

Black Parallax: Hollywood's Recent Approach to Mitigating Racial Excess

By Felicia Cosey

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that from 2013 to 2021 Hollywood filmmakers have favored casting Black British actors to play Black American characters in dramas dealing with racism and oppression in the US in order to remove the racial excess associated with Black American subjects. Once excess is removed, filmmakers feel free to craft narratives that appeal to US moviegoers and that elide the national shame of the enslavement and persecution of descendants of American slaves.

Keywords: Racism, Excess, Black British, Black American, Hollywood, Cinema, Lacan

Black Parallax: el enfoque reciente de Hollywood para mitigar el exceso racial

RESUMEN

Este artículo argumenta que, de 2013 a 2021, los cineastas de Hollywood favorecieron elegir a actores negros británicos para que interpretaran a personajes afroamericanos en dramas que tratan sobre el racismo y la opresión en los EE. UU. con el fin de eliminar el exceso racial asociado con los sujetos afroamericanos. Una vez que se elimina el exceso, los cineastas se sienten libres de elaborar narrativas que atraigan a los cinéfilos estadounidenses y que eludan la vergüenza nacional de la esclavitud y la persecución de los descendientes de esclavos estadounidenses.

Palabras clave: racismo, exceso, negro británico, negro estadounidense, Hollywood, cine, Lacan

黑色视差：好莱坞近期用于减轻种族歧视的方法

摘要

本文论证认为，好莱坞电影制片人从2013年到2021年在有关美国种族主义和压迫的戏剧中倾向于让英国黑人演员扮演美国黑人角色，以消除与美国黑人主题相关的过度种族差异。当这种过度差异被去除后，电影制作人就能自由制作吸引美国电影观众的叙事，并避免“奴役和迫害美国奴隶后裔”这一国家耻辱。

关键词：种族主义，过度，英国黑人，美国黑人，好莱坞，电影业，拉康

B etween 2013 and 2021 Hollywood production companies released several dramatic films that dealt with the racial oppression of Blacks in the U.S. What made these films unique is that they starred Black British actors in the lead roles. Some of these films include the following: *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Selma* (2014), *Free State of Jones* (2016), *Loving* (2016), *Get Out* (2017), *Detroit* (2017), *Black and Blue* (2019), *Harriet* (2019), *Queen & Slim* (2019), *One Night in Miami* (2020), *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2021), and *Passing* (2021). Debates ensued on social media about the merits of casting Black American actors over Black British actors in these roles, or whether Black British actors were qualified to play Black American characters. These debates often de-

volved into essentialist language related to authenticity or which group of Black people were more oppressed, British or American.

While contentious, these online discussions failed to adequately interrogate *why* Hollywood filmmakers made these casting choices. Two-hundred-and-eighty-character tweets cannot possibly explore the reasons filmmakers made these casting decisions, and a more rigorous approach is needed. Yet as of this writing, there have been no scholarly articles about this topic. There are three reasons for this. The most obvious reason is that this touches upon a sensitive subject, and the complexities of Black diaspora require a nuanced approach to discussing the racist oppression of Blacks on both sides of the Atlantic. Second, as will be illustrated, filmmakers do not want to admit their biases. They will instead provide often problematic reasons for their casting choices, such as actor training or celebrity culture. Finally, analyzing these filmmakers' motivations requires employing theoretical notions that are less popular in academia than they were in the 1990s.

By applying Jacques Lacan's theory of *jouissance* to ideas of excess, one sees a possible reason for these casting decisions. Because of racist stereotyping, Black Americans are mischaracterized as possessing a certain excess. This stereotyping stems from decades of film characterizations, popular culture, and societal injustice. Filmmakers, whether White or people of color, retain biases that similarly recognize Black Americans as possessing racial excess. These biases manifest themselves in their casting decisions and subsequent preference for Black British actors when crafting narratives about racism in the U.S. By viewing their casting decisions through a black parallax, filmmakers are capable of making these casting decisions and defending them against criticism.

WE NEED TO TALK

While promoting his film *Kong: Skull Island*, Samuel L. Jackson caused a stir by suggesting Black British actors were taking movie roles from Black American actors. When discussing the film *Get Out*, starring Daniel Kaluuya, Jackson stated the following:

I know the young brother [Kaluuya] who's in the movie, and he's British . . . There are a lot of black British actors that work in this country. All the time. I tend to wonder what would that movie have been with an American brother who really understands that in a way. Because Daniel grew up in a country where they've been interracial dating for a hundred years. Britain, there's only about eight real white people left in Britain . . . So what would a brother from America made of that role? I'm sure the director helped. Some things are universal, but everything ain't. (Calvario)¹

Jackson reasoned Britons cost less to hire and movie executives believed "they're better trained . . . because they're classically trained" (Calvario).

In a clumsy attempt to extend this discussion, in Spike Lee's Netflix series *She's Gotta Have It*, episode writer Barry Michael Cooper has the protagonist Nola Darling accuse Black British actors of taking work from Black American actors ("#SuperFunky"). The dialogue between Nola and her Black British boyfriend Olu is as follows:

1 Jackson does not elaborate on what constitutes "an American brother," whether it is someone born in the U.S. or a naturalized citizen.

OLU. Black British actors are better suited than Black American actors because they don't carry the burden of . . . fucked up Black American history. Lynching, slavery, Jim Crow, all of that.

NOLA. You're not unburdened, Olu! British ships were the dominant force in the Atlantic Slave Trade. Almost two million kidnapped Africans died in the Middle Passage. You and your Black British blokes didn't come out unscathed. You just developed Stockholm Syndrome and fell in love with your captors.

Nola's response to Olu elides the many Black British authors (see Headley, Smith, and Femi) and activist groups (see Mohdin) who write about and fight for equality daily in the UK. It also elides the historical contingency of the UK's treatment of Black British subjects such as the Windrush generation (see "Windrush Generation").

Both Jackson and Lee faced harsh criticism, particularly from their British counterparts, for diminishing Black British actors' experiences with racism. John Boyega, star of the film *Detroit*, responded to Jackson's comments by tweeting, "Black brits vs African American. A stupid ass conflict we don't have time for" (@JohnBoyega, "Black brits"). Boyega, whose last name Nola intentionally mispronounces, voiced his disdain for the *She's Gotta Have It* episode by calling the scene "trash" (@JohnBoyega, "Trash").

As Boyega and other Black British actors noted, they too face racism. This is evidenced by their limited acting opportunities in the UK. For example, in the past decade, period mov-

ies and television programming have grown in popularity in Great Britain, but the roles available for Black British actors are limited to those of servants. Actor David Gyasi of Chris Nolan's *Interstellar* lamented, "all scripts have lead roles[,] but I wasn't reading for them when I was here [in the UK]. You get tired of hearing people say: 'Turn to page 33'" (Black "The Rise"). The indication is that the role is so minor, the character does not appear until one third of the way through the script. David Harewood of Showtime's *Homeland* attributes the lack of roles in the UK to an underrepresented Black middle class. Harewood asserts the following:

I think perhaps it's to do with economics in the UK. There is a black middle class in America—you have a black president, black CEOs, you've got black political analysts and you turn on CNN and you have black anchors . . . In the UK, we don't have a growing, viable, strong, aspirational black culture. Commissioning editors and advertisers don't see us as a target market and because of that we're not really part of the fabric of society. (Thomas)

While actors such as John Boyega and Cynthia Erivo are securing dramatic British roles, primarily through their own production companies (see Petski and Ritman), more needs to be done in the UK film industry to create opportunities for actors of color. Speaking to the UK's Parliament, Idris Elba explained that it is in the UK's best interest to represent diversity (Jaafar). He continued by saying that when British television and film industries do not cast people of color, that "talent gets exported all over the world."

Black diaspora is a sensitive and complex topic that requires

delicacy, understanding, and compassion. It is not something that can be addressed in flippant television dialogue or awkward radio soundbites. As columnist Renée Kapuku contends:

[W]e need to use episodes like these [the Jackson and *She's Gotta Have It* events] to move beyond demanding accountability but push for conversation and nuance . . . We need to engage the wider international black community; and we need to hold each other accountable for reproducing some of the inequalities we seek to dismantle in our own communities. We need to achieve this not through ignorance, through platforming unfounded assumptions nor through unproductive infighting . . . Most importantly, *we need to talk.*

Scrutinizing the casting choices of Hollywood filmmakers and identifying both conscious and unconscious biases directed toward Black American actors are steps towards engaging the wider international black community. By identifying biases and hypothesizing the origins of these biases, a dialogue can begin on ways to improve representation for all Black actors, no matter their nationality.

Yet there is a paucity of scholarship dealing with this trend of casting Black British actors to play Black American characterizations in dramatic films. Scholars have written about casting decisions related to Black actors playing non-native roles. For example, Ricardo Guthrie's research addresses Black American actors playing roles of African characters. He focused specifically on Forest Whitaker's depiction of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. Guthrie likens his performance

to racial ventriloquism that harkens back to blackface minstrelsy. Simone Knox discusses the trend of casting British and Irish actors in quality television series in her essay titled “Exploring the Casting of British and Irish Actors in Contemporary U.S. Television and Film.” Quality television series, as described by Robert Thompson, are series that have a “quality pedigree,” attract audiences with “blue chip demographics,” tend to be literary based, and aspire “towards realism” (13-5). Knox points to the success of HBO’s *Band of Brothers* in 2001 as the beginning of the most recent trend of casting British actors in American television roles. The show featured British and Irish actors such as Damian Lewis, Jamie Bamber, Michael Fassbender, Dexter Fletcher, Tom Hardy, Matthew Leitch, and James McAvoy (Ch. 10).

Christine Becker’s essay “Accent on Talent” also deals with the trend of casting British Actors in television series. Becker notes that almost all American quality drama series feature a British actor because British actors are believed to be more skilled than their American counterparts. She acknowledges that the trend excludes British actresses, as there are twice as many actors working in the U.S. as actresses, because actresses are “associated in the press with the banality of celebrity and physical beauty than with the craftsmanship of acting . . .” (Ch. 9). Christopher Holliday’s “The Accented American” contends British actors’ mimicry of an American accent others them while also reinforcing “the screen presence of the British actor-as-American, soliciting spectators’ attention to their extra-textual identities as non-natives, whilst paradoxically consecrating ‘Britishness’ through the individual actor’s quality command of American language” (64). In other words, the British actor’s accent, a Brit mimicking an American, reinforces his “outsidedness” for the spectator. This sonic affect proves effective for characters seen as outsiders in

the narratives. Holliday uses Damian Lewis' Nicholas Brody in Showtime's *Homeland* as an illustration. Finally, Kimberly Fain's *Black Hollywood* discusses the empowerment of Black filmmaking in the age of Obama. With this empowerment, filmmakers have reimagined southern slavery with films like *Django* and *12 Years a Slave*. Fain focuses on *12 Years* to discuss the Black diaspora of British actors playing roles that showcase racism and oppression. She sees Black British actor Chiwetel Ejiofor's performance in *12 Years* as reimagining "blackness and freedom" in a global context (185).

While researchers such as Guthrie, Knox, Becker, Holliday, and Fain deal with the complexities of the English accent and actors playing non-native roles, none of them address the recent trend of Black British actors playing Black American characters in Hollywood films. Knox briefly touches upon the lack of opportunities for Black British actors in the UK as cause for the recent immigration of these actors to the U.S. Therefore, her essay focuses on the circumstances that compel British actors to travel to the U.S. for acting jobs rather than the circumstances that cause filmmakers to cast them in American roles. Fain also discusses the lack of opportunities for Black British actors, but she fails to challenge the motivation for casting these actors in American roles.

This article takes a different approach and seeks to interrogate why filmmakers during an eight-year period, 2013 to 2021, cast primarily Black British actors in lead dramatic roles dealing with racism and oppression in the U.S. By investigating notions of authenticity in representation and biases in casting, this paper identifies perceptions of racial excess in the Black American actor as the impetus for casting Black British actors in Black American dramatic roles dealing with racism and oppression.

Present discussions of representation also include notions of authenticity. For instance, telling stories of transgender characters now requires more than a storyline dealing with transgender issues. Those in the transgender community also demand authentic representation by casting transgender actors. Steve Friess describes Jared Leto's role as a transgender woman in *Dallas Buyers Club* as a modern-day "Mammy" characterization. Carol Grant says Eddie Redmayne's performance in *The Danish Girl* bears all the hallmarks of a "cisenormative gaze of the transgender community." Similarly, representation of Asian Americans demands more than plots involving Asian American characters. Notably, the casting of Emma Stone as a Chinese-Hawaiian native in *Aloha* generated criticism from those in the Asian and Pacific Islander community (Yamato). The Black American community as well expects authenticity in representation. Michael Boyce Gillespie's *Film Blackness* contends that Black American films are expected to feature a specific reality. Gillespie also asserts the value of a Black American film is contingent upon a "consensual truth of the film's capacity to wholly account for lived experience or social life of race" (Introduction).

Yet what is an authentic representation of the Black American lived experience? Online critics would say an authentic representation involves films written, produced, directed, and acted by descendants of African American slaves. Some filmmakers would argue an authentic representation consists of convincing writing, direction, and acting. The two sides—critics and filmmakers—place emphasis on differing aspects. For the critic, authenticity hinges upon cultural influences, but for the filmmaker, authenticity hinges upon suspension of belief, that the audience believes the representation is authentic. Both critics and filmmakers' ideas expose a parallax view of race. In other words, when approaching the Black

subject, the angle at which the subject is viewed gives a different image.

When making casting decisions, filmmakers hope spectators see the image of Black characters, not Black British or Black American actors. By casting Black British actors in dramatic films dealing with racism, filmmakers appear to elide the effects of systemic racism and the quasi-legal oppression of slave descendants in the United States. The function of this elision is to mitigate the racial excess associated with the Black American subject. Racial excess refers to a perceived over-enjoyment the Black American subject experiences in transgressive acts. Put another way, that which is perceived as excess is always that which is latched on to by the racist as excess. In fact, race itself is perceived to be an excess.

EXCESS IN BLACKNESS

The term excess harkens to Jacques Lacan's theory of *jouissance*,² which is not merely sexual enjoyment, but an unsymbolizable enjoyment. Lacan states, "*jouissance* being properly speaking (sic) an opening out whose limit cannot be seen, and whose definition cannot be seen either" (*Le Séminaire XIII* 212). Put another way, unlike its French counterpart, *jouissance*, which means enjoyment, *jouissance* cannot be articulated. It is both frightening and fascinating. For Lacan, *jouissance* is transgressive (*The Ethics* 191). In other words, the prohibition of *jouissance* elicits a desire to transgress that which is forbidden. Dylan Evans explains the transgressive nature of *jouissance* further by noting the following:

2 Lacanians italicize *jouissance* to distinguish between Jacques Lacan's theory of *jouissance* and the French word *jouissance*, which means enjoyment.

the pleasure principle functions as a limit to enjoyment: it is a law which commands the subject to ‘enjoy as little as possible’. At the same time, the subject constantly attempts to transgress the prohibition imposed on his enjoyment, to go ‘beyond the pleasure principle.’ However, the result of transgressing the pleasure principle is not mere pleasure, but pain, since there is only a certain amount of pleasure that the subject can bear. (91–92)

That the pleasure brings about pain does not discourage the subject from transgression. In fact, the prohibition of *jouissance* elicits a desire to transgress that which is forbidden. The enjoyment of the object *is* excess. Ruth Stein describes the “phenomenon of excess” as “the overstepping of boundaries, the sense of overbrimming with inordinate arousal that makes one feel it cannot be encompassed” (44). The notion that someone is overstepping boundaries, or transgressing, enjoying an object that the subject cannot, frustrates the subject. For the subject encountering the Black American other, that frustration is manifested in an imagining of racial excess.

Racial excess describes the dimension of racial expression (whether by conduct or speech) that appears to evade the realm of meaning, yet it has a material component. Concepts of race are based on physical features that exist in reality. It is because of the materiality of race that racial excess is seen as a “stain” on the subject of racial difference. In other words, the racist believes Black Americans are “stained” by their race and cannot speak or act independent of it. When the Black person speaks, his words (no matter the merit of what he says) are perceived to be imbued with a racial compo-

nent that evades the ordinary construction of meaning. He is saying just a little something more than the same words would convey if spoken by a non-racialized subject. His actions, his conduct, no matter the merit, are perceived to be imbued with a racial component that exceeds that of the non-racialized person. His conduct always conveys just a little something more than the same conduct would convey by a non-racialized person. Put another way, the racist sees this “little something more” in examples of perceived excess enjoyment in the Black American subject. The Black American subject never just dances, but rather experiences a heightened enjoyment of dancing that exceeds the ability of the non-racialized subject to enjoy. The Black American subject never just has sex, but rather is able to enjoy sex in a manner that exceeds the ability of the non-racialized subject to enjoy.

Examples of racial excess would be the typical racist clichés such as: Black Americans dance too well; they laugh a little too loud; they enjoy food too much; their penises are a little too big; their butts are a little too curvy; they have too many babies out-of-wedlock, etcetera. Black Americans, in other words, experience a superabundant *jouissance* that is only accessible to them. Put in even simpler terms—*Black folk just seem to enjoy a little more than the rest of us*. This, of course, is just a fantasy concocted by the White racist in an attempt to make meaning of the racist’s own shortcomings.

A recent example of a racist’s fantasy of Black excess can be found in the Buffalo shooter’s screed, posted online. Eighteen-year-old Payton Gendron shot and killed 10 shoppers, mostly Black, at Tops Friendly Markets in Buffalo, New York. He specifically targeted this store because of its location in a predominantly Black part of Buffalo. Gendron carried out the attack to warn Whites of the “replacers.” He ascribed to

Replacement Theory which suggests that White people are being replaced by non-White people. His document states, “the average black takes \$700,000 from tax-payers in their lifetime.”³ Some of his other observations include the following:

Blacks have less moral understanding than Whites.

Blacks are more reckless than Whites.

Blacks are 50% more likely to cheat on their spouses than Whites.

Black men are over a hundred times more likely to rape a White woman than vice versa.

Blacks are 600% more likely than non-Blacks to commit murder.

All these racist stereotypes point to racial excess. Lack of moral understanding means the Black person engages in immoral activities, i.e., sexual lasciviousness, drug abuse, and theft. Recklessness, infidelity, rape, and murder also evidence excess. The memes posted in his screed that deal with Black people are almost all sexual in nature. Gendron projects his own sexual frustrations on to Black people. Stated differently, Gendron sees black people as enjoying something, sex, that he has no access to. This sexual freedom, a freedom he believes the government endorses with handouts amounting to \$700,000, will lead to more Black people, either through birth or immigration. Those Black people will eventually replace White people.

Payton Gendron’s conduct and writings are extreme examples of racists’ mindsets about Black racial excess. Yet his

3 Gendron posted his screed in Google Docs. Google has since deleted the document, but it can be found on right-wing blogs and discussion sites. Out of respect for the victims of the shooting, reference information, including the web address, will not be provided in this article.

beliefs offer a window into the perception that many people have about Black Americans. These biases are not merely present in White people. They also influence the way people of color, including Black people themselves, view the Black subject.

A less overt and more insidious illustration of racist notions of Black American excess can be seen in Hollywood casting decisions. Filmmakers—from executive producers to casting agents—attribute a certain sophistication to Black British actors that they do not attribute to Black American actors (Bastién). Associated with this sophistication is an implicit belief that the Black British actor lacks the same racial excess that encumbers his American counterpart. This belief that Black British actors are more sophisticated than their American counterparts and are devoid of racial excess enables filmmakers to negotiate the anxieties they feel about picking at the scab of racism in America. Expressed differently, casting Black British actors in Black American roles mitigates racial excess and presents a blank canvas for which filmmakers may create dramatic narratives about the U.S.'s oppressive past and present.

BLACK PARALLAX

This racist past is recounted throughout the history of Hollywood cinema, beginning with D.W. Griffith's full-length feature *The Birth of a Nation*, which created the template for racist stereotypes of Blacks that continues to this day. Donald Bogle explains Griffith's racist stereotypes in his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, where he argues Hollywood filmmakers have followed Griffith's archetypes of Blacks by creating five modes of characterizations. For Black males there are Toms who are affable and subservient

to Whites (Bogle 2–3), Coons who are clownish buffoons for the entertainment of Whites (Bogle 4–6), and Bucks who are brutish reminders of what could happen to Whites (Bogle 7–14). For Black females there are Mammies who are clownish and rambunctious servants of Whites and Mulattoes who are tortured products of miscegenation (Bogle 6–7). These modes limit the depth and dimension of Black characters and pigeonhole Black actors into limited roles. Pigeonholing Black actors into these narrow characterizations results in Black actors competing for limited roles and reluctantly accepting parts that often paint Black Americans in a negative light.

Recent scholarship has delved into Hollywood production culture to explore rationales for casting choices. Monica White Ndounou's *Shaping the Future of African American Film* contends "race-based economic principles guide investment decisions and distribution deals in the movie industry" (Ch. 5). She emphasizes that films with predominantly Black casts are "labeled 'urban'" and do not receive wide (i.e., nationwide and international) marketing and distribution because executives believe these films garner limited appeal outside Black American communities. Ndounou points to the industry's use of the Ulmer Scale to illustrate the color-coded economics of Hollywood cinema. The Ulmer Scale was developed by James Ulmer, a contributing writer for *The New York Times*. The scale tracks, measures, and ranks "star power of more than 1,400 actors worldwide" (Ndounou Ch. 5). Ulmer's methodology consists of "polling leading deal-makers from Hollywood and key international territories" to create a "100-point ranking system to measure bankability, the key component of star power" (Ndounou Ch. 5). Ulmer describes "bankability" as "the degree to which an actor's name alone can raise 100% or majority financing up-

front for a film” (Ndounou Ch. 5). In other words, a film with Tom Cruise as the lead can easily receive total funding before principal photography begins. A film like Dee Rees’ *Pariah*, about a Black American teenage lesbian, however, encounters funding roadblocks because the lead Adepero Oduye is unknown. The Ulmer Scale is not as widely used today as it was ten years ago, but the same principles of bankability still determine casting decisions. The Ulmer Scale provides individuals with racial biases a scientific rationale for their casting decisions.

Hollywood filmmakers’ views on bankability and what constitutes an “urban” film illustrate their approach to casting Black British actors for Black American characterizations. They see Black British actors as fulfilling the casting requirements merely because they are black. Yet from a different angle, these actors are not completely black because they do not possess the perceived excesses of Black Americans.

This view is what Slavoj Žižek calls a parallax view. He describes the parallax view as a “constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. Thus, there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space—although they are closely connected, even identical in a way, they are, as it were, on the opposed sides of a Moebius strip” (“Introduction”). Kojin Karantani influences Žižek’s notion of the parallax view in his writings on optical delusion. Karantani asserts that what the subject sees in the mirror image and in the photographic image are a “pronounced parallax” (2). In other words, the pronounced parallax creates an optical delusion. The example Karantani gives for the pronounced parallax can be seen with the advent of photography. When people first viewed photographic images of themselves, they were horrified by what they

saw, similar to hearing a recording of one's voice. Yet people eventually "came to see the image in the photograph as themselves" (2). The pronounced parallax was people's experience when they first saw their photographic images (2).

Karantani's photography and voice recording analogies suggest that when placing oneself in the metaphorical shoes of another, a pronounced parallax develops. In other words, if one's viewpoint is an optical delusion, then the other person's viewpoint cannot be an optical delusion as well. Žižek progressed this argument further by suggesting these two viewpoints constantly shift, and therefore can never share the same space. Žižek's parallax view proposes that when one looks at an object from a different angle, it looks completely different. This is significant for understanding the preference for casting Black British actors for Black American characterizations. Black British and Black Americans are closely connected, by the materiality of race, even identical in a way, but they are not the same. The concept proposed in this article to explain this preference is the black parallax.

The black parallax presents a Black subject that on the surface seems like any other Black subject, but when viewed through the filter of national origin, one is presented with a parallax view. When the filmmaker looks at the Black American actor, the actor seems to be teeming with racial excess. However, the filmmaker sees the Black British actor as lacking that racial excess and lacking any historical contingency. These filmmakers look at Black Americans through the lens of national origin, and therefore, the Black American actor is bursting with racial excess.

When asked about casting two British actors for the lead roles in the film *Queen & Slim*, screenplay writer Lena Waithe responded as follows:

It's [asking why Black British actors were cast] divisive. I think it doesn't move the culture forward. For anyone that has that argument . . . anyone who says, 'let's get some American whatever,' I say at the end of the day, if you're black and you get pulled over by a police officer, he's not going to not kill you because you have a British accent. We all in this together. Black is black. Is black. ("Lena Waithe")

Queen & Slim deals with an Ohio couple (played by Daniel Kaluuya and Jodie Turner-Smith) who kill a White police officer in self-defense after that officer shoots Queen. Indeed, a Black British person could have the same encounter with an American police officer. However, this road movie deals specifically with the brutality Black Americans have faced when interacting with law enforcement dating back as far as the 1700s, when modern-day policing was formed through slave patrols (Hassett-Walker). What should not be missed in Waithe's deflection is her assertion that Black is black. This is the very thing filmmakers hope viewers see, that Kaluuya and Turner-Smith are Black. Yet because of the black parallax, the filmmakers see these actors' national origin—and because of their origin they appear to lack the racial excess of Black American actors.

This is not to suggest Black British actors are incapable of playing Black American characterizations. There are highly talented Black actors around the world who can play these roles. Additionally, the point is not that filmmakers in Great Britain do not also see Black British actors as possessing similar racial excess. The point is that Hollywood filmmakers whitewash the historical contingency associated with racism

in the U.S. by creating characters that lack a perceived black racial excess.

HISTORICAL CONTINGENCY

For some filmmakers, casting Black British actors to play Black American roles whitewashes the oppression that Black Americans have experienced for hundreds of years. It elides: the kidnapping, enslavement, and rape of Africans; the Jim Crow laws passed that segregated, disenfranchised, and terrorized descendants of slaves; and the school-to-prison pipeline of mass incarceration that created a New Jim Crow and makes it legal to discriminate against former convicts, which disproportionately affects Black males.

Where the Black American actor, as a descendent of slaves, may offer living proof of that oppression, the Black British actor ostensibly presents, for the predominately White film-making industry, a blank slate with regards to America's national shame of slavery and subsequent Jim Crow laws. Carmen Ejogo, who plays Coretta Scott King in *Selma*, suggested this perceived blank slate was an asset when approaching iconic moments in King's life. She stated, "I've been trying to convince myself that being British has had no bearing on any of this, but actually (sic) I think that's where it served me well . . . I'm not as entrenched in the history so immediately. I didn't go to school and learn about Coretta. I didn't know who Coretta was until I played her the first time. It wasn't as daunting as it might have been for an American actress. An African-American actress . . . that might have been a bit more of a challenge" (Haile). Ejogo's British identity provides a blank slate that serves two functions. First, it absolves the Hollywood-based film industry of any guilt associated with white privilege because the actor does not represent the great

national shame of slavery and oppression of Black Americans. Second, the British actor's distance enables the narrative's rendering of Black American oppression to be softened for White American consumption because ultimately, *Selma* was made for White American consumption. As Joe Pichirallo, producer of *The Secret Life of Bees*, speculated, "the bottom line is that the major studios want assurances that film projects have the potential to attract a significant white audience" (Barnes).

Moviegoers also like to see themselves as progressive in matters of race and appreciate films that address the U.S.'s historical past, even when that past involved racial injustices. However, when faced with evidence of the nation's past atrocities, (White) American moviegoers are confronted with uncomfortable truths about their national narrative, that the U.S. is not a just and moral nation that recognizes the rights of all human beings. Spectators resist films that cause them to question their national identity. To mitigate these circumstances, screenwriters employ narrative devices that seek to make moviegoers feel better about their country once the story ends.

Past filmic incarnations of racial oppression saw the "white savior" as a means for softening the uncomfortable content of America's racist past. The white savior is a White protagonist, usually male, who risks his inscription in the social order to right a moral wrong against a non-White person or group of people (Murphy and Harris). For example, *Amistad* and *Mississippi Burning* both have White male protagonists who risk everything to right the wrong of white supremacy. *Amistad* depicts John Quincy Adams fighting for the freedom of a group of kidnapped Africans set to be sold into American slavery. *Mississippi Burning* is a fictionalized account of two

white FBI agents who solve the mystery surrounding the murder of three Freedom Riders near Philadelphia, Mississippi. Director Alan Parker took great liberties with the authenticity of the story, for example portraying the FBI as guardians of Civil Rights advocates when in fact, under J. Edgar Hoover, they worked surreptitiously to paint advocates as communists and enemies of the U.S. Parker explained his reasoning for making the FBI agents the protagonists rather than the Freedom Riders: “because it’s a movie, I felt it had to be fictionalized. The two heroes in the story had to be white. That is a reflection of our society as much as of the film industry. At this point in time, it could not have been made in any other way” (Sirota). Parker’s decision to make the two protagonists white was rewarded with strong box office sales and Golden Globe and Academy Award nominations.

Haile Gerima, director of the film *Sankofa*, describes the white savior as a “white point of entry.” Gerima states, “I think that even the idea of a Black story cannot be told without a white point of entry—from *Mississippi Burning* to Stephen Biko. White distributors and producers continue to say it’s not commercial to do a film about Black people without having a ‘point of entry,’ which means white people” (Gerima and Woolford). This white point of entry or white savior diminishes the Black subject’s agency. Black subjects and their narratives have no validity until they are legitimated by White subjects. For Black Americans, this necessity for white legitimacy harkens back to the Black American’s need for freedom papers or slave passes when traveling to avoid capture from slave patrollers. Black American subjects’ existence, like that of slaves, is contingent upon White recognition. They are not recognized, they are not legitimated, and they are, therefore, barred from entry into the social order. This is commonly recognized today when a White person calls the police on a

Black person because it seems as if that black body “doesn’t belong” in the White person’s space.

BLANK SLATE

While the white savior motif is still deployed, for example, in Brad Pitt’s character Bass in *12 Years a Slave*, a shift in casting decisions has ushered in a subtler approach to dealing with racial excess and the national shame of racism. For eight years, between 2013 and 2021, several critically acclaimed films chronicling Black Americans’ experience with racism featured Black British actors in the central roles. *Twelve Years a Slave* is the first film of this new trend. British Nigerian Chiwetel Ejiofor plays Solomon Northrup, a Black American freeman kidnapped and sold into slavery. Ejiofor’s presence, with extreme close-ups that focus on the pain in his face, makes palpable the brutality of slavery for the White American audience. Northrup’s desperation in trying to return home to his family and his heroism at defending Patsey from their brutal slaveowner Epps is emblazoned across Ejiofor’s face and sorrowful eyes.

Many general audience members likely assume Ejiofor is American due to his lack of a noticeable British accent. Nevertheless, this casting decision facilitates the exploration of different narratives that filmmakers would be uncomfortable pursuing with a Black American lead actor. In addition, as Carmen Ejogo noted in her own experience, Ejiofor and director Steve McQueen’s British origins inoculated them from the cultural and social indoctrinations of a Black American with slave ancestry.⁴ Ejiofor and McQueen were not three or four generations removed from their own family

4 It must be noted that Black American John Ridley adapted the screenplay for *12 Years a Slave*.

members' experience of slavery and servitude in the U.S. As Black Britons Ejiofor and McQueen are certainly stained by racial difference, which often bars them from access to the British film industry, but Americans, as noted by Samuel L. Jackson's comments, are ignorant of this discrimination. Because Americans do not see it, they do not think it is there. In fact, in his response to Jackson's comments about Hollywood filmmakers casting Black British actors for Black American roles, British actor David Harewood writes, "Perhaps it's precisely because we are not real American brothers that we black British performers have the ability to unshackle ourselves from the burden of racial realities—and simply play what's on the page, not what's in the history books." This is exactly the black parallax. Hollywood filmmakers hope that when the American spectator sees the Black British actor from a distance, he appears as an American character. Yet when the filmmaker sees the Black British actor up close, he sees the actor's Britishness. That Britishness conceals any racial stain, or racial excess the actor possesses.

The same racial stain is, however, believed to be existent in Black American actors. Speaking about his series *Fargo, Season 4*, Chris Rock revealed he would give showrunner Noah Hawley feedback about the script. Rock stated, "Occasionally. Whenever I would interject, it wasn't as a writer. In the 1950s [when the series takes place], my dad was 17 and my granddad was 30. So I know these guys a little bit. Occasionally I would pull Noah to the side and go, 'what about this?' As the senior black person on the set . . . there is a responsibility you have if you disagree with something" (Hibberd). Casting Black British actors gives filmmakers a blank slate for which to develop narratives that may not be historically accurate or that may elide historical contingency. They do not have to worry about Black American actors challenging the

film's authenticity, and the filmmakers may not be encumbered by the necessity for accuracy.

In fact, while promoting *12 Years a Slave* at the Toronto International Film Festival Steve McQueen distanced himself from conversations about race. Johanna Schneller of *The Globe and Mail* asked McQueen, "Can we talk about race in North America? Are we all too careful, are we all too fearful?" (Qureshi). McQueen responded:

I made this movie because I want to tell a story about slavery and a story that hasn't been given a platform in cinema. It's one thing to read about slavery, but when you see it within a narrative, it's different. Now if that starts a conversation, wonderful, excellent . . . But for me, this film is about how to survive an unfortunate situation. I don't know what kind of conversation you are talking about. It's a very broad question, and I don't know what you mean . . . I hope it goes beyond race. You're trying to narrow it down to race. Yes, race is involved, but it's not entirely about that. (McClintock "Toronto").

Steve McQueen's response to Schneller's questions evidences his discomfort with assuming the responsibility for discourses about race in the U.S. More importantly, his response erases the historical contingency associated with American slavery, in which ideas about race made slavery possible in the first place. Race for the Black American is tied inextricably to slavery because the descendants of slaves are still affected by racism. In fact, epigenetics researchers have argued that trauma, such as slavery, can be transmitted over generations

(DeGruy). Therefore, for the Black American, a conversation about slavery must include a conversation about racism today.

In addition to relieving filmmakers like McQueen of the responsibility of discussing real-world racism, casting a Black British actor to play a Black American offers the filmmaker the parallax view of a white body under black skin. For the Hollywood filmmaker the Black British actor's culture, i.e., accent and educational training, makes him black on the outside, but removed from the excess of the Black American. This enables the filmmaker to imagine a time when Black Americans did not have racial excess. In other words, filmmakers want to tell the story of racism, but they do not want to depict the racial excess. That excess, for example, would be portrayals of Blacks rebelling against slavery or calling for open violence against racism. This historical revisionism too is a form of whitewashing.

David Oyelowo, who played Martin Luther King in *Selma*, reinforced this notion when he suggested that casting two British actors for the roles of MLK and Coretta Scott King was a good decision because he and Ejogo lacked the encumbrances of culture and history when depicting such iconic figures. Oyelowo stated, "there's something to be said for the fact that we are able to come at these films clean" (Bastién). What he means by "clean" is that he is not blemished by the racial excess that marks the Black American subject. What he means by "clean" are actors who can portray the Black American subject without risking indulging in or lapsing into the sort of conduct, i.e., racial excess, traditionally associated with negative stereotypes of Black Americans. The presumption is that Black Americans are stained by racial excess in a way that casting directors are afraid the Black American actors themselves cannot control. They fear the experience of

being a descendant of slaves is too overwhelming for Black American actors, that it will get in the way of playing the role.

This whitewashing of racial oppression provides a depiction of racial subjects cleansed of excesses such as fondness of music, innate ability to dance, superiority in sports, proclivity for sexual wantonness. In one sense, this clean depiction presents a narrative that focuses purely on racial injustice. In another sense, this depiction omits not just what is unique about the Black American experience with its specific historical contingency but also omits the very contingency explaining the genesis for contemporary Black subjectivity.

DEFENDING THE SYSTEM

Hollywood filmmakers, some of them Black Americans, go to great lengths to defend casting Black British actors in Black American characterizations. The typical defense asserts that British actors, both black and nonblack, are better trained. *Selma* director Ava DuVernay indicated she liked working with British actors because they possess theater training. She goes on to say the American system of creating actors “is a lot more commercial . . . there’s a depth in character building [in theater training] that’s really wonderful” (Bastién). DuVernay assumes the U.S. does not boast equally trained actors graduating from NYU Tisch, Juilliard, Pace University, Yale, UCLA, or many other American schools with prominent theater/drama programs.

By “commercial,” DuVernay could be alluding to another form of excess: celebrity. Returning to Samuel L. Jackson, his celebrity is associated with his colorful language and unflappable swagger. Although early in his career Jackson portrayed different permutations of the Black criminal, most notably in *Coming to America*, *Jungle Fever*, and *Goodfellas*, Jackson also

played more temperate characters, such as Arnold, the computer programmer, in *Jurassic Park*. In the late nineteen nineties to the early aughts, Jackson transitioned from character actor to celebrity. No matter the role, whether it was Stephen in *Django Unchained* or Nick Fury in *The Avengers* films, Jackson's celebrity became his performance. His performance, the enjoyment he seemed to experience when using the word "mothafucka" as both a noun and descriptor, was inextricably tied to his celebrity. Jackson's linguistic embellishment is one manifestation of that excess. The very thing that some White Americans fear about Black Americans is the very thing that keeps them enthralled with Black folk. In other words, there is a disdain for Black Americans because they talk too loudly, but White Americans love the loud talker when it is Samuel L. Jackson. With this in mind, is not DuVernay addressing excess when she states the American system of creating stars is more commercial? Is she not also acknowledging that she wants to make a "true artistic piece" that is about the piece and not about Black American excess?

Kasi Lemmons is another Black American director who found herself defending the casting of a Black British actor in a Black American role. Although producer Debra Chase Martin casted Cynthia Erivo to play the title role of Harriet Tubman in *Harriet* before Lemmons became attached to the film,⁵ when asked about the decision to cast Erivo, Lemmons stated, "she [Erivo] is uniquely perfect for the role and she's

5 In an interview after a screening of *Harriet*, Martin touted Erivo's graduation from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art as a qualification for her earning the title role of Harriet Tubman (Black Dollars University).

Additionally, Erivo faced intense criticism for her 2013 tweets that some believed mocked Black Americans (Martinez). The backlash for Erivo proved so intense, with the hashtag "NotMyHarriet" trending on social media, that she found herself addressing those 2013 tweets throughout the press junket for *Harriet*.

perfect in the movie. I watch this film all day long, every day . . . And I play a game where I look for Cynthia and I can't find her . . . Take off the wig, you know she's under there . . . Erivo disappears into the role" (Obie). Associated with this disappearance is the disappearance of Black American excess. Stated differently, Erivo's Britishness does not carry the presumed excesses of the Black American actor, whose descendants were most likely slaves. Erivo hides from Lemmons because she does not have any of the baggage of being a Black American.

By removing that excess, Lemmons is capable of turning Tubman's character into a superhero, who has what Lemmons calls a "Spidey sense" to evade capture and free at least 70 slaves. Lemmons' characterization of Tubman as a superhero with direct contact to God is a form of whitewashing. Like the past incarnations of the magical negro, Tubman's humanity is whitewashed for the furtherance of plot. Brooke C. Obie notes about the film that "by hyperfocusing on the superhuman elements of Tubman, as *Harriet* does . . . the impact is to further separate this icon from her humanity" (Obie). The logical reasoning for this whitewashing is that critics and the movie-award-nominating class expect a whitewashing. In other words, *Harriet* as a product was crafted for this type of critical reception. The expectation is that films about racial oppression should feature a "realistic" superhero. Therefore, if Lemmons focused on Tubman's humanity, she would have to address Tubman's sanity (i.e., sane people may not put themselves in harm's way or claim that God talks to them).

BLACK AMERICAN COONERY

In the film *Get Out*, directed by Jordan Peele, Daniel Kaluuya, whose own problematic approach to diversity reveals the

complexity of African diaspora,⁶ is cast as Chris Washington, a Black American dating a White woman, Rose Armitage. Although a critically acclaimed thriller that offers a Black American perspective of present-day racism and microaggressions, *Get Out* too fits within this trend of casting Black British actors as Black American characters. Most notably, director Jordan Peele cast Kaluuya as Chris after seeing him in the British television series *Black Mirror*. Kaluuya's Britishness brought a gravity and weight to the *Get Out* role without the racial excess of Black American subjectivity.⁷

Yet if Kaluuya's Britishness brought seriousness to his characterization of Chris, Black American Lil Rel Howery's comedic background brought a buffoonish comic relief to the film. Howery's comic characterization is distinctly American, harkening back to coonish characters like Mantan Moreland. The Black buffoon is something the filmmakers felt only a Black American was capable of playing because as noted earlier, it is a characterization dating back to 1915's *The Birth of a Nation*. The classical training and perceived poshness of a British actor suggest he is better suited for the serious pro-

- 6 In discussing diversity in film, Kaluuya took umbrage with the use of the term minority. He said, "even people who say that black people are minorities, there are a billion black people in the world. A billion white people ... What part of that is a minority?" (Haile). While postcolonial critics note that the term "minority" is outdated, and many prefer the term "people of color" instead, Kaluuya's statement demonstrates a detachment from the historical contingency of the oppression of Blacks globally. Eritrean-American writer Rahawa Haile says Kaluuya's assertion "minimizes the specifics of systematic racism," that it's a form of "benign erasure" because "it asks that we focus on what unifies us in spite of other struggles."
- 7 As a black man, Daniel Kaluuya is not immune from experiences of racism and stereotyping. In 2013 he sued London Metropolitan Police for removing him from a bus, pinning him to the ground, and strip-searching him (Lydall).

tagonist. Meanwhile, a working class, urban Black American, such as Howery, because of his excess, must be typecast as the coon. In Howery's case, he provides comic relief in a film tackling a subject matter that makes most White spectators uncomfortable.

Robin DiAngelo calls this discomfort "white fragility." DiAngelo claims:

given how seldom we [White Americans] experience racial discomfort in a society we dominate, we haven't had to build our racial stamina. Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are unaware of or can never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race. We consider a challenge to our racial worldviews as a challenge to our very identities as good, moral people. Thus, we perceive any attempt to connect us to the system of racism as an unsettling and unfair moral offense. ("Introduction")

To mitigate white fragility in films dealing with racism, the coonish character offers a moment of relief from the mirror that has been reflected upon the White moviegoer. After Chris has uncomfortable interactions with the Armitages and their party guests, the phone conversation between Chris and Howery's Rod Williams is necessary. When Rod implores Chris to leave because Rod believes Chris will become a sex slave, the tension built up previously is released. This short exchange between Chris and Rod ameliorates any anxiety associated with White fragility.

BLACK BRUTE

Another stereotype D.W. Griffith offered his viewers in narrative cinema's nascence was the Black brute. Donald Bogle describes this subset of the Black buck as barbaric and someone "out to raise havoc" (10). The brute, like the coon, is not a lead character in dramatic films, but he plays a pivotal part in the narration. The brute, unlike the coon, serves as an antagonist to the protagonist. The brute's excess stands in contrast with the protagonist's virtue. Like the coon, the Black American, because of his perceived excess, is often cast in these roles. For example, in *Judas and the Black Messiah*, which also stars Daniel Kaluuya in the lead role, Black American LaKeith Stanfield plays Bill O'Neal, a real-life FBI informant who in the late 1960s infiltrated the Chicago Black Panther Party. O'Neal assists the FBI in gathering information on Fred Hampton, real-life community activist and Black Panther leader. Hampton, played by Kaluuya, is killed in a police raid. In the film, O'Neal provides layout information of Hampton's apartment to the FBI, who passes it on to the Chicago police, and O'Neal drugs Hampton so that he will not wake during the raid, making it easier for the police to kill him.

O'Neal is dubbed the Judas because Hampton takes him in, even as others in the Panther party are suspicious of him, and O'Neal rises among the ranks in the party. Hampton embodies the messiah as a community activist who is so influential, he unites such disparate groups as the Panthers and the Young Patriots Organization (a White Southerner's group that coopted the confederate flag as its party flag) to fight for worker's rights and civil rights in Chicago. Stanfield's Judas is just as guilt-ridden for his betrayal of Kaluuya's messiah as the biblical Judas. He abuses alcohol. His relationships and jobs suffer. By the end of the film, the viewer learns that this

Black Judas similarly dies by suicide like the biblical Judas. O’Neal’s betrayal of Hampton, his close relationship with his White FBI handler, and his payments as an informant make him the Black brute described by Bogle. O’Neal’s actions disrupt the coalition between the various activist groups that could have possibly changed the political and social dynamics that would shape Chicago today. With this in mind, it is no surprise Stanfield, a Black American, was cast as the Judas and Kaluuya, a Black Briton, was cast as the messiah. It is also no surprise that while both actors were nominated for Academy Awards for best supporting actor for the same film, Kaluuya took home the prize. Finally, it is no surprise that Lil Rel Howery plays Wayne, the pimp who gives O’Neal the sedative that will incapacitate Hampton during the police raid.

CONCLUSION

Dramatic Hollywood films that deal with racism in the U.S. present the opportunity to not only open discussions about America’s past and present, but to make amends for past injustices. For instance, the film *Hidden Figures* introduced moviegoers to Black female mathematicians like Katherine Johnson who made the U.S.’s first manned spaceflight possible. After the film’s release NASA named two facilities in Johnson’s honor. She was awarded an honorary doctorate. Johnson even had a Barbie doll made in her likeness. Films that deal with racism in the U.S. are necessary to move the nation forward and facilitate healing.

Yet filmmakers, like all people, are mired in biases that affect the final product presented to spectators. This paper proposes that these filmmakers’ biases manifest themselves in their casting decisions and subsequent preference for Black British actors when crafting narratives about racism in the U.S.

By scrutinizing these final products and the decisions made in creating them, improvements can be made in representation, both in front and behind the camera.

Like the Hollywood industry, the British film industry must be challenged for its racism and exclusion and forced to make changes. Black British actors should not *have* to learn American accents at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art because they cannot find roles in the UK. In fact, that Black British actors are told they *must* learn (Black) American accents—like one would learn stage fighting—to secure steady work, illustrates the problems of racism in film casting. It is important that discussions about casting decisions do not vilify Black British actors, or pit Black British actors against Black American actors, but instead question the motivation for these casting decisions. Though inartfully stated, Samuel L. Jackson pointed to an ugly stain on our nation's past—racist stereotypes and perceptions of Black Americans—and the present incarnation of racism toward Black Americans, both in and outside the film industry, must be interrogated.

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