Bad Boys: Abstractions of Difference and the Politics of Youth "Deviance"

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BAD BOYS
Abstractions of Difference and the Politics of Youth “Deviance”

Todd R. Ramlow

As in common homophobic discourse, the object of devaluation and intolerance in discourses of disability is seemingly erased in the phobic utterance. Phrases like “That’s so gay” and “That’s retarded” are used colloquially to indicate that an object or event is senseless or silly. These speech acts become so routinely abstracted that those who perform and witness them lose sight of the real gay and disabled people whose very lives are overcoded with negative social and individual value by such idiomatic usage. There is, then, a metaphorics to the discourses and social processes of both “erotophobia” and “stigmaphobia” in which word and meaning become abstracted from or divested of the object to which they originally adhered.\(^1\)

The most obvious recent example of the abstraction of erotophobia is found in the lyrics of rapper Eminem, who has been assailed for his repeated use of the term *faggot* and the often vicious misogyny of his music. Eminem has attempted to defend and distance himself from overt hatred of gays by claiming that for him, *fag* or *faggot* does not necessarily mean “gay” or even “homosexual” but is a term of disempowerment, used to refute the masculinity of an adversary.\(^2\) Eminem’s defense, however, fails to acknowledge that his sense of the term as demasculinizing precisely reinforces the stereotype of the “effeminate” gay man. Of course, this is nothing new, and the disciplinary connections among gender “inappropriateness” in men, homosexuality, and social exclusion have a rich history.

Speaking about his youth in Harlem and his own constellation of race, gender, and sexuality, James Baldwin remarks: “The condition that is now called gay was then called queer. The operative word was faggot and, later, pussy, but those epithets really had nothing to do with the question of sexual preference: You were being told simply that you had no balls.”\(^3\) Baldwin is a little disingenuous; certainly, he understood how these emasculating epithets connect to structural racism...
and sexism, which often cast black and/or homosexual males as “boys,” or “quasi-
women,” that is, as passive and less than men. Baldwin’s remark, however, attests
to the persistence of discursive investments in erotophobia that mask or displace
the object of social scorn and shame. Being called a “faggot,” a “pussy,” or “gay,”
then, is not always or overtly about the material fact of sexual difference or same-
sex relations; it is about the failures of heteronormative masculinity. Or so domi-
nant cultural logic (and self-justification) would have us believe.

But there is another displacement in the debates and scandals surround-
ing Eminem. When “we” criticize him for his misogyny and homophobia, what is
less directly expressed are dominant cultural anxieties over perceived crises of
racial and class mobility, which are displaced onto concerns over a seemingly
pathological white masculinity. Still more displacements are made in the accusa-
tion that Eminem contributes to the corruption of American youth; common cul-
tural concerns over the state of today’s youngsters are rarely about real teens and
their problems but, rather, are about perceived threats to a normative social order.
Jonah Goldberg’s assertion that “among the few things that Americans seem to
agree on these days is that our children are in trouble” indexes these displace-
ments without specifying who this “we” is, or how and why we agree on the trou-
bled nature of our youth, and demonstrates how naturalized these discursive
investments have become.¹

In this essay I examine precisely these sorts of displacements, but I add
the dimension of disability to questions of physical, racial, and sexual difference
and demonstrate how disability complements and complicates discursive invest-
ments in structural segregation. Focusing my analysis on youth as the site of spe-
cific cultural panics and crises over masculinity and race suggests, further, how
discursive abstractions of queerness and disability intersect with gender, race, and
class to compose a hegemonic formation of cultural aberrancy and social exclu-
sion. The crises of youth deviance that I examine here, and that are expressed
in the debates about Eminem, in the wake of the shootings at Columbine High
School in Littleton, Colorado, and in popular culture in Boyz N the Hood (1991)
and Kids (1995), circulate metaphors of disability and queerness to manage the
“threat” of a nonnormative heterosexual masculinity that is tied to questions of
racial and class mobility.

It is odd that as a culture we have been so enraged by Eminem, a white-
boy rapper, when his genre of popular music has been consistently homophobic
and misogynist for years. While there has been plenty of cultural criticism about
gangsta rap and specific black rappers in the past, few of the controversies caused
by them have reached the level of national panic that Eminem has created. This is
a situation of which Eminem himself is keenly aware and which he addresses in the song “White America,” off his most recent album, *The Eminem Show*. To attack black rappers for “inappropriate” lyrical content or for sexism and homophobia, I suggest, not only would be “culturally insensitive” but would require both a much broader analysis of the structural inequalities that have produced these prejudices in America and an open admission of white America’s continuing complicity in racial oppression.

This is an analysis to which as a nation we remain most resistant. We can attack Eminem, however, for on some level, if only on the surface level of his skin, he is “white,” even if his status as such is complicated by his own upbringing and class. Yet the controversy over Eminem is not merely sustained by our cultural reluctance to consider our own role in systemic injustice; it is driven by anxieties about shifting social relations and increasing racial and class mobility. While gangsta rap threatened mainstream America from the cultural margins for years, it was not until it had moved from the margins to the center of popular culture, as the immense popularity of Eminem shows, that it directly concerned white America. Once gangsta rap had moved from the inner cities to the suburbs, to white middle-class teenagers’ bedrooms, the genre, embodied in the spectacular whiteness of Eminem, became the site of national panic and ideological concern.

So the crisis signaled by Eminem is not so much about vulgar language, homophobia, and sexism as it is about the increasing prevalence of black cultural forms in U.S. mass media and the economic and social mobility of black America. To attack P. Diddy or Jay-Z or Lil’ Kim for flossin’ their ice or “not knowing their place” would be overtly racist, so instead we attack Eminem for his “inappropriate” language and behavior and for “corrupting” the (white) youth of America.

The displacement of racial and class anxieties into the policing of Eminem’s homophobia and misogyny is further complicated by his performance of a normatively understood pathological masculinity. In his performances Eminem strikes the gangsta pose that is, Brent Staples argues, a unique manifestation of masculinity in response to the ongoing history of racism and oppression in America. In this case, the social and historical devaluation of black men has worked to produce a comportment of masculinity in opposition to the traditional infantilization and emasculation of racism. This pose has produced a panic in the dominant culture precisely because it exceeds (or perhaps points up what we all already knew to be) traditional, heteronormative associations of masculinity with aggressiveness and the potential for violence.

So in the controversies over Eminem we find a number of displacements, all of them filtered through discursive investments in erotophobia. When we talk
about Eminem’s homophobia and misogyny, what we really express are cultural anxieties about the increasing social, economic, and political mobility of racial minorities. Furthermore, this threat is not confined to the material realm but verges on entering the more abstract realm of identity. As Eminem’s gangsta pose and performance demonstrate, on some level blackness is contagious and threatens the normative coherence of white masculinity.

These metaphoric abstractions of difference in dominant social and ideological discourses have come under criticism by scholars and activists in disability studies and queer theory. My focus on these abstractions is in no way meant to ignore this politically important work; rather, it suggests that we need to consider more carefully how these erasures of identity and materiality constitute the very limits of social inclusion. Recognizing that disability and queerness have metaphoric lives in excess of “real” physical and/or sexual difference does not mean that those abstractions cease to organize social life. The analysis of the “use of disability [and queerness] as a metaphor for social conflict” is of real urgency for disability studies and queer theory if we are to understand how our bodies and identities are made to do social and political work that seems to have little or nothing to do with us. While “scholars and activists have demonstrated that disability is socially constructed to serve certain ends,” which is equally true of queerness, it still “behooves us to demonstrate how knowledge about disability [and queerness] is socially produced to uphold existing practices.” What concerns me here, then, is how knowledge about disability and queerness as marks of cultural disqualification is (re)produced in and around the cultural category of youth and in moral panics over contemporary youth and its deviance. This knowledge has little to do with the real lives or sociopolitical status of youth today, just as it has little to do with the materiality of disability or queerness; instead, it seeks to “uphold existing practices” of social segregation and the organization of U.S. culture according to dominant racial and gender regimes.

When I refer to “disabled” and “disabling” youth in this essay, I use the terms in their dominant cultural and ideological senses. While I refrain from placing them in scare quotes, they should always be read in the context of this exclusionary logic. Disabling youth, for example, has nothing to do with Simi Linton’s deft “claiming disability,” which is a destabilization of dominant understandings of and paranoia over what it means to claim disability and, at the same time, a resignification of the term disability as a site of critical intervention into ableist discourse. Similar to the queering of queer, the claiming of disability redefines a term of social exclusion, staking a claim to community, identity, and the reorganization of social life. Instead, disabled and disabling, as I use them in and around
the category of youth, reflect only dominant cultural logics of disqualification and exclusion, which perceive disability as having only negative social value and as something to be pitied, policed, or overcome. My use of the terms disabled and disabling draws attention to their function in the normative organization of society and their circumscribed usage by dominant ideologies; it does not uncritically and unselfconsciously reassert the “natural” understanding of the terms as having negative, exclusionary power.

Similar rhetorical strategies animate my use of erotophobia and stigmaphobia, although perhaps in the opposite direction. Rather than confine the discursive investments of social normativity in physical and sexual difference to homophobia and ableism, I expand those terms to erotophobia and stigmaphobia to draw attention to the many markers of identity that social exclusion comprises. The terms are deliberately wide-ranging, suggesting the many ways that individuals, identities, and communities can “find themselves at odds with straight culture” (which I would reterm dominant culture). Cindy Patton defines erotophobia as “the terrifying, irrational reaction to the erotic which makes individuals and society vulnerable to psychological and social control in cultures where pleasure is strictly categorized and regulated.”

Erotophobia is a disciplinary regime that manages and sorts individuals and identity by regulating pleasure and sexuality; it is not limited to the usual associations of homophobia with same-sex desire, identity, and pleasure.

Similarly, stigmaphobia extends the reach and disciplinarity of ableism, so that the marks of physical difference on which social exclusion is based, while often filtered through the representation and materiality of physical disability, are not limited to them. The terms of social and political disqualification register simultaneously across multiple boundaries of identity. Queer theorists and disability studies scholars alike have noted how injunctions to normativity through race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and physical ability share modes of discursive investment and practices of exclusion. Stigmaphobia draws attention to the various ways in which bodies, individuals, and identities can be marked as different and to how various stigmas associated in dominant logic with race, class, sexuality, gender, and physical ability operate simultaneously to reconstruct a normative social order.

In what follows I first consider how discourses of race, disability, and queerness function together in regimes of power to determine bases of social and cultural disqualification. Next I consider how the culturally constructed category of youth is a particularly impacted site on which these social anxieties and crises are played out. Finally, through an analysis of specific youth crises and controver-
sies (post-Columbine media coverage and the films *Boyz N the Hood* and *Kids*), I demonstrate how this system of disqualification circulates in popular culture and around youth over time and how social and political metaphors of exclusion are caught up in dominant discourses of queerness and disability.

**Social Isolation and the Erasure of Material Differences**

In my example of the cultural crises surrounding Eminem, what I hope to have highlighted is how dominant discourses displace their own objects of concern, so when we appear to be talking about one thing, we are really talking about something else. In caviling over Eminem’s misogyny, homophobia, and corruption of youth, we really express cultural anxieties about racial mobility and masculinity. This discursive sleight of hand is accomplished first and foremost by paving over, masking, or displacing the materiality of difference (whether physical, racial, or sexual) so that, metaphorically, the category becomes dissociated from identity, and specific words or terms are “naturally” presumed to resonate across social and political boundaries.\(^\text{16}\)

Just so, disability studies scholars have demonstrated how dominant discourses of disability have functioned historically to sort human beings and physical differences for social and political purposes. In *Claiming Disability* Linton points out “the mechanisms by which disability is covered over, layered with meaning and rendered invisible.”\(^\text{17}\) The materiality of disability is often erased to justify the heteronormative, racist, and ableist organization of society. Dominant discourses of disability have functioned in excess of the physical embodiment and experience of disability and, as master tropes of social exclusion, have “rationalized cultural segregation.”\(^\text{18}\)

Far from limited to the discursive regime of disability, this “metaphoric vitality” is common in various (if not all) discourses of social exclusion and difference. These abstractions are carried out not only through the radical dissociation of category or identity from embodiment but through an individuation and isolation that rejects anything but singularity and specificity. Marks of social difference or “deviance” are isolated so they may make no appeal to community or belonging; their very singularity is the basis of their abstraction.

This individuation and isolation of physical, racial, and sexual difference has been experienced historically by people with disabilities, queers, and racial minorities in America as the disavowal of the dominant culture’s responsibility for the disciplining of difference. In the past this individuation justified the confinement of disability to the purview of institutional medicine and had wide-ranging...
social repercussions. It attempted to “keep [disability] a personal matter and ‘treat’ the condition and the person with the condition rather than ‘treating’ the social processes and policies that constrict disabled people’s lives.”19 This reliance on the individual as the site of difference and deviance has a similar history in racist discourse, which habitually imagines black men, women, and communities as distinct and separate from a normative America. “The idea that there are discrete black communities, beset by black problems, which can and should be solved exclusively by black people taking responsibility for themselves, is precisely the logic of segregation, no matter how empowered individual black people may feel in the process of its articulation.”20 Specific differences, whether racial, physical, or sexual, are idiosyncratic problems that must be dealt with by individual or subculture—an imperative that attempts to cover over the dominant culture’s involvement in the processes and policies that segregate social life.

Thus various cultural discourses of difference and intolerance abstract those differences, make their status as social disqualifiers seem natural, and, at the same time, individuate those differences so that the dominant culture can remain blissfully (or willfully) ignorant of its own role in social segregation. These discourses do not operate in isolation but intersect with and influence each other and continually redefine the bases of cultural exclusion. The “metaphoric vitality” of queerness and disability, in particular, functions in and around the cultural categories of youth and youth “deviance” to manage, through displacement, certain cultural anxieties about the future of the social and certain perceived crises of masculinity and racial mobility.

How race, class, gender, and various sexual and physical embodiments intermingle with and complicate the truth claims of queer theory and disability studies has been carefully considered by each discipline; the part that age plays, however, has not. Age is, of course, a numerical fact; it is a matter of lived years. But it is also a cultural construction, with meanings and politics that change over time. This is nowhere more obvious, perhaps, or more socially and politically urgent than with regard to youth, whose social and political enfranchisements are circumscribed by an arbitrary age of majority and whose basic civil rights are repeatedly violated in America until that magical number of years has been lived. As contemporary debates about youth in America demonstrate, when metaphoric abstractions of difference circulate around a specific site of cultural concern, their normative functioning becomes increasingly naturalized and difficult to resist or undo. Goldberg’s all-encompassing “we” who agree on the trouble of contemporary youth (“Our children are in trouble”) is an excellent example.
The Freak Show of Youth

In multiple media, contemporary youth are marked by the rhetorics of disability and queerness as objects both of discipline (they are the physical embodiment of a deviance in the body politic that must be controlled) and of pity and social concern (they, and by extension American culture, are increasingly disabled by violence). These representations of youth are often not directly concerned with or reflective of real physical difference, disability, or queerness, although the “threat” of all three factors is a regular part of the parables we tell about the perils of youth. Disability and queerness circulate around youth more often as metaphoric abstractions through which the dominant culture seeks to understand (or at least to manage or discipline) the lives, experiences, and social and political import of one of its constituencies. These abstractions might be more clearly understood if we reconsidered the category of youth within the history and politics of the American freak show.

In her introduction to the anthology Freakery Rosemarie Garland-Thomson remarks on the changing significances of the “extraordinary body”: “The trajectory of historical change in the ways the anomalous body is framed within the cultural imagination . . . can be characterized simply as a movement from a narrative of the marvelous to a narrative of the deviant.” Garland-Thomson locates the shift in perception by which what once inspired wonder “becomes error” within the complex social, political, and cultural changes engendered by modernity.

In short, Garland-Thomson locates the change from a discourse of wonder to a discourse of deviance in the radical transformations of modern social life, which produced a host of uncertainties about the continued relevance of traditional norms and forms of social and physical life. Similarly, shifting notions of the politics and problems of youth today are indicators of anxieties about the continuity of a dominant social, political, and cultural order and about “upholding” standing social practices.

Garland-Thomson remarks that “in response to the tensions of modernity, the ancient practice of interpreting extraordinary bodies not only shifted toward the secular and the rational, but it flourished as never before within the expanding marketplace, institutionalized under the banner of the freak show.” Furthermore, the freak show reemerged “in almost unrecognizable forms in the late twentieth century.” One such form can be found in the treatment and representation of youth in America and in the cultural norms and imperatives to normativity that circulate around this often deeply conflicted social category. Indeed, the conflation of youth with the freak show, or with the metaphors of freakishness, has been the
basis of a common cultural discourse at least since the social and political rhetoric of the hippies, yuppies, and counterculture. More recently, scholars have demonstrated the continuity of the youth-freak connection with regard to the rise of tabloid television as a youth cultural form and the resurgence of postmodern freak shows and sideshows, like the Jim Rose Circus (which headlined the side stage during the first few years of the alternative rock festival and youth cultural spectacle Lollapalooza), the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus, and Circus Amok.

Garland-Thomson also notes that the freak show “fashioned . . . the self-governed, iterable subject of democracy — the American cultural self” and “bonded a sundering polity together in the collective act of looking.” This function of the freak show, I suggest, is performed by contemporary media(ted) spectacles of youth. In a multivoiced, diversified, multicultural environment, youth is one of the last unmarked categories, with little or no claim to individual rights or to specific cultural and political consideration. Discourses of disability and queerness circulate around the category of youth to reunify a polity fractured by multiculturalism and diversity, as well as by violence and uncertainties about the future.

Whether on television or in movies, music, magazines, or the news, America is perpetually caught in the “collective act of looking” at the freak show of youth. From the idealized celebration of youth’s crazy styles and behavior in a commercial that declares “being young . . . priceless,” while “for everything else, there’s MasterCard,” to our carefully mediated horror at killing sprees in our schools, American culture is perpetually fascinated and repelled by the spectacle of youth.

Charles Acland’s theorizing of the category of youth helps us see that the crises of youth, disability, and queerness are similar (if not ideologically the same) in that all of them express anxieties about the future of the social. Acland, who attempts to show “the way in which youth in crisis corresponds to an anxiety concerning the reproduction of social order,” claims that the category of youth has “no fundamental essence except as a problem; as a crisis of value, of economics, or of resources.” The crisis of youth as one of value and resources is similar to the one that Garland-Thomson posits for the extraordinary body, which came to express a crisis of economic and labor value in the expanding marketplace of industrial capitalism.

Historically, youth and people with disabilities have been perceived to threaten the reproduction of labor and economic systems of value, as well as the political and ideological norms of bodily and national life with which these systems are aligned. The crisis of labor and value posed by people with disabilities is that their “special needs” interrupt the Fordist rhythms of capitalist America. Peo-
ple with disabilities are often perceived as nonproductive members of society or, worse, as unnecessary burdens on industry, which must accommodate their needs. At times, of course, capitalism is directly responsible for the production of disability (whether through work-related accidents, unsafe working conditions, repetitive-motion or stress-related injuries, or environmental toxins that affect reproduction) and indeed relies on the differences it constructs between able-bodied worker and disabled burden.

The threat that youth apparently poses to capitalist systems of labor is that, because youth is a time of instruction and indoctrination between childhood and adulthood, it might come to reject or fail to learn or conform to traditional patterns of labor or of socioeconomic and political value. This economic crisis created by youth was most clearly elaborated in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the cultural panics and debates over “Gen-Xers” and “slacker” youth, who were perceived as listless and, most important, unproductive.28

To defuse such a threat to the social order, the cultural other (whether the person with disability, the queer, the racialized, or the young—or rather, all of these separately and at once) must be visible. A primary function of the freak show, then, is to make physical difference and disability spectacularly visible and therefore manageable. This is also a function of cultural stereotypes about queer bodies and mannerisms (butch dykes, femme fags) and about dominant (i.e., adult) cultural preoccupations with racial and youth styles and performance (mohawks, dreadlocks, safety pins as fashion accessories, hip-hop baggy trousers, 40s, blunts). Garland-Thomson makes the spectacular visibility of all these others clear: “Invested with meanings that far outstrip their biological bases, figures such as the cripple, the quadroon, the queer, the outsider, the whore are taxonomical, ideological products marked by socially determined stigmata, defined through representation, and excluded from social power and status.”29 Add “youth” to the mix, consider how all these categories are mutually constitutive of cultural normativity and social disqualification, and you arrive at what I mean. The multiple positioning, intersections, and visibility of “deviance” of all sorts are integral factors in the construction of social order; they prescribe the very limits of the social.

Columbine, Queerness, and Pathological White Masculinity

The visibility of deviance, youth, queerness, and disability contributes to the metaphoric abstractions of erotophobia and stigmaphobia as they circulate around youth and as they gesture toward an understanding of contemporary social and
The scene was reported in florid prose in newspapers and given visual representation on local and national television news programs on the first anniversary of the shootings: innocent teens physically and psychologically disabled by school violence.

The flashbacks, the shivers, the physical and emotional “frailties” of these posttrauma students are all a part of the abstractions of disability and stigmaphobia that routinely surround our culture’s narration of the stories of youth violence. These disabling effects directly contrast with some fantasy ideal of normality. In the same Washington Post article Sergio Gonzales, a witness of the shootings, remarks that the aftereffects and the lingering sadness in Columbine students are not “the regular life of a teenager.” Of course, what was everywhere implicit but nowhere stated in the ongoing national coverage of Columbine was that this was not “the regular life” of suburban, middle- to upper-class teenagers. Underclass and inner-city teens have faced quotidian school violence for decades, but as long as it stayed confined to those other neighborhoods, middle- to upper-class America felt safe.

In the face of the disabling effects of school violence, the students at Columbine, their parents, the local residents of Littleton, and citizens across the country tried to restore some notion of “normalcy” and “regular” youth life. Such an attempt to reclaim an impossible normality is subtended by the visible presence of disabled teenagers. But how are we to argue against normality when these youth have been so dramatically altered, psychologically and physically, by the eruption of deviance and violence in school? Seeing images of or reading about teenage survivors “still propelling themselves down the school’s corridors in wheelchairs,” we are somehow to conclude that these youth, precisely because of the visible presence of their wheelchairs, are owed and deserve only our pity, such
is their tragedy. That they are “still propelling themselves” in wheelchairs, moreover, suggests that their disability is something that they will eventually overcome or forget about, just as we as a nation must move beyond the disabling effects of violence.32

In the context of post-Columbine understandings of the crisis of youth, the visible presence of disability becomes a marker of how the physical and mental integrity of the normate is always threatened with disability by unrestrained deviance. Normality is always already subject to its own disability by the presence of deviance.33 Of course, in the wake of Columbine and other school shootings, nontraditional youth, of whatever size and stripe, have come under increasingly strict surveillance and discipline across the country.

Just as we have been encouraged to understand the effects of deviance on the dominant culture through disability, or through the susceptibility of the normate to disabling deviance at any moment, we have been encouraged to consider the motives behind Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s act of violence through an abstraction of erotophobic discourse and a heteronormative logic of queerness. Immediately after the Columbine shootings the media seized on the moniker “The Trenchcoat Mafia” for the school subculture to which the teens belonged. It was as if The Trenchcoat Mafia were the name of an organized paramilitary group rather than a nickname given to a group of somber teens who dressed in dark colors by their normate counterparts in jockdom. The Washington Post neatly summed up The Trenchcoat Mafia as “mostly . . . seniors who wore black clothing and black trench coats to school and sounded doomsday warnings about the end of the millennium. Some of their classmates described them as white supremacists absorbed by Gothic fantasies.”34 Other Columbine students were not as sophisticated in their day-to-day dealings with these high school misfits. As one student reported, The Trenchcoat Mafia “were called ‘faggots’ and school jocks ‘threw rocks and bottles at them.’”35 One cultural discussion that has emerged from the Columbine shootings is increased attention to school bullying as a major contributing factor in youth violence, and recent studies have focused on verbal harassment as the primary form of bullying. The most common example of verbal harassment among teenage boys is the epithet faggot (which further complicates Eminem’s self-defense), a slur launched regularly not only at Harris and Klebold but at Andy Williams, who opened fire at Santana High School in Santee, California, two years later.36

Nevertheless, the language used by the Washington Post and by newspapers across the country immediately circumscribed the shooters with a rhetoric of deviance rather than consider how institutional bullying and the microcosmic vio-
lence, intolerance, and erotophobia of Columbine High School produced the very act of violence that cultural commentators were trying to understand. It is worth recalling Linton’s suggestion that dominant disability discourse ignores or elides the “social processes and policies” that delimit disabled people’s lives in favor of an individualized conception of physical difference. The same phenomenon can be seen at work in the demonization of Harris, Klebold, and other deviant youth: ignore the social and political processes and inequalities that produce youth violence in favor of a simplified understanding of individual pathology. Hey, they were outcasts, misfits, queers. It is no surprise that they acted out so violently. We, so the logic goes, should have seen it coming, if only because of their clothes.

It was not just their sartorial style that got Harris and Klebold labeled queers. The books they read, the movies they liked, the music they listened to, and the statements they posted on their Web sites were all used as evidence of the boys’ outsider status. The Washington Post reported that “they hated jocks, admired Nazi’s and scorned normalcy,” “loved explosives and guns,” and quoted lyrics from the German industrial-metal band KMFDM. In its desperation to explain and to assign blame for this explosion of youth violence, the Washington Post and media outlets across the country failed to acknowledge that morbid fascination with mortality, guns, and violence is common among youth, especially nontraditional, unpopular, perpetually bullied young boys.

Just so, Kevin Merida sought out answers to the question “Why?” in the pervasive violence of American entertainment. Merida blamed Marilyn Manson and KMFDM; the films The Basketball Diaries (1995), Apt Pupil (1998), and American History X (1998), even though this third film is explicitly antiracist and antiviolence; the video games Doom and Wolfenstein 3D; and even the fashion designs of Alexander McQueen, Anna Sui, and Helmut Lang, which Merida deems “pessimistic urban armor.” The incessant blaming of shock rock “Antichrist Superstar” Manson is telling, considering the gender trouble (or “crisis of masculinity”) Manson has posed for American culture. Characterizing Harris and Klebold as Manson fans set up a seemingly natural connection in the public mind between the boys’ act of violence and the genderfuck amorality of Manson. Indeed, following Columbine, Manson’s concerts were canceled throughout the United States, and the performer was continually put on the defensive by national media that attempted to locate blame for the Colorado teens’ actions in Manson’s influence. All of these popular cultural products were enlisted to prove exactly how and why Harris and Klebold were different from “normal” American youth. The subtext, of course, was instruction for parents who did not want their children to become deviants: Don’t expose them or let them be exposed to any of these things.
Part and parcel of the demonizing and making queer of Harris and Klebold was their characterization as un-American. That they “admired Nazi’s” was the most common motif establishing their disavowal of American normality. This characterization was (and continues to be) the most difficult to resist, since Nazi Germany has been cast as the antithesis of everything America presumably stands for, regardless of the reality of certain fascistic strains of conformity in U.S. culture. Indeed, much consideration was given in the news to whether the boys had planned their assault for Adolf Hitler’s birthday (20 April) or whether this was a coincidence, although most reports assumed that they had set the date because of its neo-Nazi significance.

Attention was also given to the fact that Harris had applied for enlistment in the marines but had been rejected because he had been prescribed the antidepressant Luvox. Harris, it was reported, had been deemed unfit to serve his country. Furthermore, this unfitness was based on a mental deficiency, and thus metaphors of disability were reintroduced into coverage of the event: not only was Harris a queer social outcast, but he was psychologically disabled. In the end, every attempt was made to distance normal Americans from Harris and Klebold. As Colorado governor Bill Owens summed it up: “These are children who don’t have the same moral background as the rest of us.” In other words, these boys were different; one of them was depressed, and they were both queer.

In the aftermath of the Columbine shootings, a whole disciplinary arsenal was deployed through the media to distance “us” from “them”—normal youth, normal Americans, from these deviant teens. An attempt was made to quell perceived threats to a normative social order through abstractions of queerness, as in the “truths” applied to Harris and Klebold in terms of gender and national identification, and through the visible presence of disability, as in the imagery of disabled students still propelling their wheelchairs down school hallways. Yet the debates and concerns surrounding Columbine had little to do with either queerness or disability as material reality; they had everything to do with a perceived crisis in the presentation of heterosexual masculinity as it is connected to questions of cultural violence. This crisis of masculinity was tied to the dominant culture’s paranoid fantasies about the effects of popular culture and mediated violence on youth, and the future of a normative social order.

Ensuring the reproduction of prevalent social, cultural, and political processes well after the fact, the image of real disabled youth on the first anniversary of Columbine served as a metaphor for the threat posed by youth deviance to the physical, psychological, and cultural integrity of the normate subject (and
nation) and as a call for the increased surveillance and discipline of all types of nonnormative youth.

*Boyz and Kids: Disability, Blackness, and Social Mobility*

It is not only in the news, in the wake of youth violence and/or deviance, that queerness and disability become useful, mobile metaphors through which we are to make sense of the crisis of youth and which express anxieties over the continuity of a normative social order. In popular film, as Mitchell and Snyder relate, the visible mark of physical difference conveys an “overheated symbolic imagery” and plays host to a multitude of metaphoric abstractions. Physical difference in film becomes reflective of, for instance, internal/psychological/moral corruption, political regimes and power relations, and social change. The visible mark of race in film often performs a similar social and political duty and dovetails with Linton’s assertion that representations of disability work to uphold certain cultural practices. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic observe that racial stereotypes in film are not “accidental, but functional.” In white-dominated media, they assert, “racist depiction, far from being a social evil, is a social good that enables society to accomplish goals that vary from era to era but always include the subordination or marginalization of minority men.” As dominant cultural responses to John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood* and Larry Clark’s *Kids* demonstrate, when abstractions or stereotypes of disability and race circulate together in popular film, their politics become all the more difficult to unpack and resist.

*Boyz* and *Kids* are, arguably, the most controversial American movies of the 1990s. Both films provoked public outcry and cultural debate about the state of American youth, youth violence and deviance, and the future of a normative social order. Singleton’s filmic critique of racism and institutionalized structures of social and economic oppression and exploitation, and his antiviolence message (at the end of the film, before the credits roll, the message “Increase the Peace” flashes across the darkened screen), was largely ignored or overlooked by audiences and cultural commentators. The film’s release was met with acts of violence across the United States. *Newsweek* reported that the film’s opening weekend “triggered a spree of largely gang-related violence that left at least one dead and more than 30 wounded.” The violence surrounding *Boyz* was largely taken as proof that black men really were, as the stereotypes imply, violent and criminal. Furthermore, the film’s release produced a contentious, often one-sided debate over representations of violence and acts of violence and about gangs, drugs, and inner-
city life at a time when public anxiety over the threat of inner-city black youth to national life was at its peak.

Four years later, when the site of cultural panic had shifted from the threat of inner-city black youth to the moral decay and deviant behavior of relatively privileged, middle-class white youth, *Kids* was released. Clark envisioned his film, in contrast to the host of other youth-oriented films that have attempted and (he claims) failed to portray youth authentically, as a “real” representation of kids growing up in New York in the late 1990s. Accordingly, the film’s stylistics of representation—from its documentary, *cinéma vérité* filming and editing to its use of unknown, young actors and a supporting cast of “real” street kids—and its scripting by nineteen-year-old Harmony Korine contribute to a feeling of authenticity. Belief in the realness of the film was picked up on across America by the public and by critics and cultural commentators, who whipped up another national panic about the state of today’s youth.

Despite the vast differences of race, class, social location, support structures, education, opportunity, and even enactments of deviance between the populations of youth represented in *Boyz* and *Kids*, both films became emblems of youth in/as crisis, and they provoked similar, if not identical, cultural panics about youth and the future of the social. It was in his *Commentary* review of *Kids* that Goldberg stated, “Among the few things that Americans seem to agree on these days is that our children are in trouble; the causes and cures may be debated, but the diagnosis has reached a point of consensus.”

What these films also share is a representational intersection of youth deviance and disability in which the visible presence of disability becomes a natural(ized) correlate to the social, moral, and political disabling of youth lamented in the films’ receptions. This is due partly to the films’ stereotypical vision of urban life in America, particularly as connected to racialized and underclass subcultures. Valerie Smith notes that “certain narrative films construct themselves as part of a widely shared and widely recognizable reality” and that cultural critics, film reviewers, and specific (read: dominant, white, privileged) audiences participate in the continual reconstruction of the reality effects of films like *Boyz* and *Kids*.

*Boyz* is the story of how two sets of young black men—the ambitious Tre Styles and his high school football-star best friend, Ricky Baker, in contrast to their apathetic, gangsta counterparts Doughboy, Mad Dog, and Little Chris—try to cope with the violence of ’hood life and racist America. This binary structuring of heterosexual black masculinity is one of the most basic characteristics of racial and gender stereotyping in American culture. The Doughboy–Mad Dog–Little
Chris axis is probably the most familiar, for it plays into the “overwhelming media mythology of black men as lazy, criminal, undeserving, and drug-addicted.”\footnote{However, the Tre Styles–Ricky Baker axis of black masculinity is equally phantasmatic. Michele Wallace cautions that “they are flip sides of the same coin, and neither of them has anything to do with who black people—black men or black women—really are.” Both ends of this binary of heterosexual black masculinity demonstrate the racist fetishization of blackness: “Black men on welfare, homeless, with AIDS, in jail, and so forth are seen as disproportionately villainous, just as famous blacks are seen as extraordinary freaks of nature. In both cases, blackness is fetishized. There is no middle ground.”\footnote{While one may hesitate to say that the young black men at the “positive” end of this spectrum are “famous,” especially considering that Ricky is dead by the end of the film, Tre at least represents a fetishization of black masculinity insofar as he is offered, or extended as a consolation prize, some success in life and is able to escape the disabling of ’hood life.}

Because \textit{Boyz} is specifically a tale of heterosexual black masculinity, it has come under criticism from black feminist scholars. Jacquie Jones, Lisa Kennedy, and Michele Wallace call attention to the abjection of black femininity in the persons of the film’s welfare-queen and crack-addicted single mothers.\footnote{Wallace declares that the real issue in the film is the reassertion of patriarchal authority and heterosexual masculine prerogative; for her, the film and its success confirm hegemonic cultural values. Feminist critics rightly point out the gender inequalities that \textit{Boyz} reinscribes, but what their analyses often elide is how severely limited the film’s binary vision of black masculinity is.}

There is a (tentative) third possibility in \textit{Boyz}, however, a nonpathological or nonfetishized black maleness, and that is modeled by Tre’s father, Furious Styles. A veteran of the Black Power movement and the consciousness-raising, counterculture era, Furious might be taken to represent self-empowered, righteous black masculinity. Smith makes a pitch for Tre—“Our protagonist rises above the conditions of his peers because he alone has a strong, present, and neonationalist black father”—or at least she claims that this is the logic of the film.\footnote{But the film itself undoes this possibility by showing that Furious’s mode of black masculinity is not available as a model for any of the film’s young black men, not even his own son. This is made clear in father’s and son’s differing relationships to institutionalized authority as represented by the police. After Tre moves in with Furious, who is to teach him “how to be a man,” and after the house is broken into, Furious stares down the black police officer who is dismissive of his desire for justice and who complains about the “niggers” like Furious who give black men like...}
him a bad name. Later, when Tre and Ricky are pulled over for no apparent reason by the same self-hating black cop, Tre remains silent and passive, capitulating to the cop’s invective and his bending of Tre backward over the hood of his cruiser with the barrel of his gun. Where Furious stands up to institutional authority, Tre can only break down in the face of it and of racism, and his masculinity is further compromised when it is finally his tears that win his and Ricky’s freedom.

The fetishizing and pathologizing performances of black masculinity in *Boyz*, and the cultural politics behind them, can be seen more clearly when the social disqualifier of disability is added to the film’s characterizations. In a scene in which Doughboy, Mad Dog, and Little Chris struggle with the existence of God, social and racial justice, and gender relations and come to a point of disagreement, Doughboy tells Little Chris that if he does not like Doughboy’s opinion, they will “see [Little Chris] walk his crippled ass all the way home.” Little Chris’s disability, visible everywhere in *Boyz* but alluded to only a few times, is the result of a spinal injury suffered, we are told, in a drive-by shooting. Here black youth violence is literally, physically, and visibly disabling.

Little Chris’s disability is an obvious way for Singleton to comment not only on the disabling violence that infects inner-city black communities but, more abstractly, on the social and political disenfranchisement of blacks and the oppression and exploitation visited on them by a racist dominant American culture. Moreover, Little Chris’s disability is a commentary on the greatly compromised access to social, economic, and political mobility in America’s inner cities and on the near impossibility of making it out of the ’hood.

More insidiously, Little Chris’s disability plays a role in the hierarchy that operates among the characters in the film. Little Chris and Doughboy, with their shuttling back and forth from the streets to juvie and prison, their 40-oz.—swigging, trash-talking, violence-ridden, gangsta lifestyles, represent one of the film’s two visions of young black American masculinity. Doughboy’s football-star brother, Ricky, and their book-smart friend Tre, who are frustrated with inner-city life and desire to get out of the ’hood, represent the other. The quotidian struggles of these young men represent a cultural situation in which one can either be disabled by ’hood life or work to escape it. While the film forecloses that possibility for Ricky, who is murdered in a senseless act of gang violence, it celebrates Tre’s resistance to violence and gang life and suggests that he, at least, will make it out.

Of course, Tre’s moral and ethical conviction, his respect for his elders and authority, his monogamous and relatively chaste relationship with his girlfriend, and his narrative of pulling himself up by his bootstraps mimic a stereotypical script of American individualism in no way threatening to a normative social order.
The young men who do pose a threat to it, Little Chris and Doughboy, are physically, psychologically, and socially unable to escape 'hood life. Little Chris's disability becomes not only a visible marker that comments on the physical and social effects of inner-city life but a marker through which we can more easily identify the threat or crisis embodied in these youth (i.e., violence somehow equals disability). Finally, his disability assuages dominant cultural anxieties about racial and class mobility by showing that threat to be literally disabled: there is no way out of the 'hood for these youths. The violent threat of race and pathological black masculinity has been immobilized.

Although the intersections of youth, deviance, and disability in *Kids* at first glance seem very different from those in *Boyz*, the two representations are strikingly similar, and both use notions of youth and disability to express cultural anxieties about social, racial, and sexual mobility. *Kids* chronicles a single summer day in the lives of two working-class high school–aged white boys in New York City. The film wastes no time in establishing their deviance; it rather infamously opens with the main character, Telly, pressuring a fourteen-year-old girl into intercourse with promises of his devotion and of how much she is going to “love it.” Meanwhile, Telly’s friend Casper waits outside on the girl’s front stoop, swigging from a 40-oz.

Shortly afterward we see the two boys riding the subway, where they encounter a legless panhandler who rides his skateboard through the train, rattling a cup of change and chanting, “I have no legs.”52 As he passes the two boys, Casper puts what little money he has in the man’s cup—the only gesture of empathy or sentiment of any kind expressed by either boy in the film. Elsewhere their faces are completely affectless as they steal, smoke pot, harass queers, beat a man nearly to death, vandalize property, trespass, and sexually abuse their female peers. This sentimental gesture on the train is therefore striking and is significant because it sets up a strange equivalence in which the panhandler’s disability becomes the visible counterpart to Casper and Telly’s moral and psychological disability and deviant behavior.

Garland-Thomson has suggested that this scene may actually reassert a hierarchy between normate people and people with disabilities, so that Casper’s gesture is one of pity, full of the understanding that as bad as he and Telly may be, they are at least better off than the panhandler.53 While the suggestion is compelling, I find it hard to read the gesture as one merely of pity, if only because of the boys’ obvious connection to working-class, black, and Latino urban subcultures. In this gesture they recognize a fellow outcast trying to make it from day to day. Additionally, Telly’s voice-over throughout the film comments on what it is like
to be young and to have (or so he believes) nothing to lose, and yet nothing to live for, and Casper’s gesture seems to acknowledge the panhandler’s limited resources and opportunity as the boys’ own.

Significantly, the panhandler is black, and in many ways Kids contributes to a racialization of deviance and disability that, at the same time, intersects questions of class relations and a pathological heterosexual masculinity. Throughout the film the threat posed by these two youths comprises their sexual irresponsibility and their connections to underclass or working-class economies and racialized urban subcultures. James Bowman, in the American Spectator (a questionable source, although Bowman’s racially biased rhetoric is illustrative), remarks that “the real-life Beavis and Butthead are Telly and Casper, who, though white, talk in the foul-mouthed accents of black street lingo, full of yos and bros and wassups, with the all-purpose s-word a frequent signifier for the entire range of the comprehended but unexpressed.”

Bowman’s comment, and his indexing of those other youth culture pariahs Beavis and Butthead, makes clear how Kids further abstracts the connections forged among youth, deviance, race, and disability by Singleton. For all their visible whiteness, Telly and Casper are, through their lingo and behavior, black (and furthermore, “foul-mouthed” black); this is again underscored by their self-identification with the panhandler. Where in Boys disability functions to confine the threat of inner-city black youth to the ’hood, however, in Kids this threat is nothing if not mobile, entering even the sanctified space of the middle-class, white father’s house and daughter’s bedroom.

In his self-professed occupation as “virgin surgeon,” Telly represents a threat to the social order carried out through his exploitation and violation of young girls, who in turn represent a stable, heteronormative, family-oriented order threatened by racial, class, and sexual deviance. Cultural critics like bell hooks and film critics like Terrence Rafferty and John Simon have remarked on the racial politics of the film, in which Jennie, who is infected with HIV by Telly and on whom misery is heaped, is emblematic of a normative social order that must be protected. Through HIV and AIDS Kids expresses its own, or at least the dominant culture’s, erotophobia. That kids this young should be sexually active and promiscuous is inappropriate, even queer, but the film’s real scandal is that, though they all engage in heterosexual sex, they fall victim to and themselves spread HIV, which continues to be largely, if erroneously, thought a consequence of queer sex and deviant lifestyles.

Jennie’s sexual inexperience (she has had sex only with Telly, and then only once) contrasts with the promiscuity of the other girls, most of them Latina or black girls who talk freely about oral sex and proclaim that “nothing beats fuck-
ing!” Of course, none of these girls is infected with HIV; they are, in many ways, immaterial to the film’s cautionary tale. Rather, it is Jennie’s transgression of sexual morals and of racial and class boundaries that must be punished. Her class and economic privilege, represented by the traditional family life she enjoys, is underscored when, after learning of her HIV infection, she attempts to call home to talk to her mother but reaches only her little brother; while searching for Telly, she also can afford to take taxis all over Manhattan, whereas the other characters walk. Jennie clearly comes from a relatively affluent, stable family. The difference in characterization between Jennie and her racialized girlfriends is not surprising, considering how the bodies of white women have been shielded by an ideology that has often excused the most oppressive, exploitative, racist social movements and policies. Ironically, however, Jennie herself cannot be protected. Unable to reach her mother or to return home, she finally finds Telly but cannot stop his sexual abandon, and in the last scene Casper rapes her while she is unconscious. In Kids youth embody the triple threat of the disabling influences of race, class, and sexuality, all figured in Telly and Casper, with their working-class roots, their connections to urban black and Latino subcultures, and their sexual promiscuity. It is a disabling of youth and a threat to social order made explicit in the subway scene which connect a physically disabled, homeless, black panhandler to “foul-mouthed,” working-class, black-acting, white boys.

Conclusion

In the recent cultural debates over Eminem, school violence as witnessed in Littleton, Colorado, and the reality effects of films like Boyz and Kids, race, class, sexuality, and youth are repeatedly cast as disabilities that preclude social and political enfranchisement and that express cultural anxieties about the social mobility of America’s internal others. In all of these crises of deviance and violence, disability and queerness as material facts are metaphorically abstracted into commentaries on the state of youth and by extension the normative future of the social in America. Queerness and disability in these media become mobile metaphors that circulate around the culturally constructed category of youth and that define the very limits of the social in the naturalization of dominant tropes of cultural and political disqualification. Through these visual and rhetorical abstractions, queers, people with disabilities, youth, and racial minorities are produced as sites of social anxiety that require increasing surveillance and discipline. If the one thing “we” can all agree on today is that “our children are in trouble,” then it behooves us to consider not only the rhetorical strategies of the media(ted) stories
we tell about these troubled youth but also the ways that these representations, and minority life in America generally, are circumscribed and defined at every turn by the discursive abstractions of erotophobia and stigmaphobia.

Notes

1. Throughout this essay I prefer to use Cindy Patton’s term erotikophobia and Erving Goffman’s stigmaphobia rather than the sometimes limiting homophobia and ableism (although these words do appear from time to time) to suggest that the abstractions of social disqualification, while in many ways based on the material fact of sexual and physical difference, rely not on the presence of such difference but on its availability for metaphoric erasure. See Patton, Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS (Boston: South End, 1985), 103; and Goffman, Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

2. The May–June 2001 issue of the Gay and Lesbian Review, which takes on the Eminem analysis in the wake of the rapper’s duet with Elton John at the 2001 Grammy Awards, offers careful analysis from lesbian and gay intellectuals who both criticize and defend Em’s “freedom of artistic expression.”


6. At this end of the continuum of racist stereotypes and disqualification, the black race is disempowered through devaluation, while at the other end black men, in particular, are subjected to increased surveillance and policing precisely because of their unrestrained (hetero)sexuality and aggressive masculinity.


9. In reference to social discourses of disability, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder note: “It is important to state at the outset that this argument does not deny the reality of physical incapacity or cognitive difference. Rather, we set out the coordinates of the social reception and . . . representation of those labeled deviant on ideological as well as physical planes” (Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000], 7). Similarly, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson remarks that “disability . . . is the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so
much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature [New York: Columbia University Press, 1997], 6). That some of the youthful bodies I consider here are queer and/or disabled, then, is perhaps less important than that all of them are marked abstractly as queer and/or disabled by dominant discourses insofar as they exceed or break cultural rules about what young bodies and subjectivities should be or do.


11. Clare delimits the dominant cultural models of disability as follows: “The medical model insists on disability as a disease or condition that is curable and/or treatable. The charity model declares disability to be a tragedy, a misfortune, that must be tempered or erased by generous giving. The supercrip model frames disability as a challenge to overcome and disabled people as superheroes just for living our daily lives. The moral model transforms disability into a sign of moral weakness” (“Stolen Bodies, Reclaimed Bodies,” 360).


13. Patton, Sex and Germs, 103.

14. Warner, recognizing the limitations of the term homophobia, remarks that “it suggests that the stigma and oppression directed against this entire range of people can be explained simply as a phobic reaction to same-sex love. In fact, sexual stigmas are more shifty than we think” (Trouble with Normal, 38).

15. See Warner, Trouble with Normal, 28; Mitchell and Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis, 2; and Garland-Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies, 6.

16. Linton characterizes this function as the “metaphoric vitality” of “nasty words.” She offers the following hypothetical example: “The exposé in the newspaper crippled the politician’s campaign.” Here the term crippled, divested of its connection to real physical disability, takes on a metaphoric life of its own (Claiming Disability, 16).

17. Ibid., 6.
18. Snyder and Mitchell make this function even clearer: “Disability translates into a common denominator of cultural fascination (if not downright obsession)—one that infiltrates thinking across discursive registers as a shared reference point in deciding matters of human value and communal belonging” ("Re-engaging the Body," 375).

19. Linton, Claiming Disability, 11.


23. Ibid., 4, 11.


28. Richard Linklater’s Slacker (1991) and Ben Stiller’s Reality Bites (1994) are the most succinct visual representations of the Gen-X debates and of cultural anxieties over “nonproductive” youth.


31. Ibid.

32. This figuration of disability deploys at least two of Clare’s normative models of disability discourse: the “charity” and “supercrip” models. In the case of Columbine, however, these models are deployed not to say anything about disability in itself but to delineate the disabling effects of youth violence and deviance on normative American culture.

33. This stigmaphobic response to violence and youth deviance has an erotophobic correlate in the stereotype of homosexual predation on the young, particularly the notion that gay men tend or seek to “corrupt” straight men and young boys, and that homosexuality is somehow contagious and heterosexuality is always already susceptible to infection.


37. Kenworthy, “Up to Twenty-five Die.”


39. These connections between Nazi Germany and American fascism have been clearest, perhaps, in relation to the AIDS epidemic. For excellent commentary on these trends from both American and German perspectives see David Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration (New York: Vintage, 1991); In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: Grove, 1999); and Peter Zingler, Die Seuche [The plague] (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 1989).

40. Kenworthy, “Up to Twenty-five Die.”

41. Mitchell and Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis, 16.


43. Both Singleton and Clark continue to be attuned to shifts in the cultural perception and enfranchisement of black and working-class youth cultures in America. Clark’s most recent film, Bully (2001), is based on Jim Schutze’s book Bully: Does Anyone Deserve to Die? (New York: Avon, 1998), in which a group of picked-on high school kids murder the school bully. While Singleton moves away from visible disability as commentary on ’hood life in Baby Boy (2001), his characterization of a generation of young black men as infantilized by the ’hood and by a racist dominant culture echoes the stories that people with disabilities tell of their own sexual and psychological infantilization at the hands of institutional authority. See Tom Shakespeare, Kath Gillespie-Sells, and Dominic Davies, The Sexual Politics of Disability: Untold Desires (London: Cassell, 1996).


52. That this man is one of the film’s “real” people, a recognizable figure in the New York City subway system, adds to the authenticity of the film, at least for those of us in the know. Yet the man’s obvious exploitation by Clark for shock value or pity and his metaphoric identification with Telly and Casper further attest to the spectacle of youth in/as crisis as the modern-day equivalent of the freak show.

