GHETTO KIDS GONE GOOD: RACE, REPRESENTATION, AND AUTHORITY IN THE SCRIPTING OF INNER-CITY YOUTHS IN THE URBAN DEBATE LEAGUE

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Representations of black youths in both the news media and popular culture articulate and/or maintain race, class, and gender-based ideologies that demonize inner-city black youths. This essay interrogates the news media representations of educational reform efforts targeted at minority youths. The Urban Debate League (UDL), a non-profit education program targeted at inner-city youths of color, serves as a case study for this investigation. Since the program’s inception, media outlets have drawn to the program as a human-interest story. I argue that the scripting techniques deployed by the news media rely on the use of racial stereotypes designed to scapegoat poor youths of color in an effort to redeem UDL students through their successful participation in the non-profit program. How news organizations script the bodies and life experiences of UDL participants may offer a critical space from which to interrogate race, gender, and class ideologies as they operate within educational discourse through news media representations.

Key Words: news media, race, education, Urban Debate League, scripting

At 20 years old, I became a “poster child” for a national not-for-profit program, the Urban Debate League (UDL). The UDL targets minority, inner-city high schools to provide resources and support for the development of competitive debate teams, debate as public advocacy, and use of debate across the curriculum as an effective tool to increase student success in failing inner-city school systems. Developing at the height of the 1990s discourse of the “black/white achievement gap” and the “acting black” hypothesis in media representation of inner-city students, UDLs have generated significant media interest. Having debated as part of the pilot version of the program and achieving both high school and college success, I became an optimal “poster child.” Add a propensity to like being in front of a crowd, and I became a significant asset in persuading administrators, teachers, and students about the potential effectiveness of the program. Every now and then, someone would write a human-interest piece about our high school team or the local university’s outreach

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program, and later about the national UDL program. So I was well versed in the script the reporters seemed to like the most. I was an inner-city kid that faced situational and structural obstacles on the road to success, an “at-risk” youth who might have been lost to the ills associated with poor, black communities if it had not been for debate participation. Yet, that narrative never sat comfortably with me; it never seemed to really represent the reality of my situation. If being black and working-class was all that made one “at-risk,” then the narrative made sense. But, there is more implied by that characterization, including assumptions about my family and community background that were often inaccurate.

I remember one particular incident that most clearly highlighted my sense of discomfort. I was still in college and maintaining my “poster child” relationship with the UDL. Melissa Wade, my college debate director at Emory University, was contacted by a production company that wanted to put together a human-interest segment to be broadcast by a number of local news stations along the east coast. In addition to interviewing Wade, the producers also requested an interview with the two African American students on the Emory team who had been former members of the university’s outreach program, and I was one of those students. I put on a nice suit (one my mom picked out and paid what was, at the time, a lot of money for her and my dad to spend) and went to the interview, conducted in the middle of the central two-block quadrangle on the university’s campus. Emory’s architecture is quite beautiful. The quad was almost two blocks of open green space where students played Frisbee, studied while sunbathing, or attended class on a beautiful spring day. The interview went well, the reporter asking about my debate career and the UDL program. The interviewer thanked me for my time and I went on my way. A few weeks later, my debate coach called me into her office for a chat. It seemed that the producers would like to interview me again, this time while touring the inner-city community where I had grown up and the high school I had attended. I wanted to know why they had made that request before I made a decision. The producer agreed to call me within a few days. With that time to think about the request, I began to visualize what the edited version of the piece would look like. They would show my interview on campus and contrast the image of the university’s economic privilege with the “darker” image of my inner-city community. It was the “ghetto kid gone good” narrative that had already begun to make me uncomfortable. The producer finally called and I expressed my concern about their need to contrast my economic (and racial) background to that of my college environment as a means of sensationalizing my story. I simply wondered why my achievements, which were the focus of the interview, could not stand on merit alone. The producer was completely clueless and after going in circles with her for 20 minutes, I realized we were not going to get anywhere. At the end of our conversation, she stated “But, I don’t understand, I mean you did go to school there.” I told her that I would not be granting them a second interview and terminated the conversation.

The representation of successful UDL students is of human-interest appeal. It contrasts with the dominant narrative that constructs inner-city children of color as deviant and intellectually inferior. Yet, the representation of success is extremely restrictive, requiring the embodiment and enactment of the “ghetto” at-risk youth narrative to produce the transformative discourse of exceptionalism read tokenism. The repetition of the dangerous urban youth of color character as the most used representation of UDL students suggests an inability of news media to tell the success stories of inner-city students of color outside this frame. The texture and complexity of the lives of UDL students is lost within the constraints
of a pre-determined frame that restricts these students to the scripts made available to them in a society bound by the ontological standard of whiteness at the intersection of the material privileges associated with economic wealth.

As a 20-year-old, I lacked the vocabulary to fully articulate my discomfort with the scripts made available to me. What I intuitively understood to be happening was ignored by the news producer and by every other media representative I encountered. I am an “outsider within,” to use Patricia Hill Collins’s (1998) term, one “who no longer belong[s] to any one group” (p. 5). I occupy a borderland space between various communities, including the academy, the UDL, college debate, and the black community in which I was raised, where all or part of my subjectivity can be rejected or vilified at any moment. It is within this liminal space that I engage in an oppositional reading of the discourses surrounding UDL students in news media representation. Such an oppositional reading recognizes and engages the dominant, or suggested, reading offered within a field of signification (Hall, 1997). Rather than offering an alternative or more positive reading in opposition to the suggested read, I seek to highlight the modalities by which racialized representation reproduces itself.

The UDL provides media and education scholars with the opportunity to study news media attempts at creating socially responsible representations of inner-city youths of color. By examining the transformative narrative of redemption in news representations of UDL activity, this essay contributes to an understanding of the participation of news organizations in the maintenance or subversion of dominant discourses that surround black youths. How news organizations script the body and life experience of the UDL students—as threats to civic order in an effort to redeem them through their debate participation—may offer the opportunity to trace race, gender, and class ideologies as technologies of power as they emerge within and through news media representation.

To explore the way in which news media script the bodies of those participating in the UDL, I begin with a brief description of the Urban Debate League after which I describe the narrative framing techniques associated with the representation of inner-city black bodies. In particular, Ronald Jackson’s (2006) theory of scripting and media framing of black bodies informs the arguments of this essay. I argue that news media coverage of UDL activity scripts key actors in ways that simultaneously reproduce themes from dominant media frames and invite readers to fashion redemptive scripts that appear to transcend the negative stereotypes so prevalent in news coverage of black culture. I identify the scripts made available to black youths in the news representations of UDL activities. The scripts news media reproduce are grounded in racialized constructions of urban youth. This media reproduction is, in turn, a reinscription by which they attempt to negate these traditional narratives. I am interested in the complexities associated with news media attempts to reinscript black bodies to fit within a transformational narrative.

Before moving onto the body of my essay, however, a word about language choice is necessary. Throughout the essay, I have chosen to use the term black rather than African-American in order to open up the spectrum of what bodies are considered black or blackened in the context of the U.S. social imagination. Blackness is more broadly signified than its reference to African-American people. In order to theorize about blackness, scholars must begin to consider the manner in which it remains both connected to and disconnected from an understanding of black as race. When I use the term African-American in the essay, I do so purposefully to denote a sub-group within the larger scope of what signifies as black. In addition, I have chosen not to capitalize the term black. A capitalization of black seems to signify a known quantity, with boundaries that can be easily defined in order to pinpoint who
is and is not black. I would argue that blackness has become incredibly fluid, and as a point of intensification for force-relations of power, it is necessary to theorize about blackness from a strategic interrogation of the reproduction and maintenance of black as signifier.

THE URBAN DEBATE LEAGUE MOVEMENT

In the mid-1980s, Emory University’s debate team, the Barkley Forum, began an urban outreach program in Atlanta funded by a small grant from Phillips Petroleum and the National Forensic League. The five thousand dollar grant spanned a consecutive three-year period with the mission of increasing the participation of minority inner-city youths in high school forensics. Once Wade made the decision to reach out to inner-city schools in Atlanta, she encountered Dr. Larry E. Moss, a school administrator and the Law and Government Magnet Program Director at D.M. Therrell High School. Dr. Moss (one of two coaches to participate in the pilot program) started a debate team that reached state and national success by the time of his retirement from the Atlanta Public School System at the turn of the century. Dr. Moss became a critical force in the development of the UDL model and the training of debate institute faculty and high school teachers involved in the program. Beginning with Therrell, the Emory outreach program grew to encompass numerous Atlanta inner-city schools.

The Emory program focused on bringing competitive policy debate to inner-city students with the attendant benefits of improving reading, writing, speaking, and research skills. The Atlanta model of the Urban Debate League has since grown into a nationwide “education reform movement” with programs in over 20 U.S. cities, including New York; Baltimore; Washington, D.C.; Boston; Houston; and the San Francisco Bay Area (“Urban Debate League,” n.d., para. 4). Many of these programs were initially funded through start-up grants from the Open Society Institute (OSI) run by the Soros Foundation (sponsored by progressive financier George Soros). Soros believes that debate can provide an invaluable tool to disenfranchised populations all across the world (Soros, 2005).

The goal of the UDL is to bring the advantages offered by participation in debate to disenfranchised populations. The skills associated with debate have proven critical to educational success and achievement (Colbert & Biggers, 1985). The UDL’s success has been notable, as its participants generally demonstrate an improvement in academic achievement demonstrated by increased GPAs, increased levels of participation in other extra-curricular activities, and increased matriculation to four-year colleges (Arbenz, 2001; Collier, 2004; M. Fine, 1999; Mezuk, 2009; Ruenzel, 2002; Winkler, 2008). UDL supporters have argued that the program serves as a tool of empowerment for educationally disenfranchised students, providing them with the opportunity to develop communication and academic skills that increase the likelihood of their future success (Baker, 1998, 2010; Lee, 1998; Wade, Wade, & Heilmayr, 2009; Wade, 1998, 2010; Warner & Bruschke, 2001). The UDLs’ success at increasing the academic achievement of inner-city youths of color through debate participation, in spaces marked by race and class privilege, has rich human-interest appeal. Sociologist and ethnographer Gary Fine’s (2001) study of high school policy debate, Gifted Tongues notes a lack of racial and ethnic diversity in high school debate. Tim Wise (2005), a former policy debater, describes the debate community in his book, White Like Me.
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the activity is very white, not merely in terms of its demographic, but also in terms of its style, its form, and its content at the most competitive levels. Debate literally exudes whiteness, and privileges white participants in a number of ways. (p. 63)

The racial contrast between the norm of whiteness in debate, on the one hand, and the debaters of color participating in UDLs, on the other, tends to create a significant media spectacle.

In analyzing the news media representation of UDLs, I completed a system-wide search of news databases available through Ebscohost, Academic Universe (Lexis/Nexis) and Google news. I reviewed the Urban Debate League websites, including its three national organizations: the National Association of Urban Debate Leagues, the National Debate Project, and the Associated Leaders of Urban Debate. I also reviewed the websites for the New York Urban Debate League, the Baltimore Urban Debate League, the Seattle Urban Debate League, and the D.C. Urban Debate League. A review of the media section of these sites offered full text copies of, or links to, stories from national and local print news, local and national radio, local television news, and primetime television news magazines.

A number of considerations went into the choice of what sources to quote for the essay. First, I identified the major publications, such as those with a national readership or viewership (e.g., The Washington Times, The New York Times, U.S. News & World Report, CBS's 60 Minutes). Second, the UDL is not just a national phenomenon; each individual UDL may also be featured in regional press. Thus, I attempted to include a number of the regional news stories to provide a broader view of the news representation. Local television news transcripts are also difficult to obtain, so searches were limited to transcriptions made available through electronic news databases. In addition, many UDL news stories are very short pieces that announce debate tournaments or debate achievements by UDL students. Thus, I chose articles and news television examples that represented a more extended, in-depth narrative.

More than a hundred articles were reviewed for this essay. I initially engaged in a content analysis of the articles looking for narrative patterns. Although I do not cite all of the examples of the frames and scripts I found, my review of the news does demonstrate a consistency of representations that is alarming. The racialized poverty frame was persistent in the representations of UDL students. The consistency across the national news representation and the chaining out of these frames to local news media warrants this analysis.

RACE, THE CORPOREAL BODY, AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Inner-city youths of color are hyper-visible in U.S. public discourse (re)presenting the failure of U.S. public education and the ills of poverty. As black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1998) notes, racial and gender containment strategies have mutated in contemporary U.S. culture making the spaces of public interaction appear "overpopulated by dangerous Black male criminals who have made the public streets unsafe, [and] by 'public children' from the so-called Black underclass who consume educational and social welfare services far exceeding their value to society" (p. 35). In the dominant national imagination, inner-city youths are the Lost Ones, those left behind in under-funded school systems, with outdated materials, in dilapidated buildings. Representations of black youths, operating through the discursive and visual frames, in both the news media and popular culture reproduce and maintain race, class, and gender/sex-based stereotypes that demonize inner-city black
youths. Turn on a television, go to the movies, or listen to the radio and it is often clear that these youths represent the vast underbelly of U.S. society, signifying criminality, violence, gratuitous sexuality, and irresponsibility (Covington, 2010). These stereotypical representations of black bodies have become commonplace in the signification of blackness and have produced racial narrative frames.

Scholars interested in race and representation in the news have noted how media use the technique of framing to make news stories intelligible to the reader or viewer. Framing analysis is a significant tool in evaluating news media, both print and television, as it provides a means to trace consistencies in representation across media (Downing & Husband, 2005, p. 36). Viewers are trained to make sense out of the verbal and visual cues in newscasts and news stories that suggest a particular perspective or viewpoint from which the media event should be understood. Media scholar Carolyn Martindale (1990) explains, regarding media coverage of black culture, how news stories “may unconsciously convert the stereotype into a sort of mental grid or framework through which news about blacks is filtered” (p. 41). Surveys of dominant news media coverage reveal roughly three major frames that recur frequently in stories about black people and black culture, clustering around themes of poverty, familial dysfunction, and criminal offspring.

Blacks are disproportionately represented in the total population of the poor or near poor in the United States (Canon, 1999; Voorhies, Vick, & Perkins 2007). Despite the higher percentages of poverty amongst the black population, media often portray the connection between poverty and blackness in excess of the actual representation of blacks within that economic class. Race and media scholar Martin Gilens (1999) calls it a “racialization of poverty images” in the news media, arguing that since the 1960s “the complexion of the poor grew darker” (p. 102). Prior to the 1960s, the image of poverty was white, thus government support and media representation of the poor lacked any racial character (Gilens, 1999, p. 133). Gilens (1999) argues further that the white poor, the elderly, and those in the working class were portrayed in a much more positive light, as hardworking citizens down on their luck (p. 154). In contrast, black poverty was represented as a symptom of pathology. Poverty frames often are constructed through a rhetorical clustering of “verbal stereotypes” aimed to “suggest” or imply lower economic status (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, p. 96).

Within this racialized poverty frame, black families face harsh criticism for their “dysfunction.” The failure of the black family structure, defined in terms of the white heterosexual family as the normative U.S. standard, is blamed for the persistence of poverty and the social and political disenfranchisement that traps so many blacks in a generational cycle of poverty. And yet, it is not just the black family that is constructed as pathological; it is the black mother, in particular, who is the representative cause of this pathology. Black feminist scholars Roxanne Donovan and Michelle Williams (2002) note:

Black women are seen as the major contributor to inner-city poverty and all its associated problems, including the poor academic performance and high incarceration of Black youths. This image made it easier to ignore how poverty, underfunded schools, employment discrimination, and institutionalized racism created these social problems. (p. 99)

Such a portrayal blames black women for the instability of the black family unit. Black fathers are portrayed as absent in the family unit, producing children with multiple women and rejecting the responsibilities of parenthood (Hamer, 2001; Pitts, 2006; Staples, 1978). The prevalence of female-headed households in black communities has resulted in the cultural demonization of black mothers, and while black fathers are partly to blame
for the failure of their children, black mothers are more directly to blame as they raise black children. The welfare queen, the "baby mama," and the devious black mother are stereotypes that are repetitively iterated within U.S. public discourse (Collins, 1991, 2000, 2004).

If black parents are the cause of black familial dysfunction, then the rise of the thug as a stereotype of black youths is the consequence of such dysfunction. Although black youths in general face negative stereotyping in the news media, it is black males in particular who foster the most media attention and generate the most discomfort and fear. Black males in the inner-city are often "portrayed through the dominant gaze as a nation of thugs and savages" (Jones, 2005, p. 180 fn27). These thugs signify criminality, violence, and irresponsibility. As much as the "thug" is a repetition of the characterization of black masculinity as violent and sexually aggressive, with origins in both European colonialism and American slavery, it is critical to simultaneously note that the "thug" identity is a social performance taken on by some young black males (Jones, 2005, p. 180). The thug rejects school, traditional employment, and normative U.S. values. Communication studies and black culture scholar Ronald Jackson (2006) argues that the "thug, by nature, does not abide by the rules" (p. 112). The thug engages in criminal behavior that results in direct harm to the average citizen and, as such, is a threat to the U.S. social body. But, the thug performance is also a fashion statement. Low-riding jeans, brand new and completely clean tennis shoes, sports caps, a little bling (around your neck, on your hands, around your wrists or in your mouth) have become stylistic elements of the thug performance. The relationship between the news media and popular media in the material significance of the stereotype represents a dialectical tension within which young black males are demonized in the news while remaining a resilient image in U.S. popular iconography. Thus, people in the United States find themselves ambivalent in their engagement with young black men whose bodies signify the thug identity. The U.S. media consuming public often finds itself afraid of the thug on the street corner while revering him in movies, on televisions, over the radio, and through portable digital media technology.

**Scripting Black Bodies Through the Frame of Blackness**

A close examination of UDL media coverage reveals more subtle and complex layers of meaning embedded within the lines of human-interest stories. Through the lens of Jackson's theory of media scripting, it is possible to highlight the manner in which the UDL news stories invite audiences to embrace certain assumptions about inner-city youths, the debate activity, and the representational politics of race and gender. The media framing of black youths, given the significance of the black body in the U.S. social narrative, does not determine but suggests available scripts from which to make young black bodies intelligible. For this analysis, I am interested in the inscription of corporeal bodies, the tangible surface of the body and its material relation to other bodies in the social structure. Jackson (2006) argues that the body is a "discursive text" that can be written and rewritten upon (p. 7). This process of writing and rewriting the body is bound by "prior inscriptions" of the body as a socio-historical construct (Jackson, 2006, p. 7). Thus, the body is never free of inscriptions. Inscriptions are always already a necessary condition of the intelligibility of social bodies. The body carries certain markers (like sex, race, and ethnicity) that are made intelligible through the normative field of social interaction. Jackson (2006) notes:
As with any theatrical script, the script is the text, and the act of scripting is the writing of the text. Therefore, to script someone else's body is to actively inscribe or figuratively place one's self, worldview, or ascriptions onto another projected text, which often requires dislocating the original text and redefining the newly affected or mirrored text as the counterpositional or oppositional Other. (p. 53)

In other words, the process of inscription is bound by the very social discourses that bring a subject into being as black. This process of subjection requires the repetition of certain scripts to maintain the constitution of the subject as a racialized body. Scripting is a part of the very process of subjectification. Certain inscriptions have more discursive purchase, as they coincide with other discourses and in relation to other apparatuses of power—both institutional and cultural—that produce and are produced by the process of subjection.

For Jackson (2006), in order to understand how the scripting process functions in the development of racial and gender stereotypes, one must look specifically to the manner in which scripts are overlaid on corporeal bodies to signify otherness, especially in the process of dominant viewpoints asserting themselves as natural, normalized perspectives. Within news frames about poor urban communities of color, the frame often suggests the available scripts by which bodies of color may be read based on the social ideologies surrounding race, class, and gender within U.S. society. The frame is a narrative container, it (en)frames particular narrative foci. Although the frame is not deterministic, it (re)produces or (re)iterates scripts that are intelligible for the intended audience. The process of reiteration is critical because it is the incessant reproduction of the script attached to bodies that allows particular scripts to take hold of the social imagination (Gillborn, 2005, p. 490).

Bodily inscription is inherently unstable, which is why it becomes necessary to repeat or reiterate such inscriptions for the body to remain intelligible within specific kinds of frames. In this context, Jackson's (2006) concept of scripting is uniquely insightful for this study as it accounts for how the black body is inscribed in (and by) the public imagination, and it requires an interrogation of the significance of the body as a means of making media scripts intelligible. For Jackson, the body seems to function as a symbolic device that interacts with the individual's prior knowledge of certain kinds of bodies, particularly those bodies marked by Otherness.

Jackson's (2006) analysis focuses on the scripting of the black male body in U.S. popular culture, simultaneously situating popular discourse in articulation with racialized scripts across various media. Jackson begins by tracing the images of blackness in early U.S. popular culture including Uncle Tom, Sambo, the Coon, the Buck, the Jezebel, and the Tragic Mulatto, images that he argues chain out in contemporary popular culture. He notes that there is an interrelationship between historical images and narratives of blackness and the scripting of black bodies through public discourses. The negative discourses surrounding both black culture and black bodies are birthed from early colonial and imperial interaction with Africa. As European expansionism began to seek control over African resources, the resulting colonial rule of African nations and the development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade required a discursive framing with which to justify Europeans' and Euro-Americans' insouciance toward atrocity. Characterizations of the black body and black culture as abnormal, irrational, intellectually inferior, culturally deficient, violent, licentious, and potentially criminal have permeated colonial and post-colonial discourse about blackness. The repetition of these inscriptions of blackness produces a discursive field through which black bodies become intelligible to the social imagination.

It is not that the black body has no agency in responding to racialized inscriptions. Those marked by blackness produce and are produced by these prior inscriptions. The black body,
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despite its agency, is confined within the field of racialization. Particularly in the context of news media representation, the black body has limited control over the scripting of the meanings attached to and associated with blackness. Given that the news media repetitively reuse specific framing practices in association with inner-city black youth, the frame provides a conceptual limit on any attempt to reinscript the bodies of black youths through transformative narratives. This essay, therefore, is concerned with how the media recycle frames of black criminality, familial dysfunction, and intellectual inferiority to script subject positions for the bodies of the black youths featured in inspirational human-interest stories.

Many of the examples I cite are statements made by UDL students, teachers, and administrators. However, I do not attempt to theorize about the use of the normative frames of blackness by UDL members; such an analysis is beyond the scope of this essay. This essay attempts to theorize about the strategies of media framing and the manner in which black bodies are scripted according to framing practices. In other words, media organizations and their reporters make choices about which referential frames to use in the production of news stories. The journalist chooses what questions to ask and chooses a strategy for how to relay the story through narrative. An interview does not result in a full transcription of the interaction between the journalist and the interviewee. Thus, interviewees have little to no control over the manner in which their responses are translated into the narrative frame. The lack of complexity in the media representation of UDL students requires the media to exclude that which does not fit the narrative frame. The media framing of the narrative requires a re-telling of the redemption tale through the racialized poverty frame. The news media coverage of the UDL analyzed in this essay relied on a restrictive and restricting representation of the black body as it operates within the field of racial intelligibility. This analysis focuses on the construction of the narrative through frames the media has determined are most interesting and intelligible to the viewing and reading public. If the racialized poverty frame makes certain scripts available for black youth, it does so because of the process of intelligibility. The field of intelligibility for poor black bodies functions through an interactional relationship between the field of intelligibility that produces the frame and the scripts, as simultaneously the repetition of those frames and scripts are implicated in maintaining the normative function of the field.

THE RACIALIZATION OF CLASS

In the news coverage of the Urban Debate Leagues, journalists utilize various strategies to signify poverty as the central frame for describing the economic background of the students. These narrative framing strategies begin the process of defining the potential scripts made available to the general student populations from which UDL students are recruited. For example, at the very beginning, or near the beginning of the vast majority of news stories about the leagues, UDL students are identified as “minorities from lower-income households” (Estrella, 2002, para. 2), who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (Asmar, 2011; Bahrampour, 2000; Belden, 2010; Bryant, 2004; Day, 2002; Glanton, 2005; Gross, 2005a, 2005b; Hoover, 2003; Morris & Rockoff, 2002; Thrash, 2008; Villarreal, 2009). Then the stories make reference to the educational failure rates associated with poor, minority communities, such as low graduation rates, below average test scores, and low percentages of college matriculation (Asmar, 2011; Brown, 2010; Chemerinsky, 2008; Conan, 2006; Day, 2002; Gross, 2005a; Hoover, 2003; Teicher, 2004; Thrash, 2008). During the 1990s, news media became interested in the black/white achievement gap and the mounting evidence
that black youths, particularly those in poor, urban communities, were falling far behind in test scores and graduation rates (Philip, Crouse and Ralph, 1998). The news descriptions of the UDLs are often dependent on the audience calling forth such descriptions of economic poverty and educational failure associated with racial minorities from their prior beliefs or knowledge about inner-city communities of color.

The racialization of spatial discourse produces one means by which class becomes a marker of race. In other words, poverty has become so racialized in the national U.S. conversation, that it is, in many respects, a code word for race and/or ethnicity. In terms of the spatial politics of race, "urban" or "inner-city" as opposed to "suburban," has come to represent a distinction between black and white spaces. The relationship between crime and poor educational systems has become necessarily associated "with increased minority presence in a community, particularly with the presence of blacks" (Briggs, 2005, p. 20).

In UDL media coverage, reporters construct spatial characterizations of poverty, characteristics that are also marked by blackness, such as references to the images associated with the inner-city or urban areas (Bahrampour, 2000; Belden, 2010; Brown, 2010; Bryant, 2004; Glantcn, 2005; Hill, 2005; Houppert, 2007; Ruenzel, 2002; Stahl, 2003; Swanton, 2009; Teicàer, 2004). Note the following example from a 2007 Washington Post article:

FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL IS A MASSIVE FORTRESS HOUSING 1,200 STUDENTS. It sits across the street from Baltimore’s Mondawmin Mall, a glorified name for a vast, mostly empty parking lot with a smattering of shops, which has never really lived up to its promise as a shiny transportation hub for bus and subway lines. On a windy day, litter blows across the parking lot like tumbleweed, picks up speed across Gwynns Falls Parkway, floats on an updraft from passing traffic and whams into the stone walls of Douglass High School, where pieces of it line up, like so many students, in a tidy row against the base of the building. (Houppert, 200*, para. 90)

Urban city centers are constructed as spaces that are run-down and dirty. Houppert’s description of the scene indicates that Douglas High School is spatially located within the inner city. The description creates the image of failing communities, where dreams for a better future have died. The dreary representation of the failure of inner-city development initiatives and the seeming emptiness associated with wasted spaces may encourage readers to retrieve prior knowledge of failing minority communities. Most significant about Houpert’s descriptions, however, are the last few lines that aesthetically narrate the moving of trash from the run down mall to the high school. She compares the trash to the students and in doing so demonstrates that black youths have been thrown away and discarded, housed in a warehouse institution more like a prison than a school.

An extended example from a popular television news magazine may make clearer the use of spatial metaphor within the racialized poverty frame. On March 7, 2003, CBS’s 60 Minutes aired a nine minute segment on the Walbrook High School debate team in Baltimore, MD (Stahl, 2003). Under the direction of black male debate coach, teacher, and police officer Angelo Brooks, the Walbrook Warriors had proven themselves successful not only within the Baltimore Urban Debate League, but also in integrated competition against suburban schools. The 60 Minutes segment begins with Leslie Stahl seated in front of a life sized photo replica of two black students engaged in a debate competition. Stahl begins the feature by noting that high school debate has changed from an activity that only served suburban schools to increasing representation from inner-city schools. Stahl observes: “Most of the
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students at Walbrook High School come from low-income families, many from broken homes. The question is: Can debate change the odds for them?" (Stahl, 2003) 

As she continues to speak, the camera surveys the entrance and hallways of Walbrook High School while students are moving through the building to attend class. At the front doors, we encounter six young black males in thug uniform. Most of the young men are sporting white or black t-shirts, low-riding jeans, and tennis shoes. One young man in particular fills the screen, making notable the jewelry in his ear and around his neck, and the tattoos on his arm. The viewer is encouraged by Stahl to read the young black man as a representative image of low-income black youths. Stephen Haymes (1995) argues that "the black body . . . carries a pathological image that signifies threat and disorder" (p. 46). As Stahl indicates verbally that many of the Walbrook high school students come from "broken homes," the camera spans rapidly moving students in the hallway. The students are faceless, the speed of the camera not allowing a clear picture. However, their race and sex seem clear. The students are racial and ethnic minorities (the majority appearing black), with both males and females represented. Also significant within the camera frame is the darkness of the hallway, where poor artificial light illuminates the dark bodies moving through an ominous hallway (and, remember, lighting is a choice when filming).

Not only does the school environment become significant in racialized spatial imagery, but the home environments of the students do as well. For example, a Chicago Tribune reporter writes: "In Atlanta, a program began last year targeting middle-school students from public housing developments in the city" (Glanton, 2005, para. 11). Housing projects are characterized as the breeding ground for inner-city failure. As housing projects rarely include intact family structures, they become a critical representation of the pathologies associated with black, female-headed households. Housing projects signify the welfare queen stereotype, as it is the black female who is the representative image of governmental assistance for un-wed mothers. Breitbart and Pader (1995) argue: "Images of 'landscapes of poverty' (Francis, 1981, p.10)—dark, dirty hallways, vandalism, drug dealing, occupants who are alleged not to care about each other or their children—have become associated increasingly with young, low-income, unmarried mothers, primarily women of color" (p. 7).

The darkness, filth, violence, and criminality associated with the inner-city environment is contrasted to the normalized debate environment represented by suburban public and private schools. In the 60 Minutes piece, for example, note the following interchange between Stahl (2003) and the Walbrook coach Officer Brooks:

STAHL: (Voiceover) The original concept was that the inner-city students would compete only amongst themselves, but Coach Brooks takes his team to tournaments against suburban schools where parents hire private coaches and pay to send their kids to debate camps. You show up, and they're all in suits . . .

Off. BROOKS: (Voiceover) Yes.

STAHL: (Voiceover) . . .and jackets?

Off. BROOKS: (Voiceover) Yes.

STAHL: (Voiceover) And your kids?

Off. BROOKS: (Voiceover) We're in jeans, and T-shirts, and you know . . .

STAHL: (Voiceover) And that was intimidating to your kids, wasn't it?

Off. BROOKS: It was because they felt, you know, ostracized.
During this conversation, the Baltimore students are pictured approaching a suburban high school. The architecture seems designed around the image of a European-style castle with grey-stone walls, Cathedral-like structures, a large majestic front door, all surrounded by beautifully manicured lawns. The suburban students at the tournament are dressed in the prep school uniform: khaki pants for boys, khaki skirts for girls. Males are attired in button-down shirts, blazers, ties, and dress shoes. Young women are dressed in skirts, tights, crisp blouses, blazers, and dress shoes. The population seems significantly composed of white and mostly male students. The camera frame is infused by light; in contrast to the prior dark imaging of Walbrook High School, the private school appears bright, clean, and tidy.

In contrast to the suburban debate uniform described above, the Baltimore debaters are shown in jeans, t-shirts, tennis shoes, athletic team coats, and sports hats. While it seems that the framing of the clothing difference can be characterized through the lens of class alone, the difference of race and ethnicity is critical to creating a significant image contrast. These bodies are scripted through their contrast. In other words, such a sharp contrast in imagery is designed to encourage the audience to read the UDL students as outsiders facing insurmountable odds when facing the bodies pre-scripted to represent social and economic privilege, i.e. white bodies or bodies ideologically coded as white and economically privileged. It is not just the difference in attire that creates such a critical contrast, although Stahl and Brooks's conversation indicates otherwise. More significant is the racial contrast between the UDL and suburban students. Within the sea of whiteness, the Walbrook students appear uncomfortable and out of place.

That the students appear out of place is a critical narrative strategy, which highlights the students' difference from the more privileged representation of the white, middle to upper class debater. And yet, this particular visual contrast may simultaneously conflict with the reinscription of the students offered within the narrative of transformation. For example, although the contrast in dress between the UDL students and the suburban debaters would indicate that the students wore urban or hip hop gear to tournaments, in other parts of the video the debaters are shown in khaki pants, collar and/or button down shirts, blazers, etc. During their group interview with Stahl, for example, all of the students are in khaki pants and matching blue collared shirts with an emblem on the shoulder. The double contrast, that positions the UDL debaters between the representations of their home schools and the students in that environment and the suburban high school debate students, produces an ambiguity in the narrative of transformation. In other words, the UDL students' transformation is incomplete: While they are exceptions to their normal inner-city environment because of their successful debate participation, simultaneously, they do not quite fit into suburban, middle class spaces either.

The scripts made available for black youths within the poverty frame mark the students as destitute, and the attendant consequences of destitution indicate the likelihood that these students should be failures. The students are scripted as poor minorities within inner-city school settings. These schools are constructed as warehouse institutions where underachieving students are stored. It is necessary to script the entire high school student population as part of this narrative in order to demonstrate that the UDL students are its exceptions. It is the contrast between what people may expect from this student population and the achievement of the UDL debaters that helps to make the narrative intelligible to the audience. The UDL students must be initially scripted as part of the larger student body in their schools in order for them to be redeemed later by their debate success.
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DYSFUNCTIONAL BLACK FAMILIES AND THE BIRTH OF THE “THUG”

In this section, I return to the discussion of familial dysfunction, a recurring theme cited in earlier examples (see also Conan, 2006; Geracimos, 2004). In their descriptions of UDL participants and the schools and communities from which they come, journalists frame their subjects as members of dysfunctional families. Note the following characterization of UDL participants proffered by Heather Hollingsworth (2006) from the Associated Press: “Over the years, Jane Rinehart has taught a debater so poor that his home was heated with a kitchen stove cranked up to 500 degrees with its door open and the burners blasting. Others have spent their early years in foster homes or shuffled among relatives” (para. 2). Here is another example from a 2009 issue of Inside Counsel:

Gregg recalls the story of a high school girl who had been in foster care because one of her parents was in prison and the other was addicted to drugs. “She was underperforming [in school] and meeting everyone’s expectations that she would amount to nothing,” Gregg says. Getting involved in debate turned the girl’s life around. She became a top student headed to college. (Swanton, 2009, para. 7-8)

The student remains nameless, and as in the previous example, the unnamed student becomes a stand in or a representative of the total population of students the UDLs serve. The parents of these students are constructed as drug abusers and criminals who are either inept at providing the basic needs of their children or they abdicate responsibility altogether. The Inside Counsel article seems to indicate that the student’s underachievement is directly related to parental dysfunction and irresponsibility; because of these obstacles, there are “expectations” that the student would be a failure.

In the 60 Minutes segment, Stahl also refers to this frame of black familial dysfunction: “Brooks says his students have overcome tremendous adversities like child and sexual abuse and drugs in the family.” Another example, from Heather Hollingsworth (2006) at the Associated Press, notes that some students “have spent their early years in foster homes or shuffled among relatives” (para. 2). A more extended example may help to make the point even more poignant:

“My mom was a drug addict,” he says. “I couldn’t speculate about what drugs she was on, but she was an addict, and it eventually tore our family apart.” When Iggy [sic] was in ninth grade, his stepfather left his mother, returning to New Jersey and taking Iggy’s older brother with him. Iggy was left with his mother, who, he says, spiraled downward, disappearing for long stretches and failing to pay the bills, including the mortgage on the house she owned in Baltimore. One day when Iggy was 14, she simply disappeared. Iggy stayed on at the house for a week by himself, thinking she’d come back. But instead the sheriff showed up and handed Iggy a court-ordered eviction notice. Iggy took what he could carry and went over to a friend’s house. (Houppert, 2009, para. 58)

Ignacio “Iggie” (the correct spelling) Evans is being interviewed as one of the champions of the Baltimore Urban Debate League who had also been awarded a full debate scholarship to Towson University. Evans’s success that year had paved the way for an invitation to the National Urban Debate League Championships. He is described as having a single mother and an absentee father. His mother’s drug addiction and her subsequent abandonment serve to reiterate the bad black mother narrative.

Consider the clustering of frames, thus far, surrounding UDL students, their families, and their communities. Poverty, family dysfunction, and the inner city are interactional frames that suggest available scripts by which to read black mothers, fathers, and black communities. Black families and black communities are consistently portrayed as barriers to the
potential success of inner-city youth. There are very few positive characterizations of students' relationships with their biological parents. Neither black parents, nor the communities in which they raise their children, are characterized as positive influences or integral presences in the achievement of UDL students. These are the students on whom attention focuses because they are intelligible in the existing racialized frames, even as their stories are then used to reinforce the frames. These are the dominant, if not only, stories told and heard.

If black families and black communities are characterized by deviance, then the threat posed by black youth is the consequence. Breitbert and Pader (1995) note that in stereotypical characterizations of single black mothers, "their children are racialized and seen as the epitome of urban disorder, and hence, a threat" (p. 7). This dysfunction results in the characterization of these students as out of control, violent offenders, better "known . . . for . . . high dropout rates and and [sic] gang activity than for their academic prowess" (Day, 2002, para. 1).

Stories script the UDL students as "thugs" within the poverty/urban decay frame. Within the space of public education, "thugs" represent all that is wrong with failing inner-city schools. "Thugs" are nightmarish agents in the educational environment, violating school rules, disrupting class, and engaging in physically and sexually aggressive behavior, students, as described in one UDL story, who are "more likely to go to jail or die than go to college" (Tucker, 2011, p. A1). News media representations script UDL students as potential "thugs" (e.g., Bahrampour, 2000; Brown, 2010; Day, 2002; Gonzalez, 2000; Morris & Rockoff, 2002; Murphy, 2009; Segarza, 2007; Teicher, 2004). Note the following passage from the Chicago Tribune:

"These kids, in many ways, have been largely abandoned by traditional support systems. There are a lot of family issues around employment, substance abuse and other challenges," said Wade, who helps run the Atlanta program. "There is a lot of fighting and if you have a dispute, you hit. We work a lot with respect issues and learning to use our words so we don't have to use our fists." (Glanton, 2005, para. 29)

As this quotation indicates, families are characterized as violent, possible training grounds for producing children with violent behavioral tendencies. Again, the students are characterized as being from families where parents are unemployed and drug abusers. Seemingly, these children must be re-trained to overcome their upbringings in dysfunctional families. I attribute no intentionality to Wade’s description of the students’ families as violently dysfunctional. Wade may not have intended for these quotes to be chained together in this manner. As van Dijk argues (2000), "If sources are quoted, we may also expect that those are selected that confirm the general attitudes about the group in question" (p. 39). Quotations are chosen by whether or not they fit the frame of the story being told. As it reads within the frame, the family dynamics amongst UDL students and their parents have taught the students to respond to disagreements with violence. Such a characterization reiterates normative racial discourses that construct black bodies as criminal and violent.

Wade makes use of the "thug" image in her rhetorical communication with the news media. Multiple news agencies have quoted Wade's use of the term. Given the iconic significance of the black male as "thug" in the U.S. imagination, news media's use of these particular quotations are a significant means of defining the race, gender, and class frames that script the bodies of black (usually male) youths. Note the following excerpt from a Teachers Magazine article:
“We have all kinds of students participating in debate, but some of the best are kids I lovingly call thugs,” says Melissa Maxcy Wade, who created UDL. “But in debate, you enfranchise kids. Instead of being bad, they walk around saying: ‘Wow, I just beat Elite Academy. Look at me!’” (Ruenzel, 2002, p. 25)

The use of the term “thug” references an image in the mind of the audience. The thug as a symbol of deviance, violence, and criminality is signified though its citation in our current discursive environment. Wade is specific here about what she means by “thugs” in the context of the educational classroom: “they disrupt class, get kicked out, etcetera” (as cited in Ruenzel, 2002, p. 25). Wade argues that “These are kids who won’t participate in a system that is oppressing them—they know they’re being screwed” (as cited in Ruenzel, 2002, p. 25). Wade argues similarly, in the Chronicles of Higher Education, that these “thugs” are “smart, they’ve found a way not to learn in a classroom. Debate gives them the value of their voice. If they have communication, if they have their voice, they don’t need to use their fists” (as cited in Hoover, 2003, p. 28). These students are normally represented as impeding the progress of a classroom environment, forcing teachers to spend a significant amount of time dealing with disciplinary issues. Such disciplining serves only to raise student ire and encourage further disengagement from the education system. Although Wade’s use of the term “thug” may have cultural baggage, her characterization of the thugs’ circumstances in educational spaces is potentially transformative. Wade places the blame for “thug” behavior on a “system that oppresses them.” She argues for a structural interpretation of racism and classism that disrupts the normative narratives that blame black culture and families for black student failure. Yet, across the media representation of the UDL, the structural criticism that targets racial and economic barriers to educational equity that is presented by Wade becomes overwhelmed by the characterization of cultural and familial explanations for failure amongst inner-city youths of color.

In the Ruenzel (2002) passage, Wade notes her use of the term “thug” is done in a “loving manner” (p. 25). By qualifying her citation of the “thug” image with this phrase, Wade remains critical of discourse that would identify her students with the negative baggage attached to the term. In other words, Wade may problematize the association of the “thug” image with the youths of color the UDL serves. The “thug” is not an irredeemable, violent, criminal aggressor who rejects a neutral school environment. Instead, the students are re-coded as “smart” and their rejection of the educational system is justified given that the “system” is designed to maintain their failure. Yet, such a characterization, as read through the racialized poverty frame, simultaneously functions to romanticize the young black men to whom she refers, especially when read against media representations of white intervention into the “toxic” realities of “at-risk” youths of color. Within the narrative, Wade becomes the savior and the UDL students become mythical beasts that can be soothed by the caring touch of a white female hand. In essence, the image is a (re)affirmation of the mythical literary and pop culture figure of the misunderstood hero. If one considers the plethora of movie representations that depend on the image of an out of control black or brown teenager saved by the white star of the film (e.g., Wildcats, Dangerous Minds, Glory Road, or Freedom Writers) one begins to understand why this representation of Wade’s relationship with the young black men in the program is significant as a media framing of the league and the suggested scripts by which media consumers are to read UDL actors.

Lastly, the visual representation of Officer Angelo Brooks in the 60 Minutes special reproduces the racial scripting of inner-city black youth as potential thugs, even while attempting to produce a narrative of transformation and triumph. Brooks is shown in his
Baltimore Police Department (BPD) patrol uniform during the classroom scenes filmed at the school. Stahl makes sure to mention it. While the camera shows Brooks at practice, Stahl (2003) explains to the audience that Brooks teaches classes and coaches the debate team "in full uniform, including a loaded gun." Stahl's tone is incredulous which assures the audience that such a practice is indeed unusual for a normal high school classroom. Brooks is shown during a speaking drill at an afternoon practice. He walks around the classroom holding a timer, while the students speed read through a debate speaking drill. The camera pans in on Brooks's shoulder, zooming in on the patch on his arm that identifies him as a member of the BPD. The camera then pans out, then refocuses and pans in on the nine-millimeter firearm strapped to his waist.

Brooks's police uniform does not appear out of place even though the practice is occurring in what is clearly a classroom. In a suburban setting, a police officer teaching in a classroom would only seem intelligible if it were crime safety prevention day and the police department had sent an officer as an ambassador of good will to local schools. Yet, with Brooks surrounded by young black and brown students, his police uniform seems more acceptable, intelligible as a normal presence in a school dominated by minorities. If one simply looks at these images without the context of the verbal story, then one might be convinced that the students are juvenile delinquents engaged in some type of rehabilitation program run by a correctional officer. And yet, it is not just the uniform itself that signifies to the audience. The uniformed officer is carrying a (presumably) loaded firearm into a public school and into a classroom with students. That Brooks carries a weapon while he teaches students would seem to signify that some threat, or imminent danger, is present in his everyday interactions with students. And, such a threat would seem reasonable because of the student population with whom Brooks works. In other words, inner-city youths of color signify chaos and disorder. For example, earlier in the piece, Stahl notes: "A cop in the classroom, so committed to making a difference that he let a kid who was a gang member and a drug dealer join the team." Stahl’s voice is overlaid onto video footage of the Baltimore students at an after-school practice. As Stahl mentions "gang member" and "drug dealer," the camera zooms in on a young male (ambiguously black or brown) wearing eye-glasses, khaki's and a button down shirt. Stahl's assertions in conjunction with the visual images tell the viewer that the young man is very possibly one of those dangerous students whom Brooks has reformed. In other words, whether or not the young man is the actual student whom Stahl is describing is irrelevant, he becomes a stand-in or a place-holder for the scripting of criminality onto young black and/or brown male bodies. Their supposed propensity for violence, crime, and various other social infractions mark young black and brown bodies as likely offenders. Such a status breeds fear within the broader U.S. society of young black and brown vicious criminals. This makes the arming of oneself, while working with such students, a reaction that can only appear reasonable.

Consider the clustering of frames in the 60 Minutes story. Earlier in the documentary, the students are identified as poor youths of color wasting away in a low performing school with limited resources. The school building appears dark and dilapidated, hardly a place that seems conducive to learning. The students are scripted as possible drug dealers and, at the very least, troublemakers from dysfunctional families and communities. Officer Brooks becomes a significant part of the frame. He, as representative of law enforcement and order, provides continuity for the narrative of criminalization of poor youths of color.

While I focus on the repetition of the racialized poverty frame in the 60 Minutes example, it is important to note that this framing practice occurs in the context of a transformation
narrative of redemption. Officer Brooks is described by the students as an integral figure in their academic and personal development who has remained committed to their growth, even fielding late night phone calls as students attempt to cope with trauma in their lives outside of school. I refer back to an earlier example in which Stahl describes Officer Brooks as allowing a known drug dealer to be a member of the debate team. In response Brooks explains: “We can’t arrest ourself out of the problems” (as cited in Stahl, 2003). Also during the interview, Eric Beale, one of the Walbrook students, describes the debate team as a family. Following that statement, images of Brooks are shown while a voiceover from Stahl (2003) states: “With Brooks playing the part of the dad many of them don’t have.” The framing of Brooks’s relationship to the students in the context of his police body is significant. Stahl’s troubling of our normative understanding of police relationships to inner-city students of color offers a moment of complication of the normative discourse around the inner city and policing. In other words, Brooks is (re)scripted from police officer to coach and father. The reinscription is potentially transformative as it offers an alternative script for black men in contrast to the absentee father or the thug. However, in order to position Brooks as a father figure for his students, Stahl makes a sweeping claim about the absence of the students’ biological fathers, reiterating the narrative of familial dysfunction in inner-city communities.

Black youths generally represent problematic figures within the racialized poverty frame, while UDL students as particulars are offered alternative scripts within the transformation narrative. There is a desire to redeem the “thug” from the dangerous “rites of passage—drinking, drugs, and prison” (Hoover, 2003, p. 28). Reform efforts that redeem the “thug,” make her/him a more palatable, more sympathetic, and therefore a more redeemable figure. Note the following example from a Chronicle of Higher Education article: “She [Wade] and other proponents of the leagues also insist that debate can steer high risk students away from the temptations of drugs and gangs. Sometimes, those students become the best debaters, Ms. Wade says” (Hoover, 2003, p. 28). Here is another example from U.S. News & World Report: “Urban debate has also meant remarkable success in diverting at-risk kids from poverty, drugs, and violence. A student who can argue a point with words won’t do so with fists” (Morris & Rockoff, 2002, para. 6). Given the repetition of the theme of violence that runs through the news representation, the students signify disorder, chaos and criminality. Their young black and brown bodies must be scripted through these representations in order for their debate participation to be notable. They represent the exception that proves the truth of the scripts that are made available to those marked by blackness in a society defined by whiteness and economic privilege.

In the poverty and urban decay frame, the news media attempt to reinscript UDL black youths as victors able to transcend poverty and familial/cultural dysfunction. The news media’s ability to narratively reinscript the students as exceptions to the rule makes the stories of the UDL notable. Note the following example from the Chronicle of Higher Education concerning a student in the Southern California Urban Debate League who “doubts he would have considered applying to college if he hadn’t felt the adrenaline jolt of debate” (Hoover, 2003, p. 28). Stahl, in the CBS special, notes: “Before she joined the debating team, Regina was thinking about dropping out of school. Now she wants to become a Supreme Court justice.” Again, Stahl speaks: “Before debate, William had no interest in going to college. Not anymore.” One last example from a debate coach during a newspaper interview: “Two of the kids told me that, before their experience in debating, they weren’t planning on going to college. Now they are” (Gulick, 2009, para. 8). The focus on college
matriculation is a culmination of the redemption narrative. The clustering of frames in the redemptive tale indicates that the student populations the UDL targets are potential criminals, violent aggressors, and a drain on the social body. That these kind of students might be redeemed through debate participation reinscribes the UDL students from their common representation as chaos and disorder. College represents an orienting of the self toward the normal avenues of economic and social success. A college education realigns the young black body with the normative social body. And, yet, the reproduction of the racialized poverty frame and the attendant scripts offered to UDL students and their supporters ensure that these young black bodies can never fully be aligned. The redemption narrative of transformation depends on the normative intelligibility of the young black body in order to highlight UDL students as exceptional. Even as the UDL students are notable because of their difference from the norm as constructed within the frame, they are simultaneously unable to escape it as a defining narrative of their success.

What is the function of redemptive scripts? Is the scripting of the UDL students potentially transformative? The redemptive scripts offered to the UDLs students are an attempt by the news media to reinscribe black youths, painting them as worthy of efforts to redeem them. In that manner, the scripts can be redemptive. UDL students' successes and accomplishments are amazing, and their efforts should be publicized. The media's attention to the program's success is a critical means of advertising the league to potential students and their parents, teachers and administrators, and potential donors. However, the intelligibility and sensationalism associated with the racialized poverty frame reproduce scripts for UDL students that depend on a recirculation of race, class, and gender norms in order to make the transformative tale intelligible. In order for the story to be transformational, it requires a process of change from one state to another, i.e., the process of transforming. In order for the students' transformation to be complete, it requires a narrative explanation of their ostensible before status. The students represent, at least within the news media frame, at-risk youths who are more likely to fail than to succeed in the U.S. educational system. For the news media, it seems that framing techniques are dependent on positioning these students as at-risk in order to later redeem them through their debate participation. It is significant that such techniques require a scapegoating of the entire population of poor black youths in order to demonstrate that the urban debaters are exemplars. Human-interest stories about the UDL provide very limited personal background on the student participants. Instead, the media narratives either identify general background information for the student population, like socio-economic status and spatial background, or more direct references to students' background without identifying specific students, making all inner-city youths of color stand-ins. None of these characterizations are positive. Black families only appear in the frame as dysfunctional; there is little to no positive representation of families and communities, or UDL students' relationship to them. There are limited representations of UDL students who do not meet the "at-risk" frame.

**Conclusion**

Speech communication scholar Travis Dixon and journalism scholar Christina Azocar (2006) note, "the media in general and television news in particular have inculcated stereotypes about young Black criminality" (p. 144). In recent years, media scholar Peter Parisi's (1998a) analysis of extended print news stories "on race relations and life in urban African-American neighborhoods" (p. 239) notes that the news media has begun to respond to
criticism that it invariably portrays minorities in a negative light (1998b). It is because of such ambivalence in news representation about blacks and the rising national discourse about black underachievement that news media may increase positive stories of black student achievement. Yet, the crime news format is difficult to refuse because of its intelligibility to the audience. Thus, news media often reproduce the urban decay, poverty, and crime frames even when attempting to offer more complex representations of racial others. A reproduction of such frames results in a scripting of racial others according to the context of the frame. So, the poor black body only becomes intelligible within those frames.

As Jackson points out, scripting is not a static, monolithic process of one-size fits all meaning-making; rather, it is possible that subversive scripts can be generated for and by audiences. Dominant media frames suggest scripts for the audience to use in interpreting narratives about the ubiquity of inner-city decay, black violence, and nihilism. Such representations prime audiences to adopt the redemptive scripts deployed to describe triumphal UDL participants. Yet, as I have demonstrated, in order to embrace the redemptive script, the audience must also accept associated scripts that mark inner-city black youths as deviant, violent, and culturally dysfunctional. There is always the potential that the audience will read against the normative frames news media offer to them; however, that does not belie the fact that there is likely a suggested reading of the frame (During, 2003). In other words, this article can make no determination of how audiences actually read the news representation of UDLs, but it does suggest that the news framing practices suggest particular readings based on prior representations of deviance and criminality in inner-city communities of color.

Is it not possible to construct a human-interest story about the UDLs that simply focuses on the achievement of smart students? Why is it necessary to paint the students as potentially destructive in order to demonstrate the significance of their story? Journalists could frame UDL students through the drama of competition, the highs and lows of winning and losing, intellectual grudge matches, the stress on the coaches as they respond to their debaters’ successes and failures, the hard work and frustration as students grapple with foreign concepts, or the amazing depth of discussion about the significant political issues of our time. Stories could even mention the hardships when one lacks the economic advantages and resources that increase the likelihood of competitive success, but it is not necessary to demonize black families, black youths, and black culture to do so. At the very least, a diversity of representations of black mothers/fathers and urban minority communities would disrupt the normative frame of poverty, race, and deviance. Not all UDL students come from broken homes, with absentee dads (most likely in prison) and drug-addicted mothers. The scripts offered may not be deterministic, but the strength of the poverty and urban decay frames greatly limits the scripts made available to black youths.

Earlier in this essay, I drew on Karen Houppert’s (2007) article, “Finding Their Voices,” in the Washington Post to discuss the framing of familial dysfunction. Houppert, profiling Baltimore Urban Debate League student Ignacio “Iggie” Evans, asks personal questions about Evans’s family background. Houppert notes that while Evans was initially reticent about sharing his story, she persisted and eventually convinced her interview subject to reveal sensitive information about his personal background. Three years after the original interview in August 2007, Houppert (2010) published a follow up article entitled “Whatever Happened To . . . the Baltimore high school debater?” Evans, at the time of the article’s publication, was in his junior year of college at Towson University and along with his debate partner was well on his way to being a formidable competitor on the national college policy debate circuit. Houppert’s (2010) second article begins with a summary of what she
believes to be the relevant information from the first article. Still misspelling his name, she reported:

Iggy was a kid who had a lot of strikes against him. He never knew his biological dad. His mom struggled with drug addiction, and he landed in foster care. He attended Baltimore's Frederick Douglass High School, one of four failing Baltimore schools slated for takeover under the No Child Left Behind Act. His odds of success were poor. (para. 2)

Here we have a reproduction of the familial dysfunction and failing community/school frames, which is followed by the narrative of exceptionalism that identifies debate as Evans’s savior:

But Iggy, an argumentative kid, found a way to channel his contrariness through the wildly popular Baltimore Urban Debate League, a program that teaches the fundamentals of democracy—as well as critical thinking, basic literacy and research skills—to underprivileged students. (Houppert, 2010, para. 3)

The repetition of the narrative frames associated with black youths, in this example, demonstrates the difficulty these students will have in any attempt to escape this narrative’s social intelligibility. The narrative frame may be quite difficult to overcome because of its intelligibility to audiences trained to process the classed and racialized redemptive narrative. Yet, the final paragraph of the Houppert (2010) follow up article on Evans may offer a glimpse at potential tactics students and supporters might use to respond to the context of the frame when engaging with media representatives:

Meanwhile, he continues to question what it means to be a black man in America today, personally and politically. Though Towson is only a half-mile north of the Baltimore city limits, Iggy’s sense of displacement is profound. “My biggest challenge is being able to authentically perform who I am in these spaces,” Iggy says. “At the very least, debate has taught me to relentlessly defend my position as a black man and to understand my community’s needs.” (para. 8)

Evans does not speak to the obstacles he faced as a young man; it is Houppert who summarizes that part of the initial story. Evans focuses the discussion away from the racialized poverty frame that positions blackness and urban communities as spaces from which to escape, to his community as a place to direct the resources made available to him through debate training and a college education. Rather than demonize his community, Evans indicates both a love and support for the very community that Houppert has characterized as nothing but deviant, with dilapidated school systems and failing students. The Houppert/Evans example, while demonstrating the strength of the frame, simultaneously indicates that students can engage the frame, attempting to create alternative scripts to those that are normally intelligible.

Given the audience for this journal, I think the readership might be more interested in a discussion of the potential responses available for UDL students and supporters to this normative media frame, rather than a focus on what the media might do to resolve this problem. I attempt to offer some possible tactics and strategies for engaging the news media given the prevalence of the frame. First, UDL students should be trained to interact with journalists. Anyone who has worked with UDL students knows that they are often incredibly intelligent and quite sensitive to and reflexive about issues of representation. Thus, investing time in training UDL advocates, teachers, and coaches in media tactics, in order to educate the students, may be a significant tool in supporting student agency in the shaping of their representation. Students can learn to pivot the dominant frame. Knowing that the frame
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exists and how it functions may offer students the opportunity to interact with the frame, engaging in oppositional discourse designed to disrupt the normative scripts made available within the racialized poverty frame.

Second, UDL administrators and teachers might consider broaching the subject of the normative frames used in a majority of news representation of the UDL with journalists interested in featuring the program’s students. Those journalists who are unwilling to reject or, at the very least, interrogate the racialized poverty frame should potentially be denied access to the students. All interactions between journalists and students could be recorded by a UDL representative, likely a good common practice as a means of protecting the interests of the students given their ages. In addition, those recordings could be used to further engage media outlets in conversations about what narratives journalists have chosen to focus their attention upon versus what may have been said in the actual interview.

Lastly, administrators and teachers might turn to minority and alternative news press outlets as options for more complex representations of the UDL and its students. Future research into UDL representation should evaluate the framing and scripting techniques of these alternative presses.

The suggestions I offer, however, must be considered within the context of a dominant narrative that will be difficult, if not impossible, to replace through individual and even institutional acts of agency. The issue here is one of the intelligibility of representations and the scripting of racialized narratives on the corporeal bodies of those coded as black in the social imagination.

REFERENCES


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