

Painting the Color Black

Onyeka Chigbogwu

Black people have struggled for decades to be represented on movie screens. But what's even more important than representation is depiction.

When it comes to Hollywood portrayals of Black characters, there is often an attempt to contain a part of their personality or story. This is according to Mariam Petty, professor of radio/television/film studies (RTVF) at Northwestern University. She says Black characters must compromise their complexity in order to appeal to a primarily white audience. Petty gives the example of Black male characters' appeasement of the "assumption of threat." She says Black male characters are given traits to prove to the audience that they are not plotting harm. Her prototype is Kevin Hart, who she says is paid to play the white lead's "Black best friend." This repeated trope is dangerous because it portrays black characters' stories as simple rather than complex enough to tell their own stories.

Sierra Thoulouis, RTVF first-year, says "media is something that we should use as an escape." However, Thoulouis says she has had to endure the media's poor portrayal of Black women as "sassy". These expectations, she says, have followed her into real-world interactions with friends where she says she hears things such as, "that's the black in you coming out," when she expresses irritation or passion.

So, what does accurate portrayal look like for Black people in theatres? Firstly, maybe the focus shouldn't be "accuracy."

"One man's 'accurate' is another man's lie," Petty says. Replication is futile. Nuance is everything. The story of a complex character connects with a wider audience's individual stories. Petty says it is important that a character is "dimensionalized" and not "flat."

But perhaps the most effective way to portray Black people is to move outside the realm of blockbuster films. Barbara Scharres, director at the Gene Siskel Film Center, praises the independent film industry for achieving nuance. She says independent filmmakers tend to have much more realism and in-depth and complex characterizations than Hollywood.

"In the world of independent film, there are lots and lots of directors—especially young and emerging directors at the time—who are making films, often with their own money," Scharres said. "The Cineplex can take care of all the new releases from Hollywood, but the world of film is bigger than that. Hell, it's a lot bigger."

Likewise, Adam McMath—president of the Black Alphabet Film Festival— recognizes the power of the independent film industry and works to promote it. McMath's film festival celebrates the independent art of the Black LGBT+ community.

"I think it's important to be in the community and do some work with the community to understand the different nuances of character we have," he said.

McMath points to the 2016 film "Moonlight" as a prime example. Tarell Alvin McCraney, who wrote the original play "In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue" and co-wrote the film, loosely based the main character, Chiron, off himself as a child. Both McCraney and Barry Jenkins, the film's director, grew up in Miami, the city the film is based in.

If the director of the film does not fully identify with the characters, McMath says it is important that there are people involved in the production of the film who do. To illustrate this, he refers to Black Alphabet Film Festival's 2019 headline selection, "King Ester" by Dui Jarrod. The film follows the story of a Black trans woman in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. It stars Angelica Ross, a Black trans woman who can provide insight into what it means to identify with the community—insight that cannot necessarily be provided by Jarrod or other members of the production.

To depict the color Black, according to Petty, you may have to move the color white.

"People who carry dominant privilege have to begin to be comfortable with being decentered and not have hurt feelings about that," she said.

Thoulouis says you must approach characterization with a "fresh outlook" unaltered by clichés, tropes, or common stereotypes. Additionally, McMath and Scharres both point to recognizing individuality.

The story of America is a story of 400 years. It is a story of the lives of millions of Africans and their descendants—each vivid and unique. There are so many ways to depict black.