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Boys in the Hood and Vampires in the Woods: Racialized Fatalism in Film

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ABSTRACT AND ARTICLE INFORMATION

Studies of street crime and street culture often emphasize the concept of fatalism, particularly among urban minority males. Cinematic representations of fatalistic attitudes in White characters (particularly males) are often individually pathologized and presented through narratives of romance and desirability (e.g., the brooding vampire or detective in the crime noir genre). Some criminologists have operationalized fatalism in relation to delinquency and criminality with respect to control maintenance, which can serve as a starting point for developing a more nuanced understanding of fatalistic deviance represented in entertainment media. However, very little scholarly attention has called into question the distinctive portrayals and pathologies of fatalism between racialized versus White groups in such accounts. Through content analysis of film, the current study examines entertainment media portrayals of fatalism in White and non-White characters. This examination yields results that suggest both race and class play a role in the differential pathologization of fatalism (i.e., individual versus social and cultural) of these groups. By integrating these findings with a review of the extant literature on fatalism, this inquiry suggests that some similar stereotypes and pathologizations may exist in scholarly work that purports a link between fatalism and street culture and crime.

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Films help inform a “moral universe” that frames public understanding of and responses to issues such as criminality (Kidd-Hewitt & Osborne, 1995). At the core of this moral universe is the representation of the “other” – often a person or group of color who are depicted as representing a threat to public order (see Lyon, 2009). Crime films draw on these representations to construct fictionalized accounts through which the public engages crime, victimization, punishment, and causes of deviance (Rafter, 2009), and these depictions extend to social conversations and perceptions about criminal actors and the individual and societal factors that drive their behavior. A general fear of crime is only one effect of crime media consumption (Dowler, 2003). Portrayals of crime in film also help shape and reinforce racial stereotypes, particularly with respect to White audience perceptions of Black criminality as culturally pathological (see Denzin, 2002; Neundorf & Atkin, 2000).

Although a number of examinations have made clear that popular media accounts of crime, particularly as they relate to race, draw on and reinforce stereotypes, few inquiries have specifically considered how the concept of fatalism is portrayed in film. This is a critical gap in the literature because fatalism represents a significant concept in both scholarly and public explanations of crime, especially among youth. Criminologists have long considered the role of fatalism in the etiology of crime. For example, describing the “mood of fatalism” (p. 188) Matza (1964) conceptualizes fatalism as leading to “desperation” – a state in which a person (particularly a juvenile) attempts to reassert a perceived loss or lack of control over his or her fate. Matza points out that criminal behavior, however, often leads to a further lack of actual control (through access to, for example, social capital), further exacerbating and replicating a cycle of fatalism and desperate attempts to escape it. In public discourse, fatalism is often conceptualized as relating to young Black male “predators” (Welch, 2007) and includes media portrayals, public perceptions, and political and policy decision-making (Anderson, 1995). The importance of understanding how the public explains *causes* of crime is therefore important to understanding the biases manifesting from images of race and crime in the media.

This nexus of scholarly and public conceptualization of fatalism serves as a starting point for our current inquiry, in which we analyze films to determine how they represent fatalism among youthful offenders, or potential offenders. We then draw larger conclusions related to how these portrayals inform the aforementioned moral universe surrounding the intersections of race, class, adolescence, and crime.

Literature Review

Defining Fatalism

Returning to Matza’s (1964) conceptualization of fatalism as leading to desperation, we arrive at a confluence of scholarly and societal understandings of fatalism. Fatalism is both the manifestation of desperation in the face of external limitations and controls, and perceived by the public (and indeed many criminological inquiries) as an essential reality of youthfulness, especially in communities of color and poverty. This conceptualization is, however, broad enough to require a more nuanced operationalization for the current inquiry.

As Matza’s positions represent, for some time biological fatalism has largely been rejected by contemporary criminology (Owen, 2012); however, the social form remains regularly asserted in sociological theories of crime. Brezina (2000) operationalizes fatalism as a lack of control, suggesting that delinquency acts as an adaptation to a control imbalance, particularly among youth who experience relatively little autonomy in the face of adult constructed rules and constraints. Other scholars, such as Anderson (1999), particularly those examining street culture and crime, operationalize fatalism as a more pervasive and constant presence in the life of offenders (and even non-offending residents). This type of fatalism is itself a causal contributor to delinquency and criminality; the condition of fatalism itself operates to create a scenario in which prospective offenders have “nothing to lose” in the face of a belief that “each day could be their last.” Johnston (2016) frames these concepts within a Bourdieuian constructivist approach to crime theorization, explaining that involvement in delinquent subcultures (e.g., “street culture”) facilitate a perceptual shift toward viewing the world as beyond their control – their role as deviant set in stone. Anderson (1999) recounts a similar fatalism in the lives of those studied in his ethnography, noting that many of them adopt an attitude that larger social forces and institutions are both beyond the scope of their care, and beyond their ability to reach and change.

Thus, a large body of criminology focuses on external (sub)cultural forces as the root cause of fatalism. Other perspectives consider an internal locus of control. Perceptions of self-efficacy have an impact on the perceived availability of social opportunity, or choice (Evans, 2007). Indeed, research on fatalism has suggested young people in general (regardless of race or class) are more fatalistic than adults about their prospects in life (see e.g., Boeck, Fleming, & Kemshall, 2008). Ilan (2015) bridges the external and

internal, locating fatalism in the context of hedonism and what he terms “visceral cultures” that portray and celebrate the “affirmation of life” (16).

Moving forward with our inquiry, we operationalize it by drawing on several of the aforementioned concepts, notably that fatalism can be both an outward expression (through specifically, deviance) or an individual or collective state of desperation or withdrawal based on social and cultural circumstances. These dynamics can lead to a conscious “fatalistic self,” as Brezina (2000, p.745) illustrates a type of fatalism that is non self-derogative, operating as a cause of delinquency in the absence of the intermediary mechanism of control maintenance, suggesting that, at least for some, fatalism may be an accepted component of their self-image. Urban ethnographies such as Anderson (1999) would suggest that not only is fatalism an accepted component, but an embraced, if not essential, element of “street life.” Having established some parameters around the concept of fatalism, it is important to consider how scholars have positioned race and class within examinations of fatalism. Some empirical studies point toward a link between race and the *effect* of fatalism. For example, participants in Glynn’s (2014) examination of Black men and desistance echoed a sentiment that Black young men, especially those living in poverty, often perceive they are in a position of “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” (p. 73). This outlook seems warranted in light of the reality that Black men who drop out of high school have a greater likelihood of going to prison in their lifetime (Pettit & Western, 2004). Warner and Swisher (2015) offer evidence that, among their sample, most ethnic, racial, and immigrant groups demonstrated a generally more pessimistic outlook on the future. Respondents located this pessimism in realities of poverty and violence associated with their day-to-day living and broader neighborhood characteristics. However, other studies suggest that class significantly effects levels of fatalism. For example, Brezina (2000) finds no relationship between race and levels of fatalism, but does find evidence that socioeconomic status has a negative effect on fatalism.

Media Depictions of Fatalism

In the current inquiry, we employ concepts of fatalism drawn from scholarly theory and research, but as our focus is on media portrayals, we also aim to compare these to portrayals in popular media. In this regard, Young (2012) notes of the conceptualization of deviant youth that in its liberal phase, the deviant was seen to be propelled from the involvement in a nearly-ubiquitous and innocuous deviancy into an essential and committed membership of hardened criminal

subcultures by the clumsy mismanagement of the powerful (p. 64).

Young points out two elements related to conceptions and portrayals of fatalism that anchor our current analysis: 1) that deviant behavior is purported to be wide-spread, especially among certain groups (e.g., youth, especially those who are Black) and 2) the entrenchment of fatalistic deviants in increasingly serious criminal subcultures and lifestyles is a result of the absence of modeling (e.g., from White adults) and deterrence and enforcement (from schools, parents, and the criminal justice system).

Portrayals of fatalism in film range from clearly manifest to more subtle, particularly in relation to race. For example, even films not directly portraying the “ghetto” have by proxy sent messages about race, class, and a fatalistic lifestyle. For example, Holtzman and Sharpe (2014) point out that *The Lion King* was criticized for portraying its hyena characters as stereotypical “Black and Latina/Latino ghetto characters” (p. 318). The motif of the hyena – bent on (self)-destructive behavior with little regard for larger social concerns, extends into other genres, where fatalism represents an individual pathology that is aggregated to a larger culture of the ghetto (Smith, 1995; Neundorf & Atkin, 2000). The racialization of fatalism in film is not limited to depictions of Black inner-city life. For example, Kaminsky (1974) explains that Kung Fu Films reinforce a “ghetto” imperative of revenge, respect, and strength. Benshoff and Griffin (2009) discuss *Superfly* within the context of portrayals of ghetto life that are racialized when Black characters are central, versus portrayed in terms of class when White characters are the focus.

Shadoian (1977) suggests that the gangster film, in particular, reflects societal and cultural values, and its depictions of gang life change with cultural shifts. With respect to fatalism and race, Massood (2003) suggests that representations of Blackness in cinema have evolved alongside historical and cultural contexts such as migration from the South and the urbanization of Black populations. Likewise, Guerrero (2012) provides evidence of a transition from overtly racist characterizations of Blacks in film to more subversively racist depictions of Blacks as members of the criminal underclass, living in ghettos with no hope but to “get out,” and this typically only through music or sports (Smith, 1995).

Portrayals of fatalism and race in film are not limited to a focus on a single race. They often contrast communities of color with “model” White communities. To do so, the notion of injustice is often invoked to portray lawlessness contrasted against a normative (White) moral order. For example, Braswell (2003) presents an analysis of portrayals of justice in a selection of films, suggesting that class,

ethnic, and racial injustices are often contrasted with acts of compassion from either privileged groups/persons or other marginalized persons demonstrating compassion amidst dismal social and political circumstances.

The Current Inquiry

The discussion of fatalism above outlines two main forms of fatalism: control maintenance, and, as Matza (1964) referred to it, a form of desperation. In the current inquiry, we seek to examine how the media, based on the race of those depicted, differentially portrays fatalism as one or both of these types. Based on a lay familiarity with many films depicting fatalism, we began the study with a general sense that Black youth were likely to be portrayed in film as desperate (e.g., for respect and money) but resigned to a perceived fate that involved prison or death. We expected that, conversely, White youth were likely portrayed as fatalistic in relation to forms of control from parents and institutions, but that their intent was to balance control through deviance or resistance, therefore escaping fate, not necessarily making financial or social/cultural gains (e.g., respect through violence).

Therefore, our inquiry aims to examine three main questions: a) What are the sources of fatalism for the youth portrayed in the examined films (e.g., parents, institutions, or the threat of violence); b) how are the youth portrayed as reacting to fatalism; and c) do patterns coalescing around differential portrayals of race and/or class and fatalism emerge?

Method

Films are a repository of cultural expression (Belton, 2000), but the vast number of films representing a particular concept creates issues when sampling, as indeed, not all films of a genre, or even those containing elements related to that genre (here, fatalism), can be evaluated. For this reason, our study employed a purposive sample that accounts for a number of dimensions important to the research questions at hand (i.e., dimensional sampling, as presented by Arnold, 1970). This approach guides both the development of our sample and its analysis, as it considers dimensions within each film, employing a case-study structure, and then extends these dimensions across films, essentially creating a comparative case-study that emphasizes in-depth analysis of a relatively few number of cases (or here, films).

We used several dimensions of analysis established up-front as criteria for inclusion in our sample. Given the reality that not every film including fatalistic youth could be included, we began with a

dimension of time to narrow our sampling frame. To do so, we focused primarily on the portrayal of Black characters in the history of American film. Portrayals of Black characters prior to 1942 were focused around stereotypes of “Afro-Americans as accommodating, contented, comic figures” (Cripps, 1993, p. 3), so we excluded these, and directed our attention to more recent films. Assessing the state of films from the past several decades, it is evident that some thematic and tonal shifts were significant and, notably, that the 1990s witnessed the rise of “hood films” (Massood, 1996, 2003) characterized by the place-based identity of Blacks (Forman, 2002). Thus, we began with this genre-shift and included films from 1990 to the current, though acknowledge that future research on the longitudinal shifts in portrayals of fatalism over a larger time would be useful. Our study presents a starting point for such research.

Additionally, since we are interested in race and delinquency, specifically, we began by brainstorming about films from the past 30 years that epitomized representations of delinquency for Black and non-Black characters. Having established some examples, we then used the Filmaboutit (n.d.) database to expand our list. This database allows for users to search by themes and subthemes. We used fatalism, race, and delinquency. The initial results numbered in the hundreds, so we further narrowed our criteria and purposively selected films based on several criteria. This required us to read synopses and, in some cases, view films before deciding whether to include them. After having narrowed our list, we then looked for notable omissions that our searches in the database might have left out. We did this through a process of broadly researching films including similar themes through consulting other research, web-search engines, and informal discussions with one another as our list grew and adapted to capture the dimensions of our study.

The criteria we used to develop and finalize the list included several dimensions. First, we examined films with characters portrayed as youths and young adults. These characters did not have to be the lead character(s) but must have had a prominent role in the film. An excluded title would, for example, be a film in which a gang of youth were shown during one scene, without any character development or a return to these characters at another point in the film. In other words, we did not include films in which youthful characters or young adult characters were discretely and momentarily shown.

We also limited our films to those that portrayed some form of deviance. We use the term deviance here instead of delinquency to emphasize inclusion of films in which youthful characters may have deviated from rules or norms set out by adults, peers, or

institutions, but not in ways that are necessarily illegal. An example of such deviance would be dating outside of one's race/class when forbidden by family. After an initial review of potential films for inclusion, we made this decision to help facilitate a comparison of films depicting White and Black characters, since, as will be discussed in more depth, a number of films portraying White characters focused on the relationship between their fatalistic attitudes and the decision to deviate from social and cultural norms, but not necessarily to engage in criminal behavior.

Another sampling criteria was the portrayal of fatalism itself. Since, as is one of the focal points of this inquiry, fatalism can be defined in numerous ways, we liberally included films that might fit this criteria and then applied several rounds of filtering as our thesis developed. In essence, we used an abductive (see Boyd, 1981) approach, reflecting on theory and data as we developed a sampling focus, relying on naturalistic deductions and inductions based on knowledge of the films as well as theory (in this case, a theoretically informed definition of fatalism), allowing for both bodies of knowledge to evolve as our analysis moved forward. Wilson and Blackburn (2014) used a similar approach in their establishment of the initial criteria for films included in their analysis, suggesting "a definition is developed for the film population to be analyzed based on the relevant literature surrounding the film population in question" (p. 93). In this respect, Rafter and Brown (2011) present a series of readings that draw on specific films or sets of films to examine theories of crime, suggesting that films can reflect societal interpretations of crime causation and serve as vehicles for prompting and facilitating learning about theoretical perspectives on crime. More specifically, Rafter and Brown (2011) highlight the prevalence of subcultural and strain theories in movies related to race and crime, positing that these relationships are a reflection of larger societal conceptions of race, class, and crime. Here, as discussed above, concepts of fatalism employed in our sampling iterations were drawn both from popular portrayals of fatalism and their conceptualization in these theories.

Finally, it should be noted that we deliberately excluded comedy films. Our decision to do so stems from a desire to limit interpretation of the thematic content of the assessed films. Analyzing comedic portrayals would, in our estimation, require us to "read into" the meaning of satirical portrayals to an extent that these readings may offer substantially different results from the readings of non-comedic portrayals. In other words, the extent and nature of interpretation of comedic films would differ greatly enough from non-comedic films that it would make comparison

difficult, without devoting a substantial portion of our analysis to such differences.

In summary, our sampling criteria narrowed films to those with youthful characters engaging in deviance and demonstrating fatalistic attitudes in some form. Even given these criteria, we acknowledge that a great number of films were omitted. However, our sample presents 26 films spanning roughly a 30-year time period, containing a balance between those portraying White and Black characters. While research has suggested that Black audiences worry about the portrayal of Black characters and culture in "in-group" entertainment (e.g., films targeted to a specific racial audience; see, e.g., Banjo, 2013), we did not attempt to differentiate between films based on an *intended* audience. However, since our analysis is concerned with both representation and cultural perception, we attempted to view the films, at least during the first pass, without excessive pausing, so that we could assess their continuity as a typical audience member might. Furthermore, while we took notes during viewing, we deliberately chose to code thematically, with an emphasis on "domains," rather than for syntax, in a line-by-line, script-focused approach. This approach allows a film to be analyzed in its holistic discursive context (Read, 2000). This approach also facilitates an abductive reasoning approach that allows for reflexivity between researcher, theory, and observed content (Ezzy, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and we employed domain analysis, which codes for thematic chunks rather than words, phrases, or utterances (Spradley, 1979). As the several figures below depict, we coded broadly for sources of fatalism among the films' characters, the characters' reactions to fatalism, and if (and if so, how) the films racialized these depictions of fatalism. Further sub-frames emerged throughout the coding process and provided insight into specific dynamics within each of the broad categories (e.g., Whiteness as a model and frames related to gender, masculinity, respect, and capitalism).

Results

Here we provide a discussion of several major themes that prevailed in relation to fatalism in our analysis of the selected films. An overview of films that most epitomize each of these major themes is provided at the beginning of each section. This overview provides further insight into the sources of and reactions to fatalism in each film. Since race played a major role even in films not typifying racialized fatalism, these figures also provide an overview of racialization of fatalism in each film.

An example from a film portrayal of Black youth is *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), which contained perhaps

one of the most straightforward and obvious depictions of fatalism. At one point in the film, a Black police officer, when responding to a shooting scene where the intended victim (the father of the main character) survived, remarks that he wishes the attack had been successful, that it would mean “one less nigga in the streets.” Later in the film, a character remarks on dying that it “don’t matter though – we all gotta go sometime.” Two weeks later the character is murdered, signaling to the viewer that death on “the streets” is almost an inevitability.

In contrast, White youth (and young adults) are portrayed in *Final Destination* (2000), in which the inevitability of death is also presented as characters who survive a plane crash are then “hunted” by death, but the characters still mostly resist death, believing they can overcome it even when a supernatural fatalism must be surmounted. The distinctions between *Boyz N the Hood* and *Final Destination* set the stage for our analysis, in which we consider the aforementioned differences in the reasons for and forms of fatalism that confront the characters in the analyzed film. We begin our analysis with a

consideration of how the youth in the selected films are essentialized, particularly along racial lines.

Essentialization

According to Young (2012), criminologists (and the public) have historically either essentialized the criminal behavior of racialized and impoverished groups as innate to their cultural memberships or championed on their behalf as a sort of sociological curiosity, therein essentially coming to the same conclusion – that they are fated to criminality through an essential, and cultural, *need* to offend.

To essentialize is to reduce a concept to its essential parts. In this inquiry, we consider how films engage in essentialism surrounding the topic of fatalism. We find that the examined films essentialize mostly along racial lines. For example, in *Traffic* (2000), even economically well-off Black characters are portrayed as fatalistically linked to the stereotypes associated with urban Black criminality. Indeed, depictions of strain are often tied closely to race, where essentialization of racialized fate transcends even economic boundaries (Rafter & Brown, 2011).

Table 1: Essentialization

Film	Genre	Character Race(s)	Sources of Fatalism	Reactions to Fatalism	Racialization of Fatalism
Boyz N the Hood (1991)	Drama	Black	One-parent families; Rival gangs in neighborhoods; Teenage pregnancies; Abusive police	Try to get out of this lifestyle through academics and football	African-American rival gangs warring in Compton
Juice (1992)	Drama	Black	Racial profiling by police; presence of gang violence; desire for respect and power	Emulate powerful gang members (e.g., committing violent crime); One character seeks to escape through music	Community is portrayed as all Black (except for White police presence) and portrayed as impoverished, gang-ridden and disorderly
Menace II Society (1993)	Drama	Black	Racial profiling by police and public; Criminal parents; Incarceration; Certainty of death on the “street”	Learn “from the streets”; Numbness to violence	Public fear of Black youth; Black on Black crime; acceptance of death as a Black phenomenon
Fresh (1994)	Drama	Black	Inner city violence; Drugs; Rival gangs; Absent fathers	Joins the drug trade; Obtains a weapon	Rival gang deaths; Death of innocents; Code of silence
Get Rich or Die Tryin’ (2005)	Drama	Black	Inner city; drug dealing; violence	Sells drugs to make ends meet; No other option; Gives it up after prison to focus on rap music	Black on Black violence; Rival drug gangs; Drive-bys; Poverty; Poor schools
Ghetto Stories: The Movie (2010)	Drama	Black	Inner-city violence; Incarcerated family members; Turf wars between North/South side	Violence; A few characters try to improve life through legitimate means	Black on black crime; Drug wars
Straight Outta Compton (2015)	Drama/Biography	Black	Single parent families; Teenage pregnancies; Gangs; Guns Drugs; Hassled by police	Main characters really resist this negative lifestyle and focus on music; Want to stay out of trouble	Become rap stars but have to deal with white managers trying to scam them out of money; Lack sophisticated business sense

In the films we analyzed, pathologization served as the primary method of essentializing. Pathologized portrayals of individuals are coupled with those of neighborhoods and a culture of “the street.” In *Menace II Society* (1993) a character remarks, in reference to selling drugs and surviving on the street, “some shit you can’t learn in the classroom.”

Media depictions appear no different. As Willis (1997) points out,

one need only glance at the most recent mainstream media reinventions of the narratives that are supposed to account for a ghetto “culture of poverty” to see the way that these films intersect with the dominant culture’s familiar stories. (p. 162)

Drugs, absent fathers, and deviant influences abound in the films’ portrayals of Black fatalism that we viewed. For example, in *Fresh* (1994), the main character’s father is almost completely absent, and he is mentored into the drug trade by an older leader of a drug-ring. *Get Rich or Die Tryin* (2005) weaves the theme of drugs on the street, absent fathers, and financial gain. White characters in the film are depicted rarely, and if they are, as nameless, innocuous buyers.

Even though films have the capacity to challenge stereotypes about race, gender and class, they often fall short of challenging pathologized notions of behavior that are linked to race and racial communities. Films are rife with examples that the paths to freedom from the ghetto typically emerge from music, sports, or college (Denzin, 2002). For example, as Brown (2008) discusses the film *Barbershop*, she notes that it “was made specifically to demonstrate a panorama of Black male identities that were different from the frequent stereotypes constructed of Black masculinity in films and television” (p. 48); however, in reality, many themes in the movie emerge that reinforce notions of Black masculinity as urban and linked to a “hip-hop aesthetic that negotiates identity through buffering, bonding, bridging, and code switching” (p. 53).

Similarly, Malec (1995) suggests that films about basketball, such as *Hoop Dreams*, essentialize the Black male, in particular, placing him in a fatalistic

struggle to leave the ghetto through the only means available to them – sports or music. In *Juice* (1992), the method of escape is music, as the character Quincy attempts to avoid the fate of his other high school friends who emulate gang violence they witness in the community in order to gain power and respect. In *Before I Self Destruct* (2009), a Black grocery store owner remarks to the main character who is applying for a job, “So what did you think; you gonna be a professional basketball player or something? -- You and about ten thousand other kids.” Malec also points to the pathologization of Black behavior and its conflation to broader cultural and social Black norms in films, suggesting that race becomes a framework for differentially judging the individual pathology versus social behaviors of groups.

Parents in films featuring primarily Black characters are often portrayed as indifferent, absent, or as in the case of *Menace II Society* (1993), criminogenic themselves. Even in films where most characters are White, Black characters are pathologized and thus essentialized by contrasting them to White characters and upholding the visceral aesthetic of the ghetto. An example is *Twelve* (2000), where the drug kingpin in the film is a Black man. Starkly contrasting the White characters, he wears baggy clothing and large golden chains. The White characters are made to seem “normal” and within the realm of redemption, in contrast to his portrayal as pathologically “ghetto.”

Racialization of Class

Some scholarly studies, such as Brezina’s (2000), offer evidence that class, regardless of race, is strongly related to fatalism. Supporting this position is a study of the intersection between religiosity and fatalism that found cultural embeddedness lowered rates of depression, suggesting that race may play a less significant role than marginalization in determining some nuanced elements of fatalism (Neff & Hoppe, 1993). Related to economic class, a lack of educational attainment has proven to be a strong predictor of future imprisonment, especially when intersecting with racial variables (Pettit & Western, 2004). Despite these realities, or perhaps because of them, portrayals of class in relation to fatalism were heavily racialized in the films we analyzed.

Table 2: Racialization of Class

Film	Genre	Character Race(s)	Sources of Fatalism	Reactions to Fatalism	Racialization of Fatalism
Poetic Justice (1993)	Drama	Black	Inner-city violence; Broken homes	Adaptation to violent lifestyle; Some have larger dreams to escape	Black deaths throughout film; Fatal and nonfatal violence
Dangerous Minds (1995)	Drama	Black/Latino	Inner-city violence; Incarceration; broken/abusive homes; Poor education system	Violence; Hyper-masculinity; Abandoning dreams for future; Disinterest in school	Two white students remain silent in background – are not named; all other students are Black or Latino
8 Mile (2002)	Drama	White (main character)	Street culture; Concept of ‘white trash’	Tries to become a rapper to get out his situation: Poverty; Domestic violence	Main character is white but his crew is African-American - help him out to become a rapper
Before I Self Destruct (2009)	Drama	Black	Absent father; Desire for money; Older role models	Violence; Cheating (in school); Drug use	“High living” as a black phenomenon; Soundtrack lyrics
Precious (2009)	Drama	Black	Teenager pregnant with second child by her father; One parent household in the projects; Physically abused by her mother	Precious tries to break the cycle; Moves to an alternative school and finds a mentor to help her, still steals sometimes because she is hungry	Black on black crime; poverty; Shows her mother abusing the welfare system and tries to get Precious to do the same; Original school she went to was rough, no one cared

Massood (2003) highlights this phenomenon in Black cinema, where urbanization and poverty became almost synonymous with Blackness. This racialization of class transcends genres, as in basketball themed films. Even gangster films that focussed primarily on Black protagonists maintain a focus on race (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009), whereas gangster films depicting white characters (e.g., *Goodfellas*) portray class as a distinctive feature and driving force behind behavioral choices.

Kaminsky’s (1974) analysis of Kung Fu films suggests that the ghetto and race are tied together in film through narratives of revenge and pursuit of respect. Even in films where the main character is White but lives among non-White characters (e.g., in *8 Mile*, 2002), respect becomes a formative commodity and goal, prompting White characters to “act Black” in order to survive.

Whether class is the result of economic victimization is also racialized. As Haiven (2014) points out, financial crises are often portrayed as a plight on the middle class and lower class White population, while urban dwelling Blacks are perceived as either the reason for or benefactors of such crises. Acquisition of capital through exploitation and the ignoring of social and environmental harms to marginalized groups has led to devastating effects, such as the highly race-specific aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (McLaren & Jaramillo, 2007). An example of this distinction in the films we examined is *Precious* (2005), where the stereotype of the welfare mother is evoked, one mother actually mentoring a younger

female character to drop out of high school and get on welfare. In contrast, the father in *Catch me if You Can* (2002) is depicted as a victim of larger social forces that ignore the plight of the well-intentioned, hard working person.

In spite of finding an almost universal racialization of class in the films we examined, it is worth noting that some depictions of white violence often overlap with those on rurality. These overlaps draw on stereotypes that rural White communities rely on informal social control in the face of incompetent policing and that White rural youth confront boredom and angst that manifests in the form of violent troublingmaking (Reid & Cesaroni, 2016). These dynamics may be linked with class, as is the case in *Twilight* (2008), where the working-class father of the main character is contrasted with the wealthy White family of the vampire with whom she falls in love. However, it is telling that both characters adopt a fatalistic attitude, not because of class, but because of the social pressures of their families and trials of “normal” teenage life.

Whiteness as a Model

Though fatalistic attitudes are common among young people, their manifestations are mediated by actual available social capital (Boeck et al., 2008). Furthermore, there is evidence that self-efficacy and resistance to hedonistic pursuits are linked to social contexts and may mitigate or limit susceptibility to strain that leads to criminality (see, e.g., Agnew, 2016). This, in part, may explain why film portrayals

of fatalism among White youth differ so starkly from Black youth. As Halsey and Deegan (2015) found, youth re-offending is often the result of a lack of practical (e.g., social, economic) capacity to desist.

In most films we viewed that presented White main character(s), these characters reacted with fatalism to the tedium, boredom, or perceived relative economic strain of White, middle-class life, but their pro-social ties and cultural capital mediated fatalism to prevent serious offending. In *Crossing the Bridge* (1992), for example, a group of White male friends struggle the entire movie with economic and social mediocrity after high school, eventually almost smuggling drugs across the US/Canadian border, but

rejecting this path as they leave their car running just before crossing through customs. This literal abandonment of fatalistic attitudes is a theme that permeates portrayals of White characters (especially youth) facing threats of violence or criminogenic forces. In *The Fast and the Furious* (2001), for example, an undercover officer actually allows one of the main characters to go free, giving them a literal “second chance.” In *American History X* (1998), the main character, a white supremacist, experiences an epiphany through incarceration and the pains of imprisonment and is able to realize the consequences of hate and reject the fatalism he once associated with it.

Table 3.1: Whiteness as a Model

Film	Genre	Character Race(s)	Sources of Fatalism	Reactions to Fatalism	Racialization of Fatalism
Good Fellas (1990)	Drama	White	Abusive father; Learning from adults; “Shady work”; Getting rich; Desire for respect	Adoption of criminal lifestyle; Rebellion against middle-class means	Italian-Americans; Race conflict between criminal enterprises/families
Crossing the Bridge (1992)	Drama	White	Young adult angst; Peers; Overbearing parents; Desire for money	Giving up dreams for future; Being “tough guys”	Few Black characters – one has abusive father -first shown is a drug dealer
Scream (1996)	Horror	White	High profile deaths in a small town and portrayal in media; threats from killer to main character throughout film	Defiance and persistence with the threat of death	Many of the primary characters are high school aged, all are white. Main character, who is threatened throughout, refuses to be a “victim” like her mother was, and fights throughout the film
American History X (1998)	Drama	White	White supremacy, dad died and spurred the hatred of minorities	adopt the white supremacy lifestyle, make it known to minority schoolmates	Violence throughout movie, stresses white power throughout movie
Final Destination (2000)	Horror	White	Threat of “death” itself	Some are defiant and “tempt” fatalism; most try to avoid the patterns or “signs” they associate with death; eventually they believe they have found a way to “cheat” their own death	All the primary characters in film are white. The mortician, who explains “death’s design” to the teenagers, is African American. He is the most accepting of fatalism, while many of the other characters are resistant
Fast and the Furious (2001)	Action	White, Hispanic, African American, Asian American	Street culture, street racing culture, former prison time	Subscribe to street race culture, regardless of consequences, though they flee from police.	Multiple races/ethnicities represented in film. One main character, who is white, is also an undercover cop, and allows other character to go free rather than capture him

In contrast to these portrayals are what Guerrero (2012) argues amount to Blacks in film being portrayed as criminals, living in poverty, and subjugated to a White normality. He notes that the narrative of subjugation prevailed during Reagan’s administration. Blackness was portrayed as a threat to urban civility, where White characters wanted to pursue the American dream in peace. The concept of the American Dream is also predominant in films portraying White fatalism. For example, in *Catch me*

if You Can (2002), the main character becomes a con-artist largely in response to seeing his father face economic hardship and the indifference and coldness of corporate America, making it difficult for an average person to get ahead. Parents often serve as a source of fatalism in films featuring mostly White youth.

However, in films with Black characters, parents are portrayed as absent or representing a deviant influence; in films with White characters, we found

that parents largely represent either an overbearing “moral” presence, such as the disapproving parents in *Twilight* (2008) who, in the fashion of Romeo and Juliette, forbid their children to pursue romance together, or the parents are perceived as middle class failures, their children (the fatalistic youth) seeking to outdo their parents and transcend the middle class through delinquent means (e.g., drug dealing, such as in *Kush*, 2007).

We need to Talk about Kevin (2011) represents a particularly interesting case where a child is pathologized (biologically) as deviant but is still represented as mostly rebelling against the moral norms imposed by his parents (particularly his mother). Parents are cast as important to White characters who experience fatalism, such as in *Twelve* (2010) where the loss of a mother actually serves to lead a character into selling drugs.

The social ties of intact families and communities offering support through employment and middle-class norm reinforcement are contrasted to normless, chaotic Black communities. Indeed, in popular media portrayals, Blackness is juxtaposed to Whiteness to uphold the notion that the “other” is a threat to moral order (Kid-Hewitt & Osborne, 1995; Lyon, 2009). The racialized other is sometimes portrayed as a threat to White normality, as is the case in *American Bully* (2009), where the events of 9/11 are portrayed as a sort

of existential threat to the youth in the film. They react by joining the military, in a sense institutionalizing fatalism and simultaneously linking it with a perspective that the other has pulled them into a world of fatalism by disrupting their once peaceful, isolated social order.

Dangerous Minds (1995) and *Freedom Writers* (2007) serve as examples of both racialization of fatalism (almost all characters are non-White except the teachers) and the framing of whiteness as a model. The youth in the film are portrayed as out of control, disrespectful to (White) authority, and destined to die on the streets without intervention, in this case, from a White female teacher. Denzin (2002) explains that these films adhere to “utopian ideals” (p. 74) and that the message is “Dark skinned people need to see through color to learn how to cooperate with hard working, well-intentioned white teacher and their unorthodox pedagogical practices” (p. 75). Such films overtly present White norms as superior to a Black (sub)culture that is portrayed as almost wholly unique and dangerous. This difference allows for White fatalism to emerge in the form of “European fatalism,” or a sense of helplessness to impact or escape large societal decisions that influence the course of their nations and communities (Phillips, 2014), but maintains that Black fatalism is more “alien” and savage – that Whiteness is the only remedy.

Table 3.2: Whiteness as a Model Continued

Film	Genre	Character Race(s)	Sources of Fatalism	Reactions to Fatalism	Racialization of Fatalism
Catch Me if You Can (2002)	Drama	White	Broken home; desire for money (learned from father)	Running away from home; adapting (pretends to be other people)	Concept of “American dream”
Havoc (2005)	Drama	White	Rich white kids trying to be gangsters. Well-off; Boredom	Have a ‘gang’ at their upper class high school. Do and sell drugs; Begin hanging out with real gangster in East LA	Stereotypical version of E. LA Hispanic gangs, drugs; Violence
Freedom Writers (2007)	Drama	Black	Inner-city violence; Belief in certainty of death; Broken/abusive homes; Education system that has “given up”	Violence; Giving up dreams for future; Disinterest in school	Certainty of violence/death linked to race and class; Mistreatment by police; Expectations by whites that they will be respected; White models of good behavior/life
Kush (2007)	Drama	White	Parents; Desire for money; Power	Reliance on power; Money and social status	Most of the characters are upper class and white; Many act as though the law does not apply to them due to their class
Twilight (2008)	Drama	White/ Aboriginal/ Native	Single parent; Controlling parents; Star-crossed love	Rebellion; Romance; Isolation from peers	Supernatural a proxy for race (and exclusion of); Race conflict between supernatural types; Metaphors for Aboriginal culture(s)
American Bully (2009)	Drama	White, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern	Threats of violence from “outsiders”	Violence	White characters feel threatened/fearful after events of 9/11; Kidnap, torture and kill a student of Middle Eastern descent (and film the events)

Twelve (2010)	Drama	White	Rich, white Manhattan high school kids and white drug dealer who straddles both worlds	Sells drugs to kids; Become entangled with a Black drug dealer; Minimal violence; Rich kids with limited adult supervision	Primary character is main drug dealer; Lost his mother and he loses hope and motivation; Begins selling drugs
We Need to Talk About Kevin (2011)	Drama	White	Biological; Parents	Defiance; Planning a major violent event	Primary character lives a comfortable life, but seems predestined to be criminogenic; Defiant against rules set by society and his parents (particularly his mother)

Gender and Race: Omissions and Intersections

Though gender was not initially a focus of our inquiry, it emerged as significant in many of the films we analyzed. In most cases, the films portrayed young males, and masculinity was linked with fatalism (e.g., Black young men were more susceptible to victimization at the hands of other young Black men). However, when female characters were present in significant roles, they were in some cases stereotyped and in others broke these stereotypes.

In spite of their diverse roles that challenged the status-quo stereotypes, young women of color have been particularly constructed as irresponsible (Griffin, 1992). However, in some films we analyzed, female characters were portrayed as voices of reason within a violent street culture. In *Menace II Society* (1993), the main female character is a good student and attempts to help the male characters escape the cycle of violence, remarking that being violent “has nothing to do with bein’ hard,” challenging stereotypes of Black masculinity, particularly in the context of street culture. In some cases, such as in *Ghetto Stories: The Movie* (2010), in which the character Martha fears and resents street violence, female characters represent the sole point of resistance to the inevitability of violent death in poor, Black neighborhood contexts. Some films also present motherhood, most notably single motherhood, as positive influences against negative forces. For instance, *Boyz n the Hood* portrays single mothers in opposition to street culture and gangs (Denzin, 2002).

In *Poetic Justice* (1993), the Black female character who goes by the name “Justice” serves as a literal voice, through poetry rather than violence, to the fatalism she and other characters feel in the face of violent street culture. In other films, however, females were portrayed as reproductive or sexual commodities. For example, in *Twelve* (2010) a female student who was a virgin, lacking the money to pay for drugs, has sex with a dealer as payment, marking a significant spiral into the despair of fatalism. Other female characters, particularly in movies depicting Black communities, were portrayed as being drawn to financially and socially successful men, often

prompting male characters to seek respect and financial gain through drug dealing and violence.

Implications

In this inquiry, we set out to determine how a selection of films portraying fatalism among youth characters constructed sources of fatalism, reactions to these sources, and the racial differences in such depictions. We found that youth, both Black and White, are often portrayed as fatalistic in films, but for very different reasons. Black youth are portrayed as fatalistic because of a pathos that is both individual and cultural, whereas White fatalism is portrayed as the result of social controls and “normal” teenage perils, and it is also portrayed as more innocuous and escapable. Gender emerged as a more significant variable in portrayals of fatalism than we had expected, but its link to fatalism was less consistent; female youth were portrayed as either voices of reason, stereotypes of their race, or commodities, drawn to fatalistic, stereotypically masculine male characters.

Lyon (2009) frames the seriousness of the role that film plays in criminal justice discourse, suggesting that racialized representations of fatalism in film extend beyond an aesthetic feature and may illuminate and influence public perceptions of, in particular, the deservedness of Black youth to access justice when they are portrayed as remorseless and nihilistic. Some of these films contribute to the national conversation and “moral panic” on issues such as gangs, crack-cocaine, and racial genocide (Denzin, 2002, p. 112), and the criminal justice “crackdown” on urban Black crime during the 1990s coincides with a rise in media depictions of marginalized, dangerous ghettos (Beckett, 1994). Media’s ability to inform a “moral universe” (Kidd-Hewitt & Osborne, 1995) requires scholars to critically disentangle fictional portrayals of racial attitudes and lived-experiences from the real complexities of criminal behavior and urban life more broadly.

Limitations. Our study is not without limitations. Since we used a purposive sample, there are

undoubtedly films missing from our analysis. While, as we note, limiting our sample size allowed for a particular approach to analysis and theoretical inquiry, a larger sample, with respect to dimensions such as time (i.e., older than 30 years) and genre (e.g., comedy) would lend for more opportunities to compare and further develop the theses included in our findings. Our use of qualitative analysis helps define thematic and theoretical foundations, but a larger sample with a mixed-methods approach to analysis may yield confirmation and expansion of our findings. We would also suggest that future studies focus specifically on comedic/satirical films portraying many of the elements we analyze and, eventually, that researchers untangle the meaning of these films in relation to more dramatic portrayals, such as those analyzed here.

Conclusion

Here, we have considered how such complexities manifest in both real and fictionalized fatalism among youth, finding that film depictions of fatalism do indeed differ depending on the race of the youth portrayed. Black youth are generally presented as “lost causes” unless they adhere to a model of Whiteness (often able to do so only if helped by a White mentor-figure), and White youth are presented as experiencing “normal” teen angst in response to the controls exerted by adult figures and institutions. Whether or not these portrayals mirror actual experiences of and responses to fatalism is debatable, as Brezina’s (2000) findings support differences in fatalistic attitudes between classes are as significant as race.

Given the power of the media (beyond just film, e.g., music) to interact with culture and perceptions of reality (see e.g. Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2015), future research should consider the role that media portrayals of fatalism play in youth’s construction of their own reactions to fatalism-inspiring stimuli (e.g., poverty, racism). Research should also consider the oversight in both the literature and popular portrayals of fatalism with respect to gender and intersectionalities with race and class. Our examination has touched on these omissions and intersections, but a deeper, more critical examination could yield important insight into the links between popular constructs and lived-experiences of masculinity and fatalism, particularly among delinquent youth.

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