analysis of movies produced from the 1940s through the 1960s, Source Code, Avatar, and Battleship have patriotic themes, which I later discuss through the construct of embodied patriotism. The patriotic theme is more double-sided than those comprising the intersectional threat (dysfunction, miscegenation, and marginalization).
DYSFUNCTION

The movies Source Code, Battleship, and Hancock include the theme of dysfunction in the characterization of Black, dis/abled males. Source Code (2011) is described as an action thriller centered on a White, male soldier who wakes up in the body of an unknown man and discovers he is part of a mission to find the bomber of a Chicago commuter train (IMDb). The soldier (Colter Stevens, played by Jake Gyllenhaal) is informed by the scientist in charge (Dr. Rutledge, played by Jeffrey Wright)—who is a Black male—that he is on a mission that allows him to re-enter the train repeatedly until he finds useful information that would avoid the catastrophe of the bombing that has already occurred. The movie is a science fiction thriller that imagines the use of quantum physics to allow access to the brain, communication with it, and time/space travel. Troubled relationships between mind, body, ethics, and science help to provide tension for the audience.

Unlike Colter, Dr. Rutledge is neither a superhero nor a wounded veteran but a counterweight to Colter, who is the heroic, wounded soldier. Reflecting the trope of the mad scientist, his genius is an extreme and therefore functions as part of his character flaw—failure to abide by moral and ethical guidelines when conducting scientific experiments. During the climax, the desires of the two characters (Rutledge and Colter) conflict. In the final scenes Dr. Rutledge breathes heavily and attempts to move quickly while leaning on his crutch to reach the isolation chamber. In the end he is unable to complete his sinister plot, which would leave the soldier (Colter) in the Source Code—in his dis/abled existence. Instead, a White female (soldier) pushes the button to release Colter, allowing him to pursue another chance at a productive life as an able-bodied teacher. In the end, Dr. Rutledge remains the dis/abled villain.

Comments made during an interview with the actor Jeffrey Wright about crafting his portrayal of Dr. Rutledge indicate how representations in movies mirror “real world characters.” In the interview he describes his character as someone who is “if not a mad scientist, a very self-absorbed scientist,” which supports the analysis of the dis/ability trope (mad scientist). Then he reveals his process.

I did think of a few real world characters as I was trying to figure out the look for Rutledge and how he spoke. . . . I did a little research on some of these quantum physicists who have some pretty . . . interesting character traits that I tried to draw from. (TV Guide, 2011)

In this interview, the actor did not take credit for Rutledge’s gait (limping) and use of a crutch—both indicating a physical dis/ability.
However, the actual script written by Ben Ripley describes two instances of Dr. Rutledge running (*Source Code* script). Rutledge, as scripted, smoked a pipe and ran. There was no mention of a crutch in the script. One is left to wonder at what point Dr. Rutledge became dis/abled and what “real world characters” or narrative representations were operating in the actor’s construction of Dr. Rutledge. We might also wonder at what point in the movement from script to screen was the decision made to portray Colter (in the isolation chamber) as a severed torso when, according to this version of the script, he was to be revealed to be an exposed brain. At the level of schooling the question becomes: At what moment does deficit thinking translate into decision-making affecting the relationships between students and schools?

Although images of dis/abled veterans were displaced by images in television and movies featuring techno marvel superheroes during the 1970s and 1980s, *Battleship* (2012) is a return to the dis/abled veteran in combination with the techno marvel hero. The dis/abled supporting character (Lt. Col. Mick Canales) is portrayed by a Black, dis/abled male (Gregory Gadson). Gadson, like the character he plays in the movie, was injured while serving in the U.S. army and has both legs amputated above the knees. High technology is situated in the prosthetic limbs of the veteran Lt. Col. Mick Canales, and his physical prowess is central to the plot as opposed to the intellectual prowess generally forwarded in the trope of the techno marvel superhero scientist (e.g., *Iron Man*, *Professor X*, *The Avengers*, *Source Code*).

Canales is introduced as a depressed war veteran who is undergoing physical therapy. In other words, his role is framed by the medical model of dis/ability and the dis/ability trope of the pathetic crip, for whom dis/ability equates to a life not worth living. This is suggested by one of his first lines in the movie, “Alright, I’ve had enough of this,” which is positioned within the larger narrative of him suffering from a dysfunctional condition as someone who is depressed (Stevens, 2012). His lack of enthusiasm to work at therapy (read life) is challenged by his therapist, a White female named Sam (played by Brooklyn Decker). Sam encourages Canales to continue his therapy while her boyfriend, the central heroic character (White, abled-bodied male), is on a U.S. Navy battleship attempting to defend the planet from alien invaders. Aside from being cast as the dysfunctional (depressed) recipient of care from the benevolent White, abled-bodied female who leads him to recover a sense of purpose for living (matriarchal relationship), his decision to respond to the call of duty repositions him as a person of worth. Dis/abled, Black males in several of the noted movies have negative social, emotional, or health conditions like drunkenness (*Hancock*) or madness (*Source Code*), and they are
often positioned in contrast to their White male counterparts (who are presented as stable and responsible partners). Likewise, in education, African American male students have been over-identified and diagnosed as having behavioral disorders (Erevelles, 2011).

MISCEGENATION

Black, dis/abled male characters have also been entangled in relationships with White women that lead to either the death or dis/ablement of the White woman (Green Mile, Million Dollar Baby) and punishment for the Black male (Hancock, Green Mile). Many movies that feature a romantic relationship between a Black male and White female either end with the dissolution of the relationship through disappearance (Mirrors) or separation (The Bodyguard, Hancock). The case of The Bone Collector (1999) is unique in that it suggests that an interracial relationship will continue between a Black male (Lincoln Rhyme, played by Denzel Washington) who is a quadriplegic forensic detective, and a White female (Amelia Donaghy, played by Angelina Jolie) who is a patrol officer. Audience members who oppose interracial relationships and assume that quadriplegic bodies are incapable of sex can leave the movie feeling undisturbed by the possibility that their relationship can result in miscegenation, as the movie ends with Rhyme and Donaghy sharing a visit from his family that she has arranged as his surprise Christmas gift. A more detailed analysis of the sexual tension and racial symbolization (i.e., lynched monkey) in the The Bone Collector has been offered by Rosa and Rosa (2011), which echoes Nickel’s (2004) analysis of “race-disability films” from the 1940s to the 1960s (p. 34).

Another example of the supercrip trope is found in the character Hancock, played by Will Smith, in the movie Hancock. Hancock is a superhuman who is an irresponsible drunkard and mean to kids—that is, until he encounters Ray Embrey, a White male public relations spokesperson (played by Jason Bateman) who works to change Hancock’s public image (redeem him). First he urges Hancock to serve time in prison with the expectation that crime will increase and the desire for his interventions will exceed the public’s concern for the damage he causes. The strategy is part of the project to brand Hancock as a repentant public servant who can save the city from crime in a less reckless manner than before. At the mayor’s request, Hancock returns to his role as crime-fighter wearing a tight fitting leather outfit and apparently ready to take on the responsibility of a superhero. He is returned to mainstream society, that is, until the major plot of the movie involving his relationship with Ray’s wife, Mary (a White female played by Charlize Theron), is revealed. This
plotline hinges on the supercrip dis/ability trope and its intersection with the themes of marginalization and miscegenation.

Although IMDb does not describe Hancock as dis/abled, his character is a superhuman who can be swiftly debilitated by his proximity to Mary, who is his former lover from another realm. His degenerative transformation from superhero to supercrip can ultimately lead to his death. This narrative of dis/ability serves as a metaphorical signifier of social or individual collapse (D. T. Mitchell & Snyder, 2006). The loss of power, strength, and vigor he experiences as he nears Mary leads him to resign himself to the margins of society again. Entangled in the dynamics between these two characters are themes of hypermasculinity, emasculation, and powerlessness. Brown (2011) has also noted that “ideas about powerlessness, emasculation, and hypermasculinity remained commonplace for explaining the educational and social development” of African American/Black males (p. 2060).

Hancock’s hyper-masculinity is emphasized by a name that includes a vulgar expression for a male penis (Han-cock) and his tight-fitting leather costume. The racist narrative of the Black man as hyper-masculine and hypersexual is contrasted to the possibility that he will become dis/abled and die. The threat of miscegenation is reduced as he commits to staying far from the White woman, an outcome that perpetuates the dis/ability trope that the dis/abled life is devoid of sexuality and sexual relations. The implications of interracial sexual relations for Black, dis/abled males contrast those of White males with similar kinds of dis/abilities or impairments. In Source Code (2011) and Avatar (2009), both main characters, who are White military men, are able to overcome their dis/abled existence and enter into romantic relationships with women. In the case of Avatar, Jake (played by Sam Worthington) engages in a cross-racial relationship with a woman who is a person of color (blue). In Source Code, Colter Stevens is able to escape his severed-from-the-waist-down torso to pursue a relationship with a white female. While both reflect the dis/ability trope of overcoming (death and dis/ability) to pursue romances with women (blue and white, respectively), Hancock sits alone above New York as an abled-bodied character and the audience is left to wonder whether or not he will succumb to his attraction to the White woman who is seemingly irresistible. Such portrayals mirror the conceptual narratives that Brown (2011) identified as pervasive in educational discourses. For instance, Black males have been understood and constructed discursively as aloof wanderers who are irresponsible with familial relationships. Those already marginal, seemingly by choice, pose a threat to the social order as outcasts who reject society’s norms, customs, or values.
MARGINALIZATION

Unlike the supercrip trope in which someone overcomes a dis/ability or debilitating conditions, the Black, dis/abled male is less likely to overcome and more likely to be marginalized from mainstream society as he is imprisoned (Hancock, Green Mile), institutionalized (Unbreakable), or homeless (The Soloist). The movie Unbreakable provides one of the most dramatic depictions of the super (pathetic) crip as a villain who is marginalized (imprisoned). In Unbreakable (2000), Elijah Price/Mr. Glass (played by Samuel L. Jackson) is a comic-book collector who has osteogenesis imperfecta (brittle bone disease). He goes to extreme measures to find someone who is the counter-extreme of his condition, someone invincible or unbreakable. The superhero character is David Dunn (played by Bruce Willis). While attempting to follow David down the subway stairs, Elijah descends the stairs with his cane in hand and his hair in disarray. The camera closes in on his feet and crutch, and the echo of their tapping is pronounced in the stairwell. Then, in slow motion, he falls. His glass crutch shatters and he wails. After a long fall in slow motion he is shown flat on his back, upside down, and moaning. This overly dramatic shot is almost comedic. His askew afro and long, black, leather jacket is reminiscent of the Blaxploitation genre until the coolness is undercut by the (broken and fractured) body, doubly narrated by the visual metaphor of the shattered glass cane. Cinematic effects have been used to distance people with dis/abilities or to focus on visually identifiable impairments in order to accentuate the dis/ability or the associated characterization (Hartnett, 2000). Movies amplify negative images of dis/ability through visual effects and other production techniques in ways that literature does not (Darke, 1998; Rosa & Rosa, 2011). The combination of his cry, shattered cane, hair, and close-up shot of his face portrays him as pathetic.

In the final scene, Mr. Glass is situated in the disarray of his office where his items are, much like his hair, askew. In the end, this pathetic crip is constructed through the following captions as a wheelchair-bound terrorist who is institutionalized: David Dunn led authorities to Limited Edition (Mr. Glass’s business) where evidence of three acts of terrorism were found. Elijah Price (Mr. Glass) is now in an institution for the criminally insane. The audience is reminded to associate dis/ability with disorder (physical and psychological), Blackness with Otherness, and the Black, dis/abled male with the threat of terrorism toward America as Samuel L. Jackson is wheeled away.

In summary, the movies analyzed characterize several of the Black, dis/abled males as having one or more dysfunctional traits that, when severe, are considered a dis/abling condition (e.g., severe depression,
alcoholism). Typically, they do not overcome their dysfunction or delinquency unless White counterparts morally or emotionally rehabilitate them (Hancock, The Bone Collector, Battleship). More often than not they remain dysfunctional in some respect and/or portrayed as villains (Source Code) who are punished through institutionalization (Unbreakable, Hancock). That they are often situated in a paternalistic relationship with a White person racializes the dis/ability trope and reifies the narrative of White, abled-bodied, male supremacy. Movies such as Unbreakable, Source Code, Avatar, and Battleship help to define Whiteness and ability as ideal in contrast to Black males or people of color more generally, who can either accept the goodness, bravery, and smartness of White people or remain unchanged and marginal (villains, outcasts) by choice or due to internal forces (lack of the emotional intelligence necessary for empathy, genetic condition). Common dis/ability tropes interpenetrate and intersect with narrative themes of dysfunction, marginalization, and miscegenation to construct recurring narratives of the Black, dis/abled male as an intersectional threat to the dominant social order, Whiteness, and America. The discussion of findings through the constructs of racialized space, presence through absence, and embodied patriotism is juxtaposed with the literature on schooling to suggest that similar narratives exist in schools.

DISCUSSION

Narratives at the intersection of space and race, presence through absence, and embodied patriotism help to provide a more nuanced discussion of the findings. For instance, they point out how dis/ability tropes rest on historical and contemporary fears, assumptions, and desires that audiences are expected to bring from the larger context of socially constructed meanings about race and gender in America. This discussion of the findings is supported by information from actors’ interviews and writers’ movie scripts that provide a glimpse into how acting is an imitation of stereotypical characteristics encountered through experience or research.

PRESENCE THROUGH ABSENCE

Despite the central role of dis/abled characters in the movies discussed, their posters and trailers seldom advertise the visible attributes associated with dis/ability regardless of their characters’ race, gender, or role (leading or supporting); an exception is a trailer for The Bone Collector. The absence of dis/ability and the presence of the normative corporeal image in advertisements (intended to secure an audience) indicate how dis/ability is subjugated and manipulated by capitalism (Million Dollar
Baby, Avatar, The Bone Collector, Source Code). Instead of being advertised and centered, dis/ability (or the threat of) often arises as a revelation during the climax: the denouement (Million Dollar Baby, Source Code, 127 Seconds, Hancock). Thus dis/ability is often used as an opportunistic metaphorical device that functions to prop up other narratives rather than engage the viewers in the social and political experience of dis/ability (D. T. Mitchell & Snyder, 2006).

One could argue that during the late 1990s and into the early 2000s Black males had crossed the color line in Hollywood by having been nominated for or winning Academy Awards for their portrayals of dis/abled, Black males (e.g., Cuba Gooding, Michael Clarke Duncan, and Jamie Foxx). But a closer look suggests that aside from the actors’ individual careers or artistic accomplishments, the roles are damaging; they perpetuate stereotypical narratives about race, gender, and dis/ability. More recently, in movies produced between 2000 and 2012, the leading role of the Black, dis/abled male has decreased and nearly disappeared relative to its presence in the previous two decades. By 2010 Black, dis/abled males were more absent than present in each of the Academy Award-nominated movies that featured a character who was dis/abled or had sensory impairment (The King’s Speech, True Grit, Black Swan, 127 Hours). This is a significant issue in light of the finding that in recent fictional movies featuring Black, dis/abled males, multivalent tropes of physical dis/ability are used to promote an intersectional master-narrative of Black men as threatening and dysfunctional characters who are often marginalized from mainstream society.

Pushing males of color into the margins of public media is not an improvement over presenting stereotypical images of them. The absence of Black, dis/abled males from public media is a more problematic condition, for it allows their erasure from public perception and suggests that they (as the problem) have been eradicated. Eradication through omission conjures up eugenic discourses of the past as well as the newer eugenic discourse that plays out in special education in what Baker (2002) calls the hunt for dis/ability. In this hunt, dis/abled students are sought out and remedied as part of the process of normalization. The hunt then produces an outlaw status for students who are labeled dis/abled (Campbell, 2000). Some differences (such as race) are not easily assimilated or normalized. Students of color whose dis/ability status is undiminished by instructional strategies, medication, or behavior management techniques are at risk for more intrusive services and restrictive settings (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Parrish, 2002).

The absence of Black, dis/abled males from classrooms and mainstream movies provides entertainment and education (edutainment)
that centers White, male, and abled-bodied as the norm. Questions about the absence and presence of dis/abled, Black males in Hollywood movies should be considered in the context of an industry that is motivated by profit and influenced by filmmakers who are not in the business to destabilize dominant regimes (Rosa & Rosa, 2011), but rather to market and capitalize on normative corporeality (D. T. Mitchell & Snyder, 2001). In 2011, after seeing an article featuring a photograph of a dis/abled veteran (Gregory Gadson) in National Geographic (Disabled Access Denied, 2012), the producer of Hancock (Peter Berg) hired him to play a supporting role in Battleship (2012) although he was not an experienced actor. While featuring a dis/abled, Black male (not one acting as such) in a heroic role is an exception for the movies, this decision should also raise questions such as: Why hire someone who is not an actor? Why is this role the exception? To what extent does the portrayal reproduce or challenge master-narratives? What are the benefits and harms? How do we (prepare to) engage in dialogue with students about this film and the meanings they bring to and take from it? Recycled dis/ability tropes become stereotypical messages that construct master-narratives about what dis/ability means or should mean, thereby creating a discourse guiding how we conduct ourselves, one another, the environment, and our institutions.

EMBODIED PATRIOTISM

The patriotic theme in the movies discussed above echoes in the historical and contemporary discourses of U.S. schooling. The role of schooling in the Americanization of students of minority ethnic and linguistic back-grounds (Hirsh, 1997), the trend toward the militarization of schools predominated by students of color (Galaviz, Palafox, Meiners, & Quinn, 2011), and the recent report framing the poor state of education as a national (in)security concern (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012) point to the relationship between schools, armed forces, and narratives about becoming an honorable and patriotic American. The narrative theme of patriotism as a prime expression of good citizenship unfolds amidst the threat of invasion in Battleship and terrorism in the cases of Source Code and Unbreakable.

In Battleship (2012) the Black, dis/abled character is transmogrified from a dis/abled veteran to a bionic war hero who helps to derail an alien invasion. In the movie and in his daily life, Gregory Gadson wears titanium prosthetic limbs enhanced with technology and equipped with gyroscopes, accelerators, and hydraulics. The juxtaposition of the prosthetic limbs against a technologically equipped alien situates the Black,
dis/abled male (Lt. Col. Canales) as a point of curiosity for the alien as it scans his body and pauses at the reading of it as both flesh and metal. The disorderliness of this body, in comparison to the normality of the others that have been scanned previously, disorients the alien long enough for Lt. Col. Canales to throw a major punch in a battle in which he triumphs through force. Situating the values of patriotism and honor primarily within a military frame helps to create a social order that breeds policies of force over dialogue and compassion (Giroux, 2008).

In *Source Code* the narrative of the patriotic soldier is continuously reproduced as Colter is primarily portrayed as an agile soldier who is repeatedly sent into a civilian situation to derail a catastrophic event—in contrast to the Black, dis/abled male counterpart (evil cripp, mad doctor) who is a civilian. *Source Code* defines for its audience who is heroic, morally upright, and American. However, the role of Dr. Rutledge as a Black scientist dispels the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdom that make up the common culture about race at the same time that it invariably renders him one-down (Delgado, 1995): an evil scientist who is mad and contrasted with the noble warrior/soldier (Colter). The point of interest convergence is that the movie presents the underrepresented image of a Black, dis/abled male in the role of a doctor and scientist—careers and fields of study where Black males are underrepresented.

Beginning in the elementary school years, science and mathematics are two areas of the greatest disparity, and the factors implicated in the suppression of African (Black) American college students in natural science (physical and biological sciences), technology (computer science), engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields “include academic and cultural isolation, motivation and performance vulnerability in the face of negative stereotypes and low expectations, peers who are not supportive of academic success, and perceived and actual discrimination” (Maton & Hrabowski, 2004, p. 548). If the received message is that Black (dis/abled) males who achieve academically are prone to behaving irrationally, unethically, or unsympathetically, then one might ask why we should empower them through education to effect change that they will likely use to disservice the public good. Others might suggest that the military rather than college is a better option and field duty more suitable. In 2000, Blacks were over-represented in the military (Lutz, 2008). Yet research on whether their assignment to combat arms is correlated with race is not substantiated by research, although Gimbel and Booth (1996) have found that during the Vietnam War those with lower scores on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) were more likely to be assigned to combat arms.
RACIALIZED SPACE

Movies craft narratives that define corporeal normativity through the use of space and positioning within it, namely through subtleties such as which bodies occupy what space. It matters, for instance, that in the movie *Source Code* the Black and White dis/abled bodies are kept separate by windowpanes. In the end it is the Black, dis/abled male (Dr. Rutledge) who attempts to get past the glass but remains locked out—peering, panting, and mad—while the White male character (Captain Colter Stevens) is able to leave his dis/abled body and continue a heterosexual existence as an abled-bodied man. The tension in their juxtaposition is built through the quick panning back and forth between the settings: the train with Colter and the hallway where Dr. Rutledge is urgently attempting to enter the isolation chamber. However, the subtle (cinematic and social) effect is the spacing between races in which Black, dis/abled males are locked out, trapped, or confined with their mobility determined by relationships with White males and females. Thomson (1997) reminds us of Aristotle’s spatial metaphor that positioned the female body as deviant, a movement away from the norm of maleness. However, the trope of overcoming dis/ability (as a movement closer to the norm of maleness) is typically reserved for White males, especially when their virility is juxtaposed against the body of a woman (*Avatar*) and/or a dis/abled, Black male (*Source Code*).

How bodies are spaced can influence how relationships (such as those that constitute community membership) unfold. Movies such as *Source Code* can prompt questions for educators such as: What does the juxtaposition of the dis/abled limb of the Black character (or student) as a civilian scientist and the upper torso and head of the White character (or student) as a soldier-turned-teacher teach us about the character of dis/abled people and how they should be treated or prepared? Who are we encouraged to embrace or reject? How do the narratives of soldiers, scientists, and civilians resonate with the narratives of Black (dis/abled) males in educational contexts? In schools, where the labeling of students as dis/abled coincides with their eligibility to receive supports and services, membership is primarily about relating to abled-bodied peers within a preexisting structure called (special and general) education: naming who is to be included/excluded. A similar arrangement exists for students of color in that U.S. schools were originally organized to serve students identified as male and White American (primarily of Western European descent or understood as White according to legal definitions of White racial identity at the time). Despite the passage of *Brown v. The Board of Education* (1954) and the shifting construction of race, relating within
schools for people who are dis/abled, raced, and gendered by historical and contemporary expressions of a normative center means that their membership is vulnerable to the flux of segregation (de facto and de jure), de-segregation, and re-segregation. The combination of testing and tracking further leads to segregation of the races and helps to ensure that interracial relationships (platonic or romantic) are prevented. This is a concerning contradiction to discourses and research that promote the value of diversity in learning and equality in education.

Additionally, much of the discourse in education focuses on the needs of students and providing accommodations, modifications, supports, interventions, programs, etc., to help (read: rehabilitate or remedy) them. The needs-based discourse helps to center dis/ability in the student rather than in the system of testing and identification that reproduces achievement gaps and tracking patterns in which Black students are placed in less rigorous courses than their White and Asian counterparts (English, 2002). Meanwhile, those best positioned to accommodate schooling to students’ needs, abilities, and interests are teachers. Yet, on average, teachers of color account for a small percentage of the teaching force, whereas students of color comprise a much larger percentage in urban schools (Branch, 2001). The practices of racializing and spatializing (dis/abled) students reflect “the logic which has become so familiar in discussions of gender, race, or disability: male, white, or able-bodies’ superiority is naturalized, remaining undisputed and obscured by the ostensible problem of female, black, or disabled deviance” (Thomson, 1997, p. 280). Despite the embeddedness of deficit thinking that positions some as thinkers and others as doers, “[c]ritical teachers must not allow normative conceptions of the body/mind to orient their praxis within the space of schooling and outside” (Rosa & Rosa, 2011, p. 142). Instead, educators can attune to how stereotypical narratives in film leave out a range of experience among Black men’s tales of survival and resistance, of success and failure, of grief and joy, of anger and empathy (Tucker, 2007). They therefore construct an empty space of representation (Guerrero, 1994). The absence of diverse representations of the social and political experience of dis/ability among Black males in schools and society is one such empty space that is filled with stereotypical narratives.

CONCLUSION

The continued critical analyses of cultural texts and material conditions for the presence of narratives that are undergirded by deficit thinking within institutions (media, education) must be undertaken to better observe how multivalent, intersectional, and interpenetrating narratives script a living curriculum and pedagogy for educators and students in
and out of schools. Educators and administrators who want to acknowledge and avoid reproducing and succumbing to the influence of master-narratives and interpenetrating problematic tropes when making decisions concerning students in general (or special education)—and more specifically Black, male students of varying dis/abilities—are encouraged to entertain more complex readings of the experiences of Black, male students and provide more opportunities for them to interpret their lived experiences and produce counter-narratives (Brown, 2011). However, before audiences of master-narratives can rewrite the scripts or pathological inscriptions upon the bodies of Black (dis/abled) males they must understand these scripts and their origin (Jackson, 2006).

The approach to critical media literacy advanced here urges educators to analyze institutions and transform them and the pathological narratives of damage that operate on and within them. According to Erevelles (2011), “the only way to challenge the pervasiveness of compulsory able-bodied heteropatriarchal White supremacy is by engaging in a materialist critique of ‘crippin’ the living curriculum” (p. 33). She recommends a radical curriculum approach that relies on a transnational historical materialist analytic through which to explore the interconnections of socially segregated institutions and work to transform the material conditions within which dis/ability and other social identities are constituted as damaged. For instance, those who are preparing students for college and careers (including military careers) can foster counter-spaces that encourage counter-stories depicting Black (dis/abled) males as honorable and patriotic without arms (weapons) (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Counter-stories and the related approach to CRT writing, composites, can merge fictional and nonfictional accounts to expose and challenge material and discursive conditions that master-narratives help to construct. This article concludes with a counter-story and example of the inverse relationship between narratives acted and enacted in the lives of Black (dis/abled) males.

A Hollywood movie that provides a counter-story to the scripted societal curriculum of master-narratives and interpenetrating dis/ability tropes is *The Avengers* (2012), featuring the dis/abled character Nick Fury, who has a bionic prosthetic arm and arms/weapon. As a character from Marvel Comics, Fury was changed from a White male to a Black male in the image of the actor Samuel L. Jackson, who was contracted to play the character in several movies in the series of Marvel Comics-based movies. In the translation from comic book to the silver screen, Fury has retained his intellectual prowess as a scientist and his character as a patriotic and honorable soldier in a high-ranking position of leadership: director of the peacekeeping association the S.H.I.E.L.D. Moreover, his role has
become more pronounced over time through the series of movies. In an interview, Jackson stated that in *The Avengers* the audience does not have to wait until the end of the movie to see him, as was the case in *Iron Man* (2008). He added, “It’s always good to play somebody [who] is a positive in society as opposed to somebody who is a negative” (BBC Radio *Newsbeat*, 2012). This comment and the evolution of Jackson’s role can support a curriculum of counter-space in which the images and roles that Black (dis/abled) males want to play can be elicited.

**References**


APPENDIX

Filmography

*Avatar* (Dir. James Cameron, 2009).
*Battleship* (Dir. Peter Berg, 2012).
*Black Swan* (Dir. Darren Aronofsky, 2010).
*Frankie and Alice* (Dir. Geoffrey Sax, 2010).
*Green Mile* (Dir. Frank Darabont, 1999).
*Hancock* (Dir. Peter Bang, 2008).
*Home of the Brave* (Dir. Mark Robson, 1949).
*Intruders in the Dust* (Dir. Clarence Brown, 1949).
*Iron Man* (Dir. Jon Favreau, 2008).
*Lost Boundaries* (Dir. Alfred L. Werker, 1949).
*Men of Honor* (Dir. George Tillman, Jr., 2000).
*Million Dollar Baby* (Dir. Clint Eastwood, 2004).
*Mirrors* (Dir. Alexandre Aja, 2008).
*Pinky* (Dir. Elia Kazan, 1949).
*Rust and Bone* (Dir. Jacques Audiard, 2012).
*Source Code* (Dir. Duncan Jones, 2011).
*The Bodyguard* (Dir. Mick Jackson, 1992).
*The Bone Collector* (Dir. Phillip Noyce, 1999).
*The Green Mile* (Dir. Frank Darabont, 1999).
*The King’s Speech* (Dir. Tom Hooper, 2010).
*The Soloist* (Dir. Joe Wright, 2009).
*True Grit* (Dir. Ethan and Joel Coen, 2010).
*Unbreakable* (Dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 2000).

VONZELL AGOSTO received her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She is assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of South Florida. Her research focuses on curriculum leadership and anti-oppressive education informed by culture, arts, and technology. Her work has been published in scholarly journals such as the *Journal of School Leadership, Teacher Education & Practice*, and the *Journal of Negro Education*.