

ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY

A socio-historical analysis of the consequences of modern anti-racism in Hollywood

by

Renée Gull Krøldrup Nielsen



A Dissertation

Submitted to the Department of English

Aalborg University

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Supervisor: Torben Ditlevsen

June 2021

Abstract

Det overordnede formål med denne afhandling er at kortlægge racekonflikten i USA i dag ved at undersøge konsekvenserne af moderne antiracisme og identitetspolitik i Hollywood.

Undersøgelsesresultaterne illustrerer og omhandler omstændighederne i Hollywood, men kan i bredere forstand projiceres ud på det amerikanske samfund. De to forfattere, Linda Nicholson og John McWhorter, udgør det teoretiske grundlag, da begge har noget at sige om det samme samtidshistoriske fænomen, men fra et henholdsvis historisk og politisk samt sociologisk perspektiv. Disse to indgangsvinkler er blevet holdt op imod en række eksempler på moderne antiracisme i Hollywood i form af filmanmeldelser, artikler og YouTube videoer med henblik på at undersøge hvordan denne kritik af filmindustrien formuleres og argumenteres. Studiets resultater peger på, at de seneste filmudgivelser og den diversitetsrelaterede diskurs, der cirkulerer om Hollywood, viderefører og forstærker den interne virkelighed af USA som gennemgående racistisk og forudindtaget. Disse venstreorienterede lighedskæmpere imiterer de oprindelige fra 1960ernes borgerrettigheder, men kæmper for noget mindre håndgribeligt. Moderne antiracisme drives af beretninger om undertrykkelse og racisme og er en trøst for især afroamerikanske individer, som kæmper med usikkerhed og mindreværd. Moderne antiracisme og identitetspolitik har til formål at fremme minoritetsgrupperinger såsom Black Power, men forklæder denne kamp som en lighedskamp, der søger at skabe harmoni mellem sorte og hvide i USA. Siden den moderne antiracismes indtog i Hollywood i 2010'erne, har den umiddelbare reaktion været at inkludere ud fra rigide principper og efterkomme samtlige ønsker fra den sorte venstrefløj. Når formålet er at opnå lighed, skal man dog være påpasselig med at indføre særbehandling, men i stedet turde forlange det samme fra alle. De succes historier, som afroamerikanere har brug for, kommer kun gennem incitament og selvskabt præstation. Den mulighed fratager man dem, når de ansættes og fremhæves på baggrund af hudfarve. Det kan derfor forekomme paradoksalt, at det der er brug for, er en tilbagevenden til det værdisæt, Hollywood havde før årtusindskiftet, hvor filmindustrien stolede på sin egen dømmekraft og inklusion var en igangværende proces.

Table of Contents

1. Abstract.....	2
2. Introduction.....	4
3. Methodology.....	5
4. Theory.....	6
a. Identity politics	6
Identity Politics as theory	10
b. Modern anti-racism.....	11
Therapeutic alienation.....	11
Tracing It.....	13
Facing It	14
Erasing It.....	15
Therapeutic alienation as theory	17
5. Analysis	18
c. What is the problem in Hollywood?	18
d. Did Hollywood appear to have the described race problem in the 1990s?.....	21
e. What are the major film companies doing to remedy the accusations made against the industry?.....	30
f. Do the measures taken towards increasing diversity seem to be working?	39
g. Why is Hollywood's change of culture not working?	46
6. Conclusion	50
7. Works Cited	54

Introduction

You could say it's like driving your old, familiar car. It might rattle a bit, but one can take that into account and manoeuvre easily. On the other hand, if one chooses a new lifestyle, no one can predict what might happen to the self, or have any idea how to deal with events as they arise. It will be hard to see ahead to the future, and life will be filled with anxiety. A more painful and unhappy life might lie ahead. (Kishimi and Koga 34)

During the preceding decade, and notably the last few years, it has been inevitable to notice a movement in the American film industry regarding racial equality and diversity. Hollywood has been attempting to restore its reputation, namely that the industry has been neglecting racial minorities with regards to appointing positions both behind and in front of the camera, as exemplified by the #OscarsSoWhite social media wave. Of late, the industry has also taken on accusations of sexual difference, preference and exploitation as exemplified by the #MeToo movement. In the wake of these social operations, awareness has spread calling for Hollywood executives to implement more social balance in all aspects of the industry. The subsequent impact of these individually distributed hashtags goes to show how public figures have gained increased leverage over the ongoings of hugely powerful conglomerates. This increased leverage is what has sparked my interest as I delve into the controversial topic of “modern anti-racism”, or “third-wave anti-racism”, as it has also been referred to, in American mainstream film. The choice has been made to briefly touch upon sex and gender but ultimately focus on race due to concerns of space and clarity of scope. Since Hollywood has started to conform to the wishes of the left, one may perhaps detect a dissonance between the allegations of prevailing racism that continues to be made against the industry, and the reformed Hollywood that exists today. The left is defined as: “political groups who favor sharing money and property more equally among the members of a society: political groups who support liberal or socialist policies” (“the Left”). The number of racist accounts in white America in general, regardless of changing societal conditions, is the subject of author John McWhorter's book *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America*. McWhorter, with his primary message that black Americans are dwelling on the past due to a low self-esteem, has been chosen as primary theorist for this thesis, together with Professor of History at Washington University in St. Louis, Linda Nicholson. In contrast to McWhorter's political approach, Nicholson, with her book *Identity Before Identity Politics*, offers a more historical context that can be used in trying to comprehend why Hollywood is finding itself as the target for an insatiable diversity mob. In the process of comparing these two perspectives, it seemed interesting to draw parallels between the current situation in Hollywood and the identity politics initiated by the civil rights movement of 1960s America, the latter of which Nicholson believes to have posed an ill turn in American racial history. Both McWhorter and Nicholson

understand black America's desire to seize power for themselves but maintain that it is a dead end. The intention of this study is therefore to challenge the case of modern anti-racism in Hollywood by dissecting some of the critiques brought against the industry in recent years by various participants from within as well as without, together with Hollywood's conformity to remedying those critiques, to see if identity politics in Hollywood poses a disservice to American current affairs similar to the 1960s identity politics, or if there indeed is racial reconciliation to be won from it this time around. Apart from the two scholars whom this dissertation has turned into theorists, the secondary literature will consist of academic sources such as Minjeong Kim and Rachelle J. Brunn-Bevel's mapping out of the commercial considerations that go into Hollywood's conduct of business, Rebecca Chapman's account of the inclusion rider, and Meredith D. Clark's review on the cancel culture phenomenon. Together they contribute with financial, legal, and socio-psychological perspectives on this many-faceted diversity crisis. African American author Ta-Nehisi Coates has been included to provide a viewpoint contrasting the ones of McWhorter and Nicholson. His book *Between the World and Me* is framed as a personal letter to his son Samori, warning him of becoming *too* relaxed in the presence of whites, and The Man in general. Apart from these academic sources, several film reviews, statements, and reactions have been retrieved from far and wide to offer a sufficient body of material to analyse and apply the theories to. These viewpoints, originating from online articles, newspapers, and YouTube videos, add value as this dissertation focuses on public leverage and power of discourse. The intent of this thesis is to detect a mental pattern amongst the critics and say something broad about American society by exemplifying it through Hollywood. Hollywood is interesting in this regard, as the film industry makes up a sizable part of the country's economy, and influences, as well as sometimes reflects, society.

Methodology

Planning the approach for this master thesis has been an acknowledgement that the humanities do not offer one fixed way of doing methodology. In stark contrast to scientific studies, there is no single definitive answer within the humanities but instead a need for exemplification and argumentation when making a case and drawing a conclusion. Language and discourse studies rely on analysis, interpretation, and comprehension. These analytical examinations will most likely be apprehended differently according to who will take them in and when. Ten years from now, this research might be perceived in a manner completely different from what is the case today, due to societal and contextual circumstances having changed. For that same reason, the hermeneutical spiral can be applied to this ever-evolving topic, consistently shifting public discourse. As methodology poses a fundamental yet negotiable role in this thesis, the theoretical considerations will be of more significance as they are the ones providing a framework from which this thesis will take its point of departure. Method, in this case, has therefore come to mean sorting and selecting material for this

scope, including the two theories of Linda Nicholson and John McWhorter that interlock but also provide different perspectives on a given period and phenomenon, and finding a way to use them meaningfully and constructively. As the concepts of identity politics and modern anti-racism have evolved through time, it should be noted that McWhorter and Nicholson's work was published respectively in the years of 2005 and 2008, meaning that even though modern anti-racism and identity politics have been part of American society to some degree for many years, this research suggests that those did not become influential parts of the film industry before in recent years. In other words, when the two authors had put these perspectives to paper, they naturally could not know what impact these tendencies would come to have on Hollywood and remaining society. Thus, even though McWhorter and Nicholson's works date back to before the concepts addressed had emerged in the film industry, their viewpoints can still be applied constructively, and can even be argued to have increased in relevance, as matters of racial injustice and social imbalance only seem to take up more space in public discourse with each year. It is therefore interesting to search out whether McWhorter and Nicholson were able to point out and articulate tendencies in American society in a time when those were far less conspicuous than they are today.

The methodology incorporates specific texts, i.e.. American films, their messages, and their receptions. The receptions in question will be those predominantly conducted by the creative elite: journalists, pundits, actors, and filmmakers in general. Please note that this research will not be carrying out in-depth analyses of the chosen films, but rather provide the reader with brief summarizations and overviews facilitating theoretical discussions about the discourses of those films. Furthermore, the decision has been made to exclude a separate discussion as the analysis will be drawing in different arguments and playing those up against each other, resulting in part analysis and part discussion. One last methodological decision has been to introduce historical as well as contemporary events in order to piece together a larger picture that will be pertinent throughout the dissertation. By and large, one half will consist of Hollywood films, and the other half real life considerations, opinions and reactions from participants within the industry.

Theory

Identity politics

The book *Identity before Identity Politics* by Distinguished Professor of Women's Studies and Professor of History at Washington University in St. Louis, Linda Nicholson, has been chosen to provide a theoretical framework of the historical and social factors central to identity politics.

In 1960s America, broad issues of equality were replaced with more intangible, social political objectives. The transition came about as political agendas became increasingly interested in

group specific problems and decreasingly interested in all-encompassing, legal initiatives securing equality for all (Nicholson 2). Contrary to before, advances such as the Civil Rights Act, ensuring minorities equal access and the right to vote, became inadequate to the groups it sought to protect (ibid. 2). Black Power took over for civil rights, Women's Liberation took over for Women's Rights and so on. Before the turn of the 1960s, what was usually addressed were the collective struggles of the oppressed. Back then, all minorities wished for was to exist in society on an equal footing with everybody else. Because of that, it seemed an evident step in the right direction when liberals began denying the significance of race and sex: "Since all claims about race and sex differences were assumed to be about the biologically caused limits of blacks and women, avoiding racism or sexism could only mean denying the reality of such differences." (ibid. 182) However, the mere denial of the significance of for instance race, was found insufficient to younger activists. These developed the viewpoint that black is not only *as* worthy as others, but that "Black is Beautiful" and distinct from the remaining races (ibid. 2). This marked a substantial shift in mentality when black activists announced that they perceived their demographic groups as positive, if not superior to whites (ibid. 2). What seemed to matter to these movers was not equal housing or desegregation of schools—rather it was promoting black pride and control over black life, sometimes conveying unique experiences and needs. This also meant that the aspirations of the 1960s identity politics had become so far removed from the previously known equality efforts - that achieving them had become more complicated. While black activists needed politicians for their resources, they also needed something that politicians alone could not provide. After all, legal exclusion was not the only exclusion hindering blacks from fully integrating into US society; hegemonic ideals of African Americans as different and inferior would also have to change for the country to accomplish such integration (ibid. 135). In its attempt to reconfigure our understanding of social difference, identity politics thus required extensive cultural challenges. The new left fought for political issues so different in nature from the previously known, that the changes they were fighting for were beyond traditional political ability.

The socially concerned identity politics that rose out of the 1960s, were a result of African Americans lacking culture. In the period from the 1930s to the 1960s, large quantities of American immigrants, such as the Jewish, Irish, and Italian, became deracialised. This deracialisation led to the new concept of "ethnicity", suggesting that racial differences were relatively minor, and culturally rooted rather than reflective of "inner character". (Nicholson 98) The groups that were now considered "ethnic", differentiated in behaviour, e.g., food preferences and religion. While this turning point was advantageous to European- and some Asian immigrants, African Americans remained racialised. As opposed to the aforementioned, many whites still perceived blacks as "possessing certain shared psychological and behavioral characteristics that were thought to be as much rooted in "nature" as were an alleged common skin color and other physiological characteristics." (ibid. 97) This partial integration came to mean that race was now simply a matter of black and white. What

seemed to separate blacks from their fellow non-native Americans, and therefore seemingly what barred them from being regarded as ethnic groups, was their missing distinctive cultural traits. In this connection, it is relevant to retain the fact that African Americans did not initially come to the US by their own free will, so referring to them as immigrants would be inaccurate. According to Nicholson, this very fact was partly to blame for blacks' defective integration into American society. Bringing with them a rich and proud sense of heritage, as those associated with for instance the Italian, was not possible for African Americans; instead, their customs had been stripped away from them and long forgotten (ibid. 99). When it came to the importance of race in African American identity, there seemed to be two opposing viewpoints:

According to conservative whites, black people possessed only a biological identity: they were people of the African race who merely happened to be in the United States. According to many liberals, both white and black, black people had no distinctive cultural identity because they did not have a distinct culture: they were Americans who merely happened to have dark skin. This meant that their behaviors were either identical to those of white people or were the problematic consequences of slavery and discrimination. Neither position allowed for the idea that African Americans had created behaviors that were different from those of a certain American ideal and also positive. (ibid. 102)

However, by the 1920s, large numbers of African Americans had migrated from the South to Harlem, New York. What evolved in this urban centre was an explosion of black culture and intellectualism that would later be known as the Harlem Renaissance. By the turn of the decade, certain favourable conditions had aligned, preventing traditional elites from monopolising culture; publishing houses, magazines and theatres grew in a city of great cultural diversity, including a dense African American population (ibid. 108).

Simultaneous with the Harlem Renaissance, arose the phenomenon of "The New Negro", first coined and articulated by Alain LeRoy Locke in his celebratory anthology by the same name. Locke put to paper the transition which he saw around him; black artists of all shapes and sizes were using the arts to gain civil and political influence (Nicholson 113). Two generations out of slavery, a new type of African American identity emerged that would change perceptions of blacks from those of uneducated farmers to conscious intellectuals (ibid. 115). For a people, whose culture had long been perceived as non-existing, being acknowledged for their artistic talent, be it within music, dancing, philosophy, art, poetry or writing, was considered liberating.

Let us then, briefly, turn back to the two opposing viewpoints on black identity; that African Americans are either like other Americans, with skin colour being of little or no importance, on the

one hand, and the viewpoint that African Americans are members of the African race, on the other. Now, the supporters of the former claim, tended to be those of the black upper- and middle classes, while the ones who argued the latter, tended to belong to the less affluent black communities (Nicholson 121). As the new century progressed, this division proved that progressive events such as the Harlem Renaissance was not enough for the poor and working-class African Americans to abandon the sense of racial consciousness, instead they continued to view, and started to celebrate, black identity as distinct from white (ibid. 125). Langston Hughes, an acclaimed frontline figure of the Harlem Renaissance, states in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” from 1926, that for the Negro artist to live up to his full potential, he must renounce his ambitions of becoming white and American (ibid. 116). Instead, he believed that the black artist should turn his full attention towards the black poor and working classes. Hughes’ view on African American identity was thus racial in a way that supersedes class, and he must therefore be considered to belong to the “members of the African race” side of the argument (ibid. 117). While the class hybridity of 1920s Harlem was the only kind of population that could possibly begin to express a distinctive African American cultural identity, it must be remembered that those who were giving voice to it were a small group of intellectuals. Several scholars have noted that the limited influence of the Harlem Renaissance was primarily due to its social composition (ibid. 117). Even though the movement can be said to have had significant influence on the following decades’ artistic institutions, it was not powerful enough to provide all blacks with a renewed outlook on their identity: the Harlem Renaissance “had no grass-roots attachments. Its success depended on its strategic placement, not its power.” (ibid. 118) The events unfolding during the first half of the 20th century, including the deracialisation of other ethnic groups and blacks’ diverging perceptions of black identity, resulted in an ambiguous sense of belonging for the black American. Despite serious attempts to positively rethink and reshape African American culture and identity, blacks remained racialised up until the 1960s.

Identity politics caused progress as well as disintegration in American society. When critiquing identity politics of the 1960s, it is necessary to look both at the ideological consequences and impact on structural patterns of American life. In the wake of Black Power and Women’s Liberation, the country experienced changed discourses surrounding race and sex. As addressed earlier, Black Power had, contrary to civil rights, started to embrace group differences as positive and possibly environmentally caused. This embrace facilitated new and open discussions about such differences that were not possible prior to the emergence of identity politics (Nicholson 182). The more comfortable people became debating issues of race and sex, the more progress was made in US institutions; women developed dual identities as caring mothers simultaneously participating as wage earners. Additionally, the political preferences, values and individual needs of blacks and women were now explicitly addressed and taken into consideration (ibid. 183). As for the ideological consequences, identity politics have been critiqued for causing the dissolution of the 1960s left.

Especially the participants who turned the civil rights movement into Black Power have been attacked, as they, in shifting focus towards social identity, disregarded the increasing poverty and economic inequality among black communities, which in turn would have been central to the 1960s left (ibid. 177). Another ideological consequence, following the emergence of identity politics, are the gender and racial assessments that all political and marketing campaigns, television programmes, film productions, music etc. will have to undergo. This new lens, detecting microaggressions far and wide, is considered irritating to some (ibid. 183). The problem seems to be that in our endeavour to overcome social inequality, we have become too race conscious, resulting in a kind of “tribalistic” mentality, in which the emphasis on our differences has clouded our similarities (ibid. 183). Consequently, identity politics turned out to be in part counterproductive in that it did not resolve problems so much as it relocated them.

Identity Politics as theory

Broad, generalising conceptualisations can be drawn from Linda Nicholson’s examination and analysis of identity politics. The first being that identity politics composed a wrong, yet complex and well-founded, turn in American history. A turn that would allegedly bring together the nation under a new and improved understanding of diversity, but which instead ended up creating a divide even bigger than before. By the turn of the 1960s, blacks were at a point where they felt left out. Contrary to the remaining immigrants who had succeeded in becoming deracialised, and who were now part of society on a more equal footing, black Americans remained racialised and defined by their physical differences. In contrast to the Chinese or the Italian, who had carried with them a strong cultural heritage to their new home in America, blacks missed several of those native African customs, which meant that they did not feel the same pride from being foreign. After the emergence of identity politics, however, a new dignity arose from belonging to a minority. This newfound dignity turned from positive to negative in that it began to cloud the things that the minorities actually had in common with the majority. Now, identity politics were no longer uniting America under equal opportunity, as was initially intended by civil rights, but rather created an us-versus-them-dichotomy. In that way, identity politics contained conflicting interests. Decades after its heyday, Nicholson argues that identity politics is still deeply rooted within society and works as a benchmark against which all matters are measured. The prevalent problem with identity politics seems to be that its objectives can never be met, as it requires the recognition of so many individual needs and preferences that agreeing with any one of them would mean disagreeing with another. Linda Nicholson’s conceptualisation of the events and results of identity politics can thus form a relevant theory for the purpose of this dissertation. This theory would be that, even though there was an understandable reason for its uprising in the late 1960s, identity politics has not, and will not, form the

basis for any healthy diversity programme in America. Rather than being the democratic answer to racial inequality, it simply poses a new extreme, turning the oppressed into the oppressor.

Modern anti-racism

Insecurity can make you work harder, which meant that blacks back in the day openly said, “If you’re black you have to try twice as hard.” I have lost count of how many times I have heard black people on radio call-in shows I participate in ask why that adage has fallen away. It’s because of a new mantra that says, perhaps, “If you’re black you have to complain twice as much.” (McWhorter 167)

Now the concept of identity politics, and the time leading up to its emergence, has been mapped out, let us turn to another perspective on African American identity and the reason for its transition. John McWhorter is an American linguist and associate professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University. He has published several books discussing issues of African American identity, including his work *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America*, in which McWhorter introduces the concept “therapeutic alienation” as the reason for why blacks and whites have not yet reached a stage of solidarity in America, and the reason why large proportions of the black community are still lagging behind. With therapeutic alienation as his defining message, McWhorter discusses several matters pertaining to modern anti-racism, such as public discourse, identity, social history and social-psychology, and thereby detects patterns governing US mentality. The point is to theoretically establish McWhorter’s position, and subsequently use it in the analysis, alongside Linda Nicholson’s historically centred identity theory.

Therapeutic alienation

“Therapeutic alienation takes people nowhere; it holds people right where they are because it is all about alienation for its own sake rather than doing anything about it.” (McWhorter 318)

Therapeutic alienation is a national mood, a meme, teaching us that the estranged worldview of so many black Americans is due to a lack of hope, respect, and acceptance. According to John McWhorter, however, this view disregards history (ibid. 173). Two factors initially enabled therapeutic alienation. First, when black America met the New Left in the 1960s, conditions had improved for blacks, rendering them and their complaints of social injustice significantly less vulnerable than they would have prior to civil rights (ibid. 7). Second, America had reached a stage where whites now had to be prepared to listen to the complaints of blacks, and, as a bare minimum, pretend that they were valid. Not to say that this was the case with all white Americans, but a time had indeed come when a new openness towards blacks had developed amongst educated and influential

voices—causing said openness to spread quickly across university curricula and governmental policies (ibid. 7).

Before this shift, “Most blacks were more interested in fighting the concrete barrier of legalized discrimination than the abstract psychological happenstance of racism.” (McWhorter 7) Before the sixties, therapeutic alienation was largely unknown, even though it was a time when legalised discrimination gave blacks plenty reason to feel insecure (ibid. 6). Post civil rights, therapeutic alienation had become the leading black ideology, teaching that “dressing down whites for the sins of the past was a “blacker” thing to do than facing what needed to be done in the present” (ibid. 60-61). The burden of legalised discrimination had been replaced with another one: the sense that blacks were defined by defiance, and with that, united by suffering (154).

Now, more than fifty years later, this ideology has caught on in the greater parts of society, from both black and white business managers and journalists to educators and homeowners (McWhorter 8). Today, the meme thrives as it “reinforces one’s sense of psychological legitimacy, via. defining oneself against an oppressor characterized as eternally depraved” (ibid. 6) If one is quietly unsure whether one is worthy or okay, it can seem enticing to affiliate oneself with a collective group of noble victims: “When one feels inferior to whites deep down, one is uncomfortable presenting oneself as a self-directed individual. That individual wouldn’t be good enough. So, one seeks a tribal identity, hiding oneself within a multitude living for an abstract ideology larger than any one person.” (ibid. 185) Only, this tribal identity cannot offer sustained security, nor does it propose a way forward for blacks. Instead, it plants new seeds of insecurity, encourages dissention, and even forestalls people from trying their best (ibid. 177). McWhorter claims that what is particularly malevolent about therapeutic alienation is that it is therapy disguised as politics; politics claiming to provide a solution to poverty and feelings of segregation, naming the combating of racism as its greatest burden, but really is something entirely different—namely a kind of therapy, not interested in conciliation or amendment, but rather the soothing quick fix that comes from keeping things the way they are.

With his work on therapeutic alienation, McWhorter is not questioning whether racism exists—he is positive it does—but rather its potential exaggeration, and whether its extent is substantial enough to determine blacks’ fates today (85). He describes it as a comforting escape to blame a supremacist system for one’s circumstances, rather than blame one’s own parents, who were similarly unable to break free of this way of thinking, and, consequently, failed to raise their children with the maturity and affection that would indeed render therapeutic alienation impossible.

The therapeutic alienation meme presents black America as the only culture with no negative traits; consisting only of people who *want* to succeed but who are never given the chance (McWhorter

92). It survives on accounts of misery, neglecting accounts of blacks succeeding despite racial bias. Keeping these stories at the forefront is the only way the internal reality of blacks living under systemic racism can persist (ibid. 81). If a black person proposes that there is such a thing as a culture of poverty, or that large numbers of middle-class blacks indeed are thriving in the US, then that person is perceived as a “soulless” black person; a traitor to the culture (ibid. 237-239). According to McWhorter, what is crucial is that we, without flinching, admit that black culture has imperfections, like all other cultures. Admitting such imperfections does not mean turning our backs to the poor (ibid. 231). On the contrary, he believes that this admission would do good because it solidifies African Americans as human beings (ibid. 231).

Tracing It

The following six stanzas provide a foundation for understanding how the poor African American lifestyle has been, and still is, perceived by the broader black and white American population. The stanzas are commonly known arguments for why the poor black population has not managed to break free from poverty, crime, and destitution. McWhorter establishes that the first stanza: “Low-skill factory jobs moved away” (McWhorter 75), is untrue in that poverty was evolving in black neighbourhoods even before such factories relocated. Using Indianapolis as his continuous example, McWhorter asserts that a time did indeed come when low-skill positions rose in numbers outside of town, but at the same time expresses his discontent with blacks’ reluctance to move along with the jobs (ibid. 55). What especially boggles McWhorter, is society’s readiness to accept selling drugs on the street as a justifiable alternative for the providing father—but expecting him to commute three miles a day, to put bread on the table, is the same as surrendering to an evil system, and frankly, asking too much (ibid. 56). This leads us to the second stanza, which reads: “Housing discrimination kept blacks from leaving inner cities to follow work” (McWhorter 78). The problem with this stanza seems to be that, even though McWhorter recognises the occasional occurrence of discriminatory housing policies, it disregards the legions of blacks who *have* managed to move away from the slums and into middle-class neighbourhoods (81). He criticises the inclination for both black and white people to present tendencies rather than universals when it comes to black life—and that usually means overseeing black progress: “Even if some of us are okay, it must always and forever be that most of us are much less okay, and this could only be whites’ fault. To be authentically black is to maintain a wary sense of white America—whatever that is—as eternally “on the hook” (p. 154). The third stanza, “When middle-class blacks moved away, the poor had no role models” (ibid. 92), suggests that without lawyers and doctors living nearby, it is only to be expected that blacks slide back into existences of crime and destitution. The fourth stanza: “Housing projects made social chaos inevitable for poor blacks” (ibid. 97), is to McWhorter a vast oversimplification. The social deterioration that evolved among poor blacks, living in tall buildings or elsewhere, from 1960 to 1970

was due to cultural, and not architectural, factors (ibid. 101). According to the fifth stanza, “Highway construction broke down poor blacks’ sense of community” (ibid. 104), the positioning of the Highway 65 tore Indianapolis communities apart to such a degree that neighbourhoods became estranged to its residents, who seemingly lost the ability to create new friendships, with the people living on their side of the highway (ibid. 104). The sixth and final stanza, “Drugs came in” (McWhorter 106), advocates that drugs were “somehow imposed on black communities and that poor blacks were inherently incapable of resisting overusing them and basing their lives on selling them.” (ibid. 106)

According to McWhorter, these claims are problematic for two reasons. On the one side, they present poor blacks as spineless people: “It seems that many are comfortable with the idea that poor blacks are so vulnerable, so devoid of any human agency, that all one has to do is wave a crack pipe in front of them and about every second one of them will leap at it like a dog grabbing a pork chop.” (109) On the other side, in hiding behind the allegation that all misery befalling poor blacks is white America’s fault, the stanzas prevent both the black and white population from acknowledging and dealing with their problems.

Facing It

After having dissected the pretexts standing in the way of acknowledging the causes for poverty in black America, McWhorter proposes that the next logical step is to look at how and why it is that there is a tendency to hold on to these ways of thinking; what McWhorter refers to as the meme of therapeutic alienation (McWhorter 153). Memes are defined as “thought patterns that become entrenched in society via self-replication from mind to mind, along the lines of genes in organisms” (ibid. 172).

Decades after the civil rights movement, McWhorter argues that blacks are still clinging on to a downtrodden and oppressed worldview, originating from a time in which they were hardly born themselves. This adopted worldview is the meaning behind trait one: “Memes can thrive independently of external conditions” (McWhorter 175). As suggested above, the present-day conditions governing black life are not the same as the ones prior to civil rights. Consequently, the frame of mind that blacks lead inferior lives, cannot be based on external reality, but rather on internal reality. What makes the therapeutic alienation meme possible is thus notions concerning black current-day oppression; notions which are sufficiently and continuously proven by our internal reality, because we want to believe in them (ibid. 175).

Trait two takes this argument further by establishing that “Memes can condition a resistance to empirical evidence” (McWhorter 179). What is meant here is that when black reality is addressed,

people tend to refrain from factual knowledge. McWhorter holds up examples of intellectuals who have started conversations about how it is white America that is still teaching and allowing bigotry. As he takes apart each account, it becomes clear that there is no empirical evidence supporting any of these claims, and the reason is that what drives these people is personal (ibid. 185). McWhorter criticises this denunciation of reality as he thinks it disrespectful to the black ancestors who broke their backs to make one's opportunities and freedom possible (ibid. 185).

Trait three reads: "Memos proliferate by copying from one person to another" (McWhorter 186), and points to black, current-day imitations of previous equality struggles. McWhorter has throughout his life and career noticed significant differences between the diversity advocates of modern time and the ones of the 1960s. What he is suggesting is that, apart from fighting for separate objectives, modern black protesters have a disparate demeanour about them; according to their faces and body language, there exists an excitement for protesting that was nowhere to be found during the Selma march and Birmingham protests (ibid. 189). The reason for this is that equality fighters today are mimicking the ones of the past. McWhorter proposes that they are putting on a show resembling the events they have seen and heard about so frequently through television and folklore. Unlike the initial movements, lives are not at stake today, and therefore nothing can take away the buzz of acting up and getting attention. Protesting is thus risk free in a way dramatically different from the civil rights movements (ibid. 190). Instead of basing truths on external reality, people tend to rely on what they see and hear from public discourse, and further those ideas, given that they fit in with individual objectives. Modern anti-racism is thus not propelled so much by external reality, as by the psychological comfort brought on by a continuous belief in the present-day relevance of previous race struggles.

Erasing It

Finally, McWhorter addresses the mentality and institutional conditions surrounding the schooling of young African Americans. His examination consists of three habits of mind, covering topics of financial circumstances, performance, racism, and blackness as merit. Like the memes addressed earlier, these three habits of mind also concern common perceptions of black life and black circumstance. McWhorter assesses the first habit of mind "Black students are poor" (McWhorter 284) as a debased conception of the reality surrounding black students, as it neglects the fact that the black middle class grows larger with every year, continuously narrowing the income gap between whites and blacks (ibid. 284-285). When it comes to black children growing up in poor environments, McWhorter is a proponent of affirmative action. He does not, however, think that middle-class students should receive preference, as he believes their performance problems are due to cultural identification—a distinct problem which will be returned to later. According to McWhorter, this habit

of mind, referring to all black students as poor, is keenly clinging on to public discourse by means of a “mental filter” (285). This filter, sitting readily in most black people, prevents them from listening and participating objectively, or at least open-mindedly, in conversations about for instance affirmative action. It is McWhorter’s experience that, if he does not remember to remind audiences repeatedly that he is talking about middle-class black students exclusively, someone will almost always reach their hand in the air, and, after summarizing their personal, defective schooling experience, ask him why he does not think that they deserve affirmative action. The point is that the mental filter blinkers people, and thereby bars them from considering and isolating the specific topic in question. As soon as a racial issue is brought up, people switch mental mode, suspending basic logic and treating buzzwords as arguments in themselves (ibid. 357). This jumbling together of topics and circumstances goes hand in hand with therapeutic alienation, as it instigates conflict, depicts the one participant as insensitive, and precludes any constructive conversation about why things are the way they are and how we may go about mending them.

Habit of mind number two: “Black students underperform because racism is not dead” (McWhorter 290), treats the general achievement gap between black and white students. It suggests that black students would succeed to a higher degree academically, were they not weighed down by biased teachers. Even in college, the notion that black students’ performances suffer because of racism, persists. It would then seem obvious that said problems would disappear in all-black colleges, however, that has not proven to be the case (ibid. 292). McWhorter proposes that, even though racism exists, what prevents black students from excelling is not issues of racism, but issues of culture. In keeping with the “loyalty towards race” sentiment, there is a notion among black students that caring about school is the same as “acting white”, with certain subjects, such as math, being regarded as particularly white (ibid. 281). Fear of being taunted by fellow classmates can thus prevent students from devoting themselves to passing a subject (ibid. 267). According to McWhorter, this culturally rooted conception is the basis for the underperformances of many black children.

McWhorter states that one of the most grievous fallacies since the 1960s, is the idea that black people’s salvation will be the end of racism (292). The prospect of racism vanishing is as unlikely as the one of theft, violence, and all sorts of malignity vanishing. Realising that racism will never go away, he believes that we should teach children to rise above and succeed despite bias, instead of dwelling on a goal that will never be realised. Along the lines of previous statements, McWhorter deplores the notion that black people, in this case black children, should be the only race incapable of overcoming adversity. What not one single black student will gain from, he says, is “one more article pretending that a white teacher who watches black students failing for years is a racist” (ibid. 294). Consequently, even though racism exists, it is not, and should not be what hinders black children from succeeding.

In the third and final habit of mind “For black students, not being white is merit” (294), McWhorter explains the problems of universities pursuing diversity through race preferential admissions procedures. We are taught to believe that, to create “diverse” student bodies, it is justifiable to lower a university’s standards, and anyone who does not believe so, is morally bereft (ibid. 294). Only, the thing is that surveys have found a correlation between increased diversity on campus and decreased satisfaction amongst students’ college experience (ibid. 299). McWhorter ascribes this outcome to the fact that if blacks must do only so well to be admitted, then that is exactly what they will do—and that removes incentive from young lives, which is the force of all human and cultural change (ibid. 295). Consequently, the minorities accepted through preference policies, given that they are placed in a school beyond what their qualifications would usually have allowed them, tend to be discouraged by their lesser grades when it comes to initiating their PhDs and entering academia (ibid. 299). Placing higher-achieving and lower-achieving students, across races, in the same college, has thus rarely proven constructive for either part.

Therapeutic alienation as theory

The patterns that John McWhorter detects in the perception of black life can, similarly to Linda Nicholson, be conceptualised. What he is witnessing in American society is a shared readiness to justify black failure with popular and well-prepared excuses. A readiness which is conditioned, amongst blacks, by hurting, and amongst whites, by fear and guilt. McWhorter is offering a theory for the lack of advancement in black life post-civil rights, as well as one for a way forward. He points to America’s reluctance to discuss black accountability and progress, and how that makes whites equally, if not especially, to blame for the downward spiral of black America, and consequently, the development of therapeutic alienation.

To use McWhorter’s assertion as theory would in this case mean to measure racist allegations about the film industry against the concepts addressed in relation to therapeutic alienation. For instance, are the people placing the allegations making use of the stanzas in their argumentation, do they seem to be referring to an internal or external reality, are they giving voice to the “soulless” black person sentiment, are they copying popular memes, and last, what are their opinions on affirmative action. From answering these questions, it will hopefully become clear to which extent therapeutic alienation has gained entry in Hollywood, and how it has impacted the film industry thus far.

Analysis

What is the problem in Hollywood?

Claims, such as the one that Hollywood has a larger race problem, are demanding fundamental changes in the American film industry. The six major companies—Universal, Warner Bros., Paramount, Disney, Sony, and Fox—collectively referred to as Hollywood, dominate the field and did in 2017 account for more than 80 percent of the domestic box office (Kim and Bruun-Bevel 39). Consequently, Hollywood governs the industry in areas of creation, production, marketing and distribution. So far, the conglomeration has been preserving its monopoly by relying on the “safe bet”, i.e., putting their money towards blockbuster productions with well-known film stars in hope that they will relate to broad audiences. As African Americans constitute thirteen percent of all Americans, the choice has been to predominantly appeal to white audiences (ibid. 58). In other words, predictions of how well a film will do at the box office has been the determining factor in selecting which productions will get the green light.

Of late, this strategy has been attacked for prioritising financial considerations over racial inclusion, only allowing for more cultural and political alternatives when profit is guaranteed (Kim and Bruun-Bevel 37-39). The position is that this approach to casting disregards ethnic minority potential and makes it harder for black talent to enter the relentlessly competitive industry—talent that could have otherwise gone on to produce inclusive stories enlightening American theatregoers on: “topics especially relevant to black communities (e.g., fighting racism, overcoming adversity, religion and spirituality, kinship)” (ibid 41). The Academy Awards also took a lashing for not having any racial minorities amongst the nominated in the major acting categories in 2015 and 2016, causing the spread of the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite (ibid. 41). Following this argumentation, the case is not that Hollywood executives deliberately choose to exclude ethnic minority talent from their films because they do not like black, Asian or Hispanic people. Rather, they tend to favour white actors because of a business strategy predicting that appealing predominantly to whites will limit financial risk. The structural context in Hollywood failing to present a balanced variety of ethnic minorities is thus not regarded as a deliberate menace, but as a cynical piece in the overall puzzle of a segregated America that holds profit as its main concern, but which takes no accountability when it comes to balancing out racial injustices (ibid. 59).

To some pundits, the sentiment that blacks continue to occupy minor roles due to a well-established business model that evaluates them as too risky, correlates with other acts of systemic racism they see throughout the country. American author and journalist, Ta-Nehishi Coates, establishes how racism has become unsurprisingly prevalent due to people “merely enforcing the

whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy” (10). It is Coates’ belief that African Americans are not to blame for the way they themselves as well as other blacks are treated in America, but that the maltreatment of their kin is ultimately their responsibility (137).

Within the mainstream film stage, the demand for a higher level of diversity is increasing. The sentiment is that even though more black actors are given a chance in Hollywood, the majority never exceed beyond the position of the token character, i.e., side-lined characters included to avoid racist allegations by complying with affirmative action initiatives (“Tokenism”). The positioning of these token characters is often accused of solely providing hollow sidekicks to white main characters. The stories of these minor characters performed by ethnic minority actors are not their own. Instead, their purpose is to provide comic relief or to help propel the white protagonist’s growth by reminding them of their worth (Smail).

Even films containing nuanced and beneficial portrayals of blacks have been critiqued for containing narratives which “reinforce white normativity or superiority” (Hughey 543). These black representations by white directors have been accused of dramatising and exploiting African American history for their own benefit, often depicting the white character as the one who saves blacks from racism and injustice (ibid. 543). Positive as these black representations are in themselves, their directors have been accused of having self-serving objectives of appeasing whites by stressing feelings of racial reconciliation (ibid. 543). It is thus considered constructive that black actors are depicted in a positive light, yet destructive that they should be so by a white director. The argument is that these white portrayals, allegedly proliferating from black stories differently than those created by black filmmakers, “downplay deep-seated, prevalent racism in the past or ongoing racial conflicts and tension” (Kim and Bruun-Bevel 47). The claim that black and white filmmakers can aggravate and improve matters of racism in the real world, leaves a sizable responsibility with a creative industry that is built to entertain, and perhaps more importantly, suggests that racism is still prevalent in the US.

McWhorter would refer to the suggestions that racism is still posing a big threat to blacks, and that they are turned away at the door in Hollywood, as part of an internal reality. Instead of agreeing that this is what most of life is for blacks, he would advocate that blacks are looking for microaggressions to maintain the internal reality of white America as eternally “on the hook” (154). According to him, the external reality would be that Hollywood is filled with black actors, many of whom have reached ultimate stardom. He might perhaps have gone on to mention recent film stars, Daniel Kaluuya, Tessa Thompson, Amanda Stenberg, and Caleb McLaughlin, who are examples of young African American actors who have recently risen to fame, and who are currently flourishing in Hollywood. In conclusion, apart from Hollywood’s immediate aim to provide entertainment, experts

claim that it too should account for its social responsibility. It seems that the solution, and hence the way to avoid rebuke, is if the stories regarding black circumstance and black history are told by blacks themselves.

The concern is that for black actors and filmmakers, being excluded from the mainstream film stage is not only a question of blacks being denied the opportunity to showcase their individual artistic voice, but also a question of being denied the opportunity to gain social and political influence, through the world of film (Kim and Bruun-Bevel 41). This exposition is interesting in relation to Linda Nicholson's assertion that identity politics rises out of a need for representation, and in black America's case, due to a lack of culture (102). When expressing that blacks feel denied their social and political influence by not being represented in film, it must then mean that black Americans cannot feel represented under just any American identity, and consequently, that America still has a long way to go in uniting blacks and whites as one nation. Coates would agree with this proclamation. He refers to the reconciliation of black and white Americans, and especially the end of systemic racism as the "Dream"; a utopia that, in longing for it, will only make blacks' lives more wretched (Coates 29). The Dream speaks of a state in which blacks start to feel relaxed, and sheds feelings of uneasiness, around whites. He even goes so far as to say that believing in the Dream and thereby letting one's guard down, is so dangerous that it kills blacks (ibid. 29). Coates is a firm proponent of protecting black beauty, but never felt it was celebrated in films, television or in textbooks when he was growing up (43). For that reason, he is adverse to changing aspects of black appearance, such as dying and straightening black hair, and 'taming' black speech, which is often part of everyday life when working within the world of acting. He associates this conduct with "acting white" as it means conforming with white expectation, and ultimately making blacks look more like whites. To Coates, associating oneself too much with white conduct is the same as selling out on one's blackness—a phenomenon that McWhorter also has observed, and which he refers to as being a "traitor to the culture" (237). Consequently, more is at stake for the black American, if the onscreen representation of his or her skin colour, along with other cultural traits, is a requisite for that person's sense of impact on society.

The sought-after level of inclusion on the big screen is found in black independent films. As Hollywood's business strategy has been to choose projects that would relate to the broader audiences, black independent filmmakers have felt compelled to form creative communities of their own (Kim and Bruun-Bevel 40). From these communities, films are being applauded for containing diverse and nuanced depictions of black life. However, as these productions account for less than twenty percent of the country's overall box office, their distribution remains limited. Because Hollywood makes up such a sizable part of the country's revenue, it influences other areas of the economy as well. The industry has the power to:

integrate films with different types of media (e.g., printed media, television, or music); and are connected to businesses in different fields (...). Owners aim to create synergy between their company holdings through cross-promotion (...). The film industry is not just about films but is an important economic force intimately related to a variety of areas such as the beauty and cosmetics industry, clothing and apparel, travel and leisure destinations, sports and entertainment, and other markers of conspicuous consumption, both domestically and internationally. (Kim and Bruun-Bevel 40)

As a consequence, if black filmmakers and audiences want to expand their influence to the broader population, they will need to have their productions adopted by one of the six major companies, as they are the ones powerful enough to reach the mainstream audience and thereby grant the requested social and political leverage. For this to happen, it would require a whole new business strategy for Hollywood—one that the production companies would be reluctant to make as it contradicts the industry's logic of safety. It would require changing the way that the industry has ensured its profits for decades. A change that would indeed only come around given that the industry had somehow deemed it worthwhile. In conclusion, the diversity proclamation threatening Hollywood is so extensive in nature, that to comply with it will require changes in the very fabric of the industry.

Did Hollywood appear to have the described race problem in the 1990s?

Fuck authority. Why should I salute The System and work for “chump change” for years without being sure it will pay off? Especially when the po-lice are knocking niggers’ heads together? So off he went to the corner store to take his place as one more black man making a *living* selling blow-and eventually he went to jail.
(McWhorter 109)

The grip on Hollywood's diversity endeavours was not as tight in the films of the 1990s as it is today. In retrospect, some of the titles that dominated theatres thirty years back, in what has been coined the golden era of black film, seems to have been let off the hook easier than what is the case today. Audiences and pundits still criticised Hollywood's fiddling with indigenous cultures, accusing some of having self-serving motives, while applauding other works of inclusion as ideal. Whatever the critique might have been, audiences did not have the same impact on the on-goings of the industry.

One of the decade's most memorable black productions is the indie film, *Boyz n the Hood*, which quickly became a cult classic as it provided moviegoers with a glimpse of what it was like living in the crime and gang infiltrated ghetto of South-Central Los Angeles in the eighties and early nineties. The narrative follows Tre, from when he is placed in his father's care as a young child, to

him becoming a grown man, who must learn how to navigate in this harsh environment. The themes of the picture are those of temptation, the power of African American culture in the ghetto, the ramifications of capitalism; especially with respect to exposed blacks, and last, the responsibility that comes with parenthood. The overall message goes in two directions: both blaming The Man for the corruption of the ghetto and holding the individual responsible for their own life.

The message that the absence of the father figure, especially in the black ghetto, has severe consequences for the lives of young individuals, is hammered home early in the story. In this exposed community, Tre's father stands out. He is the only parental figure who maintains a steady job, and who has managed to break free of the crushing negligence that has become the norm of the scene. For that reason, the minute Furious receives custody of Tre, he wants to make sure that he is going about his newfound parental role the right way. With years of black experience behind him, Furious decides that preparing his son for what lies ahead will entail teaching him about responsibility and routine:

[Furious] Alright Tre, I gotta lay down the rules of the house. It's the same thing as weekends, you remember. Alright then, what are they?

[Tre] Clean the bathroom, sink, floor and tub. I gotta clean *that* tub?

[Furious] Yeah.

[Tre] Clean my room, water the lawn. Dad, can I ask you something?

[Furious] M-hm.

[Tre] What do you have to do around here?

[Furious] I don't have to do nothing around here, except for: pay the bills, put food on the table, and put clothes on your back. You understand?

[Tre] (Mutteringly) Glad I don't have to pay no bills.

[Furious] You know Tre, you may think I'm being hard on you right now, but I'm not. What I'm doing is I'm trying to teach you how to be responsible. It's like your little friends across the street—they don't have anybody to show them how to do that. They don't. And you're gonna see how they end up, too. I'm glad you're here, Tre. You're a prince, you know that? You're the prince, I'm the king. And right now the king says it's time for the prince to go to bed. (*Boyz* 12:15-13:40)



Boyz n the Hood (1991)

Later on, when Tre has reached maturity and is hanging out with a childhood friend, Furious brings the boys to a billboard not far from their neighbourhood for a lesson on gentrification:

[Ricky] Hey man, I don't know about all this, Fury. Walking 'round motherfuckin' Compton and all, man.

[Furious] Rick, it's the 90s. We can't afford to be afraid of our own people anymore, man. Will you two knuckleheads come on? I want you to take a look at that sign up there. See what it says? "Cash for your home". 'Know what that is?

[Tre] Billboard.

[Ricky] Billboard.

[Furious] What are y'all—Amos 'n' Andy? Are you Stepin and he's Fetchit? I'm talking about the message. What it stands for.

(BYSTANDERS APPROACHING)

[Furious] It's called gentrification. It's what happens when the property value of a certain area is brought down. Huh? 'You listening?

[Tre] Yeah.

[Furious] They bring the property value down. They can buy the land at a lower price, then move all the people out, raise the property value and sell it at a profit. Now what

we need to do is we need to keep everything in our neighbourhood, everything black. Black owned, with black money. Just like the Jews, Italians, the Mexicans and the Koreans do.

[Elderly black onlooker] Ain't nobody from outside bringing down the property value. It's these folk (POINTING AT GROUP OF YOUNG BLACK ONLOOKERS) shootin' each other and sellin' that crack rock and shit.

[Furious] Well how do you think the crack rock get into the country? We don't own any planes. We don't own no ships. We are not the people who are flying and floating that shit in here. I know everytime you turn on the tv that's what you see.

[Elderly black onlooker] Oh yeah.

[Furious] Black people.

[Elderly black onlooker] Yeah.

[Furious] Sellin' the rock.

[Elderly black onlooker] Right.

[Furious] Pushin' the rock.

[Elderly black onlooker] Yeah.

[Furious] Pushin' the rock. Yeah, I know. But that wasn't a problem as long as it was here. It wasn't a problem until it was in Iowa and it showed up on Wall Street, where there are hardly any black people. If you wanna talk about guns, why is it that there's a gun shop on almost every corner in this community?

[Elderly black onlooker] Why?

[Furious] I'll tell you why. For the same reason that there's a liquor store on almost every corner in the black community. Why? They want us to kill ourselves. You go to Beverly Hills, you don't see that shit. But they want us to kill ourselves.

[Elderly black onlooker] Huh.

[Furious] Yeah, the best way you can destroy a people, you take away their ability to reproduce themselves.

[Elderly black onlooker] Yeah.

[Furious] Who is it that's dying out here on these streets every night? Y'all.

(ELDERLY BLACK ONLOOKER POINTS TO GROUP OF YOUNG BLACKS)

[Furious] Young brothas like yourselves.

[Young black onlooker] (REMOVES SUNGLASSES) What am I supposed to do? A fool roll up tryna smoke me, imma shoot the motherfucka if he don't kill me first.

[Furious] You're doing exactly what they want you to do. You have to think, young brother, about your future. (*Boyz* 1:03-1:06)

A lot can be taken away from this scene. By the beginning, Ricky expresses feeling uneasy from being on enemy territory. However, as Furious's lecture progresses, we see murky figures quietly gathering to tune in. It seems that the truce between these young men is facilitated by the unifying quality of being victims by the hand of an ever larger, shared opponent, namely white America in general and capitalism in particular. Suddenly, in suggesting that their feud should lie elsewhere, they start to act civilised. In stark contrast to the short-tempered behaviour, we have witnessed so far from like-minded, young, black individuals, this bunch is listening obediently as they recognise the paternal goodwill of Furious's authoritative demeanour. An absorbing feel-good sentiment unfolds from this moment. The solidarity that Furious' speech incites in these black individuals by the sheer fact that they are all in the same boat is difficult to imagine to the same extent in a white setting, with whites feeling united simply by the colour of their skin. Unfortunately, not all 'brothers' got the message that blacks should not wage war on each other, as Ricky is shot dead within a few weeks.

Rearing one's child by teaching them about responsibility is undoubtedly a stance that McWhorter would sympathise with. In his opinion, Furious is doing exactly what should, but somehow rarely is, required from a providing and affectionate black father; what indeed leads the way forward for poor blacks and renders therapeutic alienation impossible. One of his main arguments is that the misfortune of poor blacks stems from absentee fathers and defective upbringing in general. When the film then goes on to suggest that capitalism is the one imposing drugs, alcohol, and guns on black neighbourhoods—thereby consenting to the sixth stanza—that would reduce McWhorter's excitement considerably. He would say that the reason for the deterioration of black neighbourhoods is not the effects of capitalism or whites trying to make blacks kill themselves off, but rather that a new culture had emerged around drugs by the mid-1960s:

This was because they were now living in a period when the levels of basic shame in doing so were lower than they had ever been in American history. This was sparked initially by the countercultural revolution among whites, when drugs went mainstream. But where poor blacks took this ball and ran with it in the uniquely destructive way in which they did, the issue was a new culture of alienation, under which becoming a drug seller or chronic user was not only okay, but also even a mark of strength. Or at least, just okay. (McWhorter 109)

In McWhorter's defence, it can be argued that the position that white America is to blame for young blacks idly hanging around the streets and shooting each other up contradicts the claim that such young individuals will need to be taught about responsibility or else they will end up like their fatherless friends. It seems that the director of the film, John Singleton, cannot decide whether the fault lies with supremacist America or wanton parents. McWhorter would probably ascertain that these messages are predominantly constructive, but that they fail to go all the way. He would argue that a film relating so directly to blacks and black culture highly impacts discourse, and, as he would coin it, black internal reality. Therefore, when the film suggests that poor blacks are undeserving of their misfortune, it only contributes to the copying of memes, neglect of societal conditions, and simulation of civil rights struggles—ultimately reinforcing and facilitating therapeutic alienation.

With the release of *Boyz n the Hood*, rapper-turned-actor, Ice Cube, who plays the role of Doughboy; a young black man who has been in and out of juvenile hall throughout his life, expressed how pleased he was with bringing the black experience to the world (Smith). Other than portraying the harsh realities of living in a dangerous neighbourhood, the film also showcases multiple key characteristics that blacks at the time, as well as today, often choose to include in their portrayal of black culture, and which have contributed to the film's cult status. The highly stylised hip hop lingo originally associated with lacking education, for instance, depicted by the young but also older characters of the film, is one cultural aspect that especially poor African Americans have embraced as their own and reclaimed as positive—in a manner resembling what gays did with the term “gay” and the colour pink. This entails slang, abbreviation of words, but also more content-determined concepts such as referring to any fellow black man as “brother”. Another black culture trait is the looks and apparel of the characters. Whether it is snapback caps or denim on denim, director Singleton wanted to encapsulate what young men actually looked like in South Central, and that sometimes meant asking actors to bring their own hip hop paraphernalia to set, or film them in the outfits they wore to their auditions (Jones). Tre is also occasionally wearing some bold and colourful African inspired patterns. All of these aesthetic expressions seen in the film are emblematic of black culture and have played a significant role in integrating early 90s West Coast street style into American fashion DNA (Gallagher). This reclaiming of some of the less positive traits of poor, black America correlates with

Nicholson's perception that African Americans for decades have been wanting a culture of their own that would separate them from the remaining population.

Boyz n the Hood was received with critical acclaim, cementing it not only as a brilliant debut of director John Singleton, but as an "American film of enormous importance" (Ebert). It has been difficult to search out any negatively loaded reviews of this film. Singleton's story is about blacks, made by a black director, and based on his own life experiences. For those reasons, *Boyz* readily lives up to the current requirements of inclusion in Hollywood described earlier. This position might remind one of Langston Hughes' stance that black artists should turn their full attention to the black poor and working classes and can be said to have worked in this case as the high level of black representation seems to have been a vital contribution to the film's success.

Another ethnic minority film that became known to the masses during the 1990s, was Disney's *Pocahontas*. Released in 1995, it was the first Disney film to be based on an actual historical person, and so the ambition of the production was to give life to the legend, while simultaneously using some of the historical discrepancies of Pocahontas' myth to offset some of the less agreeable aspects of the story (Boothe). As a consequence, *Pocahontas* centers around a young Indian woman—and not a ten-year-old girl, as was actually the case—who is the daughter of the mighty chief Powhatan. It was also believed that the story would become more dramatically enticing if it involved a romance between the princess and the English explorer, John Smith, even though the actual probability of such a romance, due to Pocahontas' age and some logistic factors, has been heavily debated (Gilbert). According to director, Eric Goldberg, the choice stood between making the film historically accurate and making it socially responsible (ibid.). In a 1995 documentary about the making of the film, producer Jim Pentecost describes Pocahontas as "the strongest heroine we've ever had in a Disney film" ("The Making of Pocahontas" 03:24-03:29). He points to the fact that apart from being more mature than previous Disney princesses, Pocahontas is also both athletic, vivacious, and has a dignified posture (ibid.).



Pocahontas (1995)

Upon *Pocahontas*' release, some journalists debunked the film for being an expression of Hollywood's fantasies about Native American women: "Her offer of sacrifice, her curvaceous figure and her virginal stature have come to symbolize America's Indian heroine" (Aleiss). Angela Aleiss went on to express how Indian women in film are usually defined by their male relationships, and that their importance is compromised the minute that relationship ends (ibid.). The film also ruffled some feathers among Native American groups, including Powhatan Nation, which traces its roots back to Pocahontas herself (Gilbert). Instead of rejoicing at the level of female agency in Pocahontas' character, the Powhatan Nation focused its attention on the film's support of the "Good Indian" trope; a Native American woman who is willing to give up her life in order to save a white settler (ibid.).

Pocahontas does throw herself on John Smith to prevent his execution, but her sacrifice is reciprocated seconds later when John Smith positions himself between Pocahontas' father and Governor Ratcliffe, resulting in Smith taking the bullet. The film's protagonist is the woman of her own story; she thinks for herself, fends for herself, and ultimately chooses to give up on love out of feelings of loyalty and responsibility for her tribe and homeland. Even though a love story is incorporated in the film's plot, it does not become Pocahontas' salvation, nor does it determine her faith. Instead, it opens her eyes and helps her character grow.

Not all, however, conceived of Disney's Native representation as demeaning. Oglala Lakota activist for the rights of Native Americans, and voice of chief Powhatan, Russel Means, described the production of *Pocahontas* as: "the finest feature film ever done about American Indians in the history of Hollywood" ("Disney Magazine"). In making *Pocahontas*, the filmmakers consulted with a variety

of technical experts, historians, and Native American leaders to ensure the feel and tone of the film was right in terms of the people and culture it sought to portray (Boothe). Means states that he was “shocked” at how revolutionary the plot was. In his opinion, the fact that the white settlers in the film admitted that they came to Jamestown to rob, and pillage was huge for Native Americans—something that had never been done before (“Disney Magazine”). The indisputable malignity of the English settlers is indeed kept central to the film’s message, with Governor Ratcliffe as the primary antagonist, while the tribespeople, on the other hand, exhibit virtues of patience, humanity, and wisdom (Bodenner).

Though *Boyz n the Hood* and *Pocahontas* constitute two different motion picture genres, the one a personal film and the other a mainstream production, represent two different ethnicities, have contemporary and historical narratives, have social political agendas and historical interpretive agendas, and perhaps even appeal to two distinct target audiences, the productions both adequately exemplify what was possible within the field of ethnic minority films in 1990s Hollywood, and how they were received upon their release. Both consisted of actors and filmmakers who took pride in being associated with their respective artworks, portraying a minority culture and history that they themselves could relate to. They wished to provide audiences with a realistic slice of American life, as well as history, but simultaneously cared for the sympathetic and entertaining qualities of storytelling. The differentiating receptions of *Boyz* and *Pocahontas* seems to be due to the fact that, while *Boyz* was applauded for being an all-black production, *Pocahontas* was only in part produced by Native Americans, contained sensitive colonial history, and gave moral absolution to (some) of the white settlers. Though *Pocahontas* also portrays an ethnic minority culture and experience, its story has received criticism for not sticking to historic accuracy. Put in other words, what worked for *Boyz* did not work for *Pocahontas*, apparently given that the latter dramatised historical events for entertainment purposes, or that it stressed feelings of racial reconciliation, as articulated by Hughey. It is not difficult to imagine Coates having a thing or two to say about Disney’s take on Pocahontas’ legend, perhaps involving that, like blacks, Native Americans must remember: “how much they [white Americans] took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold.”, and at all times avoid engaging in projects that would somehow compromise the histories of indigenous exploitation and murder (71). Nicholson, on the other hand, would argue that the exclusive portrayal of indigenous culture traits in this ‘golden era of black film’, although they may be positive in themselves, can lead to a tribalistic mentality that, if not mixed with other cultures, can develop into identity politics less interested in uniting and creating equality and more interested in creating an us-versus-them dichotomy (183). Following her logic, Disney’s *Pocahontas* has perhaps received a response more polemic than deserved, as its narrative provides the more diplomatic sentiment of the two; providing indigenous cultures with respect and pride, while at the same time

seeking reconciliation with the English, while *Boyz n the Hood* is a more spiteful adult drama with the incontrovertible object of criticising white America.

The 1990s was thus a period in which Hollywood was sympathetic towards authenticity and awareness, but when entertainment purposes were of paramount importance. The decade was one in which the major production companies reigned supreme. Initiating a production about an ethnic minority was not perceived to accompany as big a risk as it does today. The conglomeration evaluated which films were being selected for production, with critics and pundits being of little to no importance. Several productions of this period have been regarded as labours of love, concerned with making ethnic minorities feel represented and proud of their heritage. The filmmakers themselves, including ethnic minority cast members, were pleased with the level of inclusion, and felt like they contributed something progressive to their respective communities. Sometimes the films were saluted with high praise, and sometimes not, but overall, the fact that Hollywood's major companies were executing these narratives goes to show that they believed in their own intentions and that, at that time, was enough.

What are the major film companies doing to remedy the accusations made against the industry?

As of the last few years, new standards have been implemented in Hollywood to restore the industry's reputation and secure the longevity of its financial dominance, comprising matters of quantity in relation to multi-ethnic casting, classics being reconsidered, and more narratives surrounding black and other marginalised groups.

"The 'inclusion rider' should be a Hollywood standard" is both a popular opinion in Hollywood and the name of Kalpana Kotagal's article, debating one of the film industry's most recent affirmative action concepts (Kotagal). The inclusion rider is a clause that an actor can insert into their contract when negotiating conditions to work on a film, requiring a certain level of gender and racial diversity among a film's cast and crew (ibid.). At the 2018 Oscars, actress Frances McDormand shed light on the agreement when she, in her acceptance speech, said: "I have two words to leave with you tonight: 'inclusion rider'" ("Frances McDormand wins"), and since her, several actors have followed suit (Kay 3).



Frances McDormand wins Best Actress (2018)

Destin Daniel Cretton's *Just Mercy*, released in 2019, was the director's first film alongside Warner Bros to have made use of the inclusion rider. The film's lead, African American actor Michael B. Jordan professed his joy of taking "a step in the right direction" in terms of including a level of diversity that reflects contemporary society (Walsh 3). There are commentators, however, who doubt that acts like the inclusion rider will procure any real change in this white male dominated industry. In an article for The New York Times, criminal defence and civil rights lawyer, Rebecca Chapman, expresses concern for *who* exactly will enforce the agreement, and how failing to comply with it might never be disclosed (2). She expresses the improbability of the actor inserting the inclusion rider into their contract being able to survey all matters of casting and thereby being able to detect if there is a breach, but at the same time finds it "improbable and unfair" that minority members of the crew, say the black boom operator, should seek out the actor in question and report any violations of the agreement witnessed by him or her. On those grounds, until tangible proof can be displayed that inclusion riders are properly enforced, Chapman denounces the clause as an empty promise (ibid.). According to her, the concept of the inclusion rider takes the burden of equality from the head of production and places it with the very people it is trying to protect. She also deems it problematic that production can use the agreement to avoid criticism:

But like all contractual fixes to structural imbalances of power, inclusion riders provide, at best, a limited increase in representation. At worst, they become a cosmetic fix that inoculates people in power from critique and meaningful change. By

focusing on one-off individual negotiations, any contractual solution misdiagnoses the way that power works. (ibid. 1)

She would rather see a radical change in the casting approach:

People in power should simply hire as many white women, people of color and L.G.B.T. people as possible. They should do so even at the perceived expense of white people, and even if those candidates are viewed as somehow "less qualified," with the understanding that those perceptions are culturally fixed in racist notions and structures. (ibid. 2)

Hollywood is thus taking steps to diversify its industry, here by securing that larger numbers of marginalised applicants will land a job on set. While the actors in question are in favour of inclusion riders, other commentators are less convinced of its effectiveness. Nevertheless, Hollywood's implementation of such initiatives corresponds to the earlier addressed inquiry for the industry to downgrade its emphasis on competitive entertainment, and instead step up to its social responsibility (Kim and Bruun-Bevel 41).

Another indication that the major film companies are acting upon their critique is the decision-making processes going on inside Disney+. Following the company's ambitious decision to reboot all of its Disney classics in live action, additional choices have been made to not only change medium but also make changes in relation to content, sometimes replacing white characters with black actors—e.g. Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (Torres)—changing the sexuality of characters—e.g. LeFou in *Beauty and the Beast* (Robinson)—and excluding romantic plots—e.g. *Mulan* (Radulovic). Other than making alterations on these original, best-loved classics, Disney has also chosen to take some of them up for reconsideration. It has been determined that the titles *Peter Pan*, *Lady and the Tramp*, *Aristocats*, *Dumbo* and *The Jungle Book* all withhold racist stereotypes and should therefore not be available on profiles set up for children (Evans). In light of the announcement, Disney proclaimed that children were still going to be able to watch the films on their parents' accounts, who then had the chance to sit down with their child and talk through the content warnings. The following statement has been included before the beginning of each film:

This program includes negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together.

Disney is committed to creating stories with inspirational and aspirational themes that reflect the rich diversity of the human experience around the globe. (Patches)

What has been deemed racist stereotyping and culturally insensitive in these Disney classics are respectively depictions of Native Americans in indigenous clothing, Italians speaking with an accent and eating pasta, a cat performing Chinese traits, crows singing in a manner resembling the minstrel shows, apes performing jazz and thereby allegedly caricaturing African Americans (Lund). What can be led from Disney's moral statement is that the company acknowledges that the world inhabits distinct cultures, and even describes these distinctions as "rich", only it is not clear *how* to portray those exact differences without being accused of generalisation, bigotry, and bias. In other words, what is the difference between the colourful and diverse depictions of the withdrawn Disney Classics, and the 'ideal' depictions in demand? How can the richness of Italian culture be depicted if it's cuisine and language characteristics are off limits? Mind you, the diversity level of Disney's recent *Moana* was not enough to avoid rebuke from the left either, wherefore it does not seem to matter if the case is an eighty-year-old depiction of racist crows in *Dumbo*, or a five year old depiction of Polynesian peoples in *Moana*; disapproval is guaranteed.

Other streaming services have also taken a stand by deplatforming works with controversial social issues, even if the films they inhabit are more than eighty years old. In the summer of 2020, HBO Max chose to take down the 1939 box office giant *Gone with the Wind*, after suggestions had been made to the streaming platform that the film perpetuates "some of the most painful stereotypes of people of color" and "romanticizes the Confederacy" (Harris). After a couple of weeks, the classic was made accessible again, however, this time it came following a carefully curated introduction. In this, film scholar Jaqueline Stewart both hails the significance of *Gone with the Wind* in a social and historical respect, and condemns its bigotry, ultimately reminding viewers to keep a critical eye when watching (Adams).

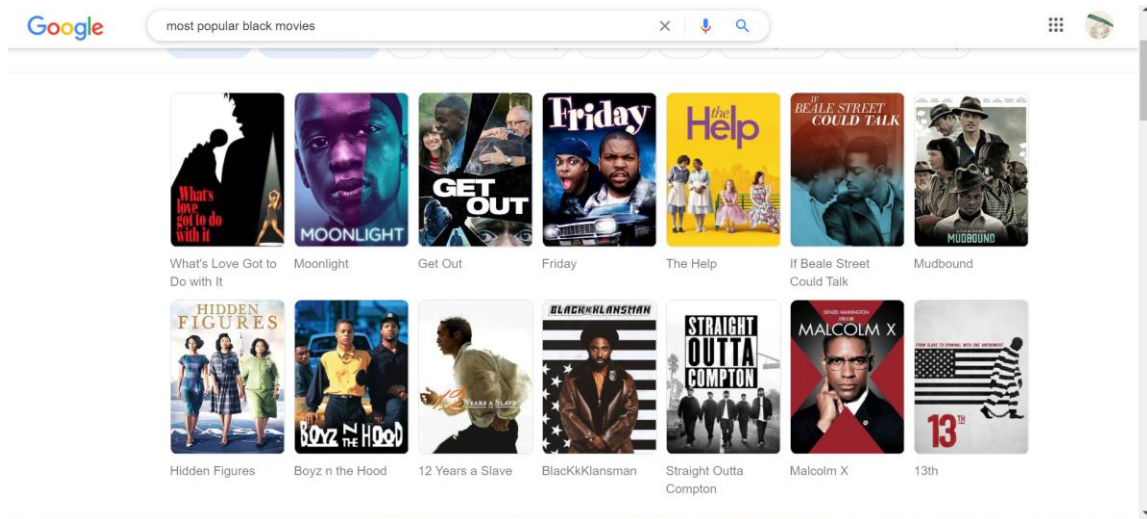
These acts of retracing and 'tidying' the cinematic registry for films that do not reflect contemporary society relates to what in recent years has been coined 'cancel culture'. Ph.D. Meredith Clark defines the phenomenon: "'cancelling" is an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money.'" (88) Over the course of the last few years, tv-shows, films, actors, businesspeople, and journalists alike have been targets for this cancellation. Clark goes on to suggest that this cultural strategy can be effective when utilised by minorities in social media spaces as a means of provoking societal change, but also expresses concern for when this social ostracizing is wrongfully adopted by the dominant culture as result of a 'moral panic': "The problem with so-called "cancel culture" does not rest with the formerly disempowered,

seemingly faceless public that the letter critiques, but with the signatories and their peers, “. . . the institutional leaders,” who, “in a spirit of panicked damage control, are delivering hasty and disproportionate punishments instead of considered reforms.””(Clark 91) Consequently, the big companies, be it within corporate life or the entertainment industry, are the ones who hold the power and who have the choice of listening to public discourse and deciding whether to respond to a certain issue. It is not the people demonstrating on the street or propagating anger on Twitter who have the power to take someone out of employment, but the institutional leaders.

In the case of Hollywood, to Clark's regret, it can be inferred that the industry is taking increasing notice of the “faceless public”, and feels, due to the consumption power and financial leverage of the audience, obliged to comply in order to stay out of the angry mob's way. One cannot help but to sense a certain defeatism from the board of Hollywood; one realising that taking up the fight simply is not worth it anymore—the same fight, for instance, that was required and indeed taken up in the 1990s when choosing to give life to the controversial story of Pocahontas. One conclusion to be led from Clark's assertion is that although it is fair and even constructive to take into consideration the opinions of the masses, certain notable decisions regarding conditions of appointment etc. should be left with qualified experts who, using their resources, will come up with a preferred solution in time. This problematique of audiences gaining increased leverage of management matters is unhelpful and dangerous in a way similar to identity politics. As with cancel culture, Nicholson describes identity politics as a case of reversing the power structure. Cancel culture thus simply becomes a new force to be reckoned with, turning tables around and one-after-one threats ‘bad guys’, or perhaps in this case, ‘bad filmmakers’, by insuring them that if they do not play by the rules of political correctness, they will get the boot.

One last indication of change within Hollywood is the increasing emergence of black films i.e., films with black actors, surrounding African American life. As exemplified below, a tendency has developed for the “most popular black movies” to be built around *previous* rather than *present* black narratives. Out of the fourteen titles, with releases spanning from 1991 to 2018, seven titles are set in the past; 1840s (*12 Years a Slave*), 1930s (*Hidden Figures*), 1960s (*The Help*, *Malcolm X*), 1970s (*If Beale Street Could Talk*, *BlackKkKlansman*) and 1980s (*Moonlight*). Nine out of fourteen have issues of slavery or segregation as the fulcrum of the plot (*Get Out*, *The Help*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *Mudbound*, *Hidden Figures*, *12 Years a Slave*, *BlackKkKlansman*, *Malcolm X* and *13th*), with three additional titles where segregation consist of a secondary theme (*Moonlight*, *Boyz n the Hood* and *Straight Outta Compton*). Put simpler, *What's Love Got to Do with It* and *Friday* are the only two black productions, out of fourteen, in which racism does not constitute a concurrent theme. In

addition, out of the fourteen titles, four directors were white and ten black; the two above mentioned non-racial titles being by a white director.



Most popular black movies (2021)

In relation to the complaints made against the film industry that there are not enough people of colour in front of, as well as behind, the camera, this overview does not provide any information as to the bigotry of the film industry nor does it account for any proportionate number of black directors in Hollywood in relation to whites, but instead forms the picture that *when* given the chance, black directors are more inclined to base their plots around issues of racism, and especially those set in the past, with the occasional story concerning what racist bias still persists in modern society. These findings might be of relevance to Nicholson's stance that identity politics arose out of a lack of culture in the black community; that the enforced migration from Africa had caused the dissolution of African traditions in America. If the agelong history of slavery and oppression is what takes up most of black discourse, and what black Americans first think of when they think of their heritage, then addressing it and spreading awareness of it through entertainment might appear appealing.

McWhorter, however, believes that the issue goes deeper still. To him, spreading the histories of the white oppressors and the black oppressed is a result of insecurity. Continuing to create films about what the white man did in the past thus attests that the need for therapeutic alienation supersedes the one for providing moviegoers with a realistic slice of current American life. The writer and director of *Boyz n the Hood*, John Singleton, once declared in an interview about the film, when asked about his own father's resemblance to the story's paternal hero, Furious Styles: "Yeah, he was very politically-minded, very black conscious. He was the only single dad on the block, so a lot of the kids looked up to him. I have to thank my father; I never had to grow up with a lot of the insecurities a lot of young black men have. He gave me a foundation that I needed." (Jones) This statement

indicates that what has allowed Singleton to become successful in life as well as in his career, is his upbringing. That sentiment correlates to McWhorter's call for fathers to skip excuses and do what is necessary for their families.

Coates would be supportive of this popular, historical theme. In his letter, Coates urges his son to remember the oppressed history of African Americans: "Never forget that for 250 years black people were born in chains – whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains. You must struggle to truly remember this past in all its nuance, error, and humanity." (70) In the indication that to remember past devastations will require struggling, Coates touches on a vital point. He is indicating that for his young son, black oppression is not part of a pressing or prevalent stream of thought, but that he must do his best to make it so. It can be imagined that the above-mentioned black directors and filmmakers have been instructed similarly by their parents during their own upbringing; that to honour the slaves or even the African American civil rights fighters is to keep tales of oppression at the forefront. McWhorter understands this third-wave anti-racism and says that it fits into the longer struggle, but that it is a "dead end" ("The Virtue Signalers"). In contrast to Coates, he states that to process incidents of bias as "meaning that black American lives are bedevilled by "racism" is, really, to spit in the eye of our grandparents." (380) Following this logic, he would rather honour his forefathers by having these films focus on black progress and advancement, instead of having them subsidise the internal reality facilitated by therapeutic alienation that black life continues to be defined by racism; a reality that he simply does not recognise.

More films about ethnic minorities have meant more narratives at white America's expense. In the process of promoting especially black films, white writers, producers, and actors have had to compromise on likability when depicting white characters, given that those have appeared next to black characters. In the abovementioned titles, whites hold up the role of the antagonist in all cases, except for in *What's Love Got to Do with It* and *Friday*. In Jordan Peele's auteurial debut *Get Out* from 2017, a white upper class family plans to add their black son-in-law to their brain transplant experiment during a weekend getaway. The horror film addresses issues of racial alienation and draws current day parallels to slavery, signalling to all beholders that this dark chapter of American history is not yet a thing of the past (*Get Out*). *Get Out* reached a worldwide box office of \$255,589,157 and received critical acclaim for "daring to reveal the horror of liberal racism in America" (Bakare), and the way "real life keeps asserting itself, scene after scene." (Dargis) McWhorter's theory would, however, assert that those two statements attest to an internal reality, predisposed to collecting accounts of racism to maintain white America as on the hook. However, with an IMDb rating of 7.7/10, it can be established that the film was successful, and more importantly for this scope, met the expectations of the diversity seeking audience (IMDb).



Get Out (2017)

Contrary to *Get Out*, Barry Jenkins' 2018 screen adaptation of James Baldwin's 1974 novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, features an all-black cast except for the occasional white male portraying the racist cop or the privileged lawyer (*If Beale*). Same as with the majority of the fourteen black titles, the white characters in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, exhibit disagreeable attitudes of the 1970s, while the black characters all inhabit equal proportions of understanding, self-control and brotherly affection. This depiction relates to McWhorter's elaboration on therapeutic alienation: "But is it really true that all cultural traits are positive ones? Or is it really true that the only group with any negative traits worthy of mention is evil, Wonder-Bread, supremacist white America?" (92). The film exclusively portrays black individuals who undeservingly have fallen victim to miscarriages of justice and does not shed light on absentee fathers or drug abuse, which are both prevalent issues in poor, black America, ultimately leading the blame away from blacks (*If Beale*).

In addition, it feels incomplete to talk about popular, recent black cinema without mentioning the Marvel Cinematic Universe blockbuster, *Black Panther*, from 2018. Although the film's protagonist and antagonist both are black, the film's connotation still leaves the impression that white America, present or not, is the problem. It is the depiction of the perfect Afrofuturistic kingdom of Wakanda, rid of white people, that jabs at US society. Unlike contemporary America, where law enforcement authorities are losing more credibility day by day, Wakanda citizens are harmoniously coexisting without a single trace of crime or revolt, but instead with an undefeated loyalty towards peers and monarchy. As an example, when Dr. Bruce Banner aka. Hulk enters the kingdom of Wakanda and deems it appropriate that he should bow down to the king, he is met with the response: "We do not do that here", suggesting that their equality-based realm is above the gestures of

authoritative respect familiar to our world (*Black* 1:32-1:33). Therefore, one cannot shake off the feeling that what makes the Wakandian community run like clockwork *is* the absence of white people.

Black Panther was the first MCU film to win an Oscar and even took away three golden statuettes in total at the 2019 Academy Awards, including the one won by Ruth E. Carter for Best Costume Design (Watercutter). Exactly the look and appearance of the film's cast is striking as all characters are seen wearing rich, futuristic interpretations of African tribal apparel. Also the accent of the characters stands out as characters deploy broad African accents based on the Xhosa language (Acuna). The continuous African inspiration tells us of film director Ryan Coogler's desire to connect the first black Marvel superhero to the exotic roots of African Americans. These choices resonate with Nicholson's theory that cultural traits and traditions provide people with pride (99), and given the critical acclaim the film has received, there is something in this imaginative African draw that resonates with viewers more so than had the scenario of contemporary, realistic black America been adopted. The film surrounding the king-turned-hero, T'Challa, has often been referred to as Marvel's best one yet, given that *Black Panther* is "more diverse" than its superhero colleagues, and contains "real life political issues":

Black Panther is without a doubt the most important MCU film to date because of its place in the pop culture lexicon. It was extremely inspiring and essential to see a film with an almost entirely Black cast where these characters were the heroes of the story.

While Marvel and Disney don't deserve props for taking so long to make this film, the people involved in creating it did a wonderful job of making such a landmark, iconic movie that meant so much to many underrepresented people. (Steele)

On the whole, prevailing black narratives such as the ones discussed above, all contribute to the advancement of black cinema, meaning that Hollywood is finally starting to live up to the long-standing requests of inclusion. However, it has not been without sacrifices. The black productions' approach to the concept of "inclusion" can itself be debated as it does not *include* several ethnicities under one roof, as suggested, where all participants hold equal importance and agency, so much as it promotes the black marginalised ethnicity alone. Measures have been taken to not only create new content that reflects the coming generations, but also to scan the film archives for older works that do not hold up to today's standards and deal with those accordingly. In Hollywood's endeavour to form social balance within the cinematic world, they seem to have succeeded especially in the titles where whites are excluded or ostracized from the general moral code. In the spirit of identity politics, the initiatives taken towards securing black representation have thus resulted in a tipping of the black and white scale, rather than balancing it out. A desire to "reflect the rich diversity of the human experience around the globe" is expressed, however, it seems that those reflections are reserved for the people

belonging to that same experience. The narratives of recent years have proven that to satisfy the left will, to some extent, require the sacrifice of whites. Consequently, in this new heyday of black film, African Americans are celebrating their promotion at an ‘egalitarian’ party to which whites are not invited.

Do the measures taken towards increasing diversity seem to be working?

The response so far seems to be that representing, and thus satisfying, all demographic groups is not as simple as first anticipated. Considering recent years, the aspiration of closing the gap of multicultural representation has entailed new problems for the major film companies. For instance, while issues of cultural appropriation, and making quality and quantity go hand in hand have been objects of criticism for some audiences, others have begun to resent the industry for its new, social approach to filmmaking.

When implementing more diversity and mixing cultures and ethnicities together, filmmakers’ risk cultural appropriation. The transgression is defined as: “the taking—from a culture that is not one’s own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge.” (Ziff & Rao 1) and has happened several times in Hollywood when casting decisions have left audiences feeling cross. With the news coming out that actress Zoe Saldana was going to portray musician Nina Simone in Cynthia Mort’s 2016 biopic, *Nina*, Simone’s daughter Lisa Simone Kelly critiqued the casting of Saldana as the actress would need darker makeup and a prosthetic nose to resemble Kelly’s mother (“Nina Simone’s Daughter”). Kelly also expressed disappointment that Saldana, in accepting the role, took away an opportunity from a blacker actress:

There are many superb actresses of color who could more adequately represent my mother and could bring her to the screen with the proper script, the proper team and a sense of wanting to bring the truth of my mother’s journey to the masses, and *Nina*, in my opinion, doesn’t do any of that. (“Nina Simone’s Daughter”)

What appears from this statement is the notion of acting or believing to be black or white, which both Coates and McWhorter address in their respective discussions. The sentiment appears that Saldana, being slightly lighter and perhaps having spent too much time in Hollywood, no longer has support where she used to (“Black Actresses React”). In her becoming too “white” and perhaps, too successful, she is bullied out by the African American community as a traitor to the culture.



Nina (2016)

Similar attacks have circulated elsewhere in the industry, including the one that actor Dwayne Johnson was wrongfully cast as the Polynesian demigod, Maui, in Disney's *Moana* (Rika)—a character which was simultaneously accused for stereotyping pacific peoples as obese (Roy)—and more recently, that it is inappropriate for him to portray the 19th century Hawaiian king, Kamehameha, in Robert Zemeckis' motion picture, *The King*, for the same reason: that he does not belong to neither of those nationalities (Yang). The launch of Johnson's own tequila brand, "Teremana", has also met backlash as some consider it another case of cultural appropriation against Mexicans ("Is Dwayne Johnson"). Other actors have similarly been accused of insensitive conduct when depicting disabled people, e.g., Anne Hathaway in *The Witches* (Ramachandran), or a sexuality separate from their own, e.g. Jared Leto in *Dallas Buyers Club* (Fox). While the former expressed disagreement with the way in which "disabled" people were portrayed, the latter would have an actual transgender actor replace Leto altogether (ibid.).

The job of the casting director thus becomes especially intricate as the only way to avoid cultural appropriation is to cast profiles who authentically match the onscreen characters; allowing or even entitling some actors to portray a character unavailable to other actors due to for examples a variation in their respective skin tones. Complying with this policy would also require a massive spectrum of actors if every demographic group should each have adequate subcategories, e.g., Tunisian *and* homosexual. A casting director must become familiar with this covert hierarchy of victimhood, so to speak—in which blacks outrank whites, African Americans outrank Afro-Latinas, disabled outrank abled, and women outrank men—if he or she wants to make sure that their choice of actor will fall on futile grounds. What indeed enables cultural appropriation is said hierarchy as it deems minorities the most vulnerable, resulting in them being the only possible victims for cultural

appropriation. It is the same hierarchy that made it possible for actor Will Smith to step into the originally white character of Robert Neville in Francis Lawrence's 2007 filmatisation of Richard Matheson's novel, *I am Legend*, and which indeed would have made the reverse impossible; to cast a white actor in the role of an originally black character. Cultural appropriation refers to therapeutic alienation as the concept is enabled by insecurity. If one feels proud of one's heritage, one is happy to see those cultural traits adopted for the big screen, and simultaneously does not take it to heart when said traits are being poked fun at, as for instance with Inspector Clouseau in *Pink Panther*.

The diversification taking hold of the major production companies is no longer enough. Earlier on, when the concept of quantity was addressed, it was suggested that the employment of more people of colour in the industry was what it took for blacks, as well as other minorities, to feel equal to whites. Now, this quantitative inquiry has become a reality as Hollywood has amped up the number of non-white cast and crew members on numerous new productions. However, audiences are still not pleased. This is where the concept of 'quality' comes of relevance, and therefore should be introduced as well. What is meant when addressing the quality of a film set is that not only is the number of non-whites relevant, but also the specific positions they are hired in, i.e., is a black person behind the camera, positioning the role of the sidekick, or the one of the main character. The critique proposes that the jobs ethnic minorities are currently fulfilling as crew or cast members are not worthy of them (Smail). This idea naturally presupposes that certain functions on set are of more value than others.

As with identity politics, the incorporation of on-screen representation in aspects of both quantity and quality would allow for an increased number of members of minority to "recognise themselves" on the big screen, but the execution hereof is problematic in more than one sense. First, asserting this level of consciousness with regards to casting means implementing affirmative action, hiring on grounds of quota principles instead of qualification principles. Thrown into the mix is also this sentiment that to "set things right" within the film industry, what is needed and even justified is: "public law, public shaming and public action" (Chapman 2), proving once again that individualised equality endeavours, such as the one from civil rights to Black Power, become counterproductive in what they were initially trying to achieve. Nonetheless, leftist audiences proclaim to be content only when portrayals live up to expectations of both quantity *and* quality.

There is not one shared perception of what the perfect representation looks like. In his book *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America*, McWhorter mentions a young African American woman whom he once heard on a radio interview, named Ayo, who expressed her discontent with non-blacks asking her about how she washes her hair. In elaborating her complaint, Ayo mentioned how: "I live in a country where black people have been part of this society for hundreds of years, and it seems to me that people should know more about each other at this level in

our development (...)”, as well as: “I don’t have to make an effort to learn about white people; that’s taught to me on a daily basis... it’s imbalanced” (McWhorter 182). To this argumentation, McWhorter raises the objection:

It is not racist to see a tightly elaborate hairdo and simply want to know what the washing methods are for it (...) But the main problem is her call for whites to, apparently, use Web sites and books and magazines to find the answers to their questions about blacks. Wouldn’t this, really, pave the way for blacks encountering no questions to complain that whites are not interested in them, do not see them as full human beings, and/or have the gall to learn about blacks from books and Web crawling instead of from actual human beings? (ibid. 182)

It seems that Ayo forgets that black Americans only consist of thirteen percent of all Americans, which may explain why white people know more about white and less about black people (Kim and Bruun-Bevel 58).

The point with this anecdote is that Ayo and McWhorter, both African Americans, have different ideas of what positive black representation looks like; when a person is indeed stepping over the line, and when they are simply expressing benign curiosity. This piece of debate might remind one of Sony’s 2019 Academy Award winner of Best Short Film (animated), *Hair Love*, which deals with the difficulties some African Americans experience in relation to tackling their hair and learning to appreciate it as part of their identity (Cherry). In her acceptance speech, co-producer Karen Rupert Toliver stated that this “labor of love” was made from “a firm belief that representation matters deeply”, whereafter writer and director Matthew A. Cherry added: “we wanted to normalize black hair” (““Hair Love” wins”).



Hair Love (2018)

Comparing the coiffure related statements of Ayo and the creators of *Hair Love*, it might appear unclear as to how black hair can be normalised if inquiring about it is reserved for African Americans, whereas white Americans will have to retrieve information silently through various media. This example makes up yet another pendant to identity politics, illustrating how difficult it is to create spot-on representations that will resonate with audiences, and enough of them to make all feel acknowledged. This is even more problematic when representations become so individual that they end up contradicting other ones. In *Hair Love*, aspirations of both quantity and quality are met; black voices are used for black animated characters, which alone points to the conclusion that Hollywood is finally managing to comply with the inclusion request. However, it can be argued that even though leftist audiences and filmmakers have had their wish fulfilled, reaching the combination of quantity and quality on a film set, disregarding the painstaking and cumbersome process that goes into making that happen, does not either create diversity in the sense of equality between races—there are only black people in *Hair Love*—but rather leads us towards an even more segregated situation resembling the 1960s transition from civil rights to Black Power.

There is a response from the right wing that Hollywood is going overboard with its deepening inclusion programme. During the last few years, numerous journalists, film critics and news presenters have stuck out their neck in verbalising how cultural appropriation and political correctness is “crushing Hollywood” (Jackson). Across the statements, the shared opinion seems to be that the demand for inclusion is no longer coming from a ‘good place’. In an online article, Kimberly Bloom Jackson writes: “Interestingly, this is one of the great hypocrisies of the PC movement: To hail “diversity,” but ultimately keep certain individuals in their place by reinforcing the very stereotypes they claim they want to transcend.” (ibid.) For Jackson, what has exemplified this hypocrisy is an incident where a Los Angeles acting coach recommended an out-of-work Jewish actress that she changed her name to “Rosa Ramirez” in the hope of improving her chances of making the cut. As one might expect, this leaked coaching session gave way to much frustration on the left wing. It is Jackson’s opinion that it is when people are ‘allowed’ to be whomever they chose, regardless of class, religion, or skin colour, that they reach freedom and the dissolution of stereotypes. The attackers of the acting coach, on the other hand, are against the ‘transition’, and even more so the suggestion, that someone should change identity or dissent from their cultural and racial heritage to seek a position in the film industry (ibid.).

Unanimous with Jackson is American cultural critic Thomas Chatterton Williams. The message behind his 2019 release, *Self-Portrait in Black and White*, is that it is time for Americans to “unlearn race” (Sewell). Williams, whose viewpoint has received backlash due to him being mixed-race and therefore allegedly more privileged than blacks, admits that obtaining this goal will call for a certain matter of confidence but that insisting on defining ourselves from a series of race categories is

unhelpful and damaging (Sewell). Though he describes the retirement from race as a “big ask”, Williams rather saw that people adopted the same kind of naivety that a child is born into the world with:

And as a parent, I would say that I have no choice but to be an optimist. I use the word naive in the book. I think that children have a way of thinking about race that is much healthier. If I asked [my daughter] Marlow to describe you, she will be like, “Summer’s wearing a beige jacket. That’s the main difference between her and the girl in the pink shirt,” literally.

I think that unlearning race for black people is more along the lines of seriously saying blackness isn’t real, race isn’t real. I’ve been socially deemed black in America, and this is a category that’s been hurting my family for generations and that has also led to extraordinary cultural contributions that I’m very proud of, but it’s not a real category and our society is damaged by insisting on it. (Sewell)

Writers on The New York Post have gone against the Oscars, stating that the 2020 Academy Awards was “bloviated”, “self-congratulatory”, “hypocritical” and “lacking entertainment” (Callahan). In their criticism, Maureen Callahan and Kyle Smith emphasise the way in which, due to its composition, the show, as well as the industry in general, has reached a stage of hollow falseness as it is built up around fulfilling inclusion and breaking glass ceilings (Smith). For this reason, instead of relying on star wattage to propel entertainment values, relatively unknown Hollywood personalities were brought in to add diversity. To these writers, it is painfully obvious that the producers of the show are staging it in this way out of fear that audiences will target them should they fail to meet expectations of diversity, but that Hollywood should equally fear losing audiences who will eventually have had enough of the self-congratulatory woke fest that is the Academy Awards (Callahan).



Daniel Kaluuya wins Best Supporting Actor (2021)

On an Australian newscast, pundits sarcastically announce that “Hollywood has died of terminal wokeness” (“Hollywood has died”). When asked about the most toe-curling examples of recent Hollywood, television personality Rita Panahi also declares that the 2020 Oscars as well as the late-night shows of American television have become woke hotspots. Panahi goes on to state that these shows were once about frivolity and cutting-edge comedy, sometimes mixing in current affairs, but have now become “scouldy” and “preachy” with the purpose of getting applause instead of laughs. (ibid.) At the latest Oscar ceremonies, there has been this shared attitude that “Hollywood can do better” in terms of diversity. What appears peculiar, however, is the need for such moral scolding with no trace of racist bias in sight. As white Oscar participants hit themselves in the head and “check their privilege”, one may doubt whether they would be able to turn around and point out one single person who is still a proponent of white supremacy. Yet the internal reality of white America, and Hollywood as one of its largest institutions, as morally bereft, persists. The same goes for Disney; even company representatives refer to selected Disney films as nothing short of demeaning, regardless of those releases being five years or eighty years old. How can Disney, or the Academy Awards hope to satisfy its audience with aspirational themes that reflect rich diversity when they have already done exactly that—once again, the answer is that they can never satisfy because therapeutic alienation abhors the prospect of satisfaction as that would result in racial truce. Until the Academy Awards and conglomerates such as Disney put their foot down, audiences will continue to order them about, demanding rearrangements and cancellations for the sake of it. This shift of focus in Hollywood discourse is what Nicholson would refer to as an ideological consequence of identity politics; that platforms become excessively vigilant as to avoiding any messages that could be interpreted as biased. The result is entertainment without flavour or spirit. Instead of sparking controversy or debate, these creative contributions appear so neuter that their aim becomes difficult to locate.

Even though the left initially declared contentment with the prospect of heightened quantity in Hollywood, it seems that the prospect of contentment has been postponed even further as quality is now being demanded as well. Even though the likelihood of quantity and quality being both fulfilled would surely render cultural appropriation impossible, it would also promote societal division and a move to tribalistic mentalities rather than promote racial solidarity in America. This exhaustive demand for representation is, however, perceived by others to be unfair and even ridiculous. As a consequence, Hollywood is finding itself in a tug-of-war where the industry is, on the one side constantly attempting to keep up with social expectations of diversity, while being attacked on the other end for appearing inauthentic, and, in the process of pleasing leftists, losing other audiences who were here for the entertainment.

Why is Hollywood's change of culture not working?

As indicated through the previous analytical questions, there has been and is still a long way to go before the public declares its contentment with Hollywood's diversity affairs. Though efforts have been made to comply with wishes of inclusion, new forces keep appearing and demanding more of the industry. Consequently, it seems to viewers that Hollywood still has not reached a stage of equality. This final analytical chapter will provide four possible explanations as to why that might be, drawing in matters of affirmative action, equality versus vengeance, financial driving forces, and finally, the consequences representation has on entertainment.

Different ground rules for blacks and whites will get Hollywood nowhere but instead hold individuals in therapeutic alienation. Looking back at McWhorter's theory, one might remember the suggestion that if only it was not for stanzas one, two, three and so on, poor blacks would be able to succeed. For the same reason that these stanzas have developed, white Hollywood executives have been walking on eggshells around black reality, resulting in them implementing affirmative action in what can be regarded as one of the world's most competitive industries. In the world of Hollywood, people have become afraid to ask the same of blacks as of whites. Even so, several black actors and filmmakers have proven to be content with being objects of lower expectation and have made the most of this opportunity. To exemplify this point, it is almost impossible to imagine an originally black body of characters being cast as all white, however, it is applauded when the reverse happens, e.g. the case of Broadway's *Hamilton* (Ellis-Petersen). In similar fashion, *Black Panther* was the first MCU film to ever win an Academy Award, and even took home three at the 2019 ceremony (Watercutter). The position that white or insufficiently black actors are able to "take away opportunities" from blacker candidates, also points to the fact that blacks do not mind being let in on account of their skin colour, simultaneously expressing no remorse with the prospect of occupying roles at the expense of "more qualified" candidates, given that those are white (Chapman 2). This new

way of conducting business is consistent with both therapeutic alienation and identity politics as the departure from equality, and arrival into differential treatment, makes insecure individuals feel good here and now—but does not fit into any constructive programme for change.

Just like in college admissions, “blackness as merit” also applies in Hollywood where it removes incentive from actors and filmmakers and exempts them from doing their best to get admitted. Even though winning an Oscar is perceived to be the ultimate recognition within the world of film, it did not seem to impress winner of Best Supporting Actor Daniel Kaluuya to the point where it felt like he had prepared an acceptance speech (Oscars). The 32-year-old actor received his second nomination and won his first Oscar this year and can say to have caught up with experienced white actors such as Brad Pitt and Leonardo DiCaprio, who both had to be in consideration for twenty-something years before receiving their first statuette, and finally did so with an entirely different air of humility and gratitude (Olsen). Incentive in Hollywood, and especially in the case of the Academy Awards, is what makes the institution exclusive, ensuring that everyone present has earned their place at the big table. Incentive is also the force that drives human growth and makes succeeding even more gratifying, which means that, when removing it, you pose an ill turn in improving blacks’ self-esteem. Along the lines of Williams’ statement that it takes confidence to forget race, it also takes confidence to expect the same from blacks as from whites, and for blacks it takes confidence to discard the allure of therapeutic alienation and simply put in the work needed.

Attempts at creating racial justice will never be satisfactory as equality is not the motive, but therapeutic alienation at best, and vengeance at worst. What is openly requested of the film industry is not what is indeed desired. Though the call for diversity indicates that all people should be equal, reactions divulge that inclusion has simply come to mean “power to blacks” or perhaps “power away from whites”. For instance, when Senegalese-American actress and producer Issa Rae—who in fact did the voice of the mother in *Hair Love*—at the 2017 Emmy Awards declared that she was “rooting for everybody black” (“Issa Rae - I’m rooting”), she hammered home the fact that justice and equality, in the sense of the best show winning, was not her agenda, but instead she expressed aspirations of a black takeover regardless of what that entailed. A similar sentiment can be retrieved from Peter Debruge’s statement that *Get Out*’s gory ending, in which all white people are exterminated, can be interpreted as “payback for all the expendable black characters that Hollywood horror movies have given us over the years.” (Debruge) Perhaps the ending was an act of retaliation accounting for more than a history of unfavourable character orchestrations.

Some express concerns about foreign filmmakers entering Hollywood and ‘failing’ to hold onto the view of white America as eternally on the hook:

In Hollywood where racial–ethnic minority actors and filmmakers have long dealt

with a variety of issues including objectification of black bodies, cultural appropriation, stereotyping, whitewashing, invisibility, and white-centered storytelling, the social distance between foreign-born talent and local minority communities can lead to the former group failing to recognize discriminatory practices and unwittingly replicating the same strategies. (Kim and Bruun-Bevel 45)

This adopted worldview is what McWhorter refers to as trait one: “Memes can thrive independently of external conditions” (175) and can also be detected in Coates’ request for his son to “struggle to remember” what white America took from “them”, instead of letting him make out his own impression of his surroundings (70). Put differently, the examples above all point to internal realities which are kept alive because they are copied from one person to another and provide certain individuals with a sense of comfort. The examples of Rae, Debruge, Kim, Bruun-Bevel and Coates all exemplify therapeutic alienation as their statements indicate that the people in question are witnessing signs of change around them in terms of racial reconciliation, but that they still feel a desire, whether conscious or subconscious, to keep things unchanged. Rather than meeting white Hollywood halfway, and thus reaching a level of actual equality, they would like to use the diversity opening to gain the upper hand.



Black Panther (2018)

The film industry’s diversity endeavours have not mended America’s sense of racial inequality because it has been brought about for the wrong reasons. In Kim and Bruun-Bevel’s article addressing the financial considerations that go into which Hollywood productions get the green light, the puzzlement is voiced at how it took seventeen films before MCU launched its first black

superhero, *Black Panther*, and how conveniently the launch came when it did (60). They go on to draw the conclusion that the film's release was positioned strategically amidst a time when public interest and political consciousness had made people eager to get hold of a black narrative that would fit into the empowerment of black representation. It seems to be a case of Hollywood spotting a tendency during the #OscarSoWhite movement and eyeing an opportunity to profit from their own criticism. After all, adopting a new MCU narrative could never pose that big of a risk as the canon already has an established community, ready to give each new production a chance and thereby secure box offices time after time (ibid. 60). Hollywood can therefore be assured to bow down to whatever mood is taking up the public due to a "the customer is always right" business attitude. The industry will always be expected to engage in project on the prediction that they will fall on futile grounds financially— i.e.. ethical motives are nice to have if they come with certain profitability. It should not be forgotten that Hollywood is first and foremost a business. This reminder leads to the final and perhaps most eloquent explanation for why modern anti-racism does not seem to be bearing fruit in Hollywood.

The demand for diverse representation in Hollywood precludes the whole idea behind entertainment. This analysis was initially begun with the statement that for African Americans, the act of filmmaking has not only been about artistic and commercial enterprise, but something more: making film has come to mean that you engage in social and political endeavours from "entertaining the black audience locked out of white theatres in the Jim Crow era, to portraying black representations and aesthetics omitted in mainstream films, to bringing the stories of racial conflict and tension from African American perspectives" (Kim and Bruun-Bevel 41). This declaration naturally places a social responsibility and strain on Hollywood, which some find unfair and destructive (Jackson). In an article debating which MCU film is better, *Black Panther* or *Captain America: Civil War*, journalist Amanda Steele argues that what in the end makes the former win over the latter is its tackling of real-life political issues, and how it is a "landmark, iconic movie that meant so much to many underrepresented people" (Steele). This statement goes to show that Hollywood has become about representation rather than entertainment; a film is now perceived as better from entailing reality as opposed to fiction. Unfortunately, however, this social responsibility also entails restrictive qualities. When an actor is restricted from playing a certain character due to issues of cultural appropriation, then that person is restricted in performing his or her job, which *is* exactly pretending to be someone else. If cultural appropriation arises from someone taking on another skin colour, sexuality, or body type than their own, then what is to prevent them from being accused of 'appropriating' accents, music, hairstyles, or eventually, certain words? If actors are not allowed to portray anyone else but themselves, then real acting is already a thing of the past. In conclusion, Hollywood will never succeed in pleasing everyone as it simply is not possible, since therapeutic alienation prohibits people from wanting to be satisfied, and since Hollywood, the "sacred land of

John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe and Humphrey Bogart” (Smith), was built with the sole purpose of entertaining whilst at the same time providing its audience with a momentary escape from the very things going on outside the cinema walls.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to determine to which extent modern anti-racism has taken hold of the American film industry, whether it is starting to resemble the identity politics of the 1960s, and what the immediate consequences have been for Hollywood’s social fabric. The theoretical tools of John McWhorter and Linda Nicholson, in addition to financial, legal, and socio-psychological perspectives, have been considered in analysing examples of public leverage and diversity discourse in Hollywood.

The analysis has revealed that Hollywood has gone from creative independence to hypersensitivity with regards to pleasing the public. The sentiment goes that no one (read: ethnic minorities) should have to adapt or change aspects of their persona to acquire a job in the industry. Regardless of fair competition, qualification and fitness, minorities should make up a certain percentage of all positions on a film set. If actors want to be “on the right side of history”, they have no choice but to follow suit, and for example declare their conformity by endorsing the inclusion rider. What has changed in Hollywood since the 1990s is thus not so much people critiquing and disagreeing with the conglomerate, but Hollywood’s willingness to bow down to them—and that seems to have made African Americans take the ball and run with it. However, with African Americans constituting just thirteen percent of the country’s population, one could argue that their proportion of on-screen representation was true to life even thirty years back. This discloses the fact that race continues to be of primary concern in the US. It also sheds light on the fact that to African Americans, Hollywood has more to do with reflecting and shaping public perception than it has to do with entertainment. This discourse solidifies that identity politics has become a substantial point of reference in Hollywood consciousness.

Modern anti-racism and identity politics become perilous once given free rein. Filmmakers and executives, who constitute the authority of Hollywood, feel compelled to bow down to the public’s wishes of cancelling vilified employees. It takes courage and integrity to stand by one’s creative decisions when those do not fall on futile grounds—and it seems that Hollywood has lost that courage. When said that this loss of courage can become perilous, what is meant is that the modern anti-racism facing Hollywood is not only limiting creative freedom in terms of what is allowed on screen, but also threatens freedom of speech in terms of the general population. We are already finding ourselves in a world where uttering one’s opinion can have severe consequences for one’s

appointment. In the case of Hollywood, going through with portraying a character in good faith is no longer enough to escape public rage and condemnation. For that reason, Nicholson's fear of history repeating itself in terms of identity politics is already becoming a reality by way of Hollywood's diversity movement.

As previously declared, identity politics do possess some constructive qualities in that they have paved way for more open discussions about race and sex, as well as allowed for progress in American institutions. This has indeed also been the case with Hollywood; however, this research has found the impact of identity politics to be predominantly negative. What the film industry is currently doing with modern anti-racism, is in several ways similar to what the government did with civil rights in the sixties; both institutions sought to improve conditions for blacks in the hopes of achieving equality, and did indeed correct some injustices, but ultimately ended up with a new power imbalance reinforcing tribal mentalities and tearing people further apart.

The African Americans expressing discontentment with Hollywood's inclusion endeavours are not concerned with obtaining equality. This becomes clear as there are some discrepancies in the argumentations examined for this research. Black audiences want equality and diversity, yet they prefer the black narratives set around past issues of racism and segregation, and would prefer those to be told by black filmmakers themselves, or by someone ranking higher than whites in the victimhood hierarchy—i.e. if a story about a slave fleeing the plantation for some reason cannot be told by an African American, then a Mexican director will be preferred to a white one. It is a matter of compensation for the centuries without cultural pride, while in America, when blacks want to reclaim aspects of African heritage—as is the case with *Black Panther*—or establish a new hip hop culture—as exemplified in *Boyz n the Hood*. Although these depictions might seem benign in how they provide blacks with a sense of pride and ownership, they have no future in terms of helping African Americans get back on their feet. When black filmmakers direct all of their attention into creating narratives around past and present oppressed black individuals, it subconsciously subsidises the internal reality of racist bias still being the prevalent issue of African Americans, as memes thrive independently of external conditions. The searching high and low for racist accounts thus sustains therapeutic alienation and contradicts the purpose of achieving reconciliation between the races. *Boyz n the Hood* was more popular among ethnic minorities than *Pocahontas* because the film looked to the past in terms of racial segregation, rather than addressed what needed to be done in the present; *Pocahontas* looked to the future by burying the hatchet between Native Americans and white settlers. The fight for inclusion in Hollywood has thus become about blacks getting back at whites, with the purpose of sustaining therapeutic alienation.

Representing everyone is not a realistic goal, as it is too much to ask of any actor or director,

and also because therapeutic alienation prevents people from being open to contentment. Having looked at the receptions of popular ethnic minority films, the controversy evolving minority castings, and some of the expectations surrounding African American representation, it can be concluded that creating the perfect representation is close to impossible—in Hollywood as well as in real life. For instance, although the resourcefulness and agency of Pocahontas' character may have satisfied feminist audiences, the film's ethnic depictions were not able to satisfy expectations of modern anti-racism. Similarly, while the creators of *Hair Love* would wish for black hair to be "normalised", Ayo would take offense at the inquiries enabling such an event.

Hollywood, and society in general, should be cautious of implementing affirmative action. This study has found that having separate rules for different kinds of employees is a disservice to Hollywood's social fabric. Nonetheless, affirmative action has undoubtedly become an integrated part of the industry. No on-screen representation can eradicate personal insecurities, and for that reason, Hollywood's procuring of more diverse characters will never solve the problem. This is evident with Anne Hathaway's character in *The Witches*, which was never meant to depict disabled people in the first place—nevertheless, Hathaway extended an apology to the disabled community, cementing that logic and integrity no longer has a place in Hollywood. For that reason, the industry must give up on trying to please and represent everyone, and instead carry on with creating compelling storytelling. Besides, if all demographic groups are treated equally, then society avoids the unintended and unfortunate connotation that some groups *need* tiptoeing around due to them being different, which ultimately reinforces inequality.

Hollywood is cautious when it comes to depicting ethnic minority reality. What Hollywood needs to do is either face reality straight on, or else stop exploiting real life for entertainment purposes. Acknowledging that black culture has flaws, just like all other cultures, does not mean the film industry turning their back on the black community. The Oscars, Coates' plea for his son to remember slavery, and modern anti-racism in general, are all expressions of fear of burying the past together with its people and moving forward in harmony with America's current residents. Therapeutic alienation is kept alive at all costs because it provides the hurting with an emotional outlet, regardless of Hollywood changing and conforming to African Americans' wishes. If not taken out on a scapegoat, then blacks are left alone to deal with their anger and insecurity, and that prospect seems too daunting to many—nevertheless, it is a requisite for moving forward. The equality of Hollywood will benefit from executives believing in their own judgement, acknowledging reality and progress. If Hollywood believes that the world is full of rich and beautiful cultures, then they need to exert that belief into the real world by practising what they preach. What would be truly progressive would be more narratives with blacks and whites mixed without race being the main topic, or better yet, a topic at all.

What can be concluded from this dissertation is that the racial problems of Hollywood, and of American society in general, is the low self-esteem of most ethnic minorities. Expecting the entertainment industry to remedy such a deep-seated and complex problem is both unfair and impossible. Up until this point, the initiatives conducted by modern anti-racism in Hollywood have proven to be superfluous and downright damaging. Allowing blacks to enter equal competition will provide them with incentive, make them do their best, and ultimately grant them the very feeling of accomplishment that will allow for a higher degree of self-respect. It takes confidence to do what is necessary in achieving social balance, namely expecting the same from blacks as from whites. Perhaps the learning that is required in achieving equality in Hollywood, and American society in general, is not how to coexist in a multicultural society without stepping on anyone's toes, nor the enforced appreciation of diverse cultures and ethnicities, but rather the *un*learning of race altogether. Perhaps, if blacks are to stay in America, they would benefit from adopting the liberal position on race that existed in the middle of the 20th century: that African Americans are Americans who simply happen to have dark skin, and therefore lay off any notions that their biology somehow makes them distinct from whites. In this way, when race is denied, equality looks the same to all.

Works Cited

- Acuna, Kirsten., and Oswald, Anjelica. "Marvel was originally unsure of Black Panther having an African accent – but Chadwick Boseman pushed back." *Business Insider*, 29 Aug. 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.in/thelife/news/marvel-was-originally-unsure-of-black-panther-having-an-african-accent-but-chadwick-boseman-pushed-back/articleshow/77816428.cms#:~:text=Boseman%20worked%20with%20a%20dialect,base d%20in%20the%20Xhosa%20language.>
- Adams, Sam. "Gone With the Wind Is Back on HBO Max With This New Introduction." *Slate*, 26 June. 2020, <https://slate.com/culture/2020/06/gone-with-the-wind-hbo-max-introduction-video.html>
- Aleiss, Angela. "Community Comment: Maidens of Hollywood: 'Pocahontas' is the pure expression of filmmakers' fantasies about Indian women". *Latimes.com*, 24 June. 1995, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-06-24-me-16519-story.html>
- "Black Actresses React To Nina Simone Film Casting!!" *YouTube*, uploaded by Rolling Out, 12 May. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBleYljdgfw>
- Black Panther. Directed by Ryan Coogler, performances by Chadwick Boseman and Michael B. Jordan. Marvel Studios, 2018.
- Bodenner, Chris. "Does Disney's Pocahontas Do More Harm Than Good? Your Thoughts." *The Atlantic*, 30 June. 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/06/pocahontas-feminism/397190/>
- Boothe, Dan. "The Making of Pocahontas 3/3." *YouTube*, uploaded by redmorgankidd. 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ytr3wtfzDiw&t=1s>
- Boyz n The Hood*. Directed by John Singleton, performances by Laurence Fishburne and Cuba Gooding Jr., Columbia Pictures, 1991. Netflix. www.netflix.com/watch/328438?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C1f641fdb88794c0ddf29548eb67b5223401363a0%3A3d1b5edad3aed624127652d5739e16a400835650%2C1f641fdb88794c0ddf29548eb67b5223401363a0%3A3d1b5edad3aed624127652d5739e16a400835650%2Cunknown%2C
- Callahan, Maureen. "Oscars 2020: Bloviated and self-congratulatory awards lack entertainment." *NY Post*, 10 Feb. 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/02/10/oscars-2020-bloviated-and-self-congratulatory-awards-lack-entertainment/>
- Chapman, Rebecca. "Inclusion Riders Won't Save Hollywood." *The New York times* 2018: A27–. Print. Cherry, Matthew A. "Hairlove". *YouTube*, uploaded by Sony Pictures Animation, 5 Dec. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNw8V_Fkw28
- Coates, Ta-Nehishi. *Between the World and Me*. New York, United States of America: Penguin Random House LLC, New York, 2015. Print.

- D. Clark, Meredith. "DRAG THEM: A Brief Etymology of so-Called 'cancel Culture.'" *Communication and the public* 5.3-4 (2020): 88–92. Web.
- Dargis, Manohla. "Review: In 'Get Out,' Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? (Bad Idea!)." *The New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/23/movies/get-out-review-jordan-peelee.html>
- Debruge, Peter. "Film Review: 'Get Out'". *Variety*, 24 Jan. 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/film/reviews/get-out-review-jordan-peelee-1201968635/>
- "Disney Magazine: Cast and Crew Interviews from Disney Adventures magazine." *Cbl.orcin.net*, 31 July. 1995, <http://cbl.orcin.net/pocahontas/misc/interviews.htm#russellmeans>
- Ebert, Roger. "Boyz N the Hood." *Rogerebert.com*, 12 July. 1991, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/boyz-n-the-hood-1991>
- Ellis-Petersen, Hannah. "'This isn't colour-blind casting': Hamilton makes its politically charged West End debut." *The Guardian*, 20 Dec. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/dec/20/colourblind-casting-hamilton-west-end-debut>
- Evans, Chris. "Six Disney Classics Tagged For Racist Imagery On Disney+ Including 'Peter Pan', 'The Jungle Book' & 'The Aristocats'." *Deadline.com*, 16 Oct. 2020, <https://deadline.com/2020/10/disney-racist-warnings-peter-pan-the-jungle-book-the-aristocats-lady-and-the-tramp-1234598855/>
- Fox, Fallon. "For the Oscar: Jared Leto Was Miscast in Dallas Buyers Club." *Time*, 4 March. 2014, <https://time.com/12407/jared-letto-oscar-dallas-buyers-club-casting-trans-actors/>
- "Frances McDormand wins Best Actress." *YouTube*, uploaded by Oscars, 12 May. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gU6CpQk6BE>
- Gallagher, Brenden. "The Style Legacy of 'Boyz n the Hood.'" *Grailed*, 19 Sep. 2017, <https://www.grailed.com/drycleanonly/boyz-n-the-hood-style-history>
- Get Out. Directed by Jordan Peele, performances by Daniel Kaluuya and Allison Williams. Universal Pictures, 2017.
- "Get Out." *IMDb*, 12 May. 2021, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5052448/?ref=nm_sr_srgs_0
- Gilbert, Sophie. "Revisiting *Pocahontas* at 20." *The Atlantic*, 23 June. 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/06/revisiting-pocahontas/396626/?UTM_SOURCE=yahoo
- "'Hair Love' wins Best Animated Short Film". *YouTube*, uploaded by Oscars, 11 March. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyAhZrmsqh0>
- Harris, Aisha. "How Movie Theaters, TV Networks, and Classrooms Are Changing the Way They Show *Gone With the Wind*." *Slate*, 24 Oct. 2017, <https://slate.com/arts/2017/10/how-to-show-gone-with-the-wind-post-charlottesville.html>

- “Hollywood has died of terminal wokeness.” *Youtube*, uploaded by Sky News Australia, 21 Aug. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cF2RYFkRthc>
- “Is Dwayne Johnson guilty of cultural appropriation?” *El Universal*, 17 May. 2020, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/dwayne-johnson-guilty-cultural-appropriation-launching-tequila-brand>
- “Issa Rae – I’m rooting for everybody black’ – Full Emmys Red Carpet interview.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Variety, 19 Sep. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WafoKj6MzcU&list=UL3m2ahWMC7XY&index=204>
- Jackson, Kimberly Bloom. “How Cultural Appropriation Crushes Hollywood.” *Hollywood in Toto*, 18 March. 2019, <https://www.hollywoodintoto.com/performing-arts-pc-culture/>
- Jeremy Kay. “Paul Feig, Ben Affleck, Matt Damon Companies Adopt Inclusion Rider (update).” *Screen International* (2018): n. pag. Print.
- Jones, Will. “Talking ‘Boyz N the Hood’ with Its Director John Singleton.” *Vice*, 1 Nov. 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/3bw44v/talking-about-boyz-n-the-hood-with-its-director-john-singleton>
- Joseph Walsh. “With ‘Just Mercy’, Michael B. Jordan Is Using the Inclusion Rider to Change Hollywood.” *Screen International* (2019): n. pag. Print.
- Kim, Minjeong, and Rachelle J Brunn-Bevel. “Hollywood’s Global Expansion and Racialized Film Industry.” *Humanity & society* 44.1 (2020): 37–66. Web.
- Kishimi, Ichiro., Koga, Fumitake. *The Courage to be Disliked: The Japanese phenomenon that shows you how to free yourself, change your life and achieve real happiness*. Australia and New Zealand: Allen & Unwin, 2017. Print.
- Kotagal, Kalpana. “The ‘inclusion rider’ should be a Hollywood standard.” *Gulf News*, 13 March. 2018, <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/the-inclusion-rider-should-be-a-hollywood-standard-1.2187350>
- Lund, Cory. “I Wanna be Like You: Racial Coding in Disney’s The Jungle Book.” *sites.williams.edu*, 12 Dec. 2017, <https://sites.williams.edu/f18-eng117-01/uncategorized/i-wanna-be-like-you-racial-coding-in-disneys-the-jungle-book/>
- Matthew W. Hughey. “Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in ‘Magical Negro’ Films.” *Social problems (Berkeley, Calif.)* 56.3 (2009): 543–577. Web.
- McWhorter, John. “The Virtue Signalers Won’t Change the World.” *The Atlantic*, 23 Dec. 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/why-third-wave-anti-racism-dead-end/578764/>
- McWhorter, John. *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America*. New York, U.S.A: Gotham Books, 2005. Print.
- “Most popular black movies”. Google, 19 April. 2021,

<https://www.google.com/search?q=most+popular+black+movies&oq=most+pop&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j69i59j0l8.2844j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#wxpd=:true>

Nicholson, Linda., and Linda J. Nicholson. *Identity before Identity Politics* . Cambridge, UK ;: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Print.

Nina. Directed by Cynthia Mort, performances by Zoe Saldana and David Oyelowo. Ealing Studios, 2016.

“Nina Simone’s Daughter: ‘It’s Unfortunate Zoe Saldana Is Being Attacked So Viciously’.” The Hollywood Reporter, 6 March. 2016, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6898340/nina-simone-daughter-unfortunate-zoe-saldana-attacked>

Olsen, Mark. “Brad Pitt wins his first acting Oscar for ‘Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood’”. *Los Angeles Times*, 9 Feb. 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2020-02-09/brad-pitt-oscars-best-supporting-actor-win>

Oscars. “Daniel Kaluuya Wins Best Supporting Actor.” *YouTube*, 26 May. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4Kz1xE3K6I>

Patches, Matt. “Disney Plus quietly pulls Peter Pan, Dumbo from Kids profiles over racist stereotypes.” *Polygon*, 27 Jan. 2021, <https://www.polygon.com/disney-plus/2021/1/27/22252244/disney-plus-removes-peter-pan-dumbo-racist-stereotypes-kids-profiles>

Radulovic, Petrana. “Mulan’s live-action love interest is better than her old animated one.” *Polygon*, 14 Sep. 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/9/14/21437004/mulan-remake-changes-shang-chen-honghui-bisexual-icon-disney>

Ramachandran, Naman. “Anne Hathaway Apologizes for Disability Portrayal in “The Witches””. *Variety*, 6 Nov. 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/global/anne-hathaway-witches-disability-apology-1234824400/>

Rika, Arieta Tegeilolo Talanoa Tora. ”How did Disney get Moana so right and Maui so wrong?” *BBC News*, 21 Sep. 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37430268>

Robinson, Joanna. “The Touching Tribute Behind Disney’s First Openly Gay Character.” *Vanity Fair*, 1 March. 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/03/beauty-and-the-beast-gay-lefou-howard-ashman>

Roy, Elanor Ainge. “Disney depiction of obese Polynesian god in film Moana sparks anger” 27 June. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/27/disney-depiction-of-obese-polynesian-god-in-film-moana-sparks-anger>

Sewell, Summer. “Is it time to unlearn race? Thomas Chatterton Williams says yes.” *The Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/15/thomas-chatterton-williams-race-books-interview>

- Smail, Gretchen. "White hero, sidekick of color: why Marvel needs to break the cycle." *The Guardian*, 15 Mar. 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/mar/15/white-hero-sidekick-of-color-why-marvel-needs-to-break-the-cycle>
- Smith, Kyle. "Political correctness at 2020 Oscars exposes Hollywood's hypocrisy". *NY Post*, 10 Feb. 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/02/10/political-correctness-at-2020-oscars-exposes-hollywoods-hypocrisy/>
- Smith, Neil. "Why John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* made a noise." *BBC News*, 30 April. 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-48104548>
- Steele, Amanda. "MCU: 6 Reasons Black Panther Is the Best Movie (& 4 Why It's The Winter Soldier)." 6 July. 2020, <https://screenrant.com/mcu-marvel-black-panther-vs-captain-america-winter-soldier-best-movie/>
- "the Left." Merriam Webster. 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/the%20Left>
- "Tokenism." *The Free Dictionary By Farflex*, 12 May. 2021, <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Token+character>
- Torres, Libby. "People are trying to prove that Ariel can't be black, and Disney put them in their place." *Insider*, 9 July. 2019, <https://www.insider.com/little-memaid-ariel-black-disney-freeform-responds-2019-7>
- Watercutter, Angela. "Black Panther's Oscar Wins Made History." *Wired*, 25 Feb. 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/black-panthers-oscar-wins-made-history/#:~:text=Last%20night%2C%20Black%20Panther%20won,to%20win%20in%20the%20category>
- Yang, Eugene. "Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson: questions of cultural appropriation over movie on Hawaiian King." *abc.net.au*, 15 Sep. 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-16/is-the-rock-the-right-choice-to-play-a-hawaiian-king-kamehameha/10236618>
- Ziff, Bruce., and Rao., Pratima V. *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*. New Brunswick, New Jersey; Rutgers University Press, 1997. Print.