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THE URBAN-SCHOOL FILM

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the politics of representation in recent urban-school films released in the United States since the year 2000. It first examines fictional films, finding that directors' adherence to exceptionalist narratives precludes a systemic view of educational inequality. Seeking alternatives, it turns to education documentaries and "quasimentaries," which provide a more holistic picture of the American school system but, by avoiding exceptionalism, may deter general audiences. Finally, the study concludes with discussion of HBO's *The Wire* and asks whether viewer expectations impose limits on the potential of critical education films. Drawing upon cultural studies and film theory, the author makes a case for nuance in representations of high-poverty education.

Dedicated to my former students
at Theodore Roosevelt K-8
and Universal Alcorn Middle Years Academy

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Introduction

Education and Popular Cinema

“*Dead Poets Society* led me to teaching.”

— Cori Marino, quoted in *BBC News Magazine* (Townsend)

In August of 2015, I began training for a position with City Year, an AmeriCorps national service program that places volunteer tutors in high-poverty urban schools. In one of our first training sessions, we watched PBS *Frontline*: “Dropout Nation,” a made-for-TV documentary about barriers to graduation in America’s education system. The use of a nonfiction film to educate us about the learning environments we would soon enter made sense to me. I was surprised, however, when we were assigned to watch clips from the based-on-a-true-story teaching movie *Freedom Writers* and even some segments from HBO’s *The Wire*. I had already seen *The Wire*’s acclaimed fourth season about Baltimore’s public schools. Recalling that experience, I realized it was my first exposure to urban education. I wondered how it had affected my understanding of educational inequality—how the films we watched in training might have influenced our assumptions going into the Philadelphia school district. Like many volunteers from City Year, Teach for America, and other AmeriCorps programs, I was white and from the suburbs. I expected that for a large number of would-be urban teachers, film is one of the first windows into high-poverty classrooms.

Even movies whose primary goal is to entertain shape public perception of educational issues. In “Using Popular Films to Challenge Preservice Teachers’ Beliefs about Teaching in Urban Schools,” P. A. Grant argues that when teachers’ “experiences differ widely from those of

inner-city youth, they rely on images in popular culture of information about worlds different from their own.” Moreover, “these images reflect and shape the assumptions with which preservice teachers enter urban classrooms and, as such, can serve as an invaluable format through which to explore these beliefs” (Grant 78). Popular school films impact outsiders’ beliefs about urban education, and, in recent years, their reach has been significant.

Since the turn of the century, movies dramatizing impoverished city schools have seen commercial success. For example, *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006), which follows Akeelah Anderson from a struggling South Los Angeles school to the Scripps National Spelling Bee, grossed nearly nineteen million dollars in the box office. Exploring a racially divided classroom in Long Beach, *Freedom Writers* (2007) garnered forty-three million dollars. And *Finding Forrester* (2000), a story of a talented black writer from the Bronx, earned over eighty million dollars. These earnings eclipse those of recent documentaries about urban education, most of which are only shown in limited screenings.¹ The role of fiction in shaping beliefs about high-poverty schools may be greater than that of nonfiction.

Because of cinema’s potential to influence public opinion, it is imperative to investigate the inner workings of popular school films, the subjects they characterize, and the values they convey. It is doubly important when, as is the case in urban education movies, the cinematic focus is on marginalized populations of poor, minority students who are harmed by educational inequality.² At stake is how outsiders understand these children and the systems that disadvantage them, as well as the ways urban teachers engage with vulnerable youth. Urban-school films put

¹ All figures from *Box Office Mojo*.

² See, for example, Darling-Hammond (2001). School funding systems “allocate fewer resources to poor urban districts than their suburban neighbors.” Moreover, “*within* these districts, schools with higher concentrations of low-income and ‘minority’ students receive fewer instructional resources” (208).

forth ideas about some of the most important issues affecting American life—race, class, and our embattled education system, to name a few—and they do so in ways that may not be obvious to the casual viewer. In order to unpack these issues, this study draws upon concepts from the field of cultural studies, in particular, the politics of representation.

In “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” Stuart Hall, the father of cultural studies, points out that film does not merely “re-present” cultural facts but rather engages in the “production” of culture through discourse. “[Cultural] identity as a ‘production’ . . . is never complete,” he argues; it is “not an essence but a positioning.” Thus, “there is always a politics of position” within film (72). Even if filmmakers do not have a political purpose in mind, their cinematic choices are always ideological in nature.

Taking Hall’s work as inspiration, this study examines the role of cinema in the production of cultural ideas about urban education. It is informed by careful consideration of the dynamics of narration, which position urban teachers and students within an imagined educational system and corresponding economy of values. By analyzing school films’ narrative techniques and their political consequences, it seeks to understand how popular culture mediates our understanding of education and inequality. Before investigating those issues in the urban education genre, it is worth considering narrative conventions in what is arguably the quintessential American school film.

Dead Poets Society: The Elite-School Film

Dead Poets Society (1989) is perhaps the most acclaimed American school film, and it sets conventions that are followed by subsequent education movies (Bell 24). Its story takes place at a fictional Vermont boarding school that is leagues away from the context of urban poverty. The classroom narrative that unfolds at Welton Academy is strikingly similar, however.

John Keating (Robin Williams), Welton's new English instructor, models the exceptional, unorthodox teacher common across school dramas. He inspires the film's student protagonists with advice to "make your lives extraordinary" and "*carpe diem*." His unconventional lessons include commanding them to tear out the stuffy introduction of their poetry readers, encouraging them to develop a unique style of walking in order to express their individuality, and, most famously, having them stand on desks to view life from a new perspective. Keating gains a cult-like status among his pupils, several of whom revive the "Dead Poets Society," an unsanctioned poetry club of which he was formerly a member. After the Dead Poets Society is busted and Keating is falsely blamed for a student's suicide, he is fired from his teaching post. Nonetheless, his loyal devotees express their allegiance to him at the end by standing on their desks and exclaiming, "O Captain! My Captain!" as he is forced to leave the classroom. Although the students are the protagonists, the teacher emerges as the film's inspirational hero.

Keating's unconventionality, clashes with authority, and quasi-cult of personality are echoed in recent school films (Bell 24). Several writers have criticized the educational ideal he represents as unrealistic and even harmful. Adam Farhi contends that Keating's unorthodoxy "implies that a teacher has to be unconventional to be qualified, making it difficult, if not impossible, for real teachers to measure up" (158). In "The Great-Teacher Myth," Robert Heilman builds upon this critique, pointing out that a rebel instructor like Keating necessitates ineffective colleagues and administrators for comparison: "First you've got this guy on a white horse charging in to save the place. So you need some set-up black hats to make him look like a hero instead of a moral egoist" (423). Elevating one heroically unconventional teacher implicitly disparages most educators. On Keating's bizarre lessons, Heilman comments, "We never do see Keating *teaching* anything" (322). Indeed, the movie makes teaching more about personality than pedagogy. Film

critic Roger Ebert observes, “At the end of a great teacher’s course in poetry, the students would love poetry; at the end of this teacher’s semester, all they really love is the teacher” (142). *Dead Poets Society* would be more aptly named “John Keating’s Society.”

While these critiques of what Farhi calls “the superteacher myth” (157) in *Dead Poets Society* have merit, the stakes for the film’s affluent students seem rather low. If, in an alternative film ending, Keating were allowed to stay at Welton Academy, his pupils might receive more encouragement to “make their lives extraordinary” and “*carpe diem*.” In his absence, they may be less inspired, but they will likely progress through their elite boarding school and on to the Ivy League campuses to which they are destined. Because the movie’s setting is predominantly white and upper-class, Keating is not expected to solve any educational problem beyond the students’ boredom. How might the implications of its super-teacher narrative change in the context of poverty?

Keating in Long Beach: Narrating Urban Schools

As a hypothetical exercise, let us assume that, in a sequel to *Dead Poets Society*, Keating got over his dismissal from Welton Academy and is on the market for teaching jobs. Experiencing renewed idealism and a burst of generosity, he takes a position at a struggling public school in Long Beach (the urban setting of *Freedom Writers*). Soon, he is back to his old ways, and the super-teacher narrative repeats itself—albeit, with the extraordinary success of underprivileged students whom he takes under his wing. In Long Beach, Keating emerges not only as a model for teaching but as the man to solve the challenges faced by high-poverty schools. He becomes not just a super teacher but a white savior, whose radical lessons will shepherd students of color from misfortune to academic triumph. A visionary outsider, he will combat apathetic and even racist

colleagues as he single-handedly changes the lives of young men and women helpless without him. And, witnessing his victories, viewers will be satisfied with the reassurance that one thoughtful, committed teacher can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing—not increased education funding, school reform, or desegregation policies—that ever has.

This thought experiment suggests that the representational stakes are greater for urban-school films than for an elite-school film such as *Dead Poets Society*. The translocation of the super-teacher plot from Welton Academy to urban school raises crucial questions. For example, to what extent does a hero's narrative mask systemic forces at play in education inequality? How might it interact with issues of social class and race? How is the agency of minority students represented in classroom and extracurricular settings? And, given narrative constraints, what scope is there for popular films to grapple with complexity in urban education?

The following chapters seek to address these and other concerns about the urban education genre. Each identifies problems and opportunities in urban-school films and suggests ways that cinema might better address systemic challenges in education. "Super Teachers" analyzes the workings of the super-teacher myth in fictional films in detail. "Outstanding Students" turns to fiction movies about student prodigies, whose journeys provide a larger picture of American education but replicate the individualism of super-teacher films. "Struggling Systems" looks to documentary and "quasimentary" films for narrative innovations that can accommodate structural critique. And, finally, "Feature Length" asks whether the *The Wire's* in-depth and politically conscious examination of Baltimore's public schools could ever reach broad American audiences.

This study of popular film proceeds on the belief that cultural artifacts should be interrogated because they shape our understandings of ourselves, of others, and of the society we

live in. Hall envisaged popular culture as a battleground of ideology. In his words, “popular culture is one of the sites where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle” (“Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’” 239). By critiquing urban-school films, we take part in the struggle for an education system that is not merely for the powerful, but for all.

Chapter 1

Super Teachers

“With little assistance from anyone and teaching methods that are barely existent, the teacher is able to overcome the odds and quickly transform the class.”

— Adam Farhi, in “Hollywood Goes to School”

The central importance that teachers have in shaping educational experiences might lead one to assume that they would occupy key roles in popular school movies. Nonetheless, Jung-Ah Choi points out that few “films depict the teacher’s classroom instruction in an ongoing manner” (244). Hollywood’s limited focus on classroom teaching may be explained by a greater narrative potential in students’ extracurricular pursuits. But if football (*Remember the Titans*), basketball (*Coach Carter*), and music (*Music of the Heart*) are flashier than lectures and exams, we might expect the classroom narratives that do make it into film to be extraordinary. This appears to be the case for urban-school movies. Two contemporary pictures, *The Ron Clark Story* (2006) and *Freedom Writers* (2007), both feature white-savior teachers who turn around a struggling inner-city classroom, seemingly against all odds. By emphasizing the heroic feats of their protagonists, the films paint these achievements as exceptional. Ultimately, their adherence to exceptionalist narrative precludes a systemic view of education and inequality.

As in *Dead Poets Society*, narrative convention figures into *The Ron Clark Story* and *Freedom Writers* in the shape of the super teacher. In “Hollywood Goes to School: Recognizing the Superteacher Myth in Film,” Adam Farhi outlines the super-teacher formula as follows:

Take one teacher, often male, ranging from someone who has ‘different’ ideas to someone who is an outright rebel. Give him an uncaring or unwilling administration, incompetent or lackluster coworkers, and students whom everyone else has given up on. With little assistance from anyone and teaching methods that are barely existent, the teacher is able to overcome the odds and quickly transform the class. (157)

With few deviations, *The Ron Clark Story* and *Freedom Writers* follow this narrative formula, presenting Ron Clark (Matthew Perry) and Erin Gruwell (Hilary Swank), respectively, as super teachers. Farhi argues that the super-teacher formula creates unrealistic expectations for would-be educators. But another sinister consequence is to encourage audience satisfaction with a single, exceptional classroom. At every step, the super-teacher formula reminds viewers that the instructor is “overcoming the odds” to achieve academic excellence. In doing so, it focuses attention on the extraordinary, obscuring the ordinary and the systemic. The result, according to one reviewer of *Freedom Writers*, is that such films “sugarcoat the reality that [teachers] like Gruwell are merely rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*—it’s wonderful, of course, that she saved a handful of kids, but what about the rest of them?” (Hughey 489). By analyzing *Freedom Writers* and *The Ron Clark Story*, we can better understand how the super-teacher narrative pushes an ethos of exceptionalism.

The form of exceptionalism in super-teacher movies is developed using specific filmic conventions. Based on Farhi’s outline, we can break the super-teacher formula into the following tropes: outsider teachers, uncaring colleagues, problem students, and unconventional pedagogies.

Outsider Teachers

That the teacher protagonists of *The Ron Clark Story* and *Freedom Writers* are “different” from other instructors—exceptions within their schools—is established early in the films. First, they are set apart by their unique experience, or lack thereof. Having taught the highest scoring fifth-grade class in Beaufort County, North Carolina, Ron Clark “specialize[s] in raising standardized test scores.” This specialty is what wins him an urban teaching job. Erin Gruwell, in contrast, has no prior teaching experience. In this she typifies the “inexperienced outsider teacher” Sophie Bell describes in a super-teacher formula similar to Farhi’s (24). Fresh thinking and a commitment born of naiveté, presumably, are what Gruwell will offer her public school.

In addition to their (in)experience, Clark and Gruwell are geographic outsiders. Clark hails from North Carolina, where he begins his teaching career. Heroically, he leaves his Aurora school to teach in Harlem because the “New York public schools are desperate for good teachers. Newspaper says they’re beggin’ for them.” Meanwhile, Gruwell is from Newport Beach, an affluent city in Southern California. She “chose Wilson,” a struggling school in Long Beach, “because of the integration program.” Leaving home to make a difference, Gruwell and Clark are positioned outside urban education systems, with the special capacity to bring change to them.

Upon deciding to teach in high-poverty schools, the two outsiders justify their choices to peers and the audience, putting their newcomer idealism on full display. For Gruwell, teaching is about civil rights:

I think what's happening here is really exciting, don't you? My father was involved in the civil rights movement. And I remember when I was watching the LA riots on TV, I was thinking of going to law school at the time. And I thought, 'God, by the time you're

defending a kid in a courtroom, the battle's already lost.' I think the real fighting should happen here in the classroom.

Gruwell frames teaching as a "battle." Viewers are to imagine her a savior "fighting" for and "defending" minority children. Meanwhile, Clark explains his departure for the New York public schools as a response to need and as seizing the day. "Dad," he says, "every year I tell my students to go for what they want in life, dream big, take risks. It's time I start living up to my own words."

Fighters, dreamers, and risk takers, Clark and Gruwell are presented as the external spark urban schools need. Their outsider characterization sets them up as bright exceptions within the struggling systems they enter. By the super-teacher narrative's logic, unorthodox, individualist teachers are the solution. Other educators are the problem.

Unwilling Colleagues

Erin Gruwell and Ron Clark's idealism contrasts with the unwillingness of the teachers and administrators that work alongside them. This contrast has two consequences. First, it cements the protagonists' exceptionalism as outsider teachers. Second, it blames educational problems on veteran staff. Following narrative convention, the two films reduce education reform to a contest between exceptional teachers and staff members who stand in their way.

The conflict between outsider and insider, newcomer and veteran surfaces immediately in *Freedom Writers* and *The Ron Clark Story*. One form this clash takes is in optimism versus pessimism. Gruwell, a new and hopeful teacher, faces cynical opposition at Wilson from English department head Margaret Campbell and experienced teacher Brian Gelford. After Gruwell shares her take on civil rights and education, Campbell dismisses her as overly idealistic by replying, "Well, that's a very well-thought-out phrase." Similarly, Gelford tells her, "Please, stop your

cheerleading, Erin. You're ridiculous." Clark's resolve meets comparable skepticism from the head of Inner Harlem Elementary School. After the two pass by a rambunctious, teacherless class during his orientation, Clark offers to fill in:

RON CLARK. "I'm your man."

PRINCIPAL TURNER. "I have an opening in grade three. If your credentials check out—"

RON CLARK. "Sir, you have an opening right here."

PRINCIPAL TURNER. "No. Last year, this class went through six different teachers before Christmas—"

RON CLARK. "Yes. Nobody wants them, and I do, so what's the problem?"

Principal Turner comes off as a fatalist, obstructing Clark's determination to help struggling students. He, Gelford, and Campbell represent "the way things are." They are the film's antagonists, whose sour attitudes seem all that stands in the way of an educational revolution.

In addition to negativity, the antagonistic teachers and administrators embody racism. "It's too bad you weren't here even two years ago, you know," Campbell tells Gruwell during their first meeting. "We used to have one of the highest scholastic records in the district, but since voluntary integration was suggested, we've lost over 75% of our *strongest* students." By "strongest students," Campbell means white students. Her bias against students of color and pro-segregation leanings are startling. Building on Campbell's segregationist sentiment, Gelford claims that "integration's a lie." "Yeah, we teachers, we can't say that," he complains to Gruwell, "or we lose our jobs for being racist." Juxtaposed with Gruwell's belief in civil rights, Gelford and Campbell's arguments do sound racist. While Campbell mentions an empirical consequence of Wilson's integration, their diatribes are rooted in fear of the minority students. "Those are lovely pearls,"

Campbell compliments Gruwell, before advising, “I wouldn’t wear them to class.” Her implication, which does not bear out, is that Gruwell’s minority students will rob her. In an even starker example of racialized anxiety, Gelford claims that the students “drive around in the open with automatic weapons,” and that he “can’t walk out of [his] door at night.” His and Campbell’s racism brackets Gruwell’s civil rights commitment. By positioning “anti-racist” Gruwell against “racist” Campbell and Gelford, *Freedom Writers* puts forward an individualist conception of racism that overlooks systemic factors. White viewers can feel comforted by the idea that there are non-racist whites like Gruwell, and that it is other “racists” who are the problem. The fact of ongoing school segregation along racial and socioeconomic³ lines is lost in Gruwell’s individual triumph.

While Principal Turner does not make overtly racist statements in *The Ron Clark Story*, that function is fulfilled by Yolanda, the secretary at Clark’s apartment complex. When Clark goes to her for local school listings, she takes on the role of cautionary gatekeeper to the Harlem community:

RON CLARK. Do you have a list of the public schools in Harlem? . . .

YOLANDA. What you want school listings for?

RON CLARK. I’m a teacher.

YOLANDA. And you wanna teach? Up in Harlem?

RON CLARK. Yes.

YOLANDA. Well then, Honey, you’re gonna need something else: personal injury

³ See Rothstein, “For Public Schools, Segregation Then, Segregation Since,” (2013).

lawyers. ‘Cause once your white behind goes on up in there, they’ll be carrying you back out the same way you went in. What kind of foolishness is this, goin’ on up there to Harlem tryin’ to teach—

RON CLARK. Okay, thank you!

Like Campbell and Gelford, who “warn” Gruwell about her students, Yolanda describes children of color as a physical threat. Unlike Campbell and Gelford, Yolanda is black. *The Ron Clark Story* assigns racism to its African American characters and chooses a white teacher as the representative of civil rights. Rather than combat white racists, Clark must convince black adults to adopt his belief in minority students’ potential. Filmgoers’ identification with an unprejudiced, white hero boils racism down to an issue of individuals. Its connection to educational inequality and segregation, as well as its consequences for school children, is obscured.

Problem Students

In addition to spotlighting Clark and Gruwell’s anti-racism, *The Ron Clark Story* and *Freedom Writers*’ characterization of minority children as “problem students” establishes an educational challenge for the super teachers to overcome. The students’ apparent delinquency makes their ultimate success a spectacular achievement on the part of their instructors, underscoring the latter’s creation of an exceptional classroom.

Gruwell and Clark’s pupils are problematized first by the opponent faculty who resent them. Before warning Gruwell not to wear her pearls, Campbell informs her of the struggle she will face with her first-year English students:

Freshman English, four classes, about 150 students in all. Some of them are just out of juvenile hall. One or two might be wearing ankle cuffs to monitor their whereabouts . . .

And if you look at their scores, these vocabulary lists and some of these, the books, Homer's *The Odyssey*, they're gonna be too difficult for them.

Principal Turner gives Clark a similar warning about his sixth-grade class:

PRINCIPAL TURNER. This class tested at the bottom of the entire New York City School district.

RON CLARK. They do seem a little squirrelly.

PRINCIPAL TURNER. Oh, they're more than squirrelly. These students have problems with learning, discipline, social skills—like Taeshawn Mitchell, two strikes going on three toward the juvenile detention center.

Clark and Gruwell's students are presented as inherently troubled, and their depiction on screen reinforces their supposed delinquency.

The opening classroom scenes in both films signal extreme dysfunction among the minority children. As Clark remarks that his future students “seem a little squirrelly,” they are shown out of their seats, throwing paper, gambling, and climbing on desks, before a spitball hits the window through which Clark is observing them. The first few minutes of Gruwell's class appear even more outrageous. Her ninth-graders scowl at her as they walk in and immediately turn around their desks. The camera zooms in on a young Latina woman's ankle cuff, and on another Latino student's hand fingering his gun. One black youth catcalls Gruwell and then starts a fight with his peer. He exclaims, “This whole ghetto-ass class got people in here lookin' like a bad rerun of cops and shit.” A closeup of Gruwell's tense face registers her agreement. According to Henry Giroux, such “opening scenes work powerfully in associating black and Hispanic kids with the culture of criminality and danger.” Moreover, they present white super teachers “as the only hope these kids have for moving beyond the context and character of their [criminal and dangerous]

racial identities” (Giroux 47). The narrative implication is that because of the students’ delinquency, Gruwell and Clark have much work to do to reform them.

That Clark and Gruwell’s challenging work will be exceptional, not systemic, is reinforced by the juxtaposition of their classrooms with high achieving classes. Before telling Clark his future students have tested at the bottom of the district, Principal Turner shows him the honors class, where pupils sit quiet and attentive. They “score in the top ten percentile on the state exams every year,” Turner explains. “We divide each grade into four classes according to their achievement scores.” Rather than a consequence of poverty and discrimination, Clark’s class seems merely a blight on an otherwise well-functioning school—the bottom quartile. Gruwell’s classroom also appears to be an aberration. After her difficult first day, Gelford advises Gruwell, “Don’t be discouraged.” He promises that if “You put your time in, in a few years, you’ll be able to teach juniors. They’re a pleasure.” This advice from the “Junior English and the Distinguished Honors Class” teacher suggests that Gruwell’s students are outliers, just too young or too “dumb,” as one of her students claims. While race and socioeconomic status influence students’ placement in honors and remedial classrooms,⁴ the films do not voice that systemic concern. Instead, they frame Gruwell and Clark’s classrooms as aberrations, requiring heroic instructors and exceptional teaching methods.

Unconventional Pedagogies

The problem students in *Freedom Writers* and *The Ron Clark Story* seem to demand radical forms of instruction, whose replicability across schools and the wider education system is

⁴ See García and Weiss, “Economic Gaps by Social Class and Race Start U.S. Children Out on Unequal Footing,” (2015)

questionable. By featuring unusual teaching styles, the films direct audiences' attention toward the extraordinary.

After struggling to engage their new classes, Gruwell and Clark break away from standard pedagogy. Bell refers to this point in the super-teacher formula as “some kind of gimmick, a departure from tradition, which gets the students' attention” (24). For Gruwell, this departure from tradition is teaching tolerance through the Holocaust. After intercepting a racist drawing of one of her black students, a symbol of gang violence that has affected her class, she tells her ninth-graders about “the most famous gang in history”:

You think you know all about gangs? You're amateurs. This gang would put you all to shame . . . You take over neighborhoods? That's nothing compared to them. They took over countries. And you wanna know how? . . . they wiped out everybody they didn't like, and everybody they blamed . . . That's how a Holocaust happens.

The Holocaust “gets the student's attention.” Building upon the success of her speech, Gruwell teaches lessons on *The Diary of Anne Frank*, plans a field trip to a Holocaust museum, and organizes a fundraiser to bring Miep Gies, Anne Frank's protector, to her classroom. Shots of newspaper articles highlighting these achievements stress the distinction of Gruwell's teaching style.

Clark's pedagogical innovation, though no less distinctive, is more of a “gimmick.” After leaving class one day in anger at his students' behavior, Clark returns with new determination and several dozen cartons of chocolate milk. He addresses his confused pupils with the following speech:

Within these four walls, you can be strangers, or you can be a family. Within these four walls can be the end of your story, or you can make it a beginning, a beginning that is better

than anything you ever imagined possible. Since I have got here, you have not listened to me once. So, here's the deal: today, we are going to learn grammar. If you are quiet and you listen, every fifteen seconds, I will drink a chocolate milk. If you can do it, you may get to see me puke. So, do we have a deal?

The sixth-graders accept, of course, and while they do not get to see Clark vomit, they do begin to listen. Clark follows this stunt by joining some of his most outspoken students for a game of double Dutch at recess, where he proposes, "If I can learn double Dutch, you have to learn everything you need to know for seventh grade." After winning them over, he serves the whole class cake and performs a "President's Rap" to teach them American history. Clark's outlandish methods are concisely summarized by Principal Turner as "acting like a twelve-year-old." They are vindicated by a celebratory announcement at the end of the film that "this sixth-grade class tested higher than any other class"—even the honors class. *The Ron Clark Story* and *Freedom Writers* champion these unconventional pedagogies and achievements, with little regard for their place in broader systems.

The question of reproducing Clark and Gruwell's methods in other classrooms is either ignored or dismissed by the two films, encouraging satisfaction with exceptionalism. For example, Clark's test score victory appears to support his antics, even though we might question the broad applicability of chocolate milk binges. *Freedom Writers* is more self-aware on the point of reproducibility but ultimately dismissive. In the wake of Gruwell's success, Ms. Campbell becomes the voice of systemic thinking:

What about new students that come in next year? Can she repeat this process every year? Her methods are impractical, impossible to implement with regularity. What if every teacher performed in this way? We have millions of children to get through the education

system in this country, and we need a means of accomplishing that which allows as many students to benefit as possible, not just special cases. And you honestly think you can create this family in every classroom, for every grade, for every student you teach?

Unfortunately, since Campbell has been established as an antagonist to Gruwell and a voice for pessimism and racism, her concerns are discredited. She raises them at a meeting with the superintendent to decide whether Gruwell can remain with her now devoted students into their junior year, breaking with district policy. The film's moment of truth occurs in the next scene: Gruwell reveals to her students that they get to "be together junior and senior year!" Like *The Ron Clark Story*, *Freedom Writers* sides with the exceptionalist.

In these two films, the super-teacher formula masks systemic forces at play in urban schools, creating exceptional classrooms that coax viewers into complacency. Their use of formulaic elements—outsider teachers, unwilling colleagues, problem students, and unconventional pedagogies—probably has less to do with the ideological bent of their directors and more to do with narrative demands. The conflict between new and veteran teachers, the challenge of delinquent students, and the intrigue of novel teaching methods draw viewers in. These conventions are the films' "gimmicks," which engage viewers who might not otherwise take an interest in inner-city students. The question, then, is can an urban-school film take a systemic view while remaining engaging? In search of the answer, this study will look beyond the super-teacher narratives of *Freedom Writers* and *The Ron Clark Story* to stories of outstanding students.

Chapter 2

Outstanding Students

“As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”

— Akeelah Anderson quoting Marianne Williamson, *Akeelah and the Bee*

In addition to neglecting (realistic) classroom teaching, Hollywood tends to overlook the lived experiences of minority students. Critiquing urban-school films that take the perspective of a white instructor, Henry Giroux laments that viewers are often given “nothing about the lives of the students themselves . . . no sense of their histories or experiences outside of the school” (47). That is certainly true for the movies discussed in the previous chapter, which follow the journeys of super teachers. This oversight is a missed opportunity, for attention to student viewpoints, if done effectively, would flesh out the state of educational inequality and register its impact on disadvantaged children. Where popular films have given voice to urban students, however, they have limited their interest to prodigies. In two recent urban-school pictures, *Finding Forrester* (2000) and *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006), the protagonists are a literary genius and a spelling virtuoso, respectively. Like *The Ron Clark Story* and *Freedom Writers*, these movies’ focus on exceptional success stories overshadows systemic difficulties. Nonetheless, by tracking students whose talents take them from high-poverty schools to elite academic settings, they provide a fuller picture of the American education landscape. While falling short of addressing educational inequity directly, outstanding-student films offer a glimpse of how nuanced representations of inequality might fit into conventional narrative.

Compared to *The Ron Clark Story* and *Freedom Writers*, *Akeelah and the Bee* and *Finding Forrester* are equally formulaic, but their narrative formula intersects with more points in the education system, giving audiences greater exposure to inequality. Taking Farhi's outline of the super-teacher plot as inspiration, I propose the following formula for the outstanding-student narrative:

Take one gifted student whose abilities distinguish her from her inner-city peers. Give her a mentor outside of the classroom who helps her see her full potential. With the mentor's guidance, the student moves on to an elite education setting, overcoming racism and adversity along the way. Ultimately, the student triumphs in a school competition and reconciles her urban background with her new academic identity.

The implications of this outstanding-student formula are more complicated than those of the super-teacher plot. In *Race and Upward Mobility*, Elda María Román captures the complexity of "upward mobility narratives" in which a person of color achieves increased social or financial status. She argues that while African American and Mexican American upward mobility narratives are often "very concerned with the collective" and issues of identity, they "play a didactic function and tend to be consumed as bootstrapping stories about self-reliance and individual success" (7). Seeking stories that are "more representative of society at large," Román does not include individualist "rags-to-riches tales" in her study. Nonetheless, she contends these and other upward mobility narratives are "laden with values about the best way to act in the world, which is why it is vital that we examine them" (239).

Unfortunately, as this chapter will show, the outstanding-student narrative offers only minor improvements on the rags-to-riches tale. On the one hand, its protagonist's transition from high-poverty school to privileged learning environment illustrates the advantages conferred by the

latter. The student's struggles in an elite institution remind viewers of his disadvantaged background, highlighting the consequences of poverty and racism. On the other hand, a cinematic emphasis on talented and upwardly mobile students pushes an ethos of exceptionalism. In this the outstanding-student film risks lulling audiences into complacency with another "feel-good" education story.

Untangling contradictions in the outstanding-student narrative will show how its hints of inequality might be made more explicit. As with the super-teacher plot, we can separate this formula into several stages: inner-city origins, student prodigies, upper-class invitations, and triumphs in competition.

Inner-City Origins

Finding Forrester and *Akeelah and the Bee* begin by establishing their protagonists' humble, urban origins. These pictures of poverty serve to make the prodigies' success more exceptional, but they also convey real challenges in poor, minority school districts. The role of the Bronx and South Los Angeles in shaping Jamal and Akeelah's identities, respectively, is continuously explored throughout the films.

Both movies open with panoramas of inner-city life that provide noticeably more sympathetic views of it than in the super-teacher pictures. Absent are the shots of violence and the aggressive rap scores that inaugurate *Freedom Writers* and *The Ron Clark Story*. In their place, *Akeelah and the Bee* plays groovy beats that fade into Akeelah's narration as she walks through town, enjoying the passing scenes of South Los Angeles. *Finding Forrester* showcases images of families, friends, black churches, and barbershops in the Bronx, set to a wistful jazz tune. Alley-Young contends that such "nostalgic representations of cities such as the Bronx," like those found

in *Finding Forrester*, “gloss over the actual problems that exist in these contexts” (Alley-Young 25). Although both films eventually address some of these urban problems later, communities of color seem to be portrayed more compassionately in movies starring a minority character. *Finding Forrester* and *Akeelah and the Bee*’s more positive openings help engender sympathy for their student protagonists who come from the inner city. When the films go on to highlight issues in under-resourced schools, those problems do not negatively characterize Akeelah or Jamal.

On the contrary, the two star students vocalize the troubles plaguing their schools themselves, demonstrating the impact of school poverty on children and youth. *Akeelah and the Bee* is the most direct in this regard. When invited to represent Crenshaw Middle School in the Scripps National Spelling Bee, Akeelah asks, “Why would anyone wanna represent a school that can’t put doors on the bathroom stalls?” Removal of bathroom-stall doors is a policy that has been undertaken by poor school districts as a way of policing drug use, sex, bullying, and other behaviors (McKay). This invasion of privacy prevents Akeelah from feeling invested in her education, a theme throughout the movie. Eventually, she decides to enter the spelling bee (as an alternative to detention), but so she will not look poor among the other contestants requests that Crenshaw “buy me a new outfit.” She cannot hide Crenshaw’s insolvency, however. “Are you taking Latin at your school?” an affluent spelling bee contestant asks her. “Are you kidding?” Akeelah exclaims. “My school barely has enough money for kickballs!” Disappointed by the lack of opportunities at Crenshaw, Akeelah says, “I don’t like my school.” Crenshaw’s plight is central to the spelling bee plot. The impetus for Akeelah’s invitation to compete in the bee is that “Crenshaw needs this publicity,” according to the principal. School poverty is therefore structured into *Akeelah and the Bee*, and its effects on Akeelah register throughout the narrative.

In *Finding Forrester*, Jamal's reflections on his troubled neighborhood offer a commentary on his educational background. Clare, his friend and romantic interest at his new prep school, suggests it "must be hard" coming from the Bronx to "new people, new school." Jamal explains, "What's hard is growing up in a place where the cops don't even want to be after dark," it is so violent. "What's hard is knowing you're safe there, because the people you need to worry about know you got nothing [no money] to give them." The point that few want to visit Jamal's home, due to perceptions of danger or squalor, is echoed by his childhood friend, Fly. Jamal asks him, "You ever met someone famous?" Fly, dismissive, retorts, "No one like that comes around here." If no one comes into the two friends' neighborhood, it is also the case that few residents are able to leave. Jamal asks Fly if he will be around to play basketball later, and Fly retorts, "Where you think I'm gonna be, in the Hamptons?" Poverty limits the youths' possibilities, and is perceived as doing so even when they succeed. After hearing about the Bronx from Jamal, Clare observes, "It's a good thing you're here." "Yeah, but these people don't think I got anything to give them either," Jamal replies. His new prep school teachers associate him with the low performance of his previous inner-city school, linking neighborhood problems and academic success. Like Akeelah, Jamal must overcome humble school beginnings.

By following their central characters from inner cities, outstanding-student films pay closer and more sympathetic attention to school poverty than do super-teacher movies. *Finding Forrester* and *Akeelah and the Bee* make the consequences of destitution resonate through the voices of Jamal and Akeelah, their student protagonists. However, the films' urban backdrops also serve to emphasize the protagonists' exceptionalism, which risks overshadowing the systemic problems highlighted in their neighborhoods.

Student Prodigies

Akeelah and the Bee and *Finding Forrester* choose prodigies as their heroes, recreating the problem of exceptionalism present in the super-teacher narrative. Standing out among their inner-city peers, Akeelah and Jamal are “super students.” They drive the films’ exploration of underprivileged and elite education but risk leaving their schools and peers behind in the minds of viewers.

The steps *Finding Forrester* and *Akeelah and the Bee* take to establish Jamal and Akeelah’s exceptionalism are very similar. For example, each film contains a classroom scene in which the prodigy hides his or her intelligence from classmates. Jamal’s English teacher asks his class whether anyone has read Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven.” After being met with silence, she asks, “Jamal, how about it?” The whole class turns, irritated, to Jamal, indicating that he is usually called on for answers. Visibly uncomfortable, Jamal hesitates before lying, “No, I never read it.” (The audience sees through the lie, having already learned of his literary bent; a stack of books in his bedroom features works by Chekhov, Descarte, Joyce, and Kierkegaard, among others. *Akeelah and the Bee* uses almost exactly the same shot in Akeelah’s room, but with different texts.) In Akeelah’s classroom, meanwhile, her teacher passes out spelling quiz grades, displaying C’s, D’s, and F’s. She scolds the class, “You’re all in the seventh grade now, and I know you can do better than this.” Then, she shouts, “Akeelah! How long did you study for this spelling test?” to student laughter. “I didn’t,” Akeelah admits, sheepishly. She gives a stealthy glance at her score—one hundred percent. Here, the teacher recognizes the bullying threat Akeelah faces for her brilliance and protects her.

Akeelah and Jamal appear smarter than their classmates, but their potential is limited by the social expectations their underachieving peers impose. In a parent-teacher conference, Jamal’s

instructor observes that he “maintains a C average, which means he does just enough to get by without standing out.” And after class, Akeelah’s teacher chastises her, “You know, you could be one of my very best students . . . What’s going on?” According to Jamal’s teacher, it is peer pressure. “Basketball is where he gets his acceptance,” she surmises. “Kids don’t care what he puts down on paper.” The same conclusion is implied by Akeelah’s narration at the beginning of the film. “You know that feeling where no matter what you do or where you go, you just don’t fit in?” she asks the audience. “That’s how I feel all the time.” Like Jamal, Akeelah is distinguished from her classmates. This is a more sinister move by the two films, to suggest that the central problem facing the protagonists is their “underachiever” peers. By lamenting how intelligence is not “cool” in high-poverty schools, the outstanding-student narrative can be read as blaming poor educational outcomes on urban youth culture—or African-American culture. *Akeelah and the Bee* complicates this notion with comments about Crenshaw Middle School’s lack of resources, but *Finding Forrester* seems more satisfied with the idea that Jamal is inhibited by his black friends. Moments that highlight the plight of Jamal’s neighborhood are relatively scarce, and connecting them to his school environment requires imagination on the part of viewers. Therefore, when Jamal is invited to attend an elite preparatory school and his current principal says, “This isn’t the right place for you anymore,” it seems he is talking about the students—not the host of systemic factors likely influencing the school.

Upper-Class Invitations

As a result of their giftedness, Jamal and Akeelah are offered the opportunity to move into upper-class educational settings: New York City’s top preparatory school and the Scripps National Spelling Bee, respectively. The prodigies’ new learning environments contrast with their initial,

high-poverty schools and are portrayed as hostile to minority students, providing the basis for a critique of educational inequality.

Film scholars have paid more attention to a third, “mentor space” in outstanding-student films than to the transition between inner-city and elite academic spaces. For instance, Alley-Young focuses on Jamal’s relationship with William Forrester, the reclusive Pulitzer-Prize-winning author for whom *Finding Forrester* is named. He argues that the film “posits . . . real learning is the love between student and mentor, challenging life experiences, and the actual doing of writing and not the formal relationships and disembodied rote learning that characterizes [the] classroom” (32).

Alley-Young’s claim misses Forrester’s primary narrative function as a super teacher or “super mentor” for Jamal as he navigates his new prep school. Forrester gives Jamal advice on how to interact with a difficult teacher, how to respond to plagiarism accusations, and how to win a classmate’s heart. The writing instruction he provides is specifically for Jamal’s difficult school assignments. Forrester thus serves as a bridge between Jamal’s neighborhood and his new school. Similarly, Dr. Joshua Larabee, Akeelah’s mentor, helps her succeed in the Scripps National Spelling Bee in spite of her disadvantaged background, as he says he did when he was young. A former UCLA English Department head and national spelling bee champion, Dr. Larabee, too, is a super teacher and a class bridge. Because Dr. Larabee and Forrester use their exceptional talents to shepherd prodigies into elite institutions, they should not be understood as radical classroom reformers. Rather, they replicate the exceptionalist logic of Ron Clark and Erin Gruwell.

Understanding these films’ “mentor spaces” as narrative steps toward elite settings is important. *Akeelah and the Bee* and *Finding Forrester* do not upend institutions in favor of extracurricular learning, a potentially nihilistic view for a country with over fifty million students

in primary and secondary school (“Back to School Statistics”). Instead, they are cognizant of the advantages conferred by upper-class education. It is an open question as to whether they ultimately reject these advantages.

Both films, however, call attention to resources and opportunities available to affluent students that Jamal and Akeelah have lacked. Jamal’s new English classroom, with its mahogany chairs and shelves of leather-bound books, has an Ivy League feel. The wall is covered with portraits of famous (and exclusively white) writers, including Forrester. Jamal’s classmates wear khakis and sportcoats, “uniforms that reify their privileged status as prep school students” (Alley-Young 29). Jealously, he calls them “two-comma kids,” that is, heirs to “a million dollars—one comma, two commas.” A school reception conveys the ways in which wealth and prestige benefit the prep school’s students. “Remember, anything you need, please give me a call,” a suited alumnus tells Jamal. “Anything.” Confused, Jamal replies “Okay?” and takes the man’s card. He has not been a beneficiary of elite networks in the Bronx.

While Akeelah does not transfer to a new school, her entrance into the spelling bee prompts her to travel to an affluent school to take advantage of its spelling club—a resource, like Latin class, that Crenshaw cannot provide. During her long bus ride, the scenery shifts from the vacant lots of her South Los Angeles neighborhood to the large houses and green lawns of the suburbs. As in *Finding Forrester*, the comparative wealth of this institution is coded visually. Akeelah responds to it by voicing her growing disappointment in Crenshaw:

‘Mama, I hate Crenshaw! It’s so boring there, and nobody cares.’

‘What? You think they care about you in Woodland Hills?’

‘At least they got Latin classes, and the kids don’t have to study in the stairwells!’

‘Good for them.’

By bringing attention to resource inequality, *Akeelah and the Bee* does more to highlight systemic forces than does *Finding Forrester*. Nonetheless, both films address the adversity the prodigies face in upper-class institutions.

At prep school and in the Scripps National Spelling Bee, Jamal and Akeelah confront racism and classism that convey the difficulty of educational mobility. For instance, Jamal struggles against low academic expectations for him as a black basketball player from the Bronx. His new crush articulates his classmates' assumption that he is a product of athletic affirmative action. "It's just like college, right?" she suggests. "You get an education, and they get what they want"—a basketball star. Jamal's English teacher, Robert Crawford, echoes this sentiment:

I had a chance this morning to review the files sent over by your former school. Test scores, impressive. Actual classroom work, not so impressive. Is this the level of work I should anticipate, Mr. Wallace? Because if it is, it will help me determine whether I should treat you as a student, or as someone here simply to pursue—How should I put it?—other endeavors.

When Jamal submits excellent writing for his homework assignments, Crawford does not believe them to be original work. He brings his suspicion to a colleague, who offers, "The boy does well in my class. He had good scores coming in. Maybe all he needed was direction." Crawford rejects the possibility that Jamal is a talented writer. "Carl, he's a *basketball player*," he says, "—from the Bronx." Satisfied with the truth of his prejudice, Crawford presents his plagiarism charge to Jamal. He explains to him, "Given your previous education and your background, I'm sure you'll forgive me for reaching my own conclusions." The film clarifies the racial and class anxieties in Crawford's conclusions through Forrester's wisdom. "Do you know what people are most afraid of?" Forrester asks Jamal. "What they don't understand . . . Crawford cannot understand how a

black kid from the Bronx can write the way you do. So he assumes you can't." Dramatizing Jamal's efforts to prove his talent, *Finding Forrester* exposes assumptions that inhibit poor and minority success in elite institutions.

Akeelah and the Bee tackles similar prejudices in the spelling bee circuit. After Akeelah nearly beats Dylan Chiu of Woodland Hills in Scrabble, Dylan's father demands of him, "If you can barely beat a little black girl at a silly board game, how do you expect to win the national bee?" Akeelah overhears the racist slight, which worsens her poor confidence. Her own brother has already warned her, "You're goin' up against a bunch of rich, white kids. They gonna tear yo' black ass up." He is correct that she will face wealthy, white students. At the district spelling bee, she learns she is "the first speller [they've] ever had from Crenshaw Middle School." One of the few African-American students, and perhaps the only student from a high-poverty school, Akeelah stands out among the crowd. As she takes the mic to spell her final word, she looks into a sea of white faces. The camera jumps between their looks of anticipation and her expression of fear. Akeelah's word, "synecdoche" summarizes the racial tension at play. One girl is made to represent the whole of black children in the white spectators' minds. Will Akeelah reinforce racist stereotypes and miss the word? Or will she break them? The film emphasizes the effects of prejudice—external and internalized—on a minority student in a white space. Like Jamal, Akeelah's upper-class invitation is jeopardized by discrimination

Akeelah and the Bee and *Finding Forrester* problematize their protagonists' transition into elite learning environments, suggesting that inequality limits educational mobility. By juxtaposing Akeelah and Jamal's original schools with affluent institutions, and painting the latter as prejudiced, the films illustrate the forces acting against poor students of color. However, the staying power of this message is threatened by the movies' triumphant conclusions.

Triumph in Competition

How we evaluate the outstanding-student narrative depends in large part on the weight we give its conclusion. Do the victories of Jamal and Akeelah in academic competitions satisfy viewers with an exceptional success story, obscuring the insights the films provide into school inequality? Or do moments spotlighting poverty and prejudice stick?

The two films emphasize the role of the individual and community differently in their prodigies' triumphs. *Finding Forrester* is more individualistic. It finds its climax in proof that Jamal's written work is in fact his own. Forrester, to whom Jamal's English teacher has attributed his writing, reads Jamal's short story at the school writing contest. Jamal listens in the crowd; his plagiarism charges bar him from participating. After hearing the story, the audience begins to give a standing ovation, but Forrester quiets them. "There's one more issue here," he says. Those words that I read today, I didn't write them. Jamal Wallace did." The crowd bursts into even louder applause, and Jamal's individual genius is affirmed. In the film's denouement, we learn Jamal has received numerous acceptances to top colleges and that the press is following his admissions process. He has been welcomed into the elite at last. A final shot of him playing basketball with old friends reminds viewers of his Bronx heritage, but, more importantly, shows how far he has come. Jamal has indeed overcome prejudiced expectations for him. *Finding Forrester*, it seems, invites viewers to be satisfied with that. The rest of the Bronx can wait.

While *Akeelah and the Bee* closes with Akeela's spelling bee win, it links her individual achievement to community participation. First of all, Akeelah *ties* for first place in the Scripps National Spelling Bee with Dylan Chiu, her rival from Woodland hills. The two hug and high-five, conveying a more collaborative approach to success and a reconciliation of differences. The film then builds upon moments that suggest Akeelah's hometown will share in her victory. In an

earlier scene, a reporter covering Akeelah says, “All of Los Angeles is talking about her. If she wins this spelling bee, it’s going to be like everybody in the neighborhood wins.” Similarly, though Akeelah’s best friend is jealous of Akeelah’s new Woodland Hills friends, she tells her, “People wanna see you do good.”

See her they do. During suspenseful moments of the national bee, the camera cuts between Akeelah and her classmates and neighbors watching her back home. This tactic invokes a quotation Dr. Larabee has Akeelah read during her training: “As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.” The implication is that Akeelah’s individual success will inspire her peers in South Los Angeles.

But the film also emphasizes her community’s support of her. When Dr. Larabee is unable to coach Akeelah for a time, her mother tells her, “You know, Akeelah, you ain’t short on people who want to help you. I bet if you look around, you’ got fifty thousand coaches.” Akeelah proceeds to practice with her family, classmates, the local grocery store clerk, a homeless man, and even gangster types. After she wins the bee, the applause fade to her narration: “L-O-V-E. It’s what I feel for all my family, and all my coaches, in my neighborhood, where I come from, where I learned how to spell. We did it.” Through one heroic character, *Akeelah and the Bee* invokes the achievement of an entire school and neighborhood. By encouraging audience identification with the whole of South Los Angeles, the film seems to conclude with a more systemic view.

The contest endings of both *Akeelah and the Bee* and *Finding Forrester’s* feel apolitical, but the former demonstrates some ambition to make the neighborhood’s success a statement for equality. During Akeelah’s training with Dr. Larabee, he informs her, “The people we’re studying—Dubois, Dr. King, JFK—these people used words to change the world.” And when the

pair travel to Washington, D.C., for the national bee, they visit a Frederick Douglass exhibit. These allusions to emancipation and the civil rights movement are fleeting, however. The resounding emphasis is on the victory of a hero, whose success is linked only tenuously to the issues of inequality brought up earlier in the film. Like the super-teacher plot, the outstanding-student narrative's last word is exceptionalism.

An exceptionalist conclusion seems logical for a movie about a prodigy. Of course, the student's transition from inner-city to elite education is challenging, yet, of course, he or she succeeds. The attention *Finding Forrester* and (especially) *Akeelah and the Bee* do pay to inequality, however, makes the films' ultimate adherence to this formula disappointing. Based on the two pictures' contradictory elements, they could offer more than a feel-good ending. Perhaps more prominent student characters could be thrown into the mix, making the story about a representative group, rather than a virtuoso. Maybe the group or community's triumph could be against systemic forces of inequality, or even given an activist element. As with *Freedom Writers* and *The Ron Clark Story*, the demand of exceptionalism appears the limiting factor in creating a critical outstanding-student film. If large-scale educational issues are of little interest to feature filmmakers, are there other perspectives of systemic inequality on screen? We will attempt to answer this question in the next chapter, on documentaries.

Chapter 3

Struggling Systems

“Our society’s problems are so enormous, and they’re all foisted upon the schools.”
— Kevin Greer, teacher in *The New Public*

If conventional fiction films have not captured the problems affecting American K-12 schools, then where might moviegoers be exposed to a critical view of the education system? Documentaries, which are expected to inform audiences about pressing issues, are one possibility. For example, *The New Public* (2013) received accolades for its portrayal of structural challenges in American education, and, perhaps more surprisingly, for its story. Greg Kauffman and Elaine Weiss of *The Nation* wrote that *The New Public* “shows how poverty presents many obstacles . . . to effective teaching and strong learning” (Kauffman). In regard to its narrative, Mark Phillips of *Edutopia* raved that *The New Public* “transcends the education film genre” (Phillips). A *Hollywood Reporter* review praised the film for its “theatrical appeal,” expressing excitement about a documentary that draws audiences in through dramatic narrative (Dofore). These reviews convey that effective documentaries fuse narrative and didactic elements to engage and inform audiences about educational issues. Nevertheless, like most documentaries, *The New Public* reached far fewer viewers than its fictional counterparts, so much so that it lacks box office figures.⁵ Might its approach be applied with greater success to fiction? *The Class (Entre les murs)* (2008), a French film that earned \$28.7 million in the box office,⁶ suggests that it could be. Considered a “hybrid

⁵ All figures from *Box Office Mojo*.

⁶ *Ibid*

of documentary style and dramatic plotting” (“The Class”), this fictional “quasimentary” (Johnson 10) maintains a systemic perspective that challenges American filmmakers’ reliance on exceptionalist narratives. An analysis of *The Class* and *The New Public* reveals that engaging school stories need not preclude an awareness of poverty, racism, and other inequities; however, this claim remains to be validated in American cinema.

Documentary and Realism

Thus far, this study has assessed urban-school films’ politics of representation. I have argued that exceptionalist narratives mask inequality, meaning that, among other faults, they *misrepresent* the reality of education in the United States. But what obligation does cinema—and, in particular, fictional cinema—have to representational accuracy?

In “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” German philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that film’s *appearance* of reality gives it a dangerous power over audiences. “Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies,” they write, such that “the film forces its victims to equate it” and its values “directly with reality” (1110). While we might question Adorno and Horkheimer’s pessimistic take on the critical thinking abilities of filmgoers, their warning is at least in part supported by social science research. As previously mentioned, urban-school movies can influence viewers’ perceptions of social issues (Grant 78). If they misrepresent educational inequality, then there are grounds for concern.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, cinema’s power to influence audiences stems from technical advancements in filmmaking. Better technology means movies increasingly resemble a form of “reality” (1110). Nonetheless, as Walter Benjamin noted, the technology of cinema does not

guarantee a singular political outcome (1062). It follows that exceptionalism is not an intrinsic quality of film, but rather a product of cinematic choices.

Of the choices that distinguish documentary as a film genre, the interview and its associated camera techniques stand out (Juel 13). Documentary interviews can be used to provide the perspectives of multiple characters on issues (Marcus and Stoddard 282) and may thus be conducive to systemic critique—a possibility this chapter will explore in detail. They also disrupt the experience of “realness” that Adorno and Horkheimer criticize. Because the interview form makes audiences more aware of the camera, documentaries are more obviously a *production* of reality; viewers are less likely to be immersed in a cinematic world that they experience as “real life.” In that sense, the documentary genre is more honest. This may support the perception among many viewers that documentaries are “objective” sources of information, even when they are laden with ideology (Marcus and Stoddard 279). Nonetheless, that expectation may make documentaries that accurately depict urban education more convincing.

If documentary conventions that promote expectations of objectivity disrupt audience immersion, however, are they detrimental to a film’s popularity? By sacrificing cinematic realism, do documentaries limit their potential as works of activism? These concerns appear to have motivated *The New Public*’s producers, who seek to minimize the obtrusiveness of the camera in their narrative. *The New Public* will serve as an effective test case for a documentary that might simultaneously draw in audiences while depicting structural challenges affecting high-poverty schools.

Documentary Narrative: Beyond Exceptionalism

The principle narrative technique that separates *The New Public* from the fictional movies critiqued in this study is its use of multiple storylines. Making use of a convention we might expect of documentary objectivity, it portrays several educators and students whose narrative arcs are combined into one whole. Presented in two parts, “Freshman Year” and “Senior Year,” the drama of *The New Public* is not rooted in the fate of a single, exceptional teacher or student. Rather, it is concerned with the future of a newly founded school—a microcosm of “the system.”

The New Public takes careful steps to tie each characters’ trajectory to the overarching narrative. This effort is apparent from the opening scenes, in which the staff and student protagonists emerge as interesting characters and, crucially, participants in a larger project. First, two of the teachers approach some kids on the street. One asks, “What’s up? Yo, where do you go to high school? You in high school yet?” They answer, and he tells them, “We’re making a new school!” After the teachers comically struggle to say the school’s name—“Brooklyn Community Arts and Media High School”—one shouts, “BCAM!” and DJ beats begin to play. The camera cuts to the principal’s apartment, where his partner exclaims, “Babe, it’s your first day of school!” He then explains, “I think what’ll make me a good principal are some of the same qualities that made me a pretty good DJ and a very good point guard when I was in my prime on the basketball court.” He and some other faculty are shown getting ready for the first day, and then the frame moves to the school’s facade. A crowd of parents and their students are gathered, and the principal shouts, “Good morning! Good morning! Parents, if your student is registered, then you give them a hug right now, and they are high school students!” The words “The New Public” appear on screen, and the school’s story begins.

The effect of this opening sequence and later scenes is to focus *The New Public's* narrative on BCAM as a community. Over the course of the film, the viewer becomes invested in the characters' collective success. School-wide incidents generate drama and unite the plots of the core teachers and students. These moments include a theft and a shooting, a subsequent disciplinary crackdown, and a community backlash in response. They are linked to an ongoing question and source of narrative tension: will the students (and teachers) make it to graduation, in spite of environmental difficulties?

While it lacks a single protagonist—the principal, a teacher, and two students offer equally compelling stories—*The New Public* follows a group of core characters who won the hearts of movie critics. Mark Phillips's review for *Edutopia* contends that the film “captur[es] kids and educators in the inner city,” and, for that reason, “it is better than any fictional film about schools that I've ever seen” (Phillips). Principal O'Brian and teacher Kevin Greer are not super teachers, but instead complex characters who struggle to create a positive learning environment for their students. In one of the most memorable lines of the movie, Greer admits:

“When we started we thought that everything was gonna be good because we ‘appreciated them,’ and we ‘understood where they came from,’ and we ‘liked hip hop,’ you know, that our curriculum and our mission was gonna be a panacea, and that's not the case.”

The students also come off as flawed but sympathetic. Far from prodigies, John Dargan and Moses Lewis III struggle with bullying, drugs, and other challenges. Both go on to attend college, but the shadow of poverty lingers as they wonder how they will manage to fund their education. At the film's conclusion, the principal laments that many of their peers have not graduated:

It's absolutely triumphant for our forty-some odd graduates, but I wish that twenty to twenty-five other students were graduating, and they aren't, so I'm a little bit sad and self-conscious about that. So, yes triumphant, not over-romantically triumphant.

Unlike outstanding-student films, *The New Public* recognizes that individual triumph does not mean an end to school poverty. Structural inequities remain.

The Documentary Interview: "Teachable Moments"

The New Public's systemic focus is strengthened by the filmmakers' use of interviews, a technique characteristic of documentary films. Interviews help communicate information about problems in urban education and are, to a great extent, what give documentaries their "objective" feel. Documentary objectivity could be considered a liability if the interviews weaken viewers' interest in the story, but *The New Public* weaves interviews seamlessly into its complex narrative structure.

Taking place at timely junctures in the film's narrative, these interviews might be called "teachable moments." An excellent example occurs in *The New Public* when a student is shot on the way to school, the first reality check for the school's unseasoned staff. Dargan, who is completing a class film project, captures his peer's opinions about this and later incidents on a handheld camera. "Honestly, I went to a school where scanning was everyday," one interviewee says to him (and the audience). "It's not a good feeling." These interviews foreground the issue of metal detectors in schools without appearing forced into the narrative. Instead, they create the sense that the school community is responding to a traumatic event in real time.

Although it is used to great effect, the interview form employed by *The New Public* is not inherently more edifying than dialogue. Memorable statements from the film's interviews could

be reimagined as parts of conversations. One educator's reflection that "inner-city school teaching is like no other job because you're dealing with basic American inequalities" might be voiced in different terms at a teacher meeting. If the camera were to focus on the character speaking, his or her words would receive similar emphasis in the narrative. In spite of this possibility, the fictional urban-school films critiqued in this study include numerous events where teachable moments might be located but are not. For instance, the scene juxtaposing Clark's remedial class with the honors class in *The Ron Clark Story* could invite discussion between Principal Turner and Clark related to inequality. Tracking, or the placement of students in classes by achievement scores, is highly correlated with race and socioeconomic status (García 2015). Neglecting to address that point, the film implies Clark's students are merely juvenile delinquents. The characters fail to reflect on their unequal worlds and, in so doing, uphold them.

The interview and narrative conventions of *The New Public* suggest that urban-school documentaries can achieve the dramatic effect of fiction films while successfully capturing issues of educational inequality. Ultimately, *The New Public* blurs the lines between fiction and nonfiction, suggesting the two are fit for comparison and could use similar techniques. Yet questions about *The New Public* remain, given its low viewership. For example, while the film has been well received by movie critics, does its narrative complexity deter casual audiences? By eschewing hero characters and exceptional stories, must it lose dramatic appeal? And, finally, are Americans viewers simply resistant to talk of poverty and inequality in film, regardless of how effectively it is executed? An examination of *The Class*, a popular French film that brings documentary conventions to fiction, will help answer these questions.

The Quasimentary

Like *The New Public*, *The Class* depicts real teachers and students at a high-poverty urban school. Its teacher protagonist, François Bégaudeau, is played by the actual François Bégaudeau, who taught French to a class of primarily immigrant students in Paris. Furthermore, his pupils are played by real students. The events in the film are entirely fictional, however. The directors exercised considerable control over the film's narrative and dialogue (Johnson 10), producing a quasimentary that is as critical as it is engrossing.

In terms of its cinematography, *The Class* mimics documentary techniques. The camera appears to be handheld, and it focuses on speakers for long periods as if to interview them. Extended scenes in François's classroom appear to be shot continuously but were in fact filmed with many breaks (Johnson 10). These conventions lead *Kansas City Star* journalist Robert Butler to write, "The film oozes near-documentary realism" (Gueye 160–161). Even more so than in *The New Public*, the elements of documentary are non-intrusive. In a review for *Film Comment*, Amy Taubin remarks that "spontaneous responses by young actors who have fused with their characters blend seamlessly with pre-planned action" (67).

In response to its documentary objectivity, critics, casual viewers, and theorists alike have received *The Class* almost as though it were a work of nonfiction. For instance, Taubin writes that "the greatest pleasure in *The Class* is seeing an actual teacher—a skilled, creative teacher—at work" (66). Summarizing popular reception of the film, Abdoulaye Gueye of the University of Ottawa observes, "For many viewers, *The Class* is a comprehensive portrayal of a system and the people it incorporates" (100). Gueye himself acknowledges the movie's accuracy: "*The Class* is in many ways a realistic movie. From multiple perspectives, it is consistent with the economics of race in the French public sector" (105). Because *The Class* appears objective, its audiences have

found it appropriate to address its relationship to the actual French education system. In other words, they have identified representational accuracy and systemic critique as valid categories for assessing a popular fiction film.

Although some might question if less realistic fiction films that are merely intended to entertain ought to be held to the same standards, I would argue that, because fiction influences viewer perceptions, the answer is yes. Moreover, fictional school movies often lay claim to factual origins. Both *Freedom Writers* and *The Ron Clark Story* are “based on a true story,” for instance, and so might be perceived as true stories themselves. In their case, the politics of representation are even more crucial. Nonetheless, based on the reception of *The Class*, documentary objectivity appears to increase the importance viewers place on a film’s representation of educational issues.

To the extent that the objective style of *The Class* provokes discussions of the French education system—as reviews indicate it has—it should be considered an asset. It is easy to see the strengths of the movie’s close attention to classroom teaching, which far surpasses that displayed in other fiction films. Even *The New Public’s* classroom scenes do not measure up, lacking the benefit of directorial control. In a notable scene of *The Class*, François attempts to teach a grammar lesson on the subjunctive tense. Eventually, one student criticizes the subjunctive as “bourgeois,” and a few others ask why François always uses “whitey” names in his sentence examples. In “Quasimentaries,” William Johnson contends that such “teaching details are for the viewer’s benefit, bringing out . . . the variety of the students’ views and concerns” (10). The students’ reactions to François’s subjunctive lesson elicit issues of class and race in education, suggesting that the French curriculum assumes an affluent, white audience. An exemplar of teachable moments, this and similar examples of dialogue in *The Class* provide a systemic critique of educational inequity.

In addition to raising structural concerns, *The Class's* objective style may actually strengthen its dramatic appeal. Johnson avers that the seemingly natural “interplay” between “the enthusiastic, provocative teacher and the students . . . is so well done that it can hold one’s attention for a remarkably long time without any further action” (10). “Eventually,” he notes, *The Class* “bring[s] in a touch of melodrama” (10). François loses his temper and calls two girls “sluts,” provoking a third, habitually defiant student to charge out of the classroom. On his way out, the student accidentally hits a peer’s head with his bag, a fact that is later used by François and the teachers to expel him. Over the course of these events, *The Class* maintains its documentary-style conventions, which contribute to the believability of the plot.

Staff meetings that are organized in the wake of this incident replicate the sense produced by *The New Republic* of a school community confronting systemic challenges. Souleymane, the student who is ultimately expelled, has come to Paris from Mali. An African immigrant, he, along with his mother, who does not speak French, must attend a disciplinary hearing with a group of white teachers. The film depicts a stark power imbalance in favor of Souleymane’s judges, highlighting racial bias in the French school system (Gueye 165). The dubious expulsion of Souleymane, which François comes to regret, ends the film on a decidedly bleak note.

As is becoming obvious, François proves a deeply flawed character. While he provides a narrative anchor absent in *The New Public*, which has no singular protagonist, it is unclear whether U.S. audiences accustomed to super teachers would embrace him. Here lies the limit to the conclusions we might draw from *The Class* for American urban school films.

American Exceptionalism?

To what extent are the cinematic choices of *The Class* uniquely French? Writing for *The French Review*, Mariah Devereux attempts to provide an answer. She begins by asking, “Why had so many American reviewers felt compelled to contrast” *The Class* with “films that share little if anything with French cinematic style?” (174). “I attempted to contextualize Cantet’s film in the history of French filmic representations of the schoolroom,” she recalls, and “was hard-pressed to think of a French film in which students were inspired by their teachers to change their unruly ways and strive for greatness of epic proportions *à la hollywoodien*” (174). After reviewing the film’s depressing plot, Devereux concludes, “This is not a feel-good, American ‘make-over’ film; this is an average French teacher’s self-portrait, shame and all” (174).

As Devereux implies, however, *The Class* was well received by American movie reviewers. At ninety-five percent, its average approval rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*⁷ is far greater than that of any other film included in this study, and it was included near the top of many American critics’ best-films lists for 2008 (“*The Class*”). Nonetheless, *The Class* grossed less than four million dollars upon its release in the U.S., indicating limited reception among casual American viewers.⁸ It would be difficult to distinguish the effects, if any, of narrative convention and language barriers on this result. Still, taken with Devereux’s argument, these figures should raise doubts about the appeal of *The Class* to general American audiences.

Given the differences between *The Class* and the American fiction films addressed in this study, we should ask whether exceptionalist school films are a phenomenon peculiar to Hollywood. While the term “American exceptionalism” has lost favor among U.S. historians and

⁷ *Rotten Tomatoes* is an aggregator of film reviews, predominantly by American film critics.

⁸ According to *Box Office Mojo*, at least one hundred foreign language movies have grossed over four million dollars in the United States.

scholars of American studies (Kammen 2), Jason Ditmer observes that movie critics still use it to explain Hollywood's preference for heroic characters (114). He summarizes American exceptionalism as "the notion that the United States is unlike other states in terms of its creation, settlement, and sense of wider mission in the world" (115). According to Ditmer, the belief in American political exceptionalism can be viewed as part of a broader "American monomyth, which is identifiable in . . . narrative genres that are quintessentially American" (115). "In this mythic narrative," he writes, "helpless communities are saved from oppression by an itinerant hero who always refrains from integration with the political community in which the hero has just intervened" (115). The terms of this American myth should be instantly recognizable in the super-teacher narrative.

Ultimately, linking exceptionalist school narratives to "American exceptionalism" in any definitive way would require a comparative film analysis that is beyond the scope of this study. It seems reasonable, however, to propose that cultural expectations in the United States impose a limit on the potential for systemic critique in the Hollywood education genre. In theory, urban-school documentaries and quasimentaries show that films about education can tackle structural issues while offering engaging characters and storytelling. In practice, American viewers have not been so engaged. In a final search for critiques of educational inequality on the American screen, this study will look to the acclaimed fourth season of *The Wire*.

Conclusion

Feature Length

“. . . a televised novel, and a big one. Innumerable subplots came and went . . . Nothing ever resolved itself in an hour.”

— L. Lanahan on HBO's *The Wire* (24)

In this study, I have suggested that, while American urban-school films have not adequately addressed education inequality, documentary and quasimentary narratives show they can. That raises the question, “Why haven't they?” Other social issues have been successfully tackled by popular fiction movies. For example, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) is credited with spurring more humane treatment of the mentally ill in American psychiatric institutions (Pittman). *Philadelphia* (1993) helped change attitudes about HIV/AIDS (Gordan), and, more recently, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) aided in normalizing same-sex relationships (Roughton). When will disadvantaged school children get their landmark issue film?

One potential roadblock is the sheer complexity of the U.S. education system. A comprehensive film exploration might weigh a number of problems, including, but not limited to, education funding, charter schools, (re)segregation, standardized testing, technology, suspensions, racial discrimination, etc. Moreover, each of these areas is controversial in its own right. This is not to say that other issues are not complex or controversial; however, the title of a recent *New York Times* bestseller, *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession* (2015), indicates the uniquely divisive state of public education in the United States.

In the book's introduction, author Dana Goldstein observes that, throughout American history, public school "teachers have been embattled by politicians, philanthropists, intellectuals, business leaders, social scientists, activists on both Right and Left, parents, and even one another" (5). She praises Henry David Thoreau, Susan B. Anthony, W. E. B. Dubois, and other "extraordinary men and women" who "worked in public school classrooms" in the face of such scrutiny:

"They resisted the fantasy of educators as saints or saviors, and understood teaching as a job in which the potential for children's intellectual transcendence and social mobility, though always present, is limited by real-world concerns such as poor training, low pay, inadequate supplies, inept administration, and impoverished students and families" (5).

Restricted to hour-and-a-half or two-hour run times, filmmakers will be hard-pressed to comprehensively address such issues. As much as *The New Public* and *The Class* try to do so, they only scratch the surface of educational inequality. But what if they had more time?

The Urban-School Series

If there is a fictional offering that has more successfully portrayed urban education on American screens, it is not from film but from television. Lauded as the greatest TV series of all time, HBO's *The Wire* mounts a searing critique of inequality in America's schools ("The Wire"). So relevant is the tale of four Baltimore middle schoolers told in its fourth season that James Trier recommends its use as a pedagogical tool for students of education (179). Reviews of the *The New Public*—a work of nonfiction—have used *The Wire* as a benchmark. One comments, "The only film that I remember capturing kids and educators in the inner city as effectively was season four

of the great TV series *The Wire*, which focused on a middle school. That's a high compliment" (Phillips). The show has been praised both as art and social commentary.

Much has already been written on *The Wire's* attention to racism, poverty, and other major structural issues. Jacob Weisberg of *Slate* reflects this trend in its reception:

No other program has done anything remotely like this one does, namely to portray the social, political, and economic life of an American city with the scope, observational precision, and moral vision of great literature. (Weisberg)

Striving for a systemic view, *The Wire* rejects the heroic individualism of super-teacher and outstanding-student formulae. In "Secrets of the City: What *The Wire* Reveals About Urban Journalism," Lawrence Lanahan explains this narrative choice:

There were no good guys or bad guys. All were individuals constrained by their institutions, driven to compromise between conscience, greed, and ambition . . . A righteous anger at the failure of our social institutions drives *The Wire*. (24)

Like *The New Public*, *The Wire* uses multiple protagonists and storylines to highlight macro forces impacting urban schools. In Lanahan's words, "Innumerable subplots came and went, and main characters disappeared from the show for several episodes at a time" (24). The fourth season features characters involved in not only the education system but also in politics, law enforcement, and drug trafficking. Those playing prominent roles in the school plot include four black youths whose academic success is threatened by poverty and the drug trade, an ex-cop turned middle school teacher, and a Johns Hopkins team attempting to implement a program to engage at-risk students. On the whole, the outcomes for these characters are bleak: only one of the four young men seems likely to escape a life of crime; the teacher is disappointed to see that, in spite

of much progress, a favorite student is back to dealing drugs; and the engagement program, though promising, is shut down by the education board. To make matters worse, in the season's intertwining political subplot, which follows Baltimore's mayor, it is revealed that the public-school district is facing bankruptcy. Far from an inspirational success story, *The Wire* portrays the substantial social and structural challenges plaguing high-poverty schools—at times even risking fatalism in its portrayal (Rosenberg). Its complex narrative techniques make this feat possible, but are they too challenging for most viewers?

A Question of Audience

In spite of its acclaim, *The Wire*'s potential as a work of education activism may be limited by its relatively modest viewership. According to *The Telegraph*, when the show first aired, it “attracted a zealous but relatively small following.” Averaging around four million viewers per episode, it was almost cancelled after its third season (“*The Wire*”). Could *The Wire*'s low ratings (as compared to other fictional offerings)⁹ be attributed to narrative complexity? Lanahan admits the series “made unprecedented demands on viewers” (24). In a rare negative review, Neil Genzlinger of *The New York Times* similarly avers that “the real questions about ‘The Wire’ . . . involve not the style, but the audience's level of tolerance. This is a series that requires commitment” (Genzlinger). For Stanley Corkin, author of *Connecting the Wire: Race, Space, and Postindustrial Baltimore*, the show “eschews friendly narrative hooks and almost completely does away with characters that viewers can readily identify and sympathize with . . . Its pleasure and

⁹ For comparison, based on average ticket prices, *Freedom Writers* had an estimated six million viewers, and *Finding Forrester* had almost fifteen million viewers (“Box Office Mojo”). It is difficult to determine viewing statistics for movies and shows after their first release. Nonetheless, *The Telegraph* cites *The Wire*'s continued place on Amazon's top-forty DVD sales charts as evidence that the series is a “slow-burning, word-of-mouth success.” *The Wire* may reach larger audiences as video-streaming services continue to attract subscribers (“*The Wire*”).

even its basic narrative structure defy the practices of a casual viewer” (Corkin 1). By complicating its story and multiplying its characters, *The Wire* addresses big picture issues but seems to turn away many viewers. Is the triumph of structural critique also the show’s downfall?

As we saw with *The Class*, *The Wire*’s critical school narrative appears to conflict with the expectations of American audiences. Given the ubiquity of super-teacher and outstanding-student narratives in the U.S., it seems that anything different may fail to satisfy viewers. Directors should not necessarily defer to audiences’ wishes, however, especially when, as is likely the case, many white, suburban filmgoers would prefer to see an education film that depoliticizes educational inequality, reassuring them that children of color at under-resourced schools need only work hard and listen to their teachers to succeed. Robin DiAngelo, a pioneer of whiteness studies, argues that, in part because of insulating forces in cultural representations and media, “white people in North America live in a social environment that protects . . . them from race-based stress.” As a result, even small amounts of racial stress become unbearable for whites, a condition DiAngelo famously calls “White Fragility” (54).

DiAngelo identifies several sources of race-based stress for white people, including challenges to conceptions meritocracy and white liberalism (57). Outstanding-student films support the idea of meritocracy by suggesting that, at least for talented (i.e., “deserving”) students, there is equal opportunity among racial groups. When super-teacher movies feature white-savior protagonists, as they typically do, they uphold white liberalism. Thus, the ideological workings of super-teacher and outstanding-student films make them more palatable to white audiences than critical school narratives. *The Wire*, *The Class*, and *The New Public*, which likely create racial stress for whites, are therefore at a popular disadvantage. If white audiences reject narratives revealing the structural inequities of schools in neighborhoods defined by racism and poverty, does

this suggest the filmmakers have failed, or that many Americans do not see education inequality as a problem demanding their attention?

“Black Films Don’t Sell”

When asked why he thought *The Wire* did not achieve higher ratings, David Simon, the show’s creator, responded that “sixty-five percent of our cast was black” (Simon). Simon appears to recognize the influence White Fragility can have on American film reception, which is perhaps what led him to choose a white detective as *The Wire*’s quasi-protagonist. Nonetheless, his answer upholds what one *Fortune* journalist calls the “outdated and extremely misguided Hollywood concerns over the ability of movies featuring black-led casts and storylines to become legitimate blockbusters” (Huddleston). By this reasoning, if films do not at least partially compensate for White Fragility, then they will not be economically successful or get through to the white viewers who might have the most to learn from them in the first place.¹⁰ Similar concerns might be levied against films that overtly critique racial inequality in education.

Nonetheless, evidence is mounting that black-led, politically conscious movies can reach broad audiences. For instance, *Selma* (2014), the first film “unapologetic” in portraying the African-American civil rights movement “as one that was primarily led by black women and men” rather than white saviors (Joseph), grossed fifty-two million dollars. *Get Out* (2016), a surreal horror movie in which the source of terror is slavery, earned over one hundred seventy-five million dollars. And *Black Panther* (2018), which uses a superhero plot to “interrogate Western

¹⁰ In 2016, fifty-nine percent of moviegoers were white (“Theatrical Market Statistics”). White people’s large share of the movie-going population may create an economic incentive for filmmakers to cater to White Fragility.

assumptions about Africa and its people” (Abad-Santos), has brought in over six hundred thirty-million dollars.¹¹ Might a critical urban-school film enjoy the same reception?

Unfortunately, that is difficult to imagine. In spite of their progressivism, which is not to be discounted, the movies mentioned above likely appeal to White Fragility in ways that a film critical of educational inequality cannot afford to do. Far from realistic, *Black Panther* and *Get Out* take place in worlds that skeptical viewers could easily rationalize as imaginary. Even a critical historical film such as *Selma* would be written off by some white audiences as depicting a bygone era, fulfilling “post-racial” fantasies. The racial inequities in American education are real and present, however, and a movie that presents them as such would offer little room for escapism.

Moreover, as super-teacher and outstanding-student narratives demonstrate, the use of heroic characters in education movies is often problematic. Reimagining a Black Panther or, more realistically, a Dr. King as educator would risk producing yet another exceptionalist school plot. Part of the above films’ appeal is in the opportunity to root for a hero, but heroes’ narratives are antithetical to systemic critique. At least for the time being, makers of urban-school films appear beholden to a largely unreceptive audience.

I have argued that the need for thoughtful depictions of high-poverty urban schools is paramount. Nonetheless, the ability of American cinema to engage most viewers with critical education narratives seems impossible in today’s cultural climate. Debates about our education system get to the core of some of our most divisive national issues, including race, class, and inequality. How can film possibly cut across these divides? Stuart Hall believed that “culture was a site of ‘negotiation’ . . . a space of give and take” (Hsu). His optimistic belief is echoed in the

¹¹ All figures from Box Office Mojo.

words of contemporary American film director Martin Scorsese. Idealistic about the power of movies to bring people together, Scorsese contends, “Now more than ever we need to talk to each other, to listen to each other and understand how we see the world, and cinema is the best medium for doing this” (John 47). The urban-school film may yet reach that ideal—but only if audiences want it to.

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Academic Vita

EDUCATION AND HONORS:

The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College

- Bachelor of Arts in English Expected, May 2018
- Student Marshall and Commencement Speaker, College of the Liberal Arts

RESEARCH:

“The Urban School Film,” Schreyer Honors Thesis April 2018

- Analyze representations of high-poverty urban schools in contemporary Hollywood films
- Selected as one of 9 Penn State students to share research with Pennsylvania state legislators at Undergraduate Research at the Capitol conference in April, 2018

“Narrating Play: Analyzing the Language of Roleplay in Online Games” July 2016

- Quantitatively examined linguistic practices in popular online roleplaying game
- Presented study conclusions as part of only undergraduate research team accepted to international Digital Humanities 2016 Conference in Kraków, Poland

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

U.S. Department of State

Bureau of Public Affairs, Washington, D.C. May 2017 – Aug. 2017

Education Programs Intern, U.S. Foreign Service Internship Program

- Promoted U.S. Department of State’s public diplomacy strategy as part of highly selective (9% acceptance rate) two-summer program with domestic and international components
- Developed teacher-training materials for classroom implementation of diplomacy simulations
- Spearheaded initiative to improve intern engagement across multiple internship programs; prototyped initiative with 6 groups of interns totaling 87 participants, 92% of whom recommended use for future internship cohorts
- Completed three-week training in leadership, professional writing, presentation skills, and government operations led by Ambassadors and other senior State Department officials

U.S. Consulate General Guayaquil, Ecuador, telework Aug. 2016 – May 2017

Virtual Teaching Intern

- Tutored group of 6 Ecuadorian teachers and professors in English over Skype for 3 hours per week as part of pilot virtual exchange program
- Devised original lesson plans and best practices for future interns in position

Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Washington, D.C. June 2016 – Aug. 2016

Cultural Programs Intern

- Provided administrative support for variety of U.S. cultural exchange programs
- Facilitated grant process to allocate funds to State Department implementing partners
- Supported tour planning for Algerian reggae band; escorted band members at D.C. kickoff
- Wrote introduction speeches for 3 musical performances by foreign artists

The Public Interest Law Center, Philadelphia, PA Jan. 2017 – May 2017

Undergraduate Legal Intern

- Aided litigation, organizing, and advocacy efforts benefiting communities in Philadelphia
- Produced memos supporting public interest lawsuits, including landmark Pennsylvania gerrymandering case; presented research findings at meetings with key stakeholders
- Drafted advocacy materials including letters to supporters and public officials
- Helped client organize successful petition to City Council to protect community garden

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE:

Housing Transitions, Inc., State College, PA Aug. 2017 – Present

Shelter Services Volunteer

- Monitor homeless shelter phones and direct clients to appropriate housing services
- Coordinate volunteer dinners to connect shelter residents with community groups
- Assist marketing, communications, fundraising, and development efforts

Skills of Central PA, State College, PA

Aug. 2016 – Dec. 2016

Adult Literacy Volunteer

- Taught math, reading, social skills, and arts and crafts to 15 disabled adults in small groups
- Organized Thanksgiving Bingo Bash event for 2 groups of 20 adult participants
- Prepared training materials for future adult literacy volunteers working with disabled adults

City Year Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA

Aug. 2015 – June 2016

AmeriCorps Member

- Coached 10 at-risk sixth-graders in math, reading, behavior, and attendance at high-poverty urban schools during college gap year, completing over 1700 hours of service
- Planned initiatives for 14 City Year teams and schools as Corps Council Representative
- Led over 200 Corps members in team-building exercises as part of Physical Training Crew
- Delivered AmeriCorps Graduation Keynote Address and other speeches to audiences of more than 300 people to boost Corps morale and bolster fundraising and outreach efforts

Global Human Rights Brigades, University Park, PA

Sept. 2013 – May 2015

Chapter President

- Arranged sustainable development experiences including trip to Panama for 15-member club

Panama Brigade Member

- Participated in week-long immersion experience in rural Panama to provide free legal services, human rights education, and cultural exchange opportunities

Children and Youth Empowerment Center, Nyeri, Kenya

Jan. 2014 – June 2014

Economic and Community Development Volunteer

- Developed programs to assist former street youth's transition to workforce and implemented onsite in Kenya during three-week service-learning trip
- Conducted 3 professional skills workshops with groups of 25 youth participants in Kenya