

Black & Privileged: Poor African Americans “intrude” on an affluent Chicago neighborhood

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Black & Privileged, a television movie directed by Chicago-based, independent film director Mark Harris (*Black Butterfly*, *Black Coffee*, *Nothing like Thanksgiving*), was released on Netflix in 2019. The movie stars Dawnisha Halfkenny, Simeon Henderson and Corey Hendrix.

The film raises, but in a glancing and unsatisfactory manner, a nearly taboo subject in America—wealth and class divisions, including divisions within the African-American population. Such issues beg for serious artistic treatment at present.

Intended as a pilot for a potential full-length series, *Black & Privileged* is set in a neighborhood on Chicago’s south side. Upon its July release on Netflix, the film reached the top 10 most-viewed list on the streaming platform and has been featured prominently at a number of award ceremonies focused on African-American filmmaking.

While in reality a seriously impoverished community, the fictionalized version of Englewood in *Black & Privileged* is a well-off neighborhood whose residents are mostly upper-middle class African-American businessmen and women. One of the film’s central characters explains, in regard to the neighborhood’s composition, “We searched through the city of Chicago for folks who not only cared about this community, but they cared about the people. And they had to understand the value of money. So yes, we have our own schools, we have our own banks, we hired our own police force.”

In Harris’s film, the lives of Englewood’s happy residents are disrupted when a nearby housing project is torn down, causing low-income blacks to turn up in the wealthy gated community. This sets off an existential

crisis among the well-heeled African Americans.

“If this happens, like, everybody’s going to leave—the doctors, the lawyers, entrepreneurs like myself ... They’re all gone,” warns Eldon (Hendrix), on learning the unsettling news. The prosperous, self-deluded denizens of Englewood ludicrously choose to interpret the influx of lower-income people as a scheme hatched by the “the [white] man” to break up their idyllic community.

Black and Privileged is at its best when it skewers the self-righteousness and hypocrisy of these layers. Another main character, Dawn (Halfkenny), initially supportive of the new neighbors, quotes W.E.B. DuBois: “To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships.” She insists it is the community’s job to lend a “helping hand” to these poor souls. Her enthusiasm turns to panic and hostility overnight, however, when she discovers her new neighbors “standing in the middle of the street drinking 40-ouncers.” Dawn demands that her husband (Henderson) call the police on the new residents!

According to statistics published by the US Federal Reserve, during the administration of America’s first African-American president, Barack Obama, a vast quantity of wealth accrued to the top 1 percent of the population, as the well-being of the majority of the population of all races suffered immensely. As part of that process, the Fed reported, from 2007 to 2016, the top 1 percent of the black population saw its share of total African-American wealth grow from 19.4 percent to 40.5 percent.

The levels of wealth inequality among African Americans and other minority groups in the US are

even more pronounced than inequality among whites. As commentator Antonio Moore noted on the Huffington Post in 2014, “A black family in the [top] 1 percent is worth a staggering 200 times that of an average black family. If black America were a country we would be among the most wealth stratified in the world.”

The emergence of such themes in a television movie such as *Black & Privileged* is significant, despite the stated, seriously narrow aims of the filmmakers themselves.

In interviews, director Mark Harris, a native of Englewood, makes little reference to the question of inequality. In an interview with FilmCourage.com, for example, Harris explains that his goal is to provide “positive images ... [of] the family unit. ... Now you can see people that own their own businesses,” etc. In spite of these limitations, more powerful images do emerge.

The starting point of Harris’s film is intriguing and potentially fruitful. Unfortunately, the director doesn’t seem to know what to do with the richness of the dramatic and social situation. Perhaps its implications are disturbing, especially to racist and ethno-centric conceptions.

Black & Privileged touches on the social, economic and cultural divide within the African-American population in the United States, but then immediately backs away from the issue as though it were radioactive. After introducing their central premise, the filmmakers drop the theme of social inequality, as the internal conflict in the community is superseded by a pointless murder conspiracy that seems to have little connection to the first half of the film.

There are several other weaknesses, including a number of the acting performances as well as the film’s editing, which is disjointed and at times very poorly done.

There are additional retrograde (and worse) elements, including a subplot involving a stereotyped Iraqi-American character who is hazed out of the community due to his restaurant’s competition with black-owned establishments. “These are the types of sacrifices we must make in order to keep our community strong.” What’s admirable about such a community?

At its best moments, *Black & Privileged* cuts or threatens to cut across the outlook of identity politics promoted by sections of the upper-middle class—the

same layers that view the election of the first black or female as president of the United States as a world-historical event.



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