

How american hisotry
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Summary

American History X was written by David McKenna and directed by Tony Kaye. Starring Edward Norton as Derek Vinyard, the film was released in 1998. The main idea of the film is the social and political issues of racism. It is a story of how a family is affected by one son's view of the history of race roles in America, his life within the neo Nazi culture, and finally, after resigning himself to such a lifestyle due to prison reformation, his attempt to pull his younger brother from the same way of violent life.

Ultimately, it is a story of the cycles of hate surrounding racism. The film is shown in non-linear narrative where events are given out of chronological order. When going back in time, the audience is given black and white film whereas the present is portrayed in color. Danny Vinyard, is given an assignment to write an essay on the incarceration of the main character, his older brother, Derek. The essay was to entail what led up to the incarceration and how his family was affected. The verbal reflection of his essay is when the audience is shown the film presented in black and white.

Also during the verbal reflection, we find out that Derek was incarcerated for the murder of 2 Black thieves who were trying to steal the truck left to him by his late father who was killed by, not without intent of the writer, a Black man a few years prior. With that, the storyline is set up so that we know why Derek and Danny have turned to a life of neo Nazism and why Derek was given a 3 year sentence for going overboard in killing the thieves: the brothers have been affected by the criminality of the Black culture.

The essay assigned to Danny, which was due the following day, was an assignment given by Danny's Black principal after his Jewish teacher reported a questionable essay to him entitled *My Mein Kampf*. In the 24 hours in which the essay is being written, and narrated to the viewers, we learn the entire story of the brothers' journeys from average kids, through neo Nazism and back, only to learn their lesson too late when Danny is fatally struck down by a former Black recipient of his race hatred, essay still in hand.

American History X correlates to the discussions of the class as well as various points of the class textbook, *Think American Government*. The film backs up two class discussions thus far in the semester: Khalil Muhammad's theory on Black criminality in America in addition to Bryan Stevenson's ideas on the stigma of mass incarceration attached to the Black culture in America.

The film also touches on political issues from the text, such as: immigration, the first amendment to The United States Constitution, and Hate-Crimes Legislation. Khalil Muhammad: The timeline of the film literally goes back 24 hours; flashes back 3 years; and historically traces back to both 1863 and 1865 when, respectively, the Emancipation Proclamation was signed (proclaiming slaves in Confederate territory to be free forever) and when the first Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was organized.

Some may even argue that the story goes back to the beginning of slavery in the United States colonies because those were the first racist acts of early America and upon which America was formed. Khalil Muhammad, a current day Black historian, might argue that the plot of this film traces back to the moment when, in 1865, following the Civil War, European immigrants were

given opportunities by the government to stray from their acts of criminality but recently freed Black people were not.

Instead, as Muhammad asserts in a Bill Moyers interview, as well as his book, *Condemnation of Blackness*, Black people were sent to ghetto housing to sort their criminality out on their own, whereas White European immigrants were given social welfare and job opportunities because they were, as Muhammad states, thought of as “ children of Americans who need our help”, but Blacks were thought of as “ naturally morally inferior and had propensity to harm people or steal”.

American History X mimics this way of American ideology when Derek preaches, “ We're so hung up on this notion that we have some obligation to help the struggling Black man, you know. Cut him some slack until he can overcome these historical injustices. It's crap. I mean, Christ, Lincoln freed the slaves, like, what- 130 years ago? How long does it take to get your act together? ” If Derek had read *Damnation of Blackness*, he would understand Muhammad's theory that it has been 130 years (from the end of Civil War to the making of the film) of a race in America that has continued to be downtrodden and imprisoned through actions such as Black Codes, Stop and Frisk policy, and the “ invention of the criminal justice system as a repressive tool to keep black people in their place”. That is a hard battle to win. Derek might also understand how he fits into Muhammad's theory that the European race has ideologies of an institutionalized Black race when Derek complains, “ One in every three Black males is in some phase of the correctional system. Is that a coincidence or do these people have, you know, like a racial commitment to crime? ” Bryan Stevenson:

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Not only does such a statement back up Muhammad's theory about American ideologies, but it also touches on Bryan Stevenson's argument. In Stevenson's interview conducted by Bill Moyer, Stevenson states that in order to change the notion that the Black man is a criminal, we must understand the history from where it stems, and we must care about human rights and dignity while we remember that all of our survival "is tied to the survival of everyone. That our visions of technology, design, entertainment and creativity have to be married with the visions of humanity, compassion and justice".

Derek's rant about Black males in the correctional system oozes with Stevenson's idea that the power of criminality identity among Black culture ultimately came from how American government and Europeans have stigmatized the Black race. In the scene where Derek finds himself in his prison cell begging African American Principal Sweeney to help him, it is not until Sweeney replies, "Has anything you've done made your life better?" that Derek sees the light and begins to make a change toward a life outside neo Nazism. This is a perfect example of the power of identity which is Stevenson's underlying idea to his theory.

Immigration

The writers of American History X touch on the illegal immigration topic as does the text, Think American Government, in chapter 1. The textbook says that, "critics (of illegal immigrants) charge that undocumented workers drive down wage rates for American citizens" (15). In the film there is a scene in which Derek gives a lecture to his neo Nazi peers on the subject of illegal immigrants to pump them up to terrorize a neighborhood store that

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has been taken over by a Korean owner who replaced the American workers with 0 illegal immigrants: “ It’s about the hardworking Americans falling through the cracks and getting the shaft because their government cares more about the constitutional rights of...” illegal immigrants. However, the textbook lends a contrasting thought stating “ advocates contend that the United States benefits from... illegal immigration. They argue that undocumented workers take jobs that citizens do not want and that they pay more taxes than they receive in government services” (15). It is also worth noting the difference in illegal immigrant statistics from when the film was released in 1998 until now.

According to the U. S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) “ 2, 830, 000 illegal immigrants resided in California in 2011 compared to 2. 5 million in 2000. ” In the same scene, Derek states, “ There’s over 2 million illegal immigrants bedding down in (California) tonight... \$400 million just to lock up a bunch of illegal immigrant criminals...” In an article by BakersfieldNow. com on May 25, 2011, it was estimated, using data from California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation from 2010, that California now spends \$1 billion on illegal immigrant prisoners compared to the time the movie was released. first amendment & Hate-Crimes Legislation: Another point worth noting, from when the movie was released in 1998 until now, is hate-crime laws. Within the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution added in 1791, Amendment 1 states, “ Congress shall make no law... abridging thefreedom of speech...” (363). Although the first amendment protects freedom of speech, it is not legal to use freedom of expression during an act of hate crime. The textbook states “ in recent

years, many states have adopted hate-crimes legislation, enhancing penalties for persons convicted of crimes motivated by bias” (69).

Interestingly, Obama signed a bill in 2009 which was rooted by two hate-crimes of 1998, the year American History X was released, but it was before the movie that the Hate Crimes Statistics Act of 1990 came into effect. According to USA Today, in an article published October 28, 2009 and entitled “ Obama Signs Hate-crimes Law Rooted in Crimes of 1998”, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act expanded the existing Hate Crimes Statistics Act of 1990 and mandated that it is against the law to attack any person “ based on sexual orientation or gender, in addition to race, color, religion or national origin”. Matthew Shepard was a gay teenager beat by two Wyoming men in October of 1998, after which he was tied to a fence where he died. In June of the same year, James Byrd Jr. , an African American man, was chained to a truck by three white men in Texas and dragged to his death. Notably, as the text explains increased penalties are given for those charged with hate-crimes, Derek only received 3 years for his hate-crime in the film.

In conclusion, I would recommend the film to anyone interested in wanting to broaden their horizons on the race wars in America. I thought it was prudent that Derek verbally gave the stereotypical views of hate mongers in America, but it would be interesting to see how Khalil Muhammad and Bryan Stevenson might add their theories to the dialogs of the Jewish teacher or the Black principal to show America a way of thinking that I believe is not in the public eye as much as it should be. Perhaps a film should come our way from those two aforementioned?

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