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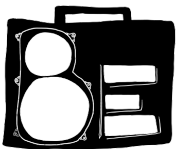
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“Bad Taste in Movies”: HACKing Films as a Site of Praxis for Black Embodiment

Eghosa Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, Andre Carter, Noah Morton

Abstract

During a time of racial unrest and a hyperfocus on inclusion and representation, three Black scholars from different time zones met on Zoom to discuss recent movies. Initially, our conversation revolved around the role of the representation of Black people in film and contentious arguments about the quality of Marvel’s Black Panther. We shifted toward a more analytical trend when we began to interrogate how the world of cinema has attempted to take progressive steps regarding representation, such as moving away from obvious racialized tropes. Essentially, we concluded that the industry has yet to address its deeper and prevailing flaws when it comes to its perception of Blackness. While much of the previous research on film unpacks the tropes and stereotypes that work as limiting factors, our work seeks to understand how Black characterizations in film serve as sites of praxis, whereby audiences learn how to read and understand Blackness. Using frameworks based on Black critical race theory, critical media studies, and critical race theory, as well as aligning that with our focus group study, we have conceptualized the humanizing approaches to cinematic knowledge (HACK). Our findings suggest that HACK will serve as a tool and mechanism to disrupt the patterns in film that act as a generational stagnation in the way we view the Black community on and off the screen.

June 29, 2021

Three Black scholars from different time zones decided to meet virtually amid multiple pandemics impacting the physical, mental, and spiritual health of the communities we come from. We gathered in the virtual space to heal and have dialogues about the ways in which we—and the Black communities that we grew up in—are represented not only in the news but also in films. At first, we spoke about our favorite films and the reasons behind each choice. We indicated how the complexity of the characters’ humanity combined with the multidimensionality of the plot created some of the conditions for our favorite films. As we began to witness the similarity among our responses, especially with regard to slave films and tropes, we wondered about how frequently Black characters in film are limited in their complexity and their dimensionality is removed to reassert dominant narratives in the form of racialized character tropes. It is no wonder that the late actor Sidney Poitier, who often portrayed

nonthreatening characters that served to facilitate a white narrative, stated in a 1967 interview: "If the fabric of the society were different, I would scream to the high heaven to play villains and to deal with different images of Negro life that would be more dimensional. But I'll be damned if I do that at this stage in the game (Morris, 2022, p. A19)." We still scream for multidimensional representation. We will not be damned.

Months after our initial conversation, we facilitated a focus group on Black characterizations in film. From our critical analysis from the focus group, we created the humanizing approaches to cinematic knowledges (HACK) as a way to disrupt dehumanizing Black characterizations in film to push toward transformative pedagogy and multidimensional portrayals. There are three elements necessary for challenging the way audiences read the Black body in film: (1) recognize and reject the anti-Black gaze, (2) refuse the removal of dimensionality, and (3) reinscribe the narratives using counter-storytelling.

For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the journey and analysis of creating the HACK, which recognizes how racial tropes are intentional inventions that further affirm the superiority of a dominant racial group. This affirmation of superiority occurs while cementing the inferiority of marginalized groups, with a specific focus on the Black community. There is a simultaneity in effect, as the innovations in films are innovations to the continued aesthetic confinement of Black racial tropes. We have added the following list of eight racial tropes below based on Donald Bogle's (1994) *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*: (1) **Buck**: The Black Brute, (2) **Coon**: A Black character depicted as a buffoon and object of amusement, (3) **Magical Negro**: A Black character who comes to the aid of white protagonists in a film, (4) **Mammy**: A large and cantankerous Black woman; (5) **Mulatto**: A tragic, light-skinned Black character, usually female, (6) **Tom**: A socially acceptable "good" Black character, (7) **Sapphire**: The Angry Black Woman; (8) **Jezebel**: A lascivious Black woman. There are additional tropes that extend beyond single characters, including the trauma porn trope, which is rooted in deriving pleasure from the graphic diminution of Black suffering. Trauma porn glorifies and exploits the depictions of systemic pain specific to Black people for the sake of entertainment. Utilizing the frameworks of critical race theory (CRT) Black critical race theory (BlackCrit), and critical media studies (CMS), we observed and analyzed the impact of these common racial tropes within films.

The call to address Black characterizations in film during instances of racial unrest and a hyperfocus on inclusion and representation has frequently been made. However, the call has remained on a dial tone. Director Ava DuVernay, whose focus is on highlighting structural inequalities in film, acknowledged that creating films outside of the dominant culture is difficult. Thus, she is committed to creating her own lane, stating:

There's a lot of talk about shattering the ceiling and certainly I sit here privileged after decades of women who have done it, but in general, I think a lot less about breaking down his door or shattering his ceiling and more about building my own house. It comes down to who gets to tell the story. If the dominant images that we've seen throughout our lifetimes, our mothers' lifetimes, our grandmothers' lifetimes, have been dominated by one kind of person, and we take that. We internalize it. We drink it in, as true, as fact, it's tragic. Because it goes beyond just the film industry. These are the images of ourselves that we consume and it effects the way we see ourselves and the way other people see us (Pollack & Simmons, 2014, 00:1:04)

We agree with DuVernay's take on the function of dominant images. Often, Black characterizations in film have made incremental changes, and those changes are not enough to show the multidimensionality of Black communities. Scholars have created various approaches that are rooted in CRT and counter-storytelling (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), which interrogates the dominant institutional structures fortified by race and racism, as well as BlackCrit, which defines those structures of domination as anti-Blackness (Dumas & ross, 2016). Black communities are negatively impacted by the film industry, which profits from anti-Blackness through the proliferation of one-dimensional narratives and tropes. Films work to contextualize Black experiences within hegemonic consumption. However, that consumption will be disrupted as humanizing approaches to cinematic knowledge are uncovered using the framework of CRT, BlackCrit, and critical media studies (CMS). As Black scholars, we are invested in exploring how certain perceptions of Blackness are legitimized through film.

Theoretical Framework

Counter-Storytelling Within CRT

CRT recognizes the genealogy of dominant narratives that are produced for the purpose of asserting and maintaining dominance over marginalized racial groups. Black feminist scholar Dr. Whitney Garrett-Walker (2021) asserts that "ideological lynching takes place to co-opt Black people's epistemological understanding of themselves and their place in the world and reiterate institutional racism and other oppressions" (p. 32). In this work, we focus on CRT's tenet of counter-storytelling, which refuses the nooses of ideological lynching to center the experiences of people whose stories are often suppressed. Dominant narratives are produced through film; counter-stories are too. Using CRT as a theoretical framework, we center the lived experiences of those in our focus group as actual knowledge to critically interrogate film while radically imagining humanizing approaches to cinematic knowledge. However, there are limits to CRT for adequately interrogating the "specificity of the Black" (Wynter, 1989). As a result, we look to BlackCrit, which offers an additional framework to investigate Black bodies within film in relation to anti-Blackness as a social construct.

BlackCrit

Dumas and ross (2016) posited that BlackCrit goes beyond CRT and the general theory of racism to analyze the specific impact of anti-Blackness on the spirits of Black students. Warren (2021) defines anti-Blackness as "an invisible cultural logic that urges a deep disdain for Blackness and Black life. It actively shades how one reads Black bodies" (p. 8). The specific focus on Black bodies is key to BlackCrit, as it demands that we explicate the marginalization, silencing, erasure, and institutionalized racism that exist in Black characterizations in film because "antiblackness is not simply racism against Black people. Rather, antiblackness refers to a broader antagonistic relationship between blackness and (the possibility of) humanity" (p. 429). We wonder about the ways in which films affirm the structures of anti-Blackness. In what ways do films provide the cement for the buildings of anti-Blackness constructed on the stolen lands of the American Dream? Using the lenses of CRT, BlackCrit, and CMS, we conduct media analysis on Black characterizations in film, as well as code the stories from the focus group.

Critical Media Studies

Critical media studies matters because media narratives contribute to the stories we live by and are used by parents to help socialize their children. Media are storytellers and are thus one source of the raw materials we draw from when we live our everyday lives and try to figure out who we are and where we are in the culture around us.

—Thomas Johnson, *Media vs. Critical Media Studies*

As we are examining films, we are interested in understanding how film socializes audiences to view Black bodies through the lens of anti-Blackness. It is not enough to recognize the politics, economics, aesthetics, and structures that undergird film. Frank Wilderson (2018) argues that if “we can start to see the policing and the mutilation and the aggressivity towards Blackness not as a form of discrimination, but as being a form of psychic health and well-being for the rest of the world, then we can begin to reformulate the problem and begin to take a more iconoclastic response to it” (p. 7). In that same vein, films teach audiences about Black people in a way that is detrimental to our collective psyche. Essentially, we are arguing that all education is indoctrination, conditioning people to accept and normalize hegemonic ideologies. Our work is about recognizing and changing these structures by drawing attention to the social relationship between a film and its viewer, which highlights the social conditioning with an aim to change it. By doing this work, we are tacitly making the argument that film has the power to shape relationships between groups and individuals. The salient, though perceived as insignificant, values presented in film can have drastic impacts on policy, economics, policing, anti-Black violence, and other facets that affect Black life. The proliferation of films like *Boyz n the Hood*, *Dead Presidents*, and *Set it off* has contributed to the overt criminalization of Black communities. Black criminality and “thug life” perceptions are reinforced by fictions shown in film and result in real life policies and consequences, such as stop-and-frisk or Hillary Clinton’s 1996 speech, in which the influence of Black criminality elicited the following statement: “They are often the kinds of kids that are called ‘superpredators’—no conscience, no empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way, but first, we have to bring them to heel” (Gearan & Phillip, 2016). These kids become “superpredators” in the eyes of this white woman because of the consistent narrative perpetuated by films like *Birth of a Nation* and *Native Son*. Of course, we are limiting our work at this time to popular American films in order to focus on the proliferation of the uniquely American brand of anti-Blackness.

The power of CMS is that it has the potential to open up the passive viewer to connect the 2D life of the film to their own 3D experiences. Once the ideas are embodied, the film is no longer just a projection but an introspective act that can either attract or deflect philosophical propositions previously masked by 24 frames per second. These frames remove the masked projections that are often kept tucked away and instead highlight the viewers’ learned internal depictions of Blackness that are inherently detrimental. We seek to include the viewer in each frame in order to move beyond the screen and into the hidden institutions of power that film ultimately represents. Far from an academic exercise, our work short-circuits a visceral understanding of film tropes to call into question power relations and iconography and stimulate a critical reflective response within and beyond the fourth wall (Auter & Davis, 1991).

Scholars such as Ott and Mack (2020) and Baker-Bell et al. (2017) have completed analyses that we would currently call CMS. Upon reading the film as text, scholars like Bogle, as early as the 1970s, uncovered several tropes of Blackness in film with direct relation to power

distributions. Using a CRT and BlackCrit framework, we focus on CMS analysis to observe common Black characterizations in film.

Using CMS, we ask the following questions of the eight common racial tropes:

1. Why do these tropes occur so often in conjunction with Black embodiment?
2. How do these tropes condition the film consumer to conceive of Black existence in an anti-Black way?
3. Is there a way to short-circuit or disrupt the passive comprehension of the messaging around Black embodiment?

To observe the influence of these tropes within Black characterizations in film, we analyze the roles for which Black actors and actresses have received critical accolades in the form of an Oscar nomination and award.

Praxis

[Praxis is] an iterative, reflective approach to taking action. It is an ongoing process of moving between practice and theory. Praxis is a synthesis of theory and practice in which each informs the other.

—Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education*

We are most familiar with praxis within discussion of classroom contexts. However, we are making the claim that media, and film in particular, acts as a site of praxis, in the sense that film occupies tangible and intangible spaces simultaneously. Just below the flickering light is the operationalization of multiple theories that converge on a single temporal plane. Both consciously and unconsciously, the viewer is subjected to concepts of gender, economics, and moral behavior. These concepts are given form by the actions of the characters, the angles of the camera, and even wide pans of the cityscape. All of these angles are turned on a single axis. Through combining the lenses of CRT, BlackCrit, and CMS, we recognize this myopic axis upon which films are created, perpetuating the dominant gaze. As Black scholars, what we are most interested in is how ideas of race are generated, regurgitated, moderated, and disintegrated whenever Black embodiment is portrayed.

As a site of praxis, film promotes various ideas about Black people through flawed audio-visual representations. Through the examination of multiple films with CRT, BlackCrit, and CMS lenses, we observed that films both reflect and stabilize ideas of Blackness or (the aberration of) Black life as lived by Black people. Morris (2022) writes that “in movies, Black characters were jolly statuary—hoisting luggage, serving food, tending children—meant to decorate a white American’s dream” (para. 6). This perception of Black people by society at large is contrasted by “the controlling images developed for middle-class white women, [however] the controlling images applied to Black [people] are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance” (Collins, 2002, p. 100).

The purpose of designating film as a site of praxis is to give weight to the assertion that anti-Blackness is not only a fixed feature in film, represented by the presence of Black characters

weighted by deleterious tropes, but it is a cornerstone of modern American society. Concerning representation, we intend to look at films with respect not only to whether Black people are present, but also how they interact with other characters and the instruments in their environments. This allows us, as a collective of Black educators, to unravel the operationalization of the anti-Black gaze, which produces and reproduces real and virtual violence against Black people. In film, this violence takes the form of one-dimensional representations of Black people that exist to venerate the dominant white culture, while simultaneously signifying and justifying the cultural genocide of Black people. We argue that film is a site of praxis, subjecting viewers to tropes that undergird whiteness as the civilized norm.

What we see through our evaluation is a representative spectrum of Blackness delimited by the Good Black Person on one end and the Bad Black Person on the other. It may be more forthright to outline this as civilized/assimilated Black person and savage/unassimilated Black person. For example, consider the acceptability of such characters as Laurence Fishburne's Morpheus in *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) versus his portrayal of Bumpy Johnson in *Hoodlum* (Duke, 1997). In *The Matrix*, Fishburne played a Magical Negro, as his sole role was in support of the white characters' development. In *Hoodlum*, Fishburne played a Buck, where violence was essential to his role. Whether as a Magical Negro in *The Matrix* or a Buck in *Hoodlum*, both roles were relegated to racial tropes. By approaching film as a site of praxis, our primary goal is to begin the process of questioning, describing, explaining, connecting, case-writing, and bringing values, lived experience, and moral commitment to improving the human condition and imagining new perspectives (Arnold & Mundy, 2020). The importance of our approach is the acknowledgment that film has the power to create real-world implications of how Black people are dehumanized. Audiences are radicalized and inoculated against Black people, and therein art imitates strife.

Through the overuse of damaging tropes, film has a twofold mission: elevating the tales of the dominant culture and marginalizing Black people. The irony is that even when films have a positive view of Black people, such as *Green Mile* (1999), *Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), *Hidden Figures* (2016), and *The Shape of Water* (2017), it is often the surprising trait of an individual and not a feature of a community. For example, in the film *Green Mile*, Michael Clarke Duncan is the only Black character in the film, and his character has both literal and figurative elements of a Magical Negro. This film attempted to elicit empathy from film audiences for a character that was falsely imprisoned. Playing a mentally disabled, Black, imprisoned Magical Negro garnered Duncan an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor. It is this type of portrayal that has influenced our decision to focus on Black characterizations in film. The aim of our project is to acknowledge film as a site of praxis and how we can inspire active engagement in the film consumption experience.

Methodology

A qualitative study of eight self-identified men, women and gender fluid moviegoers was conducted via Zoom on August 22, 2021. Our original question was:

What roles played by Black actors/actresses are deemed palatable and worthy of acknowledging, and how do those roles satiate white structures and versions of Blackness?

To answer this question, we conducted a semi-structured focus group. In addition, we had critical analysis movie nights to reflect upon Black characterizations in film. We utilized Corbin and Strauss's (2008) constant comparative method of grounded theory. Open and axial coding was used to classify concepts and codes under various categories to extract emergent themes (Creswell, 2014). For the sake of anonymity, all participants are represented using pseudonyms.

The age range of the participants was 20–65. Fifty-seven percent of the participants identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and the racial composition of the group, as indicated by self-identification, consisted of two Hispanic or Latinx, one white, four Black, and one Native participants. All participants possessed bachelors, with two having masters, and two with doctoral degrees as their highest level of education. The eight participants were interviewed virtually to explore perceptions of Black people in film, especially films that have been nominated for or won an Academy Award. We prepared seven questions and photographs of every Black winner in the Best Actor/Actress and Best Supporting Actor/Actress categories since the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1929. We conducted a semi-structured focus group interview virtually through Zoom. Our focus group discussion emphasized the perceptions of Black people in film, the limitations and stereotypes of roles that are often publicly lauded, and the challenges of public perception rooted in cinema.

Summary

August 22, 2021

More than ten people from different time zones gathered for an intergenerational focus group on Black characterizations in film. Reflecting on our initial conversation from June 29th, we looked forward to facilitating a semi-structured focus group around participants' lived experiences with witnessing Blackness in film. Our questions are grouped in three dimensions to investigate Black characters' roles and the reasons for its critical awards. We use dimensions to emphasize the need for multilayered characterizations of Black people in film. These dimensions are not comprehensive. Additional dimensions can be included to further investigate Black characterizations in film. For the purpose of this paper, the multidimensionality of the questions resonate with the multidimensionality of Black characters' roles to destabilize and refuse dominant ideologies represented in the historical, racial tropes.

1st Dimension: Setting the Scene

What movies starring Black people do you love and why? What elements of the films resonate with you?

What are your favorite Black characters in films? Explain.

The focus group participants had a variety of professional and personal lived experiences. One participant worked for a software company, while another was a tenured faculty member at a research institution. All participants shared a commonality of regularly watching and appreciating various genres of films. The aim of the Setting the Scene questions was to direct our focus group's attention to films that starred Black people to encourage critical reflection in this realm. Some participants neither noticed the films with Black people nor intentionally sought out films with a cast of color. Even the idea of not recognizing Black people in the world of a film is

significant; the one dimensionality of our roles contributes to the overall invisibilization of multidimensional Black characters.

2nd Dimension: Investigating the Roles

What do you notice about popular Black films? What do you notice about films with all Black casts?

When you think of Black actors/actresses who are recognized for their roles, what commonalities do you see? Who is doing the recognizing?

Halle Berry is the only Black actress to win Best Actress in the Oscars' 93-year history. However, seven Black women have won best supporting actress. What are your thoughts?

Entering the second dimension, we shift our gaze to focus on the roles that Black characters played in the films that we loved, as well as popular and critically acclaimed ones. We did not brief the participants on any concepts relating to Black tropes in film prior to or during the focus group. Given this, it is noteworthy that multiple participants described the racial historical tropes and named them with the same language used our theoretical framework. The participants' theoretical conceptualization of tropes served as the foundation to respond to the questions. As the links between roles of Black characters and racial tropes were made, the discussion turned to investigating the reasons why an entire film industry is intent on producing films in this dehumanizing manner. Asking the question, "Who is doing the recognizing?" encouraged focus group comments around how a dominant gaze casts limiting roles for Black characters. Within this intentional orchestration of roles from a solitary dominant gaze, the fifth question in this dimension opened a portal to the third dimension.

3rd Dimension: Contextualizing the Ac—claim

*The following are pictures of actors and actresses in the films for which they won their Oscars. *As you look at these photos, why do you think they are the winners?*

What makes a film with Black people critically acclaimed?

Ac—claim is spelled this way to emphasize how critically acclaimed roles actually stake *claims* on something. Combining the theoretical framework of racial tropes within films with lived experiences, the participants began to describe how the critically ac—claimed roles stake claim within the land of imagination. However, this land comes from the one dimensional imagination mentioned earlier in the context of the white American Dream. Films are acclaimed inasmuch as they further construct the master's house through the incessant affirmation and perpetuation of the racial tropes. We created the HACK to disrupt the dehumanizing Black characterizations in film while pushing toward transformative pedagogy and multidimensional portrayals.

Analysis

The HACK is grounded in our theoretical frameworks. Across our focus group data and discourse, we were able to recognize the importance of film as a site of praxis. Our work seeks to

disrupt the limitations of the film industry where Black people are confined to roles that limit our humanity. These limitations force us into boxes that we don't fit into and were never meant to. So our bodies are bent and broken and contorted and stuffed into unnatural shapes while we are expected to be grateful because we are being "represented." Meanwhile, the film industry leaves messy brushstrokes depicting Blackness, which are then superimposed over the actuality of Black humanity. We identified three categories that shaped our conceptualization of the HACK: stereotypical tropes, acceptable roles, and colorism.

Stereotypical Tropes

A stereotype is an intentional invention to undermine and eradicate the complexity and multidimensionality of a racialized group of people. These inventions are marketed in films. Participants in our study indicated many films that have received Academy Award nominations often affixed negative tropes to the Black body. According to Julio Cammarota (2011), the media plays a significant role in how young people learn about racial prejudice. He argues that the racist expression and exclusion that are often represented in film are often used as tools to strip historically excluded communities of their agency and commodify Black bodies in film. Frustration with this limiting narrative was expressed by our participant Dr. Matty Warren, who stated:

I get sick and tired of any picture that's going to show our kids, or show them being thrown into jail and misrepresented...That's not how we talk. That's not who we are. So I look at it with a critical eye, and I'm saying, "Are you truly representing who we really are in our fullness?"

Here, the participant pushed back against the portrayals of Black bodies in film because they do not resonate with her and how she views her people.

Another participant said:

I remember the 70s, when I was in college, and I took a class called Minorities in the Media. And it talked about the stereotypes. It talked about the Buck, big Buck, the bulky Black man with the muscles, you know, the kinda guys who will come in and tear things down.

Stereotypical tropes were explicitly named by JD, who stated that "[in films] you still see the Mammy character, and then the tragic Mulatto, the one [who] talks about the person torn between two worlds and not fitting in each, and so some of these things we still see." Tropes that were witnessed in the 70s, although modified and less overt, still exist today. Another participant articulated how dangerous tropes can be, as they contribute to the dehumanization of Black people:

I thought that this was just something that they were doing to us, and then I was like, it's just not as dehumanizing when Ben Stiller plays a stereotype, it's just not dehumanizing to all white people when they have a character just be ignorant or, like, a stereotype or not super fleshed out and so it's just, like, I feel like just because of the relationship that Black Americans have to being commodified.

The Black body does not get the privilege of individuality but is rather lumped together as one group, making it easier to fetishize and dismiss our humanity. The pervasive trauma porn trope and the sexualization of Black suffering is extended to Blackness and limits our humanity. Our youngest participant argued one consistent trope that people often read as positive is the resilient and extraordinary character. These characters are lauded for overcoming trauma and represent many of the roles that exist for Black performers. The participant asserted, "This is the theme, not all these characters are respectable just people I can admire [who] overcame something [...] They have to have some level of extraordinary." The stereotypical roles that exist for us are rooted in trauma, historical tropes, and resilience because, as our participant JD argued that "it's a safe way for [white people] to explore how they really think about us."

Acceptable Roles

In some ways, the roles deemed acceptable for Black performers have shifted over the years. Hattie McDaniel won Best Supporting Actress for *Gone With The Wind* for her role as a maid. In 2011, 72 years later, Viola Davis was nominated for her role in *The Help*—for her role as a maid. Even in the name of the awards, Black women are given awards for "support" roles, with Halle Berry being the only Black woman to have ever won the Best Actress award, which she won in 2001. The Mammy trope extends to the very name of the category of the awards that Black women are permitted to win. When going through the list of Black Oscar winners in the Oscars' 93-year history, we find similar roles nominated over time: Magical Negro à la Mahershala Ali in *Greenbook* or Morgan Freeman in *Million Dollar Baby*; trauma porn (James, 2021) in films like *12 Years a Slave* and *Precious*; Halle Berry's tragic Mulatto in *Monster's Ball*; the Buck played by Denzel Washington in *Training Day*. Though Washington's portrayal of a corrupt cop elicited the highest praise, his most memorable work as Malcolm X was not deemed worthy of the Best Actor award, with Al Pacino instead winning for *Scent of a Woman*. Only 20 Black actors have won an Academy Award since 1929, and the roles that receive that recognition continue to solidify which depictions of Blackness are acceptable and deemed worthy.

These acceptable roles shape and reinforce beliefs about race, especially as it pertains to the containment of Black people within the matrices of trauma. Cammarota (2011) argued that cinematic treatments of race provide movie viewers with the understanding that people of color often lack agency. Michelle Wright (2004) posited, "that Other's existence is consistently denied any role of importance, and yet its implied inferiority is the crux of Europeans' arguments for their ostensibly self-evident superiority" (p. 8). Hollywood works to create roles for Black artists that are deemed acceptable because they feed the insidious Otherness that has so often defined Blackness in the United States.

In film, the expansive characterizations given to white characters nurtures their existence in a way that is rooted in Black death, which forms the backdrop for Black characters' limited existence. One of our participants described this point when discussing the film *Lilies in the Field*, where Portier played a handyman who helps nuns repair their farm:

I really enjoyed the movie for the superficial reality of it, just a good story and stuff, but in looking at it through a critical lens or looking at it through sociocultural lens, this was the only safe movie for a Black man to be in that centered whiteness.

Essentially, the participant articulated that the roles Black men are allowed to play are rooted in affirming white perceptions and comfortability. They extended on this point of safe roles by discussing Denzel's Oscar win for *Training Day*:

And then, for all the other roles that Denzel Washington did now connects everything else, people were saying that one of the reasons that [he] did win for this one was because he portrayed something that they were comfortable seeing, which was a character that was corrupt, violent, and lacked integrity—all of the features of the racial historical trope of the Buck.

As one of our millennial participants stated when discussing acceptable roles that reduce Blackness to pain, resilience, or safe roles, it is usually shown in films “in a way that’s palatable for the masses.” The tastes of the masses comes from the tongues that spout one-dimensional Black characterizations in film. The vitriol that they spew has poisoned the minds of audiences around the world, in that anti-Blackness becomes the bitter pill that limits our humanity, yet we are still forced to swallow, leaving us to slit our throats to retain our very personhood and rendering us voiceless in the process. That palatability does not necessitate the humanization of Black people.

Colorism

Colorism in film works to displace the existence, the beauty, and the softness of Black actors and actresses with dark skin. In an interview in *Essence* magazine, Emmy award-winning actress Zendaya stated, “I am Hollywood’s acceptable version of a Black girl and that has to change. We’re vastly too beautiful and too interesting for me to be the only representation of that” (Danielle, 2020). Casting controversies continue to plague Hollywood. Angie Thomas’s book *The Hate U Give* has Starr, a dark-skinned Black girl, on the cover, but when the book was turned into a movie, light-skinned Amandla Stenberg was cast as Starr. Too often, dark skin is used to depict danger, brutality, and a lack of beauty inside and out. One of our participants articulated that she:

Pay attention to the shade of the face because sometimes you find that it looks like they want a certain color, a certain shade, and I was a theater major, and I was actually turned down for some roles because I was too light skin or too dark skin to be in is some plays, or “I’m sorry’, New York is saying, ‘but we didn’t write the script for a Black person in mind.’” So I think I’m very conscious of who you cast.

The shores of the audiences’ imagination are frequently drone-struck and bombarded with images of inferiority and victimization when the actor or actress is Black. Moreover, the messages are deepened when the skin tone is darker, as the Buck and the Sapphire tropes are often reserved for darker skinned artists, à la Jaime Foxx in *Django Unchained* (2012) and Mo’Nique in *Precious* (2009).

Recently, due to the #Oscarssowhite hashtag, spurred on by April Reign (*Ugwa*, 2020), there has been a push to incorporate better representation in film due to the longstanding and sustaining critiques of the industry, but some of our participants were skeptical of those changes:

I see all these Black movies coming out and I appreciate it, [but] I know they're going to go away. I know when they feel as though Black folks have calmed down, then they'll go back to business as usual, and that bothers me.

Ultimately, progress in films needs to be spearheaded by audiences. The audience is key to shifting the narrative and disrupting the current praxis of reading the Black body. For example, Zoe Saldana's role as Nina Simone in *Nina* (2016) garnered enough backlash to make the whole film a whole flop. Her desire to play the role of a prolific Black woman was rejected by viewers, as her prosthetic nose and darkened skin were a slap in the face to the historical significance of this iconic artist (Sterritt, 2016). The augmenting of Saldana's face and skin perpetuated messages of anti-Blackness and western beauty standards that exacerbated tropes of Blackness. The dehumanization of Nina Simone was illustrated by the disfiguration of Saldana's face to play her. The HACK, then, becomes an essential tool for equipping audiences to challenge and disrupt the hegemonic storytelling that encapsulates Black people in a box of tropes and traps them there with their own weighted existence.

Implications: The HACK

The implications of the results from our focus group helped us generate and conceptualize what we are calling the HACK. After reviewing the Bechdel Test and the DuVernay Test, we designed the HACK as a device for decoding and disrupting the dehumanizing characterizations of Black people and Blackness in film to push toward transformative pedagogy and multidimensional portrayals. There are three actions necessary for challenging the way audiences read the Black body in film: (1) recognize and reject the anti-Black gaze, (2) refuse the removal of dimensionality, and (3) reinscribe the narratives using counter-storytelling. We define *anti-Black gaze* encoded in film as perceiving Black people as one-dimensional historical tropes and only recognizing the stagnated imagery of Blackness. The anti-Black gaze fully encompasses the insidious nature of these tired old tropes and the intentional but unqualified inaccuracy of these depictions. In addition, the anti-Black gaze is not merely behind the camera; rather it refers to the conditions and tropes that make the scenes harmful to Black bodies and extract profits from them. Anti-Black gaze works to obstruct the critical transformative reading of Blackness. *Refusing the singular* refers to challenging the often binary space in which Black people are depicted. It is a rejection of the static form of Blackness that doesn't allow for a nuanced existence. Lastly, Solórzano & Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (p. 32). Counter-storytelling is crucial in films, as it can be used to challenge deeply entrenched narratives surrounding Blackness.

The HACK works to create a metric by which audiences can HACK the moviegoing experience and determine if the film is humanizing and meets these three actions. In order for a film to pass it must answer yes to the following questions:

1. Are there multiple shades of Blackness in the film and do they have a multidimensional storyline with full character development?
2. Is there more than one Black character in the film and do they talk to each other about things outside of race and race-based trauma?

3. Do Black people exist safely without the aid of the Magical Negro trope?
4. Do Black characters exist beyond historical and colonial tropes?

We aim to use the HACK to destabilize and refuse the dominant ideology, cultural hegemony, colonial gaze, and white gaze. Grande (2018) argued that “refusal should not be confused with ‘passive withdrawal or retreat’ but rather understood as an active instantiation of ‘a radically different mode-of-being and mode-of-doing’” (p. 58). Thus, the HACKers use the HACK to refuse and imagine possibilities of humanizing cinematic experiences. Films are sites of praxis where audiences learn about the Black body and apply that learning to their interactions with Black people. The HACK will move people away from normalizing dehumanizing depictions and allow them to (1) analyze Black characterizations in film through the lens of CRT, BlackCrit, and critical media studies (2) refuse to engage in dominant imagination rooted on our destruction (3) use language to dialogue about films as a site of praxis and (4) radically experience HACKing.

Conclusion

James Baldwin: We are behind the gates of a kingdom, which is determined to destroy us.

Audre Lorde: Yes, exactly so. And I’m interested in seeing that we do not accept terms that will help us destroy each other.

—*Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin*

We view moviegoers, en masse, as utterly zombified in front of a big screen, with this synchronized grab/toss popcorn-eating choreography. However, when watching the light from the screen flash across their faces as the scenes play out, we notice that it isn’t popcorn at all—it’s Mammy, and Jezebel, and the Coon, and the Magical Negro; artificial butter slathered over Bucks and Toms and Sapphires to make the kernels of Black stereotypes go down that much easier. Closer examination reveals that dominant-class audiences are engrossed, eyes fixed on the film and mindlessly consuming anti-Blackness that has been made entirely too palatable, but Black people are painfully lucid at worst or stingingly unconscious at best. Black people see what is happening, they see what they are being forced to digest, but they continue to do it because they are acutely aware of the dangers of the alternative. Conditioned to internalize things they know aren’t real, laugh on cue, gasp on cue, act like they believe that they are just watching a movie and not their own subjugation being endlessly propagated, swallowed by the literal handful.

To unearth the understanding of one’s own subjugation, Wilderson (2018) discussed his analysis of the perception of anti-Blackness by framing his discussion around destroying the world:

What freaks them [read: white people] out about an analysis of anti-Blackness is that this applies to the category of the Human, which means that they have to be destroyed regardless of their performance, or of their morality, and that they occupy a place of power that is completely unethical, regardless of what they do. And they’re not going to

do that. Because what are they trying to do? They're trying to build a better world. What are we trying to do? We're trying to destroy the world. Two irreconcilable projects (p. 20).

The "better world" enacted through film is one of Black criminality, wherein tropes are used to justify and provide scaffolding for the dominant gaze, whereas the HACK aims to destroy this world by forcing the reimagination of Blackness without being mediated through the white lens in order for Blackness to animate its own humanity.

Our HACK asks four questions of a given film. To pass, all four questions must be answered in the affirmative. The reasons a film passes or not presents the opportunity for dialogue, which the HACK encourages. Through critical dialogue about Black characterizations in film, we transgress the dominant imagination that confines Black people in film to imagine possibilities of healing and humanization. After creating the HACK, we reflected on our initial conversation from June 29th. We realized that some of the films we enjoy may not pass all of the questions. Films not passing our new metric for assessment does not mean that we have "bad taste in movies" or that these movies are not good; rather, it indicates that there needs to be a push for more humanizing characterizations of Blackness in films.

The undercurrent of our work here is the strong assertion that authentic representation in films is essential to imagining possibilities of Black freedom on and off screen. However, films' historical function of teaching and affirming the one-dimensionality of Black people is encouraged with awards that represent critical acclaim. As a result, films that pass the HACK are less likely to be critically acclaimed by Black performers winning Oscars because HACK films refuse to stake claims on dominant white imaginaries. The HACK encourages us to analyze racial and historical tropes to radically imagine new ways to humanize the cinematic experience. The implications of this work posit that additional research should extend the conversation to various forms of media, such as TV shows, animation, and comics. We encourage you, reader, to revisit films featuring Black characters and apply the HACK, our method of critically examining the media we consume. By undertaking this work, you are furthering our collective liberatory practice, so get your intellectual hatchet out and HACK the hell out of the next cinematic release.

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