

**Spelling Out Racial Difference:
Moving Beyond the Inspirational Discourses in *Akeelah and the Bee***
by Kathryn Linder

Introduction

Akeelah and the Bee (2006) was released in the midst of a spelling bee movie fad that began with the documentary film *Spellbound* (2002) and continued with the film *Bee Season* (2005) based on Myla Goldberg's 2001 novel of the same name. Following the quest of an 11-year-old black girl as she attempts to win the National Spelling Bee, *Akeelah* received much attention in the press because the film was the first to be produced and promoted by Starbucks Coffee Company. With an adolescent black female protagonist (Keke Palmer) and an almost all-black cast that includes well-known black actors Laurence Fishburne and Angela Bassett, *Akeelah* engages with issues of age, race and gender throughout. Because *Akeelah* is comprised of the mixed genres of family drama, sports movie, and inspirational inner-city education film, the narrative offers a unique opportunity for an in-depth analysis of how messages about education, privilege, and difference are communicated to diverse audiences.

Of particular interest in this article are the ways in which *Akeelah* draws on the conventions of melodrama in order to create a particular narrative of academic success for the film's youthful main character. Although *Akeelah* was labeled by one reviewer as a film with "such a kind heart that it renders itself immune to any real criticism" (*The Washington Times*, April 28, 2006), here I advance an alternative reading. Specifically, I combat the inspirational discourse that surrounds the film and instead acknowledge and critique dominant messages of racial assimilation and white privilege that are communicated to the film's intended audience of young people. After a brief reception study of *Akeelah*, I offer an analysis of how the film engages with standards of melodrama to convey particular messages of age, race, privilege, gender, and difference. Through an application of Linda Williams's five features of the melodramatic mode, I examine the film's portrayal of the main character Akeelah, her relationships within her black community, and her interactions with the larger dominant (white) society in order to illustrate how the film contains underlying messages of racial assimilation and white privilege.

Spelling as (Melo)Drama

Spelling bee competitions, which have been part of American educational and social culture since the 1700s¹, have been argued to be "not simply a scholastic game," but rather events that influence Americans "on some level of our cultural psyche and being."² In his 1941 article on the spelling bee as a linguistic institution, Allen Walker Read claims that "the attainment of spelling was a symbol of culture" and that spelling bees have historically "rank[ed] among the

¹ See, Allen Walker Read, "The Spelling Bee: A Linguistic Institution of the American Folk." *PMLA* 56.2 (1941): 495-512.

² Sam Whitsitt, "The *Spelling Bee*: What Makes it an American Institution?" *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43.4 (2010): 884; 885.

conservative influences in American speech... [they are] a determinant of the course taken by the language.”³ Indeed, American spelling bees “as a genuine folk institution”⁴ were one of the mechanisms through which American children both entertained the adults in their communities and also normalized the relationship between knowing how to spell and one’s ability to perform a certain level of cultural knowledge and authority through language. According to scholar Sam Whitsitt, author of “*The Spelling Bee: What Makes it an American Institution?*”, language is more than a mode of communication between individuals. Whitsitt argues that “language can provide analogies for proper moral behavior, as in expressions such as *mind one’s ‘p’s’ and ‘q’s’*, and *being sure to dot one’s ‘i’s’ and cross one’s ‘t’s’*.”⁵ Moreover, Whitsitt claims that “language itself can be the medium” through which “questions of morality, as well as other dramas of a culture” are played out.⁶ As I will argue below, the fictionalized spelling bee competition in *Akeelah and the Bee* acts as a platform for a racial melodrama through which ideals of whiteness are reinforced and strengthened.

Melodrama, a complex cinematic term that has been utilized to examine a variety of diverse film genres,⁷ has been broadly defined “as a technique or technology for working through ideas, relations, identities, and feelings.”⁸ While cinematic scholars have postulated a range of comparative definitions of melodrama in order to encompass how the term has changed over time,⁹ these same scholars agree that melodrama in film can be broadly characterized through 1) the ways in which melodramas entice audiences with messages of moral uplift and 2) how melodramas attempt to manipulate audience emotion, especially with appeals to sympathy and pity. Because melodramas depend on the identification of heroes, villains, and Manichean definitions of right and wrong in order to make particular moral claims, they are ripe for critical analysis.

The relationship between melodrama, moral uplift, and appeals to sympathy may explain why melodramas with young protagonists are so effective. Nancy Lesko, in her book *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (2001), argues that socially constructed narratives of adolescence are especially engaging for audiences because they often include messages about the future of society and the hope that youth embody. Lesko further claims that “consumers of adolescent narratives are bound emotionally to the story. We are happy, satisfied, and comforted by narratives of fulfillment (conventional adolescent development); we are disturbed and

³ Read, 512.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 511

⁵ Whitsitt, 884.

⁶ Whitsitt, 884.

⁷ See, respectively: Scott Higgins. “Suspenseful Situations: Melodramatic Narrative and the Contemporary Action Film.” *Cinema Journal* 47.2 (Winter 2008): 74-96; Despina Kakoudaki. “Spectacles of History: Race Relations, Melodrama, and the Science Fiction/Disaster Film.” *Camera Obscura* 50.17 (2002): 109-153; Sumiko Higashi. “Melodrama, Realism, and Race: World War II Newsreels and Propaganda Film.” *Cinema Journal* 37.3 (Spring 1998): 38-61.

⁸ Michael Stewart. “Irresistible Death: *21 Grams* as Melodrama.” *Cinema Journal* 47.1 (2007): 65.

⁹ See Dan Flory’s explanation of “classical” versus “modified” melodrama in his article “Race, Rationality, and Melodrama: Aesthetic Response and the Case of Oscar Micheaux.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63.4 (Autumn 2005): 327-338. Or Ben Singer’s differentiation between “action” and “pathetic” melodrama in *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

alarmed by precocity and risk”¹⁰ In films that feature youth of color in school settings in particular, anxieties about youth encountering drug use, violence, and rampant sexuality¹¹ exist alongside arguments about the need for public schooling to educate students about how to be “good” citizens.¹² As I will elaborate below, the education system in *Akeelah* has been simultaneously positioned as both a site of danger and salvation, embodying both the problems of society and the solutions to those problems through the possibility of Akeelah’s success. By focusing on an adolescent black protagonist who is fighting to save her school and larger community from funding cuts and urban blight, *Akeelah* is set apart as not only a racial melodrama, but one that is also heavily influenced by societal understandings of youth identity.

Standards of melodrama have been frequently used to examine both historical and contemporary films to better understand filmic representations of racial identity, the concept of passing, and American race relations. This may be, in part, because melodrama has a history of “support[ing] and perpetuat[ing] racist beliefs in white supremacy.”¹³ Films such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Imitation of Life* (1934), and *Stella Dallas* (1937) have all been argued to be canonical melodramas that also uphold problematic ideals of whiteness.¹⁴ (Several of these films, it should be noted, also focus on a young, female protagonist.) It is because of the historical relationship between melodrama and messages of white supremacy that film scholar Linda Williams has pointed to the ways in which melodrama has had, and continues to have, an “incalculable influence on American attitudes toward race.”¹⁵ In her 2001 book, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*, Williams argues for “the importance of investigating racial melodrama – of understanding the dynamics of melodrama in relation to the stories about race that American popular culture has long been telling itself.”¹⁶ Thus, a central goal of this article is to identify and critique *Akeelah* as a racial melodrama lest the film become part of an unquestioned national narrative of racial hegemony.

Reviewer Perceptions of *Akeelah* and the Bee

Akeelah and the Bee centers on the story of Akeelah Anderson, a young girl from Los Angeles, who unintentionally wins her school’s spelling bee, an event that she participates in at her principal’s request after she repeatedly skips school. Following her local win, Akeelah’s principal introduces her to Dr. Larabee (Laurence Fishburne), a black English professor who agrees to coach her in the hope that she will be able to advance to the Scripps National Spelling Bee. From the beginning of the film, the odds are against Akeelah. Not only does her

¹⁰ Nancy Lesko. *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*. (New York & London: Routledge Falmer, 2001): 132.

¹¹ See Mike Males’s *The Scapegoat Generation* (1996) for further explication of these national fears.

¹² See, for example, such films as *Dangerous Minds* (1995) or *187* (1997).

¹³ Flory, 330.

¹⁴ See Flory, 330; Allison Whitney. “Race, Class and the Pressure to Pass in American Maternal Melodrama: The Case of *Stella Dallas*.” *Journal of Film and Video* 59, 1 (Spring 2007): 3-18.

¹⁵ Linda Williams. “Melodrama in Black and White: Uncle Tom and *The Green Mile*.” *Film Quarterly* 55, 2 (2001): 20-21.

¹⁶ Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White From Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 43.

impoverished school lack appropriate textbooks and materials to help her train, but her single mother (Angela Bassett) is represented as uninterested in Akeelah's training as she works during the day and at night to make ends meet. Moreover, Akeelah is competing against economically advantaged youths who have been training for years and who are more familiar with the discourses of local, regional, state, and national spelling bees. Throughout the film, Akeelah must overcome a series of obstacles in order to accomplish her goal and prove that a young black girl from a poor neighborhood can succeed in the privileged domain of the spelling bee world.

Viewing *Akeelah and the Bee* as a melodrama that is fashioned after "some gladiator sports event"¹⁷ and that is "reminiscent of many sports movies in which underdogs win the day" (*St. Petersburg Times*, May 7, 2006), it becomes easy to see how film audiences are asked to engage in a cheering on of the young heroine at the expense of critical analysis. The film's main plotline, that of the black community supporting Akeelah to achieve her spelling bee dream, encourages audience members to be just as supportive. To critically question the film's portrayal of Akeelah, her black family, and her black community would mean one is not "playing along." Indeed, scholar Judith Mayne argues about the critical analysis of film that "to be conscious of race and the curious racial politics of the film is to refuse to be a good sport (in several senses of the term)."¹⁸ Throughout *Akeelah*, standards of melodrama both advance issues of race while also encouraging the film's diverse audiences to ignore them in order to be "good sports."

Feminist film scholar Sharon Willis argues that contemporary films are "representations that strive to accommodate diversity through scripts organized around specific identities and intended to capture new identity-based market segments."¹⁹ The corporate support of *Akeelah and the Bee* by Starbucks offers an interesting example of a film about a black community that is marketed across diverse audiences. In part, this marketing occurs through a paradox in which an erasure of issues of race within the film exists alongside a reliance on the film's title, which incorporates the protagonist's ethnic name, to draw both white and black audiences. For example, in a description by Starbucks's chief executive, Howard Schultz (*The Independent*, April 25, 2006), *Akeelah* is portrayed as a film with an "inspirational message about a community coming together to support one of its own," which Schultz claims is "emblematic of what Starbucks stands for." In newspaper articles about the film's promotion and reception, representatives of Starbucks do not acknowledge the film's specific racial themes, but allude to the film's "social message" (*Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 2007) and refer to the film as "socially relevant" (*New York Times*, October 22, 2006). *Akeelah and the Bee*'s tagline, "changing the world... one word at a time," also offers a vague description of the film's transformative social power, but does not specifically locate this social change as within the black community or as anti-racist.

In the remainder of this article, I critically analyze the messages of age, race, and privilege in *Akeelah and the Bee* through an application of Linda William's five aspects of melodrama: home as a space of innocence, the victim-hero character, pathos and action, realism,

¹⁷ Bassett, Angela. Interview by Robin Roberts. 26 April 2006. *Good Morning America*. Available from Lexis Nexis (accessed October 28, 2007).

¹⁸ Mayne, 149.

¹⁹ Sharon Willis. *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*. (Durham, Duke University Press, 1997): 3.

and binaries of good and evil. Williams associates each of these standards specifically with racialized melodramas and she presents each standard as a method to more fully understand “a peculiarly American form of melodrama in which virtue becomes inextricably linked to forms of racial victimization.”²⁰ Below, I elaborate on the ways in which *Akeelah and the Bee* is framed as “inspirational” precisely through the film’s portrayal of Akeelah’s victimization by the black community that surrounds her. Indeed, it is only through pursuing the national spelling bee that Akeelah, her family, and her black community can be redeemed through the idealized discourse of young people’s educational success as defined by dominant (white) culture.

Home as a Space of Innocence

For this first melodramatic mode, Williams argues that a melodramatic narrative “begins, and wants to end, in a ‘space of innocence’.”²¹ Within *Akeelah and the Bee*, however, there is no overt space of youthful innocence for Akeelah to claim as her own. Indeed, the lack of innocence that surrounds Akeelah is highlighted in the film’s opening scenes in which the audience is shown shots of her neighborhood with a voiceover introducing Akeelah as a neighborhood misfit. With an opening shot of graffiti and cement buildings, Akeelah states, “you know that feeling, no matter what you do, or where you go, you just don’t fit in?”²² Walking amidst stores with barred windows and signs written in foreign languages, Akeelah explains that she cannot find a word to describe how she feels “all the time” in her neighborhood. Despite having an extensive vocabulary from her hobby of playing a computerized version of scrabble, Akeelah cannot communicate the relationship she has with her community.

Locating where “this all starts” at her school rather than the home where she resides with her family, Akeelah situates her story in a school space filled with children, a space often constructed as one of innocence, but not in the context of Akeelah’s neighborhood. Akeelah’s school is a “fragile and fleeting [space] of innocence embedded within larger corrupt social orders”²³ that work to both segregate her school and neighborhood and deny equal academic opportunities to Akeelah and her peers due to lack of funding and institutional support. Rather than opening the film with a nostalgic site of innocence to which Akeelah is trying to return, *Akeelah* instead implies that this innocence never existed. The lack of innocence in *Akeelah and the Bee* immediately calls attention to the racial difference of Akeelah’s neighborhood and disassociates innocence from her home and school in distinctly racialized ways.

The first shot of her school is through a layer of chain-link fencing toward a basketball court where children of color are playing. The second shot is from inside the school looking out at razor wire across the top of a fence and is framed in layers of doorways. The third shot is from outside looking in through scratched, grimy windows at children climbing a stairwell. In each shot, the children are trapped within the building or its grounds by fencing. Other shots within the school show dirty lockers, uniformed children sleeping in classrooms, and students’ papers with low grades marked in red ink. These opening shots are contrasted with our first view

²⁰ Ibid. 44

²¹ Ibid. 28

²² *Akeelah and the Bee*, 2006.

²³ Ibid. 28

of Akeelah, who is walking down the street toward the school looking unsure of her surroundings and verbalizing the ways in which she feels like she does not fit.

Throughout these opening scenes, the audience is clearly meant to identify Akeelah as someone who does not belong. In addition to her explaining that she does not fit in with her larger community, Akeelah is also portrayed as not fitting in with her family. The film's first shot of her home, a shelf of books in her room, is contrasted with a previous shot of garbage on the street. On the shelf are a mixture of word reference books (thesauruses and dictionaries) and classic literature from Hurston, Faulkner, Dickens, L'Engle, and others. This shot is followed by a close up of a computer screen with a digital scrabble game, and then a shot of Akeelah playing. Akeelah is interrupted from her game by dinner, which is announced by her sister—a teenage mother holding her child. At dinner, the audience is also introduced to Akeelah's single mother, her soldier brother, and her absent brother who, it is implied, is spending time with a more dangerous crowd in the neighborhood. Through these early scenes of her home, Akeelah is set apart physically in her room as well as academically with her books and computer; she is also placed in opposition to her family who are shown interrupting her efforts to learn words or practice spelling. The film's introduction to her home life ends with Akeelah spelling words to herself in her room with the noise of sirens and helicopters drowning out the sound of her calling out letters.

Because a melodrama “ends happily if the protagonists can, in some way, return... home,”²⁴ the audience of *Akeelah and the Bee* may already be expecting a transformation of community that will need to take place by the end of the film for Akeelah to fit in with her neighborhood and family. Following the melodramatic standard, *Akeelah and the Bee* does eventually attempt to redeem the community's innocence so that it will be a place to which Akeelah will want to return. For example, the ending of the film displays a montage of shots that show Akeelah studying with members of her community such as local gang members. The montage (re)presents Akeelah's community without graffiti and with houses now located in a suburban-looking setting with more grass and less cement. For Akeelah to return home now that she has changed, the community must show change as well. The place where Akeelah did not fit in is now a community in which “everything feels right.”²⁵

The stereotypical representation of the black community throughout *Akeelah* offers the film's audience a nostalgic representation of segregation. The space of innocence in *Akeelah* is not something already present in the film, but rather something outside of Akeelah's community that it must emulate. Indeed, it is the lack of innocence in Akeelah's life that points to the flaws of her black community and home life. The redemption of Akeelah's community at the end of the film when neighbors and family members help her to achieve success at the National Spelling Bee supports Williams's argument that “melodrama offers the hope... [that] virtue and truth can be achieved in private individuals and individual heroic acts, rather than... in revolution and change.”²⁶ Rather than interrogate the social obstacles that inhibit Akeelah's success and which she must overcome, the film places individuals in her home and neighborhood as a central barrier to her spelling bee goals. Akeelah becomes a victim of her black

²⁴ Ibid. 28

²⁵ *Akeelah*, 2006.

²⁶ Ibid. 35

neighborhood and can only become a hero through “getting out” when she competes in and wins the National Spelling Bee. The goal of the film is not for the community to revolutionize black education at Akeelah’s school, but rather to help one individual achieve an individual success. (Re)locating Akeelah in her community after the final spelling bee returns audience members to a different kind of innocent and unquestioning space: Akeelah has been placed back where she belongs, has accepted her surroundings, and her community has no overt plans for systemic change that might affect the outside (white) world.

The Victim-Hero

By situating Akeelah as separate from her family and her community in her goals and academic efforts, Akeelah is developed early on as an “underdog from the ghetto” who must triumph over “a life of adversity” (*The Gazette*, April 28, 2006). Relying on racial stereotypes, the film identifies Akeelah as a “victim-hero,” the character who is developed in the second aspect of the racialized melodrama. According to Williams, “melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and on recognizing their virtue. Recognition of virtue orchestrates the moral legibility that is key to melodrama’s function.”²⁷ Although Akeelah is unmotivated at the beginning of the film, her attendance at the school’s spelling bee, despite her reservations, shows her willingness to try. Akeelah, who has skipped a grade, is portrayed as a student who can “show [that Crenshaw Middle School] students can perform” by competing against other students in local, regional, and statewide spelling bees with the hopes of representing the school at the national competition, despite the fact that the school does not have enough money to “put doors on the toilet stalls.”²⁸

Williams argues that films “need their victim-heroes to suffer in order to purge them of the taint of selfish ambition.”²⁹ In *Akeelah and the Bee*, Akeelah’s choice to compete in spelling competitions and to spend all of her summer studying (definitely a form of suffering to the children viewing the movie) is made with the knowledge that her community is counting on her. Her performance in the spelling bee is represented as necessary for the school to argue their need for money for curriculum materials. Without Akeelah, the school will be denied resources and written off as a lost cause. Additionally, Akeelah competes because of her memories of her deceased father. When she initially decides to compete, it is because her brother reminds her that it would be what their father would have wanted. Through each of her motivations, Akeelah is framed as taking responsibility for her own achievements and as representative of her community, which can be read both positively and negatively. While Akeelah is seen as able to achieve what she puts her mind to, she is also required to take responsibility for her own learning despite significant societal obstacles.

Like Akeelah, her neighborhood can also be characterized through the melodramatic standard of the victim-hero. While Akeelah is victimized by her surroundings, however, her community is seen as being victimized by their own actions (gang activity, older men panhandling on the street, and Akeelah’s mother as neglectful and unsupportive of her academic endeavors). The community is redeemed and made heroic at the end of the film when Akeelah is

²⁷ Williams, 29.

²⁸ *Akeelah*, 2006.

²⁹ Williams, 30.

shown studying with the local gang members, older men at the local park, and her mother, sister, and brother on the stoop of her house. Akeelah uses the image of “50,000 coaches”³⁰ as she envisions her community as study helpers, employing the local grocer and the mail delivery person along the way. By helping Akeelah achieve her individual goal, the community is brought together around one person, but is not shown accomplishing any kind of large-scale change. Akeelah’s community is represented as docile and always willing to help achieve a white standard—in this case, success at the national spelling bee. The film’s representation of the community’s redemption embodies melodrama’s “tendency to find solutions to problems that cannot really be solved without challenging the older ideologies of moral certainty to which melodrama wishes to return.”³¹ Ultimately, the community achieves redemption through its docility, unquestioningly supporting Akeelah as she successfully navigates the (primarily white) spelling bee world.

Pathos and Action

Williams’s third aspect of melodrama outlines how an audience’s “recognition of virtue [in the victim-hero] involves a dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of ‘too late’ and ‘in the nick of time.’”³² This characteristic is also overtly racialized in *Akeelah and the Bee* through the relationship between what is deemed as too late and what occurs just in time for Akeelah and for her community. For example, part of the pressure that Akeelah faces to achieve academic recognition is the pressure to get out of the neighborhood where her father was killed in a random shooting. The danger of getting stuck in Akeelah’s neighborhood, represented by frequent shots of metal fencing, are frequently contrasted with the house of Dr. Larabee. Although Dr. Larabee is described as living near to Akeelah (indeed, she questions his importance because he lives so close), his house is surrounded by a tranquil garden and is a place where Akeelah must “speak properly or [she] won’t speak at all.”³³ Dr. Larabee requires that Akeelah prove herself as someone who can follow orders and leave black culture behind before she can gain entry to his house and become his student. Importantly, their initial meeting takes place outside his home and Akeelah is not allowed entry until she acknowledges needing Dr. Larabee’s help to succeed and has shown her efforts to learn Latin roots.

If Akeelah can learn to strip herself of black culture in the nick of time in order to accommodate the expectations of white culture, then maybe she can accomplish her goal of winning the national spelling bee. Dr. Larabee’s home represents what Akeelah can achieve if his intervention is not already too late. Akeelah is frequently compared to other children who have been studying and attempting to make it to the national spelling bee for years. In fact, she only has two years left in which she will be eligible to compete, so her time is limited. The various obstacles that Akeelah must overcome, such as the lack of education she receives at her impoverished school, are combined with Akeelah’s low self-esteem about her abilities. By not attending school regularly and not turning in assignments, the implication is that Akeelah also thinks that her chance for a transformative opportunity has passed.

³⁰ *Akeelah*, 2006.

³¹ Williams, 37.

³² *Ibid.* 30

³³ *Akeelah*, 2006.

The above themes of saving Akeelah in the nick of time from herself and the limited future that supposedly awaits her are amplified by the sporting-event-inspired genre of the film. Several times, Akeelah just makes a deadline to compete or just makes the cut to progress to the next level of spelling bee. At one bee, Akeelah's mother interrupts her spelling and threatens to remove her from a competition. While Akeelah argues with her mother, another contestant that Akeelah befriends must stall so that Akeelah can return in the nick of time and move forward once again. At another bee, Akeelah loses by one person until her sister identifies another contestant who is cheating, thus allowing Akeelah to move to the next stage. These repeated situations in which Akeelah barely is able to move forward illustrate the challenges of the bees and also show her need for Dr. Larabee's help in navigating within the spelling bee community.

Realism

Williams argues that the fourth aspect of black and white melodrama is that “melodrama borrows from realism but realism serves the melodrama of pathos and action.”³⁴ This function of melodrama is also evident in *Akeelah and the Bee*. Because the release of *Akeelah and the Bee* followed the documentary *Spellbound* (2002), diverse audiences may have already been aware of the reality of spelling bee competitions. As well, the diverse population of Southern California allows for the possibility that three ethnic children (one black, one Latino, and one Chinese) could compete against one another at the national bee, as happens in the film. Even the stereotypes used throughout the film can be seen as realistic—Akeelah's single mother, her dead father, and her Chinese competitor's verbally abusive father—as these stereotypes are commonly used to portray people of color. However, how the realism within the film is received by white audiences (who may believe the situations with little questioning) versus audiences of color (who may be a bit more skeptical) is significant.

For example, the film plays on realities of black experience in subtle ways that may be read differently by white and black audiences. The ghost of the Ebonics controversy of the late 1990s in Oakland, which validated African American Language as a dialect, is present in Dr. Larabee's demand that Akeelah “leave the ghetto talk outside” before he will allow her in his home or agree to work with her. Larabee's requirement for Akeelah's speech directly contradicts the claim that in spelling bees “what counts in America is now how you say it; you do not have to sound like you come from any higher class to make something count; what counts is how one puts the graphic, material, singular signifiers—the letters—in the correct... order.”³⁵ *Akeelah* argues against the idea that the spelling bee “is an egalitarian gathering in which kids from every social class compete in a true meritocracy.”³⁶ In order to begin her training, constraints are immediately placed on Akeelah's vocabulary and pronunciation. As well, the cultural phenomenon of black children's fear of “acting white” in their pursuit of education is present in Akeelah's low self-esteem and in her repeated concern about being called a “freak and

³⁴ Ibid. 38

³⁵ Whitsitt, 889.

³⁶ James Maguire. *American Bee: The National Spelling Bee and the Culture of Word Nerds*. (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 2006): x.

a brainiac” by her peers.³⁷ Although the film never makes direct connections between these historical concerns and the culture of the black community, *Akeelah* clearly relies on contemporary issues of race to drive the film’s pathos and action.

A scene in the movie where Akeelah’s mother confronts her about a trip to a local school of mostly white children to study words is exemplary of this aspect of black and white melodrama. Akeelah’s mother states, “if this spelling thing means sneaking off to the suburbs... I’m calling it all off... do you think they care about you in Woodland Hills?”³⁸ In both this scene and the scene in which Dr. Larabee strips Akeelah of her “ghetto talk,” Akeelah is almost thwarted from her goal of participating in spelling bees because of adult perceptions of her racial affiliations. In the case of her mother, it is her white assimilation, while in the case of Dr. Larabee it is Akeelah’s embodiment of black culture. Akeelah must overcome both of these perceptions in order to continue toward her goal. She must perform whiteness for Dr. Larabee and the spelling bee officials and also maintain her blackness for her family and neighborhood.

Akeelah’s transition into white speech while also maintaining her blackness represents a realistic portrayal of the tension young people of color may feel when forced to accommodate dominant cultural ideas of education and knowledge. Seen through Akeelah’s progression through spelling bees as she learns the intricacies of bee rules and regulations, her assimilation is hidden within a spelling bee discourse, but the presence of all-white judges and her all-white competition imply something more disturbing at work in the film that may be more visible to black audiences than white. In the beginning of her spelling bee career Akeelah is asked if she would like a definition and she replies, “that would be cool;” she also does not speak into the microphone when asking questions and asks for definitions saying, “you want to tell me what that means?” Later in the film, Akeelah is much more polished and asks, “can I have a definition please?” and “can I have the language of origin please?”³⁹ This change in Akeelah’s language and speech patterns signifies more than her knowledge of spelling bee discourse. On one level, Akeelah’s change can be read as her “beating the system” and “playing the game” in order to win. On another level, one must ask, why is this change even necessary? Why does the film have to show this change rather than having Akeelah win the bee while also maintaining a speech pattern inflected by Ebonics?

Some of these questions are addressed by Akeelah’s performance of blackness at the National Spelling Bee. Even as Akeelah is performing whiteness for the judges of the competitions, Akeelah performs blackness by jumping rope as a mnemonic device to keep time. The relationship between jump roping and the black community, specifically young black girls, is discussed in Kyra Gaunt’s *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes From Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*,⁴⁰ in which Gaunt argues that the body-conscious rhythms used in jump rope can be traced back to the times of slavery and are heavily associated with urban girl culture. In addition to Gaunt’s book, the metaphors of double-dutch and jumping rope have been used in

³⁷ *Akeelah*, 2006.

³⁸ *Akeelah*, 2006.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Kyra Gaunt. *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes From Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*. (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

scholarly works to describe the role of blacks in politics⁴¹ and to discuss black women writers.⁴² In the film, Akeelah not only uses jump roping to practice for the competition, but also actually mimics jump roping at the competition itself when she is given a challenging word. Her time on stage is a mixed performance of whiteness for the judges and blackness for her community at home, who are frequently shown watching the live competition on television and cheering her on. Akeelah's balancing of two competing discourses is another component of the film that can be read both positively and negatively. Although at least one reviewer identified Akeelah's jump roping as "a gratuitous racial stereotype" (*The Times*, August 17, 2006), thus representing a clear stereotype of black youth, her use of the jump roping to continue on in the competition also signifies (albeit in a simplistic way) her ability to employ an aspect of historically black culture to engage in the white system. To say that Akeelah's jump roping is either a positive or negative representation of black culture is to ignore that it can be both.

Binaries of Good Versus Evil: White Anxieties in Akeelah and the Bee

Williams's fifth and final aspect of the black and white melodrama may be the most important to an interpretation of the racial messages being communicated throughout *Akeelah and the Bee*. Williams states, "the final key of melodrama is the presentation of characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichaeian conflicts between good and evil."⁴³ Throughout the film, clear binaries are drawn between the supportive Dr. Larabee and Akeelah's skeptical mother. Dr. Larabee is perceived as "mythic" (*The Washington Post*, April 28, 2006) and "inspirational" (*The Independent*, April 25, 2006) while Akeelah's mother is perceived as "hostile" (*Today Show*, May 1, 2006) and "embittered" (*Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 2006; *USA Today*, April 28, 2006). Unlike Dr. Larabee who immediately recognizes Akeelah's potential, Akeelah's mother has doubts about the obstacles that need to be overcome in order for Akeelah to succeed, thus making her the main villain within *Akeelah*. She is demonized by reviewers as a "classic commotion-causing black mom" (*The Boston Globe*, April 28, 2006). Interestingly, Dr. Larabee's association with Akeelah's assimilation into dominant (white) discourses of the spelling bee is not critiqued within the film as much as her mother's lack of support for her educational goals.

In *Playing the Race Card*, Williams draws on the narrative of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to describe a binary between a "Tom" character and an "Anti-Tom" character, both of which frame black identity in relation to white culture. According to Williams, the "Tom" half of the binary is the "good nigger"⁴⁴ who embodies characteristics of "gentle[ness]"⁴⁵ and "docility"⁴⁶ while also expressing "kindliness, benevolence, dignity, humility, and so on."⁴⁷ Unlike the "Anti-

⁴¹ Elaine Brown Jenkins. *Jumping Double Dutch: A New Agenda for Black and the Republican Party*. (Silver Spring, MD: Beckham house, 1996).

⁴² Valerie Lee. *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

⁴³ Williams, 40.

⁴⁴ Williams, 99.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 103.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 303.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 103.

Tom” character, the black man who is “an object of white fear and loathing,”⁴⁸ Dr. Larabee is dependable and willing to help Akeelah’s white principal in his time of need by becoming a mentor and spelling coach for Akeelah. Represented in the film as quiet, reflective, and dedicated to his role as teacher, Dr. Larabee is contrasted with other male figures in Akeelah’s neighborhood who are affiliated with gangs or who are poor and without jobs, and also with Akeelah’s unsupportive mother. Ultimately, Dr. Larabee, as the main “Tom” character, becomes the catalyst for Akeelah, Akeelah’s mother, and Akeelah’s community to transition from an “Anti-Tom” portrayal to a “Tom” story. Indeed, Akeelah’s success, rather than be attributed to herself or her community, is attributed to the assistance of Dr. Larabee, who Akeelah’s mother describes as “generous” when she thanks him for “everything.”⁴⁹

In *Akeelah and the Bee*, both Akeelah and Dr. Larabee embody the assimilation of the black community into dominant white discourses of education, language, and larger cultural practices. Throughout the film, a quote from Marianne Williamson’s poem “A Return to Love,” is repeated by Dr. Larabee to encourage Akeelah. He states, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.”⁵⁰ Although this quote is meant to illustrate the fears of Akeelah as a young black girl who is unsure of her abilities, it also stands in for white anxieties about people of color. To acknowledge that black people are adequate in their own right would disrupt a hierarchy of racial dominance and submission. In her book on theories of spectatorship, Judith Mayne claims that “one of the most efficient ways to evoke and deny race simultaneously is to make a black character a projection of white anxieties about race.”⁵¹ Through *Akeelah*’s focus on the power of Akeelah to succeed through assimilation into whiteness, Akeelah’s black identity is disempowered as an equally appropriate method for success.

As scholar James Baldwin argues, “the brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes.”⁵² Importantly, although Dr. Larabee repeats the Williamson’s quote to encourage Akeelah to fight for her goal, the goal that she is fighting for is located within a particular discourse of educational achievement. The goal of the Scripps National Spelling Bee is, in part, to help young people “develop correct English usage that will help them all their lives.”⁵³ In the film, there is no question that the “correct English” that Akeelah needs to emulate, and that Dr. Larabee already speaks, is a form of English that has been associated with white and middle-upper class culture. As Akeelah works to emulate “correct English” and prove her adeptness at spelling, she, like Dr. Larabee, is portrayed as a special case who is not adequate for who she is, but rather for the dominant discourses of language and education that she can perform.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 99.

⁴⁹ *Akeelah*, 2006.

⁵⁰ *Akeelah and the Bee*, DVD. Directed by Doug Atchison. Los Angeles, CA: Spelling Bee Productions, 2006.

⁵¹ Judith Mayne. *Cinema and Spectatorship*. (New York: Routledge, 1993): 148.

⁵² James Baldwin. “If Black English Isn’t A Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” *The Black Scholar* 27, 1 (2001): 6.

⁵³ “About the Bee.” (Accessed 16 March 2011) <http://www.spellingbee.com/about-the-bee>

Like Akeelah, Dr. Larabee's character can also be analyzed in terms of white anxieties about race. By embodying a "Tom" character who can only be trusted and loved rather than feared and hated, Dr. Larabee can be read as a non-threatening black man who has assimilated to white culture and who can be depended on to help assimilate others. Dr. Larabee, who is described by reviewers as a "cultured" (*The Gazette*, April 28, 2006), "inspirational" (*The Independent*, April 25, 2006) and "charismatic" (*Mail on Sunday*, August 20, 2006), embodies a phenomenon through which dominant norms of speech and pronunciation are translated into "othered" communities through "othered" individuals themselves. Problematically, Dr. Larabee is portrayed primarily as a positive influence on Akeelah and as an academic mentor; his character is never questioned for the changes that he encourages in her racial identity and performance.

The characters of Akeelah and Dr. Larabee are both used to illustrate how black people can be successfully assimilated into dominant cultural discourses without becoming threats to that dominant culture. Rather than people to be feared, Akeelah, Dr. Larabee, and Akeelah's community are shown adapting to white expectations while remaining segregated and "othered". As within the "Tom" story, the characters in *Akeelah and the Bee* are mostly represented as having "no interest in escape"⁵⁴ from societal oppressions and limitations. Akeelah may return to her black neighborhoods more competent in "correct English" than when she left, but there is no sign throughout the film of any kind of lasting change for Akeelah's school or her young peers. The community effort to support Akeelah results in the success of just one individual, rather than in larger changes that are implied to be needed within her school and community.

Conclusion

In her defense of melodrama as a genre worthy of study, Williams states that "melodrama may prove central to who we are as a nation, and black and white racial melodrama may even prove central to the question of just who we mean when we say 'we' are a nation."⁵⁵ Used as a tool to define the norm against the "other" while also creating parallel binaries of good versus evil, racial melodramas that employ narratives of youth identity and development allow for virtue to become legible in conjunction with dominant discourses of age, race, privilege, and difference. As Henry Giroux argues, "the racial coding of black youth tells us less about such youth than it does about how white society configures public memory, stability and disorder, and the experiences of marginal groups in America."⁵⁶ Problematically, while *Akeelah and the Bee* engages with important social identity issues, the film simultaneously situates these cultural negotiations in a binary construction of success (whiteness) versus failure (blackness). The story of Akeelah's success is merely a mechanism through which racial assimilation is further normalized and white privilege is maintained.

While *Akeelah and the Bee* addresses the need for more films about communities of color, the film also offers a crucial example of how racial melodramas that are meant to inspire can also offer subtle messages that privilege harmful dominant cultural standards and

⁵⁴ Ibid. 305

⁵⁵ Ibid. 44

⁵⁶ Henry Giroux. *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth*. (New York: Routledge, 1996): 69.

expectations. As the above analysis illustrates, embedded within *Akeelah and the Bee*'s inspirational message, there are also some disturbing similarities to historical black and white melodramas with more overt racist messages. Indeed, racial melodrama often offers complex and contradictory messages about both the norm and the other, thus demanding a critical interrogation of racial messages communicated through melodramatic modes. As Williams states, "melodrama is not a static, archaic, stereotyping and non-realist form, but a tremendously protean, evolving, and modernizing form that continually uncovers new realistic material for its melodramatic project."⁵⁷ As melodramas adjust over time to incorporate and respond to new realities and racial representations, further analysis of the messages racial melodramas communicate is imperative.

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⁵⁷ Williams, 297

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