



THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY IN *LUCE*

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What is *Luce* about? Effects of childhood trauma? Difficulties of adolescence? Transracial adoptions? Teenage psychopaths? All the above? *Luce* (2019) is the complicated story of a high-achieving Black male high schooler (Luce, played by Kelvin Harrison Jr.) who is facing difficulty with his teacher Ms. Wilson (Octavia Spencer). Luce was adopted by two white parents when he was a young child from Eritrea and his parents allude to him being a child soldier in the civil conflict. He is a superstar track and field athlete, lead of the debate team, the popular, attractive kid among his peers, college-bound, and can do no wrong in the eyes of his parents and school principal. Conflict arises after his teacher Ms. Wilson finds marijuana in DeShaun's (Astro) locker, which gets DeShaun (another Black teenager at the school) removed from the track and field team, resulting in him losing his college scholarship. The marijuana belonged to Luce and this event elicits a series of events plotting vengeance toward Ms. Wilson, as Luce perceives her as holding the Black youth in the school to different (higher) standards.

In the early 1990s, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the phrase "*politics of respectability*" to describe middle class Black women attending the Women's Convention of the Black Baptist Church who adopted an ideology to resist white Americans' negative stereotypes about them. She explained Black leaders argued that Black people who had "proper" and "respectable" behavior (i.e., comportment to proper dress and language, polite manners, temperament, cleanliness of person and property, sexual purity) were worthy of equal civil and political rights and protections. However, those who do not conform to such behaviors were pathologized and criminalized and, therefore, deserving of any negative retaliation. Respectability politics popularized in mainstream media after Bill Cosby's infamous 2004 "pound cake speech" at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)'s celebration of the 50th anniversary of *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.¹ He asserted disrespectful young Black men who steal and run amuck provoke police violence and that

¹ A written transcript of the speech can be found here: https://www.eightcitiesmap.com/transcript_bc.htm.



Black men who demonstrate respectability by “pull[ing] [their] pants up” are entitled to protection and safety, and even success. In other words, respectability politics posits that Black people need to distance themselves from Blackness and Black culture and assimilate to the Eurocentric values, culture, and norms to be guaranteed their safety and protection in society and be palatable to the white gaze² and white communities. Ultimately, respectability politics uses methods that incorporate surveillance, control, and repression of Blackness. Respectability politics can be observed quite frequently in discourse—using the word “ghetto” to “other” or distance oneself from Black people of a different social class, any hair texture that is coiled/curly/kinky and unprocessed is unkempt or unprofessional (not “good hair,” “nappy”), victim-blaming sexual assault survivors (“Why didn’t she report earlier?”) or state-sanctioned police violence fatality victims (“Why was he wearing a hoodie?” “Why did he run?”), and misogyny (i.e., anti-Black misogyny).

Paisley Harris remarks there are two audiences who accepted respectability politics: Black people who are encouraged to be respectable for impression management and accepting of in-group classism, and white people who need to be shown that Black people could be respectable. According to Ms. Wilson, the teacher with whom the protagonist develops a conflictive relationship, Luce violated respectability politics the moment he wrote a controversial essay in her class. She instructed students to write an essay from the perspective of a historical figure. Luce wrote his essay on Frantz Fanon, a revolutionary who argued colonialism can be overcome through violence. Due to his background as an Eritrean child soldier who was adopted by a white family and the fact that she found illegal fireworks in Luce’s locker, she immediately feared Luce and contacted his parents, Amy (Naomi Harris) and Peter (Tim Roth). She notes, “Given Luce’s background, you and Peter must have faced a lot of challenges.” Again, Luce had early exposure to violence while living in a warzone in Eritrean and when adopted, did not speak English, presented with symptoms of trauma, and required mental health treatment. However, throughout the movie, adults keep remarking on how well Luce overcame these childhood adversities. When his father found out about the essay, he immediately questioned Ms. Wilson’s judgment—centered on respectability. He remarks, “Our teenage, soon-to-be valedictorian son is suddenly a radical? A terrorist?” His father dismisses Luce’s controversial essay based on his academic success and social popularity. Luce also makes references to his parents erasing parts of his African/Black identity. During speech practice, he notes that his mother could not pronounce his Eritrean birthname, so his father suggested renaming him Luce after adoption. In Cosby’s “pound cake” speech, he provides a similar example of this type of respectability politics, as he tossed disgust at Black people giving their children

² The *white gaze* has been described by scholars, such as Frantz Fanon (a literary figure cited in *Luce*), as an underlying force of domination geared toward submission, suppression, or assimilation of Black people.



“names like Shaniqua, Taliqua, and Muhammed and all that crap,” instead of more palatable Eurocentric names.

Ms. Wilson also violates her students’ boundaries, particularly her Black students, in order to aid in their “success.” Luce’s friend DeShaun was removed the track team after Ms. Wilson found marijuana in his locker and called the police. At the beginning of the film, viewers see her approach DeShaun because he was on his phone during class during a discussion of a video of Bree Newsome.³ Given his inattention during the discussion on civil rights, she remarks, “For you, [the lecture material] could be a matter of life or death.” Luce attempts to talk to a visibly upset DeShaun once the class ends, but DeShaun walks away. The movie follows Luce as he seeks vengeance against Ms. Wilson due to her actions toward DeShaun and later himself. He takes a number of steps that ultimately resulting in her termination from the school due to a fireworks explosion in her classroom that was orchestrated by Luce (Ms. Wilson originally found the illegal fireworks in his locker during an unsanctioned search). After her termination from the school, Luce brings flowers to Ms. Wilson’s home. During the confrontation, Luce explains why he’s angry with her. Ms. Wilson once met with the Black boys in the school after DeShaun lost his scholarship and, according to Luce, she stated, “It is your solemn duty to never be stereotypes. Look at Luce. Be like Luce.” In their heated final scene, Ms. Wilson explains to Luce the importance of providing “tough love” to these boys to ensure they succeed, even if it comes at a cost to a few. She states, “You’re mad people put you in a box...America put you in a box. It’s tight and it’s dirty and you can’t move. But you know what, it’s too bad.” Ultimately, Ms. Wilson is stating that for the Black boys who do not conform and assimilate to whiteness, therefore comporting to the politics of respectability, they are placed at a disadvantage in American society.

As Harris noted in their work, Luce’s friends succumb to respectability politics and label him as a “different” Black male. One of his white friends jokingly calls him Nelson Mandela, and another peer states, “You’re not like DeShaun. He’s like Black-Black.” When Luce approaches DeShaun about his newfound Black friends, DeShaun replies that none of them are “future Nobel Laureates and shit.” In frustration over being removed from the track team, he says to Luce, “Why me and not you? It’s because they want you to win...They gotta have at least one Obama, right?” He also remarks on Luce’s clothing; even alludes to pulling up his pants, a nod to Cosby’s pound cake speech.

³ Brittany “Bree” Newsome is an activist, speaker, and filmmaker who made national news on June 27, 2015 she engaged in an act of civil disobedience when she removed the Confederate flag from the South Carolina state house grounds in response to the Charleston, South Carolina massacre of nine Black people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church by a known white supremacist on June 17, 2015. She was arrested for actions and charged with defacing monuments on capitol grounds; however, the flag was permanently removed on July 10, 2015



Finally, the portrayal of Luce’s character is multidimensional. Some viewers questioned whether he is a psychopath. It is evident that he used his power and privilege against others, including his parents and his school. Given that he was the respectable Black male adopted by an affluent white family, he was often able to avoid consequences for his misbehavior. He was a mastermind and easily manipulated others because he was a “star student” and had convenient alibis and witnesses for his revenge plot against Ms. Wilson. In fact, Ms. Wilson confronts him on using his peers as pawns and accuses Luce of also inflicting harm on his marginalized peers given his privilege and his image of respectability. In fact, by the end of the film, viewers are still uncertain whether or not he committed a sexual assault or observed a group sexual assault against a female classmate and did not intervene. Although Ms. Wilson’s actions against DeShaun were part of the respectability narrative, Luce’s behaviors were problematic. Ultimately, he escapes consequences for his behavior toward Ms. Wilson—getting her fired from his school—and continues on with his life. His positionality as an economically privileged male with white parents absolves him from accountability for his actions. For instance, after his own mother learned the truth about her son (i.e., his ability to manipulate others and mimic emotions), she blatantly lies to the principal about him having the fireworks Ms. Wilson presented to her; instead of holding him accountable for his actions, she promises to protect him at all costs.

During a conversation with his mother, Luce says, “I only get to be a saint or a monster.” What is *Luce* about? W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of *double consciousness*, where Black people balance integrating their sense of self and Black identity with the need to placate whiteness and the white gaze, describes the dilemma Luce faced as a Black teenager. *Luce* is a narrative about Black boys’ delicate journey through the United States educational system and his community with the hope of appearing worthy of success.

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