

IN AND OUT: A STUDY ON MISSISSIPPI BURNING AND DEACONS FOR DEFENSE UNDER A PERSPECTIVE OF “RACE” AND GENDER¹

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RESUMO: Dois filmes baseados em eventos históricos exploram a temática da luta contra o racismo no sul dos Estados Unidos na década de 1960. O primeiro intitulado *Mississippi Burning*, (1988) dirigido por Alan Parker retrata uma série de atos violentos direcionados à comunidade africana americana no estado do Mississippi que foi iniciada após os assassinatos de três ativistas de direitos humanos que clamavam por igualdade de direitos para todos que vivem em sociedade. O segundo filme, chama-se *Deacons for Defense* (2003) uma produção para a televisão dirigida por Bill Duke, é baseada em um movimento de resistência armado organizado pela comunidade africana americana no estado da Louisiana em reação a uma série de atos violentos a eles direcionados. Esta pesquisa objetiva contrastar os dois filmes e explorar questões como a violência contra os africanos americanos é representada nas telas. Ainda, os atos de violência e a postura que mantém a hierarquia social em que a comunidade africana americana está inserida serão estudados em detalhe de acordo com o conceito de masculinidade definido por Michael S. Kimmel e de violência teorizada por Johan Galtung (1996). Há também necessidade de se estudar o contexto e o discurso pré-estabelecido de “raças” para aprofundar a compreensão do comportamento e da complexidade dos personagens envolvidos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: masculinidade; gênero; estudos fílmicos.

ABSTRACT: *Two films based on historical events explore the thematic of the fight against the racism in the Southern region of the United States in the 1960s'. The first entitled "Mississippi Burning", (1988) directed by Alan Parker depicts a series of violent acts directed to the members of African-American community in the State of Mississippi triggered by the murder of three civil right workers who had claimed equality of rights for all members of society. The second film, a production for television entitled as "Deacons for Defense" (2003) directed by Bill Duke, is based on a movement of armed resistance organized by African-Americans in reaction to the series of violent attacks that targeted them. This paper aims at contrasting the two films and exploring issues such as the scope how violence against African-Americans is projected onto the screen. Yet, the violent acts and postures that help keeping the social hierarchy in which the African-American people live are scrutinized according to the concept of masculinity defined by Michael S. Kimmel and violence theorized by Johan Galtung (1996). There is also a necessity of scrutinizing the context and the discourse on "race" in order to deepen the understanding of the behavior and the complexity of the characters involved.*

KEYWORDS: *masculinity; gender; film studies.*

Introduction

Racism has been the thematic of several films, though two films that depict the fight against the racism in the Southern region of the United States of the 1960s' were chosen: "Mississippi Burning", (1988) directed by Alan Parker, from now on referred to as

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M.B. and “Deacons for Defense”, (2003) directed by Bill Duke, from now on referred to as D.F.D.. M. B. is a production for the big screen and depicts a series of violence against members of African-American community in the State of Mississippi when three civil right activists who claimed equality of rights for all members of society disappeared mysteriously. D. F. D. is a production for television and depicts an armed movement of resistance organized by African-Americans in the State of Louisiana. This work refers to the “white people” as white, and “black people” as African-Americans. Both films refer to the African-American individual through the term “colored” very common in the 1960s, though, it is important to notice that the term carries a negative and pejorative connotation and served as a label of segregation.

Objective

This article has as objective to tackle the problematic of the perspective of how violence against African-Americans is framed, enacted and presented to the audience. Yet, it also aims at scrutinizing, according the concept of violence theorized by Johan Galtung, the violent acts that target the African-American community and the discourse behind those acts that help keeping the social hierarchy in which the African-Americans are forced to live. Finally, it is also necessary to study the “dialogical” relation that the discourse of the characters’s new discourses on gender and “race” establish with the old ones (BAKHTIN, 1997; BRAIT, 2012).

Theoretical concepts

According to Galtung (1996), it is possible to conceptualize violence according to the types of violence found in society. He writes that when “an actor intends the consequences of violence” it is said to be *direct violence*, whereas an indirect violence that “comes from social structure itself – between humans, between set of humans (society), between set of societies (region, legions) in the world” is referred to as *structural violence* (GALTUNG, 1996, p.2). The *inner structural violence* implies in affirming that the individual has a tendency to act through violence. On the other hand, the *outer structural violence* represents the “repression and exploitation (state, politics, society)” that is present in society (p.2). And, finally, *cultural violence* that is “all of it symbolic, in religion and ideology, in language and arts, in science and law, in media and education”, whose main function is to “legitimate direct and structural violence” (p.2).

Galtung (1996) does not mention racial issues while conceptualizing violence. However, his concept of violence has been used as a theoretical framework to discuss the types of violence present in a society focusing the various aspects of oppression suffered by a distinct group within the system.

Hutcheon (2007) advocates a position on resisting the discourse of fidelity on film studies. Yet, adaptations according to Sanders (2005, p.160) represent the innumerable possibilities of “seeing things come back [...] in as many forms as possible”. Thus, this work does not aim at verifying the “fidelity” (HUTCHEON, 2007) of the historical facts enacted to the screen, but studying the two film productions as a means to reflect on how violence motivated by racial issues in American society of the 1960s is depicted to the screen and studying the pre-established discourse on “race” and “gender” through the voices or the silence of the characters.

Being the object of study two films, it is important to point out that in film studies, the camera is considered to be a narrator and the scenes are framed and scoped according to a certain perspective. Much of the scope is guided by the director of a film. In the case of “Mississippi Burning” (M.B.), it is directed by Alan Parker, an English director whereas in the case of “Deacons for Defense” (D.F.D.), it is directed by Bill Duke, member of the African-American community. Yet, it is relevant to notice that M.B. was produced in the late 1980s, whereas D. F. D. was produced in 2003. From the 1980s to 2003 much of “race” and gender studies have been developed and the scope of each film might show the different tendencies in depicting racial and gender issues to the screen at each time of production.

On masculinity

Masculinity, according to Michael Kimmel (2007, p. 86), is a “homosocial enactment” e.g. man has a need to be enacted as a man by other men. Or, “what men need is men’s approval” (idem). Historically, “[...] [black] slaves were seen as dependent, helpless men, incapable of defending their women and children, and therefore less than manly” (KIMMEL, 2007, p.89). Therefore, masculinity was denied to the African-American male. However, according to Kimmel, this negation has also a “flip side”, African-Americans were also considered to be “rampaging sexual beasts” as opposed to the civilized white male (KIMMEL, 2007, p. 90). In this context, African American females are unprotected beings (BEAL, 2012) and whose existence needs to be “validated” by Afro American males (LYNCH, 2012).

Study

In M.B., two Jewish men and African-American militants of civil rights movements coming from the Northern region of the United States of America are brutally murdered by the local police. The case is investigated by the FBI. As soon as the car of the victims is found; a hundred men are required to maintain the local order. Though, places such as the church where African-Americans may have a chance of organizing a movement of resistance are set on fire by the local white people. Then, houses are burned down in retaliation to the insistence of the FBI in solving the case of the missing activists. The African-American community mobilizes against the violence, organizing non-violent protests and the FBI pressures the local power in order to solve the crime. The agents solved the case and imprison all the involved officers with the exception of Sheriff Stuckey.

M.B. depicts a white society that segregates the African-American community, impeding the access to the civil and political right such as the right to vote. Some members of African-American community do not exercise the right to vote and to participate actively in the politics, as a result of so many decades of disenfranchisement. The civil right movement in the film brings messages of equality of rights among the two opposing groups. The distinction between the white and the African-American is contrasted in the opening scene of the film. The camera shows two drinking fountains that are labeled as “white” and “colored” at school. The drinking fountain for the white students is a proper water cooler, whereas the drinking fountain for the African-Americans is not exactly a drinking fountain, being very similar to a drinking fountain for birds in parks; it is simply a

sink that runs water continually without cooling it. That scene shows the segregation of the African-American individuals in society and the fragile “tolerance” towards them. Racial segregation was legitimized in the United States from the 1880s to 1960s in the majority of the states through laws that became known as “Jim Crow Laws”. These laws regulated the lives of the individual in society, among which it includes the regulation of public places, such as schools, buses, and restaurants. Some places for African-Americans were distinct from those reserved for the white people, or under certain conditions the African-Americans were able to walk into the same places as the white people.

After the Civil War, the South faced frustration and anger (MARX, 1996; Du BOIS, 1903) was directed to the African-American community. The segregation pushed the African-Americans geographically apart from the white society, forming African-American communities, ghettos where churches provided spiritual support. For that reason the churches became a place for mobilization and action against the oppression, as can be noticed in *M.B.* being the reason why the church of the African-American community is set on fire for representing a place of resistance. Such an act represents the attempt of the white society to keep the control of the space where the African-American community lived avoiding any possibility of reaction and political mobilization.

The film *M.B.* depicts how cultural violence is engendered in American society against the African-American community that is pushed apart from the system. In the scene agent Anderson, played by Hackman, tells about his childhood in Mississippi and what his father once had told him. Anderson says his father’s racist words: ...“If you ain't better than a nigger, son, who are you better than?” This statement that in fact is Anderson’s father’s racist statement is also the racist statement passed throughout generations through cultural beliefs and means that “race” determines hierarchical relationships that the African-American man is supposed to be at the bottom of society. This scene shows clearly what W.E.B du Bois points out: “he felt his poverty; without a cent, without a home, without a land, tools, or savings, he had entered into competition with rich, landed, skilled neighbors.” (Du BOIS, p. 899). Even though structural violence had pushed the African-American neighbor Monroe to the bottom of society, he somehow managed to buy a mule. A mule is not only an animal, but it represents a labor force that might help Monroe to improve his earnings. This fact affects negatively Anderson’s father that is being considered less capable than another man, and for this man being an African-American it has a double negative effect. The question whether Anderson’s father has or does not have a mule is not clear. The relevant aspect is that Monroe, an African-American has a mule. Anderson’s father acts through direct violence, intending killing the mule; he poisons the water that the mule had. Nevertheless, the surrounding neighbors instigate the violence showing the culturally accepted fact that an African-American man has to be at the bottom of the economic productive system, and that he is supposed to be at the lowest socio-economical and cultural level in society. That generally accepted thinking justifies the act of violence against the mule that was ultimately directed to Monroe himself. The scene shows how hatred motivated by race is passed within a family circle spreading through neighborhood defining culturally the place where each “racial” group has to occupy in society. Thus, cultural violence naturalizes the structure turning a preconceived and biased idea of “race” and social structure into common knowledge that in turn becomes a pre-established discourse on “race”. Therefore, “cultural violence” crystallizes into structural violence and direct violence, through a generally accepted discourse (GALTUNG, 1996).

The scene is very complex as it involves what is to be a masculine being in society. One of the qualities expected from a man is the ability to support economically and protect his own family. That is a culturally accepted general mark of masculinity. The fact that Monroe, an African-American man, is able to sustain his family properly overcoming poverty face the fact that Anderson's father, a white man, is being defeated by poverty causes the surrounding society to feel the threat. Therefore the neighbors warn about the possibility of what is going to happen if Monroe is permitted to continue making improvements in his life. That instigates violent actions against Monroe.

According to Kimmel (2007, p. 86), masculinity can be seen as a "social enactment" that man expects that his abilities, skills and actions are measured by "other men to grant [him] [his] manhood". Anderson's father had to act in order to keep the situation under control conforming to the pre-established discourse of "race". After having the mule killed, Monroe moves to another place. The silence in the neighborhood is a sign of recognition that the right thing was done, "justice" has been made. The acceptance of Anderson's father by the surrounding neighbors implies that the old man had complied with the pre-established discourse. Though, his father feels shame before him who as a child might not have understood the justice made. The scene shows dialogism (BAKHTIN, 1997) in Anderson's discourse as he deconstructs his father's discourse in favour of Monroe pointing out that the true villain was "poverty" that was killing his old man and not exactly Monroe. Yet, his father's wrong words being in conformity with the discourse of the neighbors show a dialogic relation to the prevailing racist discourse (BAKHTIN, 1997; BRAIT, 2012).

Another scene that shows the confessional tone on the subject of racism is the scene in which Mrs. Pell, played by Francis McDormand, talks with Agent Anderson. Mrs. Pell is the wife of one of the police officer who drove the car the night the civil right activists were executed. She says:

People look at us...and only see bigots and racists. Hatred isn't something you're born with. It gets taught. At school they said segregation is what it said in the Bible. Genesis 9 verse 27. At seven years of age, you get told it enough times, you believe it.
You believe the hatred. You live it. You breathe it. You marry it.

Mrs. Pell lives within the system and helps to maintain it. And, she explains that the perpetrator of violence in fact is molded according to the culture rooted in religion: "God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant" (Gen. 9: 27). The descendants of the tribe of Japheth are interpreted as being the white people who will become numerous and will have allies such as the descendents of Shem, and opposing to them, their enemies descended from Canaan, who are supposedly the African-American community, would serve them. The passage is misinterpreted in order to justify the oppression of the African-Americans, in this way culture naturalizes oppression and justifies the acts of violence toward one specific group. Mr. Pell's discourse implies that the system also creates victims within, as the individual thought is standardized according to the cultural and religious beliefs. Society has a pre-established discourse on racism that influences tremendously the individual's behavior. Yet, the Bible becomes an instrument of oppression providing authority on the racist discourse.

Nevertheless, M.B. does not leave space for the African-American characters to speak about his or her personal pain. Yet, the violence against an African-American male who had his testicles removed in an act of violence performed by the Ku Klux Klan is just mentioned in the report of an FBI agent. In this scene, the agent threatens to perform the same act against the mayor in case he does not tell everything he knows about the missing activists. The violence against African-American community is the motive through which the narrative is constructed, thus the African-American community becomes an object of discourse. Once masculinity was denied to the African-American male through a discourse that was repeatedly conveyed in society, the crime directed to the African-American body has strong symbolism. This physical castration is a mark of the racist discourse on the African-American male body. Therefore, it is possible to notice that it is not enough to segregate or to repress; the oppressor also imprints a mark of racism on the oppressed body.

M. B. shows an African-American in silence as the object of discourse in a society where the subject of the discourse is the white, heterosexual, male, Christian, Anglo-Saxon individual. The African-American speaks through his silence, being threatened by the system. His silence is a clear indication of the negation of his own masculinity by society that constantly asserts his inability to protect his wife and children, and thus the inability to assume a masculine role in society.

The African-American community is depicted as a victimized mass that has to be protected; their needs are conveyed mostly through the lines of the two agents who refer to them during the investigation. Having this racist environment protected by state force, the reverend of the African-American community takes a stand and speaks about the anger and non-conformity and faces the situation. The reverend while performing the service of the funeral of the African-American activist repeats what the state wants him to say: "We mourn with the mothers of these two white boys". However, according to him "the state of Mississippi" would not allow burying a white person and African-American individuals in the same cemetery. The reverend who belongs to the African-American community then calls the African-American community to "be angry" and brave to fight against oppression. The reverend is one of the few characters who is able to talk in the production. His dialogical discourse is constructed through deconstructing the pre-established discourses on racism and segregation (BAKHTIN, 1997; BRAIT, 2012).

Then, scenes of members of African-American community being interviewed by reporters follow, though their voices cannot be heard by the audience, as music is placed in this scene. This resource conveys a message of general idea of pain inherent to every oppressed individual in society instead of particularizing it. Yet, the African-American community also mobilizes as a discontent mass expressing their demands through a single word: "Freedom". This scene shows a rare moment in which the African-American community leaves their status as "object" and becomes a "subject" of their own discourse.

African-American actors play minor roles in the film conveying a discourse of a general pain probably common to every oppressed individual, despite the fact that every oppressed person's pain is distinct from one another. Yet, the voices in the film claim a general pain inherent to the individual with no distinction whether they are male or female outsiders. It is an indication of a general view of the people, seen from an outside perspective. The film does not go deeper beyond the surface level of the general view of

the pain to scrutinize and show the minutiae of the effects of racial discrimination on the individual body and soul. Thus, most part of the film, the African-American cannot speak about the inner and private pain of being segregated and its devastating effects on his or her identity as being an African-American man or an African-American woman.

The case depicted in MB is mentioned in the film *Deacons for Defense* (D.F. D.). Local authorities fear the intervention of the FBI in the state of Louisiana. D. F. D. has Forest Whitaker as a main character Marcus Clay, and the veteran Ossie Davis as Reverend Gregory. The opening scene of the film is the moment in which Clay as a child hunts with his father, as they miss the pray, his father teaches the seriousness of surviving and bringing “food on the table”. They hear a shot and they find a dead body of an African-American male hung by the KKK. Since then, Clay is a man tormented by fear that paralyzes him and impedes him from having any reaction against the oppressive system in society. This was a crucial lesson for him to outlive in society. This scene follows him in his dreams almost the entire film. This murder freezes Clay and establishes the social boundaries wherein Clay has to live; and molds the passive posture he has to adopt to survive in society.

A white pacifist named Michael Deane, played by Jonathan Silverman, arrives to town with civil rights ideas and organizes non-violent protest for equal civil rights in society for every individual. Clay’s daughter Lucille, played by Serena Lee is belabored violently by a police officer during a peaceful protest organized by Deane. Clay by attempting to protect his daughter strangles the police officer who is assaulting her. Clay is taken by the police and is brutalized and assailed by the officers. Clay tries to justify his acts by saying: “I was protecting my daughter”, the police officer then replies: “Nigger, that’s a privilege you don’t have”. The African-Americans are considered to be unable to protect women and children. And, the system does not confer to the African-American the very right of protecting his own family. For the police officer, Clay is seen not as a man, or a masculine being complying with the racist posture of the white society in relation to the African-American male posited by Kimmel (2007). Back home, Clay tells Rose, his wife played by Melanie Nicholls-King:

Look at me, Rose. Did you see what they did to me? See what I look like. I know I have spent... all my life, all my life: Yes sir, no sir. I never looked in their eyes, and I always smiled at them. Did you what they did? They beat me like I was a crook. Rose, they don’t want... they [the police officers] don’ want me even ... that I have a thought... The thought I was a man. I see. They are goin’ do the same, they are goin’ to do the same to Brooks, and they are doin’ the same with Brooks’ kids, and they are goin’ do the same with their kids. And it’s got stop. This got stop, Rose. I gotta do something. Let’s go to church.

Clay’s passive and submissive posture does not make him a reliable person in society. He then realizes that he had been only deprived of his right of behaving as a man in society. Once Clay reacts, he is treated as a criminal. The police officers, most of them members of the KKK torture him physically and psychologically, depriving him of the very right to think. Clay changes his posture and assumes his role as a man to protect his wife and family. He then becomes a subject of his own discourse in defense of his own family. The scene is confessional and his words establish a dialogic relation with the oppressive discourse of the police officers (BAKHTIN, 1997; BRAIT, 2012).

Clay starts leading an armed movement called Deacons for Defense in order to fight against racism and segregation. The great enemy is the Ku Klux Klan whose members are police officers and wealthy shop owners of the region. Clay works at a factory where 70% of the employees are African-Americans who receive low wages without any perspective of improvement in their work conditions or payment raise. With the pressure made by the media, the factory headquarter in Seattle desegregates all the spaces within all the factories such as place of work, toilets, cafeteria and lockers. That fact creates a great tension in the white society.

Clay becomes the leader of the African-American community and he becomes the subject of his own discourse and the subject of the African-American community in the white society. This reinforces the position of Marx (1996, p.25), that “racial exclusion beneficial to whites in the short run may provoke countermobilization in the long run”, namely a reaction against the racist oppression. Clay leads the movement of resistance and mobilization called Deacons for Defense, which enrages the leader of the KKK, William Chase who describes Clay as being: “like [an][...] animal, completely uncontrollable [that][...] needs to be put down”. This is the opinion shared obviously by the other KKK members in relation to the African-Americans, who they consider as being savage beasts, with no self-control that have to be stopped by force (KIMMEL, 2007).

The white activists Charles Hillibrand, played by Adam Weiner and Michael Deane, played by Jonathan Silverman are called as “nigger lovers” by the KKK leader. They are enclosed by the member of the KKK and assaulted violently. According to Kimmel (2007), American masculinity is based on the negation of the feminine, therefore being masculine implies in being non-feminine, or non-effeminate. Once the masculine being in American society is depicted as White, male, Christian, Anglo-Saxon, it is possible to notice that masculinity is denied in this context to the African-Americans extending this negation of masculinity to whoever attempted to confront the system in defense of the African-American individual. This scene shows how the homophobia is closely related to the notion of American masculinity.

Hillibrand and Deane are threatened by the police officers to leave the city otherwise they would have the same destiny as the missing activists of Mississippi. This chance was given to Hillibrand and Deane, because according to the officers, the two activists were white and for this reason they had “the same skin color as God”. Deane decides to stay and confront the local authority and the KKK. Deane responds to Hillibrand’s fearful reaction: “[I will stay] because our skin is not the same color as God’s”. Deane responds establishing a dialogical relation to the old biased discourse on white skin color and superiority. As they both remained in town, the KKK leader speaks before the two activists: “and now you boys will be given a good Christian warning that you just didn’t listen. Gentlemen, beat them with the strength of the Lord and the rage of the devil.” The activists were punished for their actions, through the KKK leader sustains his discourse speaking either in the name of God or the devil as long as it justifies his acts of violence. Cultural violence, thus justifies direct violence against those ones who try to change the status quo (GALTUNG, 1996).

Clay becomes the subject of his discourse and advocates his fight even against Deane, the activist whose fight essence is non-violence and based on resistance. Clay

confronts him by saying: “The colored men had waited for this shift for 400 years. You come down here to my town to tell how to fight my fight? My fight?” Clay speaks for himself and for the African-American community and reacts against Deane’s paternalistic posture. The African-American people can mobilize and protect themselves. It is not necessary for a white activist to speak for them, as they can speak for themselves. Deane instructs the movement is the legal aspects, though; Clay has the final decision to lead the movement.

Masculinity is present in the discourse of the male characters in D.F.D.. Reverend Gregory confesses to Clay about his fear that marked his own lack of masculinity: “I have been living in fear of the Klan all my life, was bred in me as a child and made me less than a man. But all of that has changed because of you. You freed me, son.” Clay even being aware about the risks of being killed; he posits his will to protect his family, and his future generations: “I wanna live like a man, like a man does.” These two scenes clearly show the characters’ strong will to assume the masculine role that was denied to the African-American individual and that was attributed only to the white male. In these discourses, Clay and Reverend Gregory establish a dialogic relation (BAKHTIN, 1997) between the old discourse of the denial of the masculine identity for the African-American male and their choice for living as a man, even though it would mean risking their own existence.

In the final confrontation of the Deacons with the KKK, the leader of the KKK points a gun at Clay’s head. Clay replies: “I am not afraid and I am no less of man than you are”. That obviously enrages the KKK leader who does not expect a reply. Then, the local authorities intercede and protect the Deacons’ right to “assemble”. Clay subverts the relation of power by the use of arms and direct intended violence. The fear the KKK had inflicted on the African-Americans was subverted, the African American community can finally mobilize for their civil rights.

Deane, the activist and now Clay’s friend says: “The truth is all the reason anyone listened to us is all because they were too afraid to deal with you.” This scene shows clearly the hidden belief that white society had about African Americans being savage and uncontrollable beings (KIMMEL, 20007). However, oppressive white society experienced that the Deacons for Defense had the power to mobilize and subvert the system.

Conclusion

In sum, both productions deal with the struggle against racism. Though, the struggles are depicted in distinct forms being necessary to respond who the subjects of the discourses are. The film *M. B.* depicts the viewpoint of the FBI agents, imprinting a paternalistic and protective tone in the film. *M.B.* conveys the discourse for freedom of the oppressed African-American mass, though, does not go deeper into the African-American private pain. On the other hand, the film *D. F. D.* reveals the oppressed African-American, as being able to speak for himself, about his fears and his need to fight for redemption. Both films present the question of homophobia in relation to the African-American and the underlying idea of American masculinity which has the White Christian Anglo-Saxon as a model of masculinity. Both films do not go deeper into the subject matter of the female rights in the African-American community, in *M. B.* , the African-American female characters do not have voice, whereas in *D.F.D.*, the African-American woman is someone who has to be protected by and give support to the African-American male individual. It is

possible to notice in both films that the African-American male lived under the stigma of being a non-masculine individual who is unable to protect his wife and children. Yet, the African-American community suffered direct violence living under the oppressing structure that kept them at the bottom of society, being both forms of violence justified and naturalized by religion and culture. By creating new discourses, the male characters in D. F. D. deconstruct old discourses on “race” and “masculinity”, assuming their masculine roles in society. Female characters, on the contrary, are depicted in D. F. D. as beautiful angels who are the motives why the African-American males fight to protect and build a family, whose existence is “validated by Afro American male” (LYNCH, 2012).

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