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Boyz Do Cry: Screening History's White Lies

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by Charles I. Nero



RALLY TO STAND WITH RAPE SURVIVORS. MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA. DECEMBER 17, 2016

**"Boyz Do Cry: Screening History's White Lies."
Jennifer DeVere Brody. In *Screen 43:1 (Spring 2002):*
91-96.**

I teach a first-year course at Bates College called "White Redemption: Cinema and the Co-Optation of African American History." It examines what I call "white redemption" narratives that resolve the ethical and moral dilemmas whites face as members of a dominating and oppressing group by figuratively liberating whites from racism. Most of the films I use make explicit reference to African Americans; however, I also use some films that are noteworthy for their omission of black people.

This year I paired Kimberley Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* with Jennifer DeVere Brody's essay "Boyz Do Cry: Screening History's White Lies" in order to encourage students to think critically about the representation of race and gender in an independently produced film that had garnered mainstream critical and commercial success and had been lauded for its progressive viewpoint.

I approached this assignment with trepidation, anticipating strong resistance from students. *Boys Don't Cry* had played a pivotal role in galvanizing youth and queer activism around transgender issues and in alerting the public to the severity of hate crimes. Since I knew that several queer students and their allies would be in this class I wondered especially if they would assume I would damage their cause by giving arguments to homophobic interests. Fortunately, my worst concerns did not materialize.

Brody's essay is a rather short and clearly written polemic that is quite accessible to an undergraduate audience. Brody makes a compelling argument that the success of *Boys Don't Cry* may have been due to the omission of Philip Devine, an African American man who was present and slain at the same time as Brandon Teena. The omission of Devine from the story allowed for the emergence of a traditional romantic narrative in which white women are sympathetic victims. Further, Brody calls attention to interviews in which Peirce revealed that she was concerned that showing the murder of an African American man might draw audiences' sympathies away from the murder of the white females. Brody's essay brings to light how difficult it is to discuss simultaneous oppressions without creating a hierarchy about whose oppression is worse.

The students -- most of whom are white New England American, suburban, straight identifying, and middle- to upper class -- were very resistant to discussing race in the film. The typical comment was that the omission of Devine was not racially motivated, merely a plot device. Filmmakers, these students argued, could not be expected to put everything into one film. Even students who agreed

that the omission might be racially motivated were inclined to excuse it because Devine's presence might have taken the film's focus away from the hatred of queer people.

Further discussion focused on whether we assumed that all queer people were white or that filmmakers had to make a choice between race and queerness. The assignment culminated in an eight person parliamentary style debate on the topic "*Boys Don't Cry* is one more screening of history's white lies." Each debater wrote an essay detailing their research and their contribution to the group process. The other students could give brief speeches in support of one of the two teams. The class voted for the winning team and each student had to justify his/her vote in writing on the ballots; anonymity was optional. The ballots were given to the debaters to read and then to me; they were available at the next class for all students to read.

The debate format allowed the entire class to engage in a more structured form of discussion. The fact that the winner was decided by only two votes is significant. Clearly many did not endorse calling attention to the racial choices Brody identifies. However, the essays show that students were able to recognize the importance of thinking critically about representations of race and gender and, equally important, that they were willing to challenge as unacceptable the idea that oppressions have to be ranked into a hierarchy.



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