

A Thematic Analysis of Tweets About Contested Casting for Lead Roles in the Movies *Harriet* and *Judas and the Black Messiah*

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This study explores the nuanced social media commentary about the casting of Black immigrant actors in roles depicting African American historical figures, extending the scope of Black reception studies beyond film content to audience perspectives on casting. Employing Leximancer for data analysis and Braun and Clarke's thematic framework, this research analyzes 6,073 tweets to unravel layered audience reactions. Three salient themes emerged from the analysis: Black immigrant actors' demeanor toward race issues in America, casting, and the authenticity of African American historical narratives advocating Black diversity and self-representation. This analysis not only underscores the intricate spectrum of concerns and perceptions articulated by the audience but also accentuates the demand for a casting approach that respects the historical and cultural realities of African American experiences. These insights contribute to the field of Black reception studies by illuminating the active engagement of audiences in casting debates.

Keywords: African Americans, Black, Black immigrants, casting, color-blind casting

In recent years, the casting of Black British actors in Hollywood movies based on Black history has sparked a heated debate about casting practices in the film industry. While it is not uncommon for immigrants and British actors to take on roles in Hollywood productions, the casting of Black immigrant actors in historical African American (AA) roles has generated significant controversy. These debates have primarily revolved around the sensitivity of the stories being told and the appropriateness of Black immigrant actors portraying characters outside of their own ethnic groups. The narratives in question are not ordinary; they are the stories of AA leaders—American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS)—who fought against slavery, Jim Crow, and structural marginalization.

Notably, hashtags such as #NotMyHarriet, #BoycottHarriet, and #NotmyFredHampton emerged on Twitter as African Americans expressed their dissatisfaction with the casting choices in the movies *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019) and *Judas and the Black Messiah* (King, 2021). For instance, in *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019), the role of AA activist and abolitionist Harriet Tubman, known for rescuing enslaved people, was portrayed by British actor Cynthia Erivo (N'duka, 2017). Similarly, Daniel Kaluuya portrayed former Black Panther Party leader Fredrick Hampton. While these recent movies sparked the most controversy, previous films, such as *12 Years a Slave* (McQueen, 2013), *Selma* (DuVernay, 2014), and *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), have also

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been mentioned because of the casting of Black British actors like Chiwetel Ejiofor and David Oyelowo as lead characters in historically based movies.

The contentious casting of Black immigrant actors in narratives of African American history reflects the employment of a nontraditional casting approach, often examined by scholars through the lens of color-blind casting. This technique asserts the primacy of artistic talent and actor qualifications, minimizing ethnic identity as a criterion in casting choices (Sun, 2000). Criticisms of this approach center on its insufficient acknowledgment of the full breadth of identity, neglecting the layers of ethnicity and sexual orientation (Geraghty, 2021; Pao, 2010). Black British actors, while racially categorized as Black within the archaic American racial classifications, do not share direct ancestral ties to the Black American experience of slavery and its legacies, which profoundly shape African American ethnic identity. The critical dialogue on color-blind casting lays a theoretical groundwork for grasping how audiences perceive and engage with this approach to casting in relation to identity, contesting the idea of a homogeneous Black experience.

Moreover, the debate surrounding the suitability of Black immigrants playing African American (AA) roles goes beyond identity discourse and reopens historical contentions within the Black community in America. Previous studies have identified areas of contention among ethnically diverse Black populations, including affirmative action policies, employment opportunities, and political positions (Alex-Assensoh, 2009; Brown & Bell, 2008; Graham, 2003). To contribute to this scholarly discussion and address the overlooked perspective of the audience (Geraghty, 2021), I conducted a thematic analysis of Twitter tweets related to these movies. Using data extraction and analysis software, Netlytics, I gathered and analyzed comments and posts from Twitter to identify themes using the textual analysis software Leximancer. The objective of this study is to analyze and interpret the manifest and latent responses of Twitter users to the casting in *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019) and *Judas and the Black Messiah* (King, 2021), exploring the broader sociocultural implications for the African American community.

Literature Review

Casting, Representation, and Black Casting in Hollywood

In Hollywood's historical casting debates, the focus has primarily been on dismantling the racial barriers predominantly favoring White men and enhancing representation for People of Color (POC) in cinema, with significant attention paid to racial dynamics (Erigha, 2015). This discussion has also addressed gender and sexuality representation, yet it often overlooked ethnicity because of its sociopolitical marginalization within the broader race discourse. The introduction of nontraditional, including color-blind, casting by Actor's Equity aimed to challenge these barriers by prioritizing talent over race, gender, or ethnicity (Hopkins, 2018; Pao, 2010; Robinson, 2007). However, this approach sparked debates on its effectiveness and the need to consider all identity factors, including ethnicity, in casting.

The debate over color-blind casting in Hollywood, notably shaped by August Wilson and Robert Brustein's exchange, revolves around the representation authenticity of African Americans in theater (Catanesi, 2011). Wilson, a revered AA playwright, emerged as a staunch critic of color-blind casting. He contended that such casting practices, which allow actors of different ethnic backgrounds to play AA roles, resulted in inauthentic portrayals that undermined "Black values, manners, style, and language" (Wilson,

2009, p. 40). He argued for the alignment of actors' racial realities with their roles, emphasizing that color-blind casting fostered superficial integration into a predominantly White industry rather than achieving true representational equality (Catanese, 2011).

Wilson also articulated the dichotomy within Black artistry, distinguishing between art that entertains White society and art that nourishes and celebrates Black America. He described the latter as art that is designed with strategies for the survival and prosperity of the Black community (Wilson, 1990). This division, he posited, paralleled the contrasting experiences of house and field slaves, with the former performing for White entertainment, much like crossover artists today tailor their content for White audiences (Wilson, 1990). Wilson's critique suggests that a color-blind industry, while allowing for Black artistry, often panders to White hegemonic expectations, perpetuating an inauthentic portrayal of Blackness, which is "temporary, at best, and at worst, preserves the hierarchy that allows white institutions to have control over Black expression" (Catanese, 2011, p. 40).

Adding to the discourse, Warner (2017) characterized the industry's approach as "plastic representation," critiquing it for oversimplifying Black identity and reinforcing stereotypes. She emphasized the need for representation that captures the cultural and historical experiences of the Black community. Similarly, Christian and White (2020) introduced the concept of "organic representation," advocating for a reparational casting approach that prioritizes intersectionality, including race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, in the production process. This perspective raises important questions about the necessity of ethnically specific representation, particularly in roles portraying the African American experience.

In opposition to these positions, there has been vocal theoretical and ideological resistance to calls for authentic casting. Representing a universalist perspective, Robert Brustein, an American playwright, critic, and educator, argues that emphasizing race or ethnicity in American cinema is problematic because it hinders the industry's pursuit of shared values. Brustein emphasized the importance of an actor's creative and aesthetic essence over their racial or ethnic recognition (Catanese, 2011). About Blackness specifically, Brustein contends that an approach that emphasizes racial differences prevents progress and further deprives Black talent of opportunities to embrace historically elusive roles (Catanese, 2011). Instead, casting decisions should be based on talent rather than identity, allowing Black actors to play roles that were previously denied them. Brustein also describes Wilson's criticism as divisive and hypocritical, as Wilson opposes the assimilationist color-blind approach but still relies on White production companies to produce his plays (Catanese, 2011).

Ethnicity and Capitalism in the Debate on Casting

In a 2017 Hot 97 interview, Samuel L. Jackson questioned the practice of casting British African actors in African American roles (Mumford, 2017). He argued that this approach overlooks the unique ethnic dimensions relevant to African American stories and characters. His comments highlighted an expectation within casting practices: the need to consider ethnicity alongside race. Blackness as a unifying identity for the casting choices restricted the amplification of the ethnic diversity of those classified as Black. Stuart Hall's (2006) explanation in his article, "New Ethnicities," terms this "the end of the innocent essential Black subject" because there is a failure to recognize "the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences, and cultural identities which compose the category Black" (p. 444). Hall (2006) further

predicted that once this Black subjectivity is not acknowledged in movies, there will be a continuous "political debate and argument: a critical politics, a politics of criticism" (p. 445).

True to Hall's (2006) prediction, Hollywood's hegemonic conception of Blackness as a unifying identity has sparked the ethnic debate. The selection of actors for these movies has been structured by America's racial categorization of Blackness; therefore, "ethnic distinctions within racial categories have tended to be overshadowed by the racial designation" (Cornell & Hartmann, 2006, p. 26). Despite the specificity of this study in understanding the positions of AAs, it is important to note that AA actors have also starred as historical African characters in Hollywood-produced movies like *Invictus* (Eastwood, 2009) and *The Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022). This casting method often merges ethnic identity into a broad racial category based on phenotype. Consequently, African Americans' resistance to such casting reflects their effort to "claim an ethnic identity" distinct from other Black groups in the United States (Cornell & Hartmann, 2006, p. 20).

Shohat (1995) encapsulates these concerns, stating that the casting approach generates resentment among groups who interpret casting out-group actors as a message implying

"(a) you are unworthy of self-representation; (b) no one from your group is capable of representing you; and (c) we, the producers of the film, care little about your offended sensibilities, for we have the power and there is nothing you can do about it" (p. 171).

These suggestions expand the discourse beyond ethnic specificity, highlighting broader issues, such as the role of production companies in casting decisions and the feelings of inadequacy experienced by groups like AAs when actors outside their community are consistently chosen to represent them. The perception that British actors are often more skillfully trained compared with their American counterparts can intensify feelings of inadequacy among African American actors (Knox, 2018). This viewpoint potentially fosters bias in casting decisions, disadvantaging African American talent in favor of their British peers.

About the influence of production companies, Martin (2018) argues that casting directors often downplay the impact of the televisual marketplace on casting decisions, striving to maintain the perceived integrity of the casting process, despite projects frequently being approved because of casting considerations. Therefore, this highlights how "the material reality of who controls cultural resources trumps any rhetorical efforts by Blacks to reframe incompetence in terms that privilege Black artists" (Catanese, 2011, p. 49). The casting choices for these movies are driven by capitalist motivations, leading to potential cultural erasure when casting directors claim to have selected the best actors for their roles (Geraghty, 2021).

In response to advocates of ethnic-specific casting, some film scholars (Rogers & Thorpe, 2014, p. 48; Sun, 2000) contend that this approach can limit, essentialize identity, and place restrictions on "theatrical possibilities." While recognizing the value of authentic casting for underrepresented groups, they argue that it can confine actors to roles based solely on their ethnicity or race, thereby conscripting the actor's "autonomy and agency as an artist" because acting is a "technique-based work" (Nascimento, 2009, p. 7). Moreover, Sun (2000) suggests that the goal should be a situation in theater and film where race and ethnicity become irrelevant factors in casting decisions. Sun (2000) argues that color-blind/cross-ethnic casting aims to "explore the relationship between racial and ethnic groups" and "learn the differences of other peoples" in a bid to "establish the commonalities" (p. 93). Similarly, Molina-Guzman (2013) highlights

the problematic nature of seeking cultural authenticity in casting, emphasizing that in a supposed post-racial era, race and ethnicity should no longer hold significance (para. 2). Furthermore, she highlights an important perspective for understanding the casting contention. Molina-Guzman (2013) explains that contentions around casting for historical Black roles stem from historical underrepresentation and the limited availability of significant roles for African Americans, as well as tensions among various minority groups.

Black Immigration and African Americans

Molina-Guzman (2013) suggested that the pushback against casting choices in historical movies involving African Americans may stem from historical tensions among minority groups. Specifically, within the diverse Black population in the United States, there have been historical controversies surrounding opportunities such as casting (Okonufua, 2013). The literature addressing these controversies often presents a binary perspective, pitting African Americans against the various ethnicities that make up the Black immigrant population. Consequently, it becomes necessary to discuss Black British actors as representatives of the Black immigrant population and their casting in significant historical roles as rare and prestigious employment opportunities. The increasing population of Black immigrants in the United States, coupled with the monolithic sociopolitical categorization of these groups under the umbrella term "Black," intensifies the struggle for limited resources within a system that marginalizes Blackness (Assensoh, 2000; Rogers, 2004). Therefore, it is instructive to explore previous issues and conversations concerning the relationship between African Americans and Black immigrants in the United States.

At the onset of voluntary Black migration to the United States, there were scholarly assumptions that there would be organic cooperation between Black immigrants and their AA hosts. This assumption was based on the belief that a form of Black coalition would emerge to combat White supremacy and the marginalization of Black people (Otusanya & Bell, 2018; Rogers, 2004). However, this expectation has not materialized. Studies examining the relationships between different Black groups and African Americans reveal tensions over representational political positions, affirmative action, and employment. For instance, based on investigations of race-based coalitions between African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans in New York, Rogers (2004) explained that the tensions between the two groups were not solely centered around political positions but also revolved around access to government jobs and the associated benefits. AAs believed that they suffered a loss of political representation whenever an Afro-Caribbean individual won a political office (Rogers, 2004, p. 303). Similarly, Otusanya and Bell (2018) stated that West African immigrants reported experiencing "pejorative, dismissive, and invalidating comments" from AAs (p. 46). These findings suggest that despite race being a shared characteristic, it is insufficient as a unifying factor among the groups comprising the Black population in America (Rogers, 2004).

It is important to understand that casting for historical roles holds prestigious employment opportunities for Black individuals in America. Throughout history, employment opportunities have been a point of contention within the African American community in the United States. Compared with other groups, African Americans face economic disadvantages that stem from their long history of marginalization (Briggs, 2004). A significant portion of the African American community occupies jobs that are the available options for Black immigrants upon their integration into America. Because of the tendency of Black immigrants to settle in specific metropolitan areas, there is "direct economic competition for jobs, housing, and social services" (Briggs, 2004,

p. 3). Consequently, scholars in the fields of economy and immigration have devoted considerable effort to investigating this phenomenon. From these studies, multiple scholars (Briggs, 2004; Catanzarite, 2004; Johannsson & Shulman, 2004) argue that the increased number of immigrants poses challenges for African Americans, as they contend for public services, affirmative action benefits, and employment opportunities. Molina-Guzman (2013) amplifies this position by asserting that these Black historical roles represent scarce opportunities, leading members of various Black groups to vie for such significant opportunities.

Black Audience Reception Research

The literature review foregrounds the casting debate as a significant element of analysis, particularly about African American narratives in Hollywood. It traverses the ideological spectrum from color-blind to ethnic-specific casting within the industry's racialized framework. By setting a universalist perspective, which favors talent over race and ethnicity, against advocacy for representational authenticity that acknowledges racial and ethnic identities, the review establishes a baseline for probing audience reception. Moreover, the literature situates this demand as a contention for scarce employment opportunities between African Americans and Black immigrants, attributed to America's homogenization of Blackness.

Adopting the perspective of a Black reception study, this study shifts scholarly focus from film content to the nuanced interactions of Black audiences with casting practices, a subject rooted in a robust tradition of reception scholarship. Previous reception studies reveal a complex pattern of critique and concurrence where Black viewers dissect media portrayals, spotlighting potential stereotype reinforcement alongside a push for representation. Squires (2013) encapsulates this interaction within a historical narrative, illustrating a sustained critique by Black audiences who strive for media portrayals that genuinely reflect their lived realities, thereby offering a deeper comprehension of the Black community's media engagement, especially within the context of casting controversies.

Bobo's (2002) study examined Black women's responses to *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985), highlighting how gender and cultural background shape media reception among Black audiences. Similarly, Coleman's (2014) work on Black situation comedies reveals a dynamic of both agreement and disagreement, emphasizing the nuanced nature of audience reception, as African American viewers enjoy the humor while challenging portrayals that perpetuate racial stereotypes. Inniss and Feagin (1995) found that *The Cosby Show* (Carsey & Werner, 1984–1992) elicited mixed reactions from Black middle-class viewers, who appreciated the positive depictions but also desired more realistic portrayals of their experiences. These viewers expressed concerns that focusing on an idealized, fully assimilated Black family could downplay ongoing Black issues, even as it inspired hope for improved conditions.

The Black audience's response to past issues in media representation, such as the current casting decisions, often embodies a form of oppositional engagement, a dynamic Stewart (2003) terms "reconstructive spectatorship." This form of viewership emerges as a counter to a long history of racism, stereotypes, and underrepresentation in classical cinema, which has traditionally only afforded Black spectators fleeting and superficial enjoyment. Influenced by their multifaceted realities—social, cultural, economic, racial, and sexual—Black audiences actively engage in meaning-making, articulating their subjectivities against "hostile and hegemonic institutional conditions" (Bobo, 2002; Stewart, 2003, p. 677). Similarly, as they demand ethnically specific actors, the Black audience challenges and opposes the

narratives presented by the White-controlled industry. As such, Bobo (2002) explains that in opposition, the audience undermines the text, argues that it is problematic, and provides an alternative perspective. In this instance, the alternative is a call for ethnic-specific actors in history-based Black movies. This stance, as Nascimento (2009) notes, can lead to critiques that overlook the artistry and technique of acting, favoring an essentialist view that may risk oversimplifying the actor's craft of embodying diverse experiences (p. 7).

This study advances Black audience reception research by scrutinizing African American viewers' complex and dynamic interactions with media, especially the casting decisions in films that portray their historical narratives. In a tradition that stretches back to the critical spectatorship of scholars such as Bobo (2002) and Stewart (2003), this contemporary discourse on social media continues to echo historical patterns of African American critique and engagement. Today's digital dialogues on platforms like Twitter are the latest iteration of this critical engagement, reflecting a historical continuum where African American audiences have long demanded cinematic representations that honor their cultural and historical complexities. This analysis aims to explore preferences for ideological standpoints and delve into the undercurrents of these preferences—whether a demand for historical and cultural resonance or other nuanced considerations. By synthesizing insights from the lineage of Black reception studies, this research underscores the active role of Black audiences in critiquing and shaping media representations, thus reinforcing their essential role in challenging dominant narratives and advocating for portrayals that are relatable and reflect the intricacies of their identities and experiences.

Methodology

Drawing inspiration from Geraghty's (2021) suggestions about the neglect of the audience in movie casting investigations and the potential of reception studies to unearth Black audience experiences, this research explores audience perceptions concerning the casting of Black immigrant actors in historical African American roles. Specifically, it scrutinizes the audience's views on the casting methodologies in *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019) and *Judas and the Black Messiah* (King, 2021) to unearth the overlooked issues highlighted by the audience. Recognizing the range of audience reactions films invariably attract—from tweet reactions and online forums to interviews and film critic commentaries—this study narrows its focus to the analysis of tweets, despite the plethora of responses scattered across various platforms.

To achieve the stated objective, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted. First, 6,073 tweets about the two movies were extracted. Hashtags such as #NotmyFredHampton, #BoycottHarriet, #Harrietdeservesbetter, and #NotmyHarriet, specifically created by Twitter users in response to the casting choices made for the movies, were used to select the tweets. These hashtags provided a concentrated data set that specifically addressed the objectives of this study. Additionally, given the heterogeneity of discourse within Black hashtags (Brock, 2012), there was an opportunity to explore counterpositions by other Black groups, especially Africans, whose historical characters had been played by AA actors. As a Twitter user interested in and following discussions about Black issues, I witnessed the period and extracted tweets. The tweets about the movie *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019) were published by Twitter users between July 2019 and November 2019, while the tweets about *Judas and the Black Messiah* (King, 2021) were published between July 2020 and December 2020. These periods coincided with the release of their movie trailers, generating reactions from the audience about the casting choices.

To identify the themes that emerged from the extracted data, the tweets, originally in Excel format, were saved as .txt files and imported into Leximancer. Leximancer was chosen for this analysis because it is a popular computer-assisted tool for thematic analysis used by qualitative researchers across various disciplines, including communication (Wilk, Soutar, & Harrigan, 2019). The tool provides researchers with the opportunity to “examine large amounts of data without bias, identify more syntactic properties, enhance reliability, and enable reproducibility” (Lemon & Hayes, 2020, p. 606).

Results

The analysis conducted on Leximancer revealed six highly detailed level themes and 108 concepts. The themes identified were: Harrietdeservesbetter (2703 hits), Notmyharriet (2643 hits), people (1692 hits), Black (1677 hits), and Notmyfredhampton (1460 hits). Figure 1 presents an interactive map showcasing the themes derived from the Leximancer analysis. These results align with the keywords used for data extraction, which were the hashtags organizing the tweets.

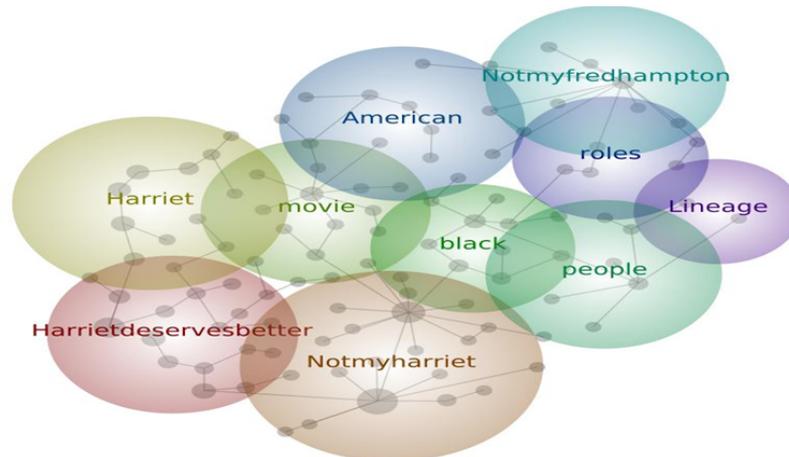


Figure 1. Map of prominent themes extracted from Leximancer.

The hashtags encompassed a range of conflicting perspectives on the issue. To ensure a comprehensive exploration of the perspectives possibly missed by the software, I applied Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework for further thematic analysis of the data set. This secondary analysis yielded the following three themes. The subsequent sections discuss these themes, accompanied by selected excerpts from the analyzed tweets. It is important to note that, as is common in qualitative analysis, some themes may contain overlapping information (Rohlfing & Sonnenberg, 2016).

Black Immigrant Actors’ Demeanor Toward Race Issues in America

The most significant observation from these tweets signals a profound concern by the audience that transcends the ability of the actors to perform the roles. At its core, the contention grapples with questions of identity, cultural stewardship, and the potential for misrepresentation by those perceived as insufficiently attuned to and concerned about the ethnic intricacies of the historical characters they portray.

Audiences, informed by a racially conscious understanding of cinematic history, assert that the actors' eligibility for such roles is compromised by their past remarks about African Americans and racial issues in America. Warner insightfully articulates this phenomenon, noting that audiences who are pivotal to filmic discourse appraise actors not solely on their on-screen portrayals but also on their off-camera engagements and narratives (Warner, 2015).

The tweets reflect African American viewers' discomfort with casting certain immigrant actors, stemming from these actors' prior remarks on African Americans and Black racial issues in the United States. Numerous tweets echoed this sentiment. For example, one tweet encapsulates this feeling: "I fully understand #NotMyFredHampton like I fully understand why American Black folks feel the way they do! When non-American Black folks say they 'are tired of talking about race' just to turn around and play one of our heroes" (personal communication, December 19, 2020). Many other tweets referred to the interview that Daniel Kaluuya conducted with *Radio Times* after his appearance in a racially themed movie like *Get Out* (Peele, 2017). Kaluuya voices his exasperation with the recurrent association of his identity with race in the context of his acting career. He articulates a desire for his craft to transcend narrow racial definitions, even while acknowledging the pervasive nature of racial discourse (Young, 2020).

Similarly, Cynthia Erivo, cast in *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019), was criticized for past comments in which she characterized the African American accent as 'ghetto' and noted that there are cultural differences within the Black diaspora. Before her selection for the role, she had engaged in discourse—as illustrated in Figure 2—on the variances within Black individuals' lived experiences globally.

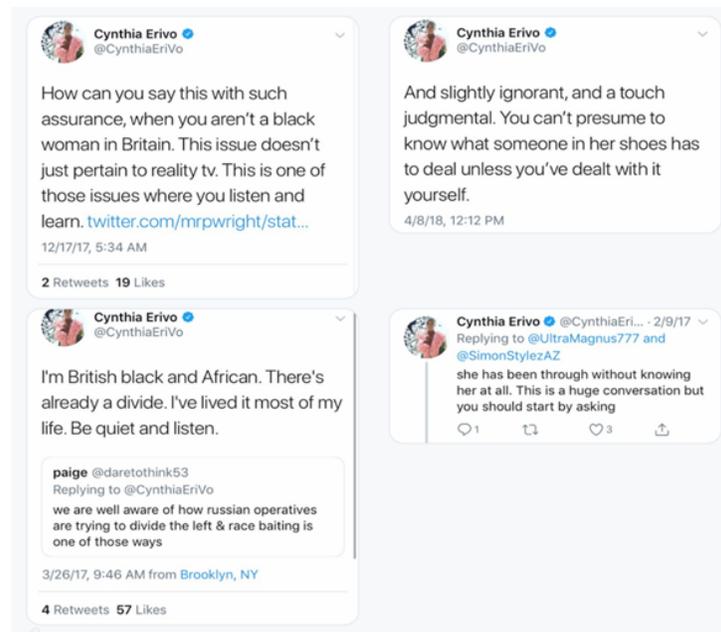


Figure 2. Cynthia Erivo's tweet suggesting that there is a difference among Black people (eBoPeep, 2018)

Such remarks led to debates on whether it was fitting for someone perceived to have shown insensitivity toward African Americans to portray a revered figure like Harriet Tubman. This sentiment was encapsulated in the arguments of several Twitter commentators. As one Twitter user argued, "Cynthia Erivo's dark skin will not be used to shield her from criticism over her ethnic chauvinism toward ADOS people. The sexism argument made by the director is also bullsh*t. #HarrietMovie #HarrietDeservesBetter #CynthiaErivo #HarrietTubman" (personal communication, October 14, 2019).

In response to criticism from Samuel L. Jackson and other African Americans, Daniel Kaluuya counters by asserting his understanding of the issues and elaborating on the multidimensional aspects of Blackness and marginalization across various phases. Daniel stated:

When I'm around Black people I'm made to feel "other" because I'm dark-skinned. I've had to wrestle with that, with people going "You're too Black." Then I come to America, and they say, "You're not Black enough." I go to Uganda; I can't speak the language. In India, I'm Black. In the Black community, I'm dark-skinned. In America, I'm British. Bro! . . . I resent that I have to prove that I'm Black. . . I see Black people as one man. (Greeley, 2017, para. 14)

In this response, Daniel highlights a shared experience of universal Blackness that can be comprehended and interpreted by all Black individuals because they have all encountered various forms of marginalization, including colorism, colonization, and racism. Similarly, during an interview with *The New York Times*, British actor Cynthia Erivo argued that being a Black girl in England is no different from being a Black girl in America (Beaumont-Thomas, 2015). She conveyed the idea that Black people in England and America collectively experience the pain of displacement and a feeling of not fully belonging in specific environments (Beaumont-Thomas, 2015).

Despite these attempts by actors to demonstrate an understanding of African American issues and amplify a universal Black experience, the African American community contends otherwise. The skepticism stems from actors like Erivo, who have publicly differentiated themselves from African American identities, sometimes in disparaging terms. This stance is embedded in a historical context where some Black immigrants have strategically distanced themselves from African American identities, as discussed in scholarly works (Johnson, 2008; Okome, 2002). This self-differentiation, aimed at navigating the systemic challenges associated with Blackness in America, often leads these immigrants to identify more with their national and ethnic backgrounds (Arthur, 2000). Thus, when such actors portray African American historical figures, they raise doubts about their commitment to connect authentically with the complex realities of these characters, reflecting a broader apprehension within the African American community about the genuine representation of their lived experiences. For instance, despite the uncertainty about Daniel Kaluuya's intentions during his interview, the African American viewership interprets his words as signaling a disconnection from the intricate realities of the African American characters he portrays on film.

As Black reception scholars have noted, Black audiences' perceptions of media productions in America are symbolically influenced by their historical racial experiences. Thus, the thought of casting actors who have historically shown contempt or who have publicly undermined the systemic adversities and reality

of African American life is unfathomable. For AA audiences, the cultural cache and moral responsibility of representing African American heroes and narratives on-screen is immense, given the rarity of such representations and the historical misrepresentation or erasure of Black stories and voices. For these viewers, the importance goes beyond the artistry of performance to encompass the embodiment of a legacy marked by resilience and resistance against oppressive systems. The actors selected to portray African American figures carry the weight of a historical journey—from the egregiousness of chattel slavery through the Civil Rights Movement to the ongoing fight against systemic racism and inequality. These roles transcend mere acting; they represent a tangible experience that continues to inform the existence and collective memory of African Americans.

The skepticism and rejection of immigrant actors by the audience is deepened by perceptions that Black immigrants often receive preferential treatment from White hegemonic institutions, being cast as “model minorities” at the expense of African Americans. Historically, this status has been used to undermine and stereotype African Americans, portraying them as less adept than their immigrant counterparts. In such scenarios, the casting of immigrant actors who have uttered statements viewed as disparaging further complicates their acceptance by some members of the African American audience.

For African American audiences, the perception of authenticity in casting hinges on actors’ deep understanding, commitment to embodying, and active advocacy for the complex realities of African American existence. When casting decisions for crucial roles fall on individuals whose past statements seem to trivialize these multifaceted realities, it disrupts African American audiences’ expectations and perceptions of authentic representation. This sense of betrayal is further exacerbated by concerns that African American stories are frequently relayed without fully capturing their essence. Hence, the selection of immigrant actors, such as Cynthia Erivo and Daniel Kaluuya, who have engaged in contentious discourse, strikes a discordant note with the community’s quest for truthful representation, creating an undercurrent of tension and mistrust among the audience.

Casting and the Authenticity of African American Historical Narratives

The examination of Twitter reactions to the film *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019) reveals a contentious dialogue about authenticity and the fidelity of the African American narratives as portrayed in the movies. These digital discourses challenge the veracity of the representation of the accounts of Black characters and stories, particularly through the lens of August Wilson’s perspective that Black artistry within a White-dominated industry is manufactured to cater to White audiences rather than to honor the complexity of Black American life (Wilson, 1990). A Twitter user encapsulated this sentiment, stating, “I’m reading the reviews for ‘Harriet,’ and essentially the movie was written in a way as not to offend the ‘good White Folk’” (personal communication, September 11, 2019). The recurring position expressed by these audience members indicates an unsettling pattern of misrepresenting African American history and leaders, a phenomenon significantly attributed to White hegemony within the film industry, which shapes narratives to placate a White audience while diluting the grievousness of Black historical experiences.

This discourse is notably embodied in the character of Bigger Long from *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019), a character that Twitter users regard as an invention of the film producer because it has no grounding in

the historical accounts of Harriet Tubman's life. The AA audience's denouncement is poignant, with one educator emphatically recommending that fellow educators eschew the film for its perpetuation of a racist agenda, suggesting that it vilifies Black individuals by falsely implicating them in the bondage of their own people. The Twitter user suggested the following:

As an educator, I would recommend that other educators not show their students this film. The movie "Harriet" fictionalized the life of Harriet Tubman in order to push a racist agenda that demonizes and blames Black people for our own enslavement. #NotMyHarriet. (personal communication, November 3, 2019)

Such a portrayal is deemed to not only misconstrue the narrative but also to insulate White audiences from confronting the historical atrocities of slavery and their residual guilt.

These discussions of misrepresentation are associated with the casting of immigrant actors in the roles of African American historical figures. The AA audience suggests that there is dissonance between the actors and their roles because of the absence of a direct ancestral lineage. The larger consensus implies that immigrant actors, perhaps removed from the visceral connection and legacy of the African American struggle, inadvertently participate in the propagation of inauthentic portrayals. As one user lamented, the actors actively collaborate with the production companies to exploit their heritage for personal gain. The Twitter user, like many others, expressed disdain for the actors' complicity in such distortive narratives.

It's a shame when someone will stoop so low that they would participate in this inaccurate, disrespectful, and agenda-driven film just for the sake of their own personal gain. Don't disrespect our people because you're willing to wear a collar around your neck! (personal communication, November 2, 2019)

This position reflects Wilson's (2009) assertion that casting individuals without a direct ancestral connection to African American history risks undermining the authenticity of their portrayal, where acting becomes an exercise in mimicry rather than an expression of lived experience and cultural veracity. Similarly, the portrayal of Bigger Long has sparked criticism for reinforcing damaging stereotypes about Black men, thus continuing the legacy of cinematic misrepresentation rooted in systemic racism and historical power dynamics. This critique resonates with scholarly examinations of race relations in America, which highlight how such portrayals shape societal perceptions of Black masculinity and contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes, particularly the harmful archetype of the violent Black man and the narrative of intra-racial gender violence.

To ascribe the representational inaccuracies found in the film solely to casting decisions would be to overlook the nuanced challenge of creative authority during the production process. Consideration must be given to the range of performers, including those of African American heritage who portrayed roles in the films in question, not merely the principal ones. Hence, laying the blame for misrepresentation at the feet of immigrant actors on account of a supposed historical detachment from the characters they play may be considered an oversimplification. Public records do not indicate any objections from African American actors, whether in leading or supporting capacities, against the depicted misrepresentations. Therefore, it

is imperative to recognize, as posited by scholars, that the authenticity of Black representation in cinema is not solely dependent on ethnically accurate casting; it involves Black people commanding cultural narratives and having access to the means necessary for expressing Black stories with authenticity and fidelity (Christian & White, 2020; Warner, 2017).

In the landscape of Hollywood, the case of *The Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022) serves as a stark illustration of the formidable barriers and likely futility that Black actors might confront in advocating against misrepresentation. Lupita Nyong'o's decision to exit the project, informed perhaps by the film's reductive portrayal of the Agojie warriors as merely heroic figures, speaks to the broader issue of actors' constrained influence on the narrative integrity of Black stories within the film industry. This predicament echoes Catanese's (2011) contention that the "material reality of who controls cultural resources trumps any rhetorical efforts by Blacks to reframe incompetence in terms that privilege Black artists" (p. 49). As such, the authority of Black people is markedly diminished by the absence of control over cultural narratives, a formidable obstacle to realizing what they regard as authentic representations of Black experiences in cinema.

Advocating Black Diversity and Self-Representation

The discourse emerging from African American Twitter users unveils a critical examination of Hollywood's casting practices, specifically the selection of immigrant actors for roles steeped in African American historical experiences. This vigorous conversation among African Americans on social media platforms illuminates the audiences' nuanced understanding of the plurality of Blackness and challenges the industry to recalibrate its practices to embrace this plurality. The insistence is on an appreciation that Blackness cannot be flattened into a singular experience, as it encompasses a spectrum of histories, cultures, and lived experiences that must be considered in casting decisions. A tweet carefully captures this sentiment: "Blackness isn't the same across the board. Our lived experiences couldn't be more different. This actor doesn't comprehend our struggle & only deals with race when he's being paid. He's a capitalist. Hampton was anti-capitalism" (personal communication, August 7, 2020).

The discourse evident in similar tweets highlights a profound and unmistakable contention. It underscores Hollywood's tendency to oversimplify and racialize American identities without adequately acknowledging the intricate histories and identities within the Black community. African Americans, through these digital platforms, assertively voice that their distinct history—a trajectory from the shackles of slavery to the contemporary battle against systemic racism—must be at the forefront of their portrayal and representation in the media. These Twitter users, reflecting on Hollywood's practices, demand recognition of the entire spectrum of African American history and its implications for their calls for ethnicity-based representation. This stance echoes findings from previous studies (Locke & Bailey, 2013; Orbe & Harris, 2008), which highlight that various segments of the U.S. Black population have historically used identifiers related to ancestry, migration narratives, ethnic groups, or countries of origin to distinguish themselves from other Black groups. This perspective, resonating with many, points to a misalignment between the expectations of the African American audience and Hollywood's approach to diversity. While there may be an increase in Black representation in the industry, there remains a crucial oversight in casting actors who authentically embody the historical and cultural realities of the roles they portray.

In addition, numerous Twitter users argue that roles depicting African American historical figures ought to serve as a form of reparation. Such casting decisions could be seen as a merited recompense for African Americans' protracted battle against the exclusion and marginalization perpetuated by Hollywood. Echoing this sentiment, a Twitter user's vehement objection crystallizes the heart of this contention: "It is morally repugnant and racist that Hollywood believes that Black people from outside the US should receive all of the opportunities that THEY have been denying Black Americans for over 100 years. #StopErasingADOS" (personal communication, October 31, 2019).

This user's comment sheds light on a broader perception among African Americans: The habitual selection of Black immigrants for roles intimately tied to the African American experience is not a mere casting choice but a continuation of historical erasure. This pattern, they fear, is a modern replication of past injustices where African Americans find themselves obscured and displaced, even in historical narratives.

Importantly, the history of Black representation in Hollywood is symbolic in understanding the fears and suspicions that the audience harbors toward production companies. The casting of non-AAs to portray AA characters is not new to Hollywood and has its roots in the popular minstrel shows of the 1830s. Therefore, the perspective of being replaced by "others" by production companies suggests a lack of agency in self-representation (Shohat, 1995). Additionally, like past instances of Blackface perpetuated by White control of Hollywood, the AA audience views this casting approach as a form of marginalization and cultural erasure that has historically defined both Hollywood and American society (Grant, 2004; Yuen, 2016). Another Twitter user articulated this concern, stating that "the erasure of American descendants of slavery from starring in lead roles by allowing immigrants to tell our American history and stories continues unabated" (personal communication, August 6, 2020).

Because of the history of racism that has shaped Hollywood and America, the audience believes that the neglect of AAs in favor of immigrants is intentional and systemic, reducing AAs to stereotypical roles that have long defined Hollywood's portrayal of Blackness (Hughey, 2009).

Finally, some African Americans and many Africans have pushed back against the criticism of the casting approach. It is important to note that this pushback was not primarily presented as a justification for the casting approach; instead, these Twitter users accused the critics of hypocrisy, pointing out instances where African American actors have been cast as historical African heroes. One Twitter user, among many others, expressed this sentiment by tweeting, "We didn't have ADOS then. Oh, it didn't exist when you were benefiting from playing African icons, but now that Black Brits are getting AA roles, you've decided to rally around? Bitch move. #NotMyFredHampton" (personal communication, December 18, 2020).

This pushback highlights the necessity for further investigation to determine whether some members of the audience who push back against critics support the casting approach. This is crucial because, based on the tweets, it is difficult to determine the opinions of the Black diaspora about the casting approach, as their tweets were primarily in response to presumed attacks on Black immigrant actors. Therefore, it is imperative to delve deeper and explore the perspectives of the audience from the diaspora, whose historical roles have been portrayed by African American actors.

Conclusion

This discourse on casting within Hollywood, as articulated by African American audiences, demands a theoretical position that creatively weaves together the transformative nature of acting with a profound understanding of cultural authenticity and historical integrity. This study's findings underscore a clear demand for a casting ethos that not only aligns with the cultural and historical veracity of African American experiences but also embodies a community's quest for representational fidelity. This dialogue extends beyond mere authenticity; it represents a critical interrogation of identity politics and the role of performance in cultural representation. The audience's active participation in shaping the discourse around authenticity in casting, as revealed in this study, emphasizes their complex relationship with media portrayals. The call for casting that faithfully reflects the historical and cultural realities of African American roles is a response to a legacy of marginalization and the misrepresentation of African American narratives within the dominant media narrative, underscoring the imperative of correcting historical wrongs through the medium of film.

Acting, fundamentally an art of skill and transformation, assumes an added dimension of historical fidelity in portraying African American figures. This expectation goes beyond the mere mirroring of characters' lived experiences; it demands that thespians embody the spirit and legacy of those they portray, resonating with the audience's collective memory and lived experiences deeply rooted in a history marked by civil rights battles, the quest for equality, and an ongoing struggle against systemic racism. The demand for the reparational or ethnic casting of African American actors in roles of historical significance is, therefore, a form of redress. It is a means to honor the cultural depth of African American heritage and acknowledge the community's right to narrate its own stories. This approach to casting is not a rejection of the craft's diversity but rather an acknowledgment that certain roles carry a cultural weight, necessitating performers who can adeptly navigate the intricate interplay of artistic skill and socio-historical consciousness.

As Hollywood navigates this terrain, it must do so with a recognition of the cultural and historical depth of these roles, balancing the transformative nature of acting with a commitment to cultural integrity. The industry's engagement with the historical narratives it seeks to portray must extend beyond surface representation, requiring a nuanced casting approach that honors both the artistry of performance and the cultural imperatives of the roles. This nuanced approach must recognize the potency of casting as more than an artistic choice—it must become a gesture toward historical justice, honoring the rich tapestry of African American experiences.

In sum, the call from African American audiences for representational fidelity in casting is a plea for transformative understanding and respect for the historical specificity of the African American experience. This call champions a production landscape that is both equitable and authentic, one that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of identity, performance, and historical consciousness. Within this context, the recurrent casting of Black immigrant actors in African American roles, while not inherently problematic, stirs contention, particularly when African American audiences perceive these actors as not fully committed to the significance of the roles they play. Such casting decisions are viewed as a form of replacement, a sentiment that grows stronger because of the frequency of these occurrences. This

perspective highlights the necessity for casting practices that are not only conscious but also deeply aligned with the cultural and historical realities embodied in these roles, as well as the expectations of the African American audience.

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