# MELODRAMATIC MODE'S AMPHETAMINE: THE STENTORIAN TRIPLET FLOWS OF "BLACK EMCEES AFFECT" PROSELYTIZING CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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## ABSTRACT

*The cinematic medium functions as an escape and a reflection of unfolding life while, correspondingly, playing a paramount role in structuring and promoting multifarious cultural beliefs and slants adhering to race. The film and TV ecosystem of Hollywood is substantially underrepresented in parameters of "blackness" among its on-screen talent, cinematographers, writers, producers, directors, crew members, and so on and so forth. Well, according to McKinsey and Company's research, "Black representation in film and TV: The challenges and impact of increasing diversity (2023)," it is clearly explained that the current representation of African Americans in major cinema studios in Hollywood is merely 9.2 percent over 70.2 percent for white people. They additionally wrote that it's only black off-screen talent that's responsible for providing jobs for other black-off screen talent; there are just not enough funds or opportunities for African Americans. This problem is directly reflected in the narratives and characters represented in cinema. The purpose of this paper is to detect and outline major breakthroughs in contemporary American cinema that paved an avenue to ameliorate the racial (black) depictions on screen while also focusing on the emphatic utilization of melodramatic modes in numerous genre configurations. This paper will attempt to delineate these various permutations and combinations of this mode, as well as lay out an alternative strategy of melodramatic aesthetics derived from video installations and visual culture for racial cessation on screen as an epilogue. Furthermore, the paper highlights the oscillations of reconfigurations that respond to race through melodrama and analyzes and categorizes them to perform a critical opprobrium to gendered and racial stereotypes in American cinema. The selection of films in this paper ranges from a festival winner to a blockbuster in order to comprehend the unabridged spectatorial affect of melodramatic mode in contemporaneous melodramatic imaginations.*

**Keywords:** *Blackness, Melodramatic Mode, Racial representation, Contemporary hollywood cinema, Reconfigurations, Opprobrium, Spectatorial affect, Melodramatic imagination, Aesthetics of melodrama.*

*"With so much drama in the industry*
*Hip hop police are listenin'*
*Be careful, or you'll be history.*
*Looks like another unsolved mystery.*
*It's murder, murder, murder*
*Ah, it's murder, murder, murder*
*Yeah, it's murder, murder, murder*
*Somebody tell 'em it's murder.*

*Murder was the case, and they blamed me."*

- *Hip Hop Police* **by Chamillionaire**

A few days ago, the Memphis police authorities finally released the deleterious body camera and surveillance footage of the Tyre Nicholas incident, which took place on January 7, 2023. The president of the United States, Joe Biden, said that it was "yet another painful reminder of the profound fear and

trauma, the pain, and the exhaustion that black and brown Americans experience every single day." It's crucial to take note of the number of similarities between this traffic stop incident and several others in the past (Rodney King, George Floyd, Daunte Wright, and Breona Taylor, to name a few). This act of racial profiling was activated through a traffic stop by the cops, which manifested into a homicidal incident that shocked the entire country and led to the pivotal release of the video footage that recorded the whole event. The power of the camera to amount to a major breakthrough in evidence with its indexicality allows the African American community to at least be aware of the atrocious code of conduct practiced by the police department against people of color, which has often gone unreported or misrepresented by the authorities. What is crucial here is that all five police officers found guilty of murdering Nicholas are black. Now, herein, the structure offered by cinema in terms of "Tom" and "Anti-Tom" narratives gets disintegrated and calls for a supplementary and reinvigorated mode of representation of issues and conditions for African Americans in America. This paper attempts to establish renewed modes of race (black) representation while also emphasizing the melodramatic mode of conducting its performance in a digitalized trans-genre world. Furthermore, by acquiescing to a multi- and new media perspective on this whole issue, I shall try and formulate an anomalous code of aesthetics that is effective in rendering a contemporaneous melodramatic imagination by incorporating consequential material from visual culture, music videos, films, and installations of the schizophrenic post-modern 21st century. Linda Williams asserts in her seminal work *The Race Card* that melodrama recognizes "virtue, expresses the inexpressible, and reconciles the irreconcilables of American culture." As a result, the melodramatic expression is best articulated to express a colored individual's digital and technologized paranoia toward their aggrieved sense of racial suffering in our times. This paper resonates with Santiago Alvarez's rendition of Lena Horne's *"Now!"* while also offering a framework to locate and identify the spectatorial affect of melodramatic

mode in contemporary race films in a country obsessed with Jordans (only highs, though) yet racially profiling every boy or girl next door.

Since the advent of cinema in America, the codes of representation for colored people, particularly blacks, have been demeaning, with white actors painting their faces black to play black people if they weren't stereotyped as criminals, nannies, handmaidens, or domestic butlers. This trend has transformed and continued with Joseph Fiennes playing Michael Jackson in *Elizabeth, Michael, and Marlon (2016);* Angelina Jolie playing Afro-Cuban Marianne Pearl in *A Mighty Heart (2007)*; Juliette Binoche playing Maria Segovia in *The 33 (2015)*; and even America's favorite superhero, Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.), was blackface in *Tropic Thunder (2008).* This whole mechanism of "whitewashing" the cinematic space has been operational for forever now. The crude mythology about African Americans was reversed by Alice Guy Blachè in her silent comedy film *A Fool and His Money (1912),* which had the first all-African American cast. Simultaneously Filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux, Otto Preminger, Powell Lindsay, William Greaves, Bill Alexander, and Melvin Van Peebles were curating a de facto underground subculture (as most of them were denied access in Hollywood) in a country where Negro theatres and cinema (which constituted the circuit of black theatres like REX theatre) didn't achieve much due to the racist *amanita ocreata* (death angel) in the Americans' psychology. This vicious downward mobility of race representation began with Griffith's *Birth of a Nation (1913)*, classical Hollywood racism embedded in the Hays code, moved to the Jazz Age's misrepresentations and *Gone with the Wind (1939)*, and was somehow dismantled by Harry Belafonte in Robert Rossen's *Island in the Sun (1957)* and Robert Wise's *Odds Against Tomorrow (1959).*

The years that followed were characterized by an explosion of Black-powered cinema channeled through Third World cinema, avant-garde African American cinema aimed at abolishing legalized and institutionalized racial segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement throughout Hollywood's

fabric. The era of the 60s and 70s for African Americans was like mayhem, which included decades of punishing mistreatment of people of color, which made the 20th century an epoch of revolt. With civil eruptions masquerading throughout America, this movement peaked during the Watts riot in Los Angeles. The unbearable trauma of families whose members (children, adults, and women) were killed terrified the entire community, and by 1968, the country was in free fall with over 16 riots, which were then exploded like a "grand artiste" in films. The structure wherein black lives existed on the peripheries of a white man's gaze came to an absolute end with Leo Penn's *A Man Called Adam* (1967). The ensemble of the film, including Cicely Tyson, Ja'Net Dubois, Morgan Freeman, and the multi-talented Davis, created a pathway for future generations of actors to look up to and follow.

Spike Lee is another such prolific filmmaker, an auteur of black cinema who attempted to control and manipulate the waves of obstreperous racial undercurrents in America with racial apogees like *Do the Right Thing (1989), Malcolm X (1992), BlacKkKlansman (2018),* and even his recent *Da 5 Bloods (2021)*. But Hollywood's major motion picture studios, after a series of ebbs and flows with people of color representation, changed in 2013, which was when the first big waves of black-themed movies came out. It was a corollary to former President Barack Obama's 2013 election. Right in that year, films lik*e Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom, 42, The Butler,* and *12 Years a Slave were* released, but they all correspond to a template that has been followed till date, which is the agglutination of African Americans into a genre of biopics, slavery, and police brutality narratives, or sports fiction. The beat of representation in 2013 shaped the peripheries and dimensions of African American representation on the big screen because it mattered who was in the White House. All of the Hollywood CEOs suddenly had to say, "Hey, the most powerful man in the world is an African American." "We need to reflect this new moment in cinema." There was a movement there, but that was in 2013. But now it's

time to resurrect Charles R. Rondeau's *Train Ride to Hollywood (1975),* a pastiche of 1940s movie cliches, and inject themselves into the mix, which is more than an "off-white take on black cool."

This paper attempts to not just catalog but also annotate while simultaneously analyzing the significant reconfigurations and transformations in the utilization of the melodramatic mode in race films as the diminution of African Americans in Hollywood feels like an Everest. For the purpose of this paper, I've decided to delineate these changes in the 21st century in relation to the cinematic medium and several other formats (video installations, digital art) rather than enlisting the corresponding past indexes of melodramatic racial format. Furthermore, this paper adumbrated an inchoate structure for the representation of race, which has been used in genres such as an ebullient melodramatic mode.

- A) magic realism: Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012)*

- B) Drama: Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight (2016)*

- C) Science fiction/Superhero Fantasy: Ryan Coogler's Black Panther franchise *(Black Panther (2018) and Wakanda Forever (2022).*

While categorically identifying the several melodramatic modes in these above-listed films, it's also imperative to understand that the study of melodrama holds a vertiginous jurisdiction to decipher the reasoning as to why, in a democracy ruled by rights (which isn't really happening), one doesn't achieve a stand of moral authority by merely crying about the infringement of their rights. Instead, we say, "I've been victimized; I've suffered; therefore, give me rights," as explained by Linda Williams in her seminal work, *The Race Card.* She writes that to fully articulate racial melodramas, herein one must observe why peripatetic drives for scrupulous and accurate modes of racially marked characters (which additionally get culminated into a realistic symposium of race) are essential since these marked characters aren't enabled by the American studios to countermand the problematic racial typages attributed to them.

Black and white racial melodrama as a whole leaps from medium to medium, functioning, whether on page, stage, screen, or courtroom, as "a state of vision, of feeling, and of consciousness." The melodramatic imagination that these Gordian stereotypes attend to, combined with their historical dynamics, is important to be configured in order to align our reflective praxis in favor of some people's racial and gendered suffering along with others' racial and gendered villainy. If Barack Obama is on one end of the spectrum, Kanye West is on the other, sporting a "white lives matter" Yeezy patterned sweatshirt. America has remained a deeply racist country modeled after its atavistic demarche and until it recognizes and deals with that internecine consciousness, even important convictions like the Derek Chauvin case (guilty of murdering George Floyd) will not meaningfully alter the status quo. As pointed out at the beginning of this paper, the Tyre Nicholas case and the video footage of his beating complicate the configuration of this race card in the times we live in. This paper highlights and conforms to the aesthetics of various performances of melodramatic modes in Kendrick Lamar's and Beyoncé's music videos, as well as various melodramatic digital aesthetics in video-installations turned into movies. Gary's *An Ecstatic Experience (2015)* and Kahlil Joseph's *BLKNWS (2015)* draw attention to several consuetudines that are reminiscent of the avant-garde techniques of the 1960s and 1970s, which were an impetuous yet unerring mode of race-representation.

We live in the twenty-first century, which has also given rise to a new neologism known as the transgenre, which encapsulates a total-melodramatic excess framework to illuminate current configurations. *Everything, Everywhere at Once (2021), Black Panther (2022), and The Hunger Games (2012)* are appropriate examples of this point. So, the association between trans-genres and melodramatic mode is a symbiotic relationship, which is vehemently utilized to produce cinematic products of our times. Continuing the famous "ignore black cinema" Oscar trend, this year's nominations, along with their social media

accouterments, fell short of encircling the spectacular films such as *The Woman King (2022)* and *Till (2022)* in this cycle.

"Melodrama is not a static, archaic, stereotyping, and non-realist form, but a tremendously protean, evolving, and modernizing form that continually uncovers new realistic material for its melodramatic project," writes Gledhill. Hence, I've chosen to investigate the "melodramatic project of race representation," which has rendered itself an antediluvian domain and requires a revamp within its aesthetics through the selected films and visual culture projects.

If melodrama is a form that's constantly modernizing and growing while encapsulating its earlier aesthetics (Expressionism, Realism, Modernism, and now Postmodernism), its real tenets are illustrated by its capacity to gesture towards the ineffable traces of good and evil. These Procrustean traces in a post-sacred era, as deciphered by Linda Williams, effectuate race as an unhinged locus of melodramatic expression. This is observed not only in the narrative strategies but also in the layered aesthetics of melodrama incorporated within the narrative to create a legerdemain conflagration of emotions, color, and their subsequent excess. This mode of high emotionalism and stark ethical conflict in which the body grieves in a loud gesture is orchestrated by a pulverized melodramatic action sequence (wrt. *The Black Panther*) or colors of melancholia (wrt. *Moonlight and Beasts of the Southern Wild*). The burst from realism into an intensified mode of melodramatic articulation is achieved through a framework of "rhetorical excess, hyperbole, antithesis, and oxymoronic illustrations." Race has been converged into a moral occult zone about which you really aren't supposed to talk, yet it thrives under a domain of popular discourse or thought quite similar to what it was in the antebellum world. In our day and age, deceptive mainstream media reporting, "Karen" figures on social media, and stereotypes in Hollywood films elicit the same emotions. "Granting public recognition to racial categories seems to be synonymous with racism itself," as explained by

Peggy Pascoe, is an apodictic in a post-civil rights and post-Lyndon Johnson's affirmative action (1966–69) era to encourage Americans to turn colorblind, not notice race, and internally support white supremacy.

The new configurations of racial victimization and vilification in the digital world of the 21st century (Nicholas Tyler's case, the Black Lives Matter movement) is entirely captured by modes of melodrama, wherein the essence of this mode is "in its ubiquitous cross-media reference," linking news programming, fiction, non-fiction, and cultural citations. The asinine yet phantasmagoric melodramatic text of muteness is utilized by the concept of race through an emphasized mode of articulated expressivity, which simultaneously functions as a dialectic between sympathy and antipathy (without mentioning their names).

In films like *Pursuit of Happiness (2006) and Fences (2016),* repressed social emotion and psyche are siphoned off, picked up by the narrative (race representation), and exploded on the mise-en-scene (via pertinacious sound design and egregious visuals).

The exaggerated notion of being good or evil is simply a condition projected onto a black male body on a media screen. The melodramatic modes of articulation are accumulated on the hyper-expressive body of the same black man who used to wear the "I am a Man" tag all the while asking for basic rights and not to be shot in the street. In this peculiar configuration, the mere claim to their citizenship lies in the efficacious spectacles of "pathos and action," while the politics of representation itself is reframed and restructured completely, creating a subservient demeanor that arises from moralizing identificatory frames articulated at the level of mute signs of black body' expression and gesture.

Another area where Hollywood excelled at playing the race card was the transformation of white supremacist guilt into a genre of testimonies of virtue. These dialectics of pathos and action that additionally address the issue of moral legibility are encapsulated in Nietzsche's "ressentiment" and

Wendy Brown's concept of the "wound." Cinema, through its multifarious modes or reconfigurations, has framed multiple signs of racial rectitude or villainy, but several of these transformations are considered integral parts of the black representation metamorphosis project in Hollywood. The trichotillomania orchestrated through Hollywood's conventions of racial representation has been splintered off through several landmark and instrumental movies representing the egregious components of racism and its subsequent trauma.

Starting on this odyssey of black representation from *Within Our Gates (1920),* we encounter Oscar Micheaux's race adjustment paradigm, which was actually a retort to Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), embedded with intransigent racial interstices. Then came Zora Neale Hurston's *Field Work Footage (1928),* which is used to this day in documentaries. Moving onto Dudley Murphy's *Black and Tan and St. Louis Blue (1919),* which prophesied the onset of digital music videos in our times. Additionally, during the same time, the tired troupes of "Showboat" (Harry Pollard's *Show Boat (1929)*, James Whale's *Show Boat* (1936), and George Sidney's *Show Boat (1951))* created a template for exhibiting black performers through an act of recycling instead of seeking out to create new kinds of roles. The unrealistic standards of beauty (dismissing people of color) or crushing black hope on screen were signifiers of the same problem, which substantiated self-hatred for black women for several decades. *Shadows (1959)*, a race drama about three siblings directed by John Cassavetes, was a model for diverse racial (black) representation on film. *Nothing But a Man (1964),* by Michael Roemer, starring Ivan Dixon and Abbey Lincoln, manufactured a platform for "star" performances in Hollywood that moved beyond the racially phenotypical attributes of black men and women. While studio movies were stuck in their retro-patriarchal drive to shape the culture rather than respond to it, writer-director George Romero orchestrated a fresh action hero by putting a movie and a gun in the hands of Duane Jones, an African American actor, in *Night of the Living Dead (1968).*

It's worth noting that the race card was not only played ethically here, but it was also hidden throughout the film, resulting in a cast of non-stereotypical black men. But correspondingly, the militant African Americans nuzzled up to this feature as the protagonist, Jones, died, picked off after fighting to save whites. This was translated as a metaphor for not staying within your race by the militants. Later that year, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis (the same city as Tyler's), and just a few years after the murders of Medgar Evers and Malcolm X, George Romero's ending of the film, wherein the black body is tossed into fire, condensed into a few reactionary darts. That same year, William Greaves' *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm, Take One (1968),* toyed with the concept of temporality and created a new genre (the innovative, social satire, and prank film). Moving on to Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweet back's Baadasssss Song (1971),* which was heavily articulated through background scores by Earth, Wind, and Fire (a jazz, R&B, and Afro-pop band). Similarly, Gordon Parks claimed the western genre and set design for African Americans in *The Learning Tree (1969),* the first studio-financed film by an African American director. A white cop shooting Tuck (a black man) in front of his four black friends and proudly declaring, "You see, this is what happens to criminals," shook the consciousness of the black spectators at the time with the absolute melodramatic reality of that scene and situation in America. Next year came Robert Downey Sr.'s (1969) advertising satire *Putney Swope*, in which the protagonist becomes the head of an advertising agency, changing the ways it works (racially and internally). This film, through its phenomenal subtextual references, created comedy as a genre reflecting on the time and space one existed in. Interracial romance was still considered an "X-rated" genre (as a black man could have sex with a white woman), but Martin Ritt's *The Great White Hope (1970)* and Sidney Lummet's *The Last of the Mobile Hotshots (1970)* helped to change that. Simultaneously emerging was *Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970)*, directed by Ossie Davis, which flipped the narrative of black defeatism and degradation by plotting a white cop into sexual humiliation at the hands of a black woman, while Davis used found footage, documentary-style frames, and Afro-American music to evoke America's racial unconsciousness. Then came Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep (1978)*, a magnum opus of black melodramatic cinema that used music deftly to illustrate character and setting while demonstrating an alluring command of the medium that was imitated into the next century (by films like *Sidewalk Stories (1989), George Washington (2000), House Party (1990),* and even Scorsese's *Shutter Island (2010)* Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* demonstrated the melodramatic medium's potential by depicting a poet discovering beauty in his own neighborhood. A decade later, Spike Lee debuted with his black Bohemia, indie-infused African American new wave, S*he's Gotta Have It (1996),* which revolutionized black women's sexuality on screen forever.

This is important to note here because it is beyond the scope of this paper to render a composite note of the entire historiography of race films encapsulating different configurations of the melodramatic mode; hence, I've attempted to enlist the major configurational changes that simultaneously impacted the ongoing melodramatic imagination of the country. Furthermore, these films also delineate the effectual changes in the usage of different devices and techniques to address the race quotient comprehensively yet unequivocally. Returning to the better-but-unsubstantiated realm of racial representation in Hollywood, the post-Obama era serves as an accepted moment at which the binaries of race representation are broken and an all-encompassing, yet distinct mode of articulation emerges. The established trends for black subject authorship by black subjects—a charcuterie of melodramatic aesthetics—titivate to better correspond with contemporaneous times.

### A- Pirouettes of melodramatic mode in principality of arcane genres

1. **Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012)***

**Fig. 1:** Illustrating a frame of black masculinity and its melodramatic camera aesthetic (high angle).



**Fig. 2:** The excess of melodrama curating a gateway for magical realism is illustrated in the carnival sequence.



**Fig. 3:** Apocalyptic mise-en-scene, a modernization of realism through melodramatic performances.



**Fig. 4:** Showing the edges of realism and magical realism, with Hushpuppy representing melodrama in that hospital gown**.**



**Fig.5 :** Capturing the real essence of poverty-ridden America post-Katrina and dismantling racial parameters



**Fig. 6:** The elements of magical realism (Aurochs) superimposed on the skin of a black woman enable trans-genre convergence by implementing the tenets of the melodramatic mode.

Benh Zeitlin's 2012 debut film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, is a film that crystallizes like a hallucination with melodramatic affect directed at the spectator. This apocalyptic southern Gothic is set during the Katrina hurricane catastrophe and revolves around Wink, a hard-drinking guy who lives in a disintegrating aquatic wickiup with Hushpuppy, his five-year-old daughter. They are both at the epicenter of this modern-day recreation of the biblical floods, which did not exacerbate but rather dissolve racial tensions. Multicultural identities coexisted, forming a kind of community to survive this disaster. Wink, who has a sclerotic blood disorder, and, in melodramatic logic, a broken heart effectuated by his wife's absence. Traversing through the exploration of the daughter-father relationship with undertones of countermanded-

black masculinity, coming of age for Hushpuppy resembles a mise-en-scene like Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* ("I told you don't stop") sequence. The film's astounding multifariousness of layered subjectivities amalgamated with social experiences and cultural identities, forming an assemblage of "black" to orchestrate a template for an animadversion of racial representations. It's critical to note that the formulation of "black" is not just a politically and culturally curated domain but a rather dynamic force de majeure that encapsulates and reflects different historical and cultural experiences of black subjects. Wink can also be described as the reincarnation of the patriarchal figure of the 1950s, who has been dismantled by the racial injustices he has faced throughout his life. This film, using several melodramatic modes, puts a moratorium on

patriarchal codes, replacing them with melodramatic, magical imagination, leaving troupes for reconciliation and a saga of survival.

This defiant, libertarian narrative is embedded with several modes of melodrama, which are invoked throughout the film, as follows:

1. The bio-politicization of southern life, particularly after Katrina, evinces a kind of creature comfort that's literalized in the multitudinous linkages between humans and animals. And to evoke this sense of excess, the director uses the mode of melodrama, illustrated through magical realism, wherein the mise en scène serves emotional logic along with a set of associations. Each serves a melodramatic purpose and has a different relationship, just like the elements of different visual zones (realism and magical realism). Miss Bathsheba, an African American schoolteacher in the Bayou (bathtub) community who infuses the histrionics of myth with her austere teaching modules in class, showcases in one of the scenes a tattoo on her right thigh depicting two giant mythological aurochs being attacked by tiny cavemen with their spears. Hush puppy internalizes this mirabile dictum through her articulation of excess, to endure catharsis for the return of the repressed (in this case, her mother's love, and a claim to normal life). Whenever there's this articulation of excess, the mise-en-scene explodes through a gamut of visuals and soundscapes, creating a nexus between these phantasmic beings and the young hushpuppy. Overexposure and fogged film stock reflect the imperfections in the world's beauty, while the handheld 16 mm camera renders the visuals with the domesticity of this family melodrama about the coming apocalypse now. This gritty and realistic camerawork functions as a facade only to be ruptured by melodramatic magical realism, which functions through

the symbolism of Aurochs and Hushpuppy's juxtaposed transformations.

2. Wink's heart attack causes sonic estrangements, which are contained by another symbolic element in the web of life (which connects humans to nature).

   In one of the scenes, in which he collapses on the ground due to his ailing condition and tumultuous weather conditions, right at that beat the world around Wink and Hush-Puppy starts to disintegrate while simultaneously the spectator is subjected to the melodramatic affect through a collection of dynamic "pillow-shots" (crashing glaciers, inbound storms, and dramatic gales). The soothing soundscape of rhythmic beats was accompanied by an implied connection between humans and nature. The connectedness is also emphasized through various freeze frames of nature shots during the unraveling of the narrative. The structure of pathos, overwrought emotion, temporal action, moral polarization, and a non-classical narrative is illustrated during this scene, at which point magical realism and documentary genres are constituted through a melodramatic mode of intensification (to articulate the inarticulate).

3. We are continuously aligned with Hushpuppy during this story of survival and trauma, which positions the spectator with Wink (outside the levee), but we are still aligned with Hushpuppy. Another instance where positioning and alignment clash, followed by a return to the concept of transference. Even the sound design of Levee is composed of a mechanical heartbeat, symbolizing the way in which the natural is mimicked and rendered fake. One of the most important scenes of the community carnival is when Hushpuppy celebrates her sexuality while traversing through the toxicity of her father's

masculinity, which functions as an impasse for her. This is a performance of the melodramatic mode.

4. The use of melodramatic mode, which emphasizes psychological polarization, i.e., the conflict of id and superego is highlighted in river scenes through an interior conflict, while repressed desires, anxieties, and fears are surfaced along with the suffering of both protagonists, evoking a sense of pathos that is also working in a dialectic with action. The construction of this narrative around sensationalism is another feature of the mode, wherein

various gestures and beats are heightened dramatically to trigger the desire to bring justice to this whole catastrophic situation. The melodramatic narrative, which is layered within the mythical aurochs (conceptualized as dramatic and immoral eugenics controller), is fallen upon the young protagonist, Hushpuppy, who is also burdened with an angle of fabulation as a cure for her absent mother's love. This substantial burden reconfigures the scene of "engulfment through which racialized bodies and indigenous territories are disposed of by and for white settlement."

## 2. Henry Jenkins' *Moonlight (2016)*



**Fig. 7:** The end shot's final frame, bursting the excess by breaking the fourth wall and its immanent color compositions.
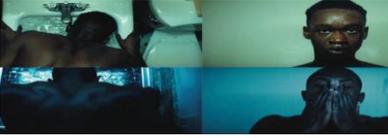


**Fig. 8:** A collage of four frames from the two sections of the film, representing the immediate change-over in color through a melodramatic gesture of looking in the mirror.



**Fig.** 9 illustrates the inclusion of racial modes of melodrama to capture a beat of closeness between black bodies.



**Fig. 10 illustrates** lush, tropical palm trees in the B.G. with a bright blue sky peeking through, which is rendered via extreme saturation (color grading), and the reflection of a Miami sheen on Mahershala's skin. The aesthetics of race applied throughout the film are like the play of light, color grading, and digital editing in this frame. The two frames showcase RAW footage and edited footage.



**Fig. 11:** Another configuration of the melodramatic mode composed of stratified color blue to evoke a motley of undertones and themes. (Absent Fathers, Family Melodrama, Socio-political Reflections, etc., to name a few)



**Fig. 12:** *Flamboya*, a Viviane Sassen photograph used as a template for Moonlight's cinematography (hues, sharpness, light, lenses, saturation, color, brightness, and skin abstraction).

*Moonlight* is about love, sex, and survival, displaced through an anionic configuration cajoled into an enmeshment of melodramatic codes and genre iconicity in lieu of mothers and absent fathers. This maudlin articulation of excess through the picaresque adventures of Little, Chiron, and Black resembles Tolstoy's trilogy: childhood, boyhood, and youth. Jenkins, through his tightly knit three-act structure, encompasses woozy, dream-like camera work that accumulates epiphanic upsurges through ostensible, extreme close-ups, all of which are interlaced with rhythmic staccatos and sonorous soundscapes without presenting a panacea for this whole situation. Stuart Hall writes in his essay *New Ethnicities* that "the question of black subjects cannot be represented within the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity." Jenkins' *Moonlight* provides a comprehensive conduit for such frameworks.

*"Just as masculinity always constructs femininity as double—as Madonna and Whore at the same time—so racism constructs the black subject as a noble savage and violent assailant." And in the doubling, fear and desire double for one another and play across the structures of otherness, complicating its politics."*

In the scene between Kevin and Chiron on the beach, when Jenkins exhibits the sole moment of physical intimacy in the film, it accurately feels that this mode of melodrama that's rendered to illustrate a study of black closeness doesn't need to burst out in excess through the mise en scène; rather, it plays on the starts and stops, the hesitations and rushes between them, which come along when Kevin touches Chiron and says, "What you've got to feel sorry for," while working his hands down Chiron's pants. This scene holds a gravitational pull towards the process of becoming oneself for Chiron and a return of the repressed for both of these young African American boys. The melodrama here in this case is captured through entropy: the glistening moonlight, the discolored sand, and the sound of waves, which all together create an ecological cosmos of "erotic" without showing fucking.

Through its melodramatic use of color, moonlight offers a hiatus from narrative time. *Moonlight* is the precise time and temperature semiotically encoded in the melodramatic mode, where "colors survive and offer relaxing detours from the thematic centering of violence," which is automated till the last frame. In the final seconds of the film and its extra-temporality, we see Little standing alone on the beach in the blue light of dusk. Just before the screen goes dark one final time, Little turns his head toward the camera, and we, viewers of the film, suddenly have the sense that he is looking at us, as though he has been "sent by color in search of color." According to the Freudian schema, in the final scene of *Moonlight*, black can neither be read as a "subject who has been engaged in the work of mourning nor as a subject stuck in a state of melancholia."

Moonlight is a multilayered drama that transforms and reforms through each act by being a self-referential portrayal of black queerness and violence inflicted upon black bodies that's fortuitously carved by Jenkins through his legerdemain aesthetics of the melodramatic mode. By incorporating the real "black" identity in the film right from the exposition, which depicts a dangerous world of drugs, gangsters, and black masculinity, Jenkins throughout the film keeps on deconstructing this notion of black identity through several cinematic tools that inform the spectator about the steps that go into making a decision or even a habit, and when the whole world is against you or even trying to pull you down to stay in the world of crime. It's the story of a young boy whose life is upended by his drug-addicted mother and bullies at school. Punctuated accouterments of melodrama are formulated through a melodramatic narrative, a stentorian sound design, and an inviting gaze by the cinematographer Laxton (drawing on the work of photographers Earlie Hudnall Jr. and Vivian Sassen), who frames these black bodies in such a way that the spectator is drawn into the character's emotional and psychological peripherals.

The melodramatic use of blue, which is also articulated as a new template to illustrate a new grammar for celebrating black body beauty, is a note to future filmmakers in which the dramatic use of blue is used to emphasize black identity as well as an insignia of congruence within identity through its leaden-footed formation.

*"In moonlight, black boys look blue. You blue, that's what I'm gon' call you."*

## 3. Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*



**Figure 13** depicts the astral plane T'challa returning to meet his father after his death. The frame illustrates the magnanimity of the African landscape through a decolonized lens.



**Fig. 14:** Illustrating the burst of melodrama through an intricate configuration of racial gestures and performances in this sequence's mise-en-scene.



**Fig.15-** A scathing depiction of toxic black masculinity vs. black (Wakandian brother) benevolent warrior.



**Fig. 16:** The melodramatic gesture of Wakanda Forever symbolizes the black power collected.



**Fig. 17:** The woman's power and usage of red for their uniforms illustrates the new configuration of "young black girl" through her action histrionics, enabling the melodramatic mode.



**Fig. 18:** The accentuated melodrama highlighted in action sequences between Kill monger and T'Challa. Mode of melodramatic digital aesthetics for representing racial discourse

Black Panther is a compendium celebrating black culture through the alacrity of Wakanda, a vibranium metal that produces kinetic energies through a process of absorption, storage, and release. This fictional metal powers the whole city of Wakanda through a confluence of advanced technologies culminating in skyscrapers, advanced communication devices, futuristic spaceships, and superhero suits, in contrast to the popular American media's depiction of Africa as backward, savage, and chaotic. The film is annotated with afro-futuristic aesthetics, allowing for an undeniable expansion of blackness in *Black Panther.*

The story is quite straightforward and centers around the ascension of Prince T'challa after his father T'chaka's sudden demise during an

explosion at a U.N. meeting. Upon this incident, T'challa becomes the warrior king of Wakanda, which is showcased as the only country in Africa that didn't bear the atrocities of arbitrary European colonization. The history of vibranium and its appearance on Wakanda represent a fusion of floral species into a hybridity of earthly and alien matter, which also augments this realm with an Afro-futuristic aesthetic incorporated within a logic of concatenation (past, present, and future) linked through heart-shaped flowers (herbs) and rituals of ancient African tribes. Goddess Bast envisioned a warrior shaman (who became the first Black Panther) with this plant, which furthermore bestowed upon him superhuman strength, thunderbolt velocity, and instinctual powers. But at the core of its heart, *Black Panther* is a story about a hero vs. a villain, which is manifested in the form of Killmonger, a former Navy seal agent with Wakandian blood running through him. Kill-monger, following the mission of his father N'Jobu, wants to seize control of Wakanda's vibranium-fueled technocratic machinery, which he instead wants to use to terminate the strands of oppression inflicted upon Africans all around the world. It's to be noted here that there's no real villain in this movie but just two African (Wakandian) natives fighting for different ideologies with different perspectives.

Several modes of melodrama are rendered in *Black Panther,* which are as follows:

- Configurations of family melodrama (the narrative)

- Generational trauma and melancholy of grief (death of T'Challa and his father)

- Melodramatic gestures of esprit de corps and camaraderie- (Wakanda forever)

- Father-son melodramatic troupe (T'challa visiting his dead father T'chaka on the ancestral plane)

- Resolution of sibling rivalry (melodramatic troupe with a resolute denouement)

- Melodrama as action choreographies (action sequences between T'chala and Killmonger)

- Hip hop as a sonic melodramatic mode (Kendrick *All the Stars*, *King's Dead*)

- Melodramatic digital visual effects (frame drops, retimes, and morphs)

- The ethos of trauma and pathos culminated in action (the deaths of T'challa's father and him).

- Virtue of innocence and villainy are ruptured once we're acquainted with KillMonger's traumatic childhood (using melodramatic flashbacks which Maureen Turim explains is a an abrupt, fragmentary, return of the traumatic event)

- By removing the spectacle and narrative divide

- The cinematography rendered through the Alexa XT camera, which emphasized the excess foregrounded in the film's mise-en-scene from narrative to aleatory effects, employs the melodramatic mode to accentuate the richness of racial representation on screen.

The film also utilizes several frameworks for exhibiting and representing race through ethical configurations, such as:

- The representation of black female power and personification of selfless strength

- The modern black woman's experience in America is mirrored.

- Reversal of the colonialism narrative

- Solidarity amongst race through "WAKANDA FOREVER" gesture

- Afrofuturist imagination of Africa

- Criticism of black masculinity

- The plight of a young black woman in America through Iron heart character

(categorized by generational trauma and violence)

● Aggrandizement of African aesthetics, lexicons, and iconicity

● celebration of black

● Inauguration of the black superhero universe in convergence culture and pop culture

● Highlighting the role of education (a non-westernized black education) and technology as super-weapons.

Blank Panther is a trans-genre (science fiction, action, drama, and black empowerment) spectacle that culminates through melodramatic modes that administer the catharsis of excess while evoking unfeigned blackness in Wakanda (a non-colonized landscape). This film operates further on Jenkins's attributed "convergence culture" with its several fandom pages and Marvel Cinematic Universe anecdotes on social media through an intrinsic circadian connectedness (performing outside the theatre space), thereby granting African Americans a superhero universe they are proud of, hence concurrently memorializing and rendering an encomiastic template of black representation. The symbolisation devices utilized in this film range from taking digs at white characters with a bon mot to evoke a sense of contemporaneous times and the need for togetherness amongst the black community which all together can voice, dissent, and affect the racial discrimination in America. This film pays homage to African culture through the glamorization of black characters and the use of rich African rituals and traditions. The hairstyles, accents, and costumes of various characters like M'Baku, Nakia, Shuri, and Killmonger exhibit realistic aesthetics of blackness and a drive toward solemnity. It's important to applaud the film for how it handled gendered perspectives and accentuated the narrative of "black women," which is an attempt to move forward from Malcolm X's speech where he articulated that "*the most disrespected and unprotected being in America is the black woman*" and represent the diversification of real black women on screen.

In the past few years, the Manichaean racial parameters have been wreathed by socio-political commentary along with the aesthetics of "real yet inclusive" representation:

Ranging from Queen Latifa's *U.N.I.T.Y. (1988)* to Kendrick Lamar's *Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers (2022)* to Ultra Nate Wyche's *Free (1998)* to hip-hop mogul Jay Z's provocative album *4.44 (2017) to* Beyonce's collaboration with Derek Dixie on *Black Parade (2020),* a Black Lives Matter anthem, these songs have vocalized the distinct and diverse black personal narratives that have been able to contain the wholesome configuration of representation. It's only these musical pieces or other miscellaneous tracks that are then additionally employed in a melodramatic mode to create a scrupulous framework for representation as observed in distinct platitudinous genres ranging from the biopics of historical characters(like *Detroit (2017)* and sports personalities(*King Richard(2021)* to victims of inner-city antagonism towards police(*Selma(2014)* and even the slavery narrative which has reached it over-fetishized culmination with *Will Smith's Emancipation(2022)* an Apple original. The vast cinematic space that their narratives have occupied is, in theory, a direct departure from stereotypes in silent and classical Hollywood cinema, as well as the infrastructure mortgaged to black audiences and films. This complex relationship with Hollywood's racial dynamics is converged into a topsy-turvy structure for racial representation, while the ever-changing melodramatic mode is reconfigured to adhere to the trans-genre framework of contemporaneous times.

**B-Melodramatic aesthetics in autodidactic video installations: a prototype of nonpareil melodramatic imagination tossing fresh aces of race cards.**

The peripheries of black representation have always been a major war zone between several principles, and Paul Gilroy responds to this exclave through an inscribed mediation of dialectical tension between representation as "a practice of devotion" and representation as "a practice of delegation." Whereas several artists have, through the medium

of video installations in art galleries or festivals, been curating work where a relational conception is exhibited that becomes the prototype of "selection, combination, and articulation." These artists and their subsequent artworks have conceded to the diverse range of black experiences with an annexed subject position, which somehow functions as a lacuna in the stereotypical norm that all black people are alike (either homeless, selling drugs, playing sports, or being hip-hop artists). To explain this further, I'd like to bring up Stuart Hill's assertions about the trajectory of black cultural production, which simultaneously explain the caprice of the politics of representation. After the demolition of

the "Tom" and "Anti-Tom" yardstick, it's been imperative for cultural theorists to encapsulate the general imagery of a black individual in America, wherein the ingenuousness of people of color is detached from their essential subject being. This incongruous mechanization of black subjects is set free by not attaching the lineaments of blackness with nature but through the historical formation of hegemony (wherein they were first brought to America as slaves, and that encumbrance shall be annihilated). Adhering to these arguments are:

A. **Ja' Tovia Gary's** *an Ecstatic Experience* **(2015)**



**Fig. 19 (a):** Censoring and suppression of a black woman's voice through digital aesthetics enables a form of repurposing archive material to generate a melodramatic spectatorial affect.



**Fig. 19 (b):** Another frame of a similar device. imprisonment of African Americans in America.



**Fig. 20 (a) and (b):** Through a scratch and explosion of violent violet color onto the female figures, resulting in their disappearance from the scene, this device enables a project of historical memorialization as well as a template for dealing with intergenerational and racial trauma.

*An ecstatic experience (2015)* is a meditative invocation of black feminist subjectivity via a mode of "oppositional gaze," which unilaterally functions as a reparative gesture focusing on the warped histories through which a black individual is perceived (something which *Black Panther* also achieved). This installation encapsulates narratives and sounds from fragmented archival media, repurposing it to derive a new format of racial representation in which Alice Coltrane performs *Stopover Bombay*, Ruby Dee embodies Fannie Moore, and perspicacious application of digital aesthetics is used to implant a melodramatic wavelength into archival footage. A restoration of African American subjectivity is achieved through this avant-garde memorialization project, in which a snatched-away terrain of history is reconstructed by producing symbolic referents to the civil rights movement and Black Lives Matter. Cathy Caruth, in her essay "The *Wound and the Voice,"* cites Freud, explaining the way in which "catastrophic events reiterate themselves." So the impact of this overwhelming racial divide can't be merely absorbed, so projects like "An Ecstatic Experience" exercise the insistence of remembrance(which isn't erroneous), which furthermore create a circumference of historical memory and witnessing. In this film, the filmmaker Ja' Tovia Gary mobilizes the spectatorial agency to become the witness of the trauma unfolded through the framing of black history in a digitalized, conscientious diagram of racism in America. A new perspective is invoked through this layered enmeshment of historical and contemporary, reality and performance, to capture the ecstatic-dialectic of black subjects between their overwhelming, unarticulated emotion and the restoration drive of black history. Gary makes extensive use of the spectator's role as a witness to the aural and visual margins of trauma. The unrepresentable trauma that cries for articulation is given a shape through the digital aesthetics, scratches, glitches, and markers that illustrate the mode of inscription on black bodies by a sensible filmmaker to systematically expose racial discrimination.

- The illustrative usage of archival material encoded with splashes of digital scratching and drawing is positioned to curate a cure for Freud's "*NACHTRAGLICHKEIT-*belatedness" through numerous motifs resulting in catharsis of a traumatic experience. A template of integration and simulation of black subjects is achieved to end this unrepresentability, wherein Anna Kaplan's dovetailing of Melos as an aesthetic form is implemented to calm the effervescent racial prejudices and their subsequent traumas of class and gender.

- The framework of non-linearity, story fragments, hallucinations, and flashbacks are ennobled through digital aesthetics and animation, which serves to effectuate the spectator bearing witness role.

- This double nature of trauma goes along with an illustration of traumatic neurosis, which is foregrounded through imaging of jail, taped mouth, disappearance from a community, and singling out through a marker of exclusion superimposed on the archival images.

- Kaja Silverman makes a similar point to Hayden White, wherein independent avant-garde cinema performs the role of an emancipator while munificently addressing and framing traumatic modalities through aesthetic forms (here through digital). It's imperative for fiction and non-fiction filmmakers to acknowledge the stalwart nature of these installations, which don't really frame traumatic cultural symptoms but rather, through a depiction of paralysis, recapitulation, and circuitousness, construct a frame that combines all aspects of the non-representability of trauma. This methodology can be used to get away from the static nature of representation and generate electrostatic force that divorces race from banal archetypes.

**B. Moving onto Khalil Joseph's video-installation.**

*BLKNWS,* which is being developed into a feature film by A24. This installation was interested in imagining a news channel from the perspective of a black creator while also simultaneously grafting content from the past, present, and future of the black experience. The news-creation industrial complex of America is satirized by Joseph's film. This whitewashed and biased media narrative is unmasked via a two-screen, two-channel framework that reimagines a news network offering anecdotes for celebrating and remembering the blackness of America.

This project was turned down by major networks to appear as a news bit, so now, through an evocation of a counterfactual creative vision in the form of an artwork, it exists. However, it is the transformation of this artwork into a feature film that makes it relevant in this research paper. Elsasser's article on *Postmodernism as Mourning Work* emphasizes TV and media's contentious role in making trauma theory incomprehensible through manufacturing and serving trash TV (a monogram for therapy), which is concurrently manifested by major media houses highlighting the verse of democracy's debacle in order to ethically represent its citizens and their shared experiences of racial trauma in the public sphere. Joseph's film attempts to redefine trauma in the post-structuralist moment, where it becomes a moment of deconstruction, or to make sense of it no matter how impossible it is, through the disposition of negative performativity, which means that various versions will eventually allow one to get totalized through an act of integration, whether individual or collective.



**Fig. 21:** The two-screen configurations of BLKNWS curating a black-media projection



**Fig. 22:** The juxtaposition of archival material with African American media events, while this template serves as a reminder of and an act of remembering black culture.



**Fig. 23(a):** Another frame from the film illustrating the deeply ingrained racial undercurrents in American psychology.
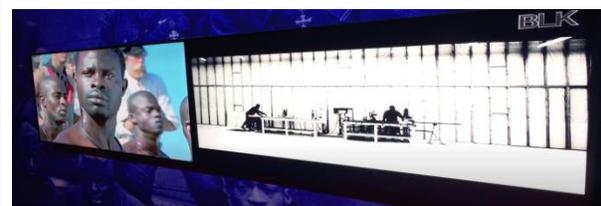


**Fig. 25:** Celebrating the inclusivity and heteronormativity of blackness and an urgent need to replace the racial binaries with extensive incorporations of different classes, genders, or races

**Figure 24(b):** Combining an archival newspaper clipping with Civil Rights Movement video footage.

Edited together like a news program, *BLKNWS* is a celebration of black culture, something that was earlier performed by Robert Downey Sr. 's (1969) advertising satire *Putney Swope.* BLNWS composites and merges several studio banners, like 20th Century Fox, Universal, Warner Bros., MGM, and Miramax, which are tightly packed in a collage, while the superimposition of BLK NWS over these studio logos performs a function of conflagration in white-washed media representation. BLK NWS orchestrates an enmeshment through a montage framework of archival videos, social media reels, interviews, newspaper clippings, memes, black performances, social media posts, and clips from other films. At times, one of the screens turns black, forming a black screen and a subsequent image processing, functional screen positing a metaphor for actual representation of the black community on major media channels (where it is nowhere to be found, thus empty).

*I been stomped out in front of my momma*

*My daddy commissary made it to commas*

*Bitch, all my grandmas dead*

-   *Kendrick Lamar "Element"*

---

*And we hate po-po*

*Wanna kill us dead in the streets fo sho'*

-   *Kendrick Lamar "Alright"*

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Hip-hop has always been an important tool for African American artists to protest vocally about the on-going police brutality in their exceptionally racist country. However, the American system becomes demagogued because of the disturbing use of hip-hop and rap song lyrics that follow on the bandwagon of black men in jail and the conviction of young black men in courtrooms. "If you believe that I'm a cop killer, you believe David Bowie is an astronaut." Tracy Lauren Marrow, aka the rapper ICE-T, said this in court after being summoned based on the lyrics of his song *Cop Killer.*

Melos plus drama, which becomes a function of music, along with Diderot's notion of gesture as a primal language where extreme emotion is articulated, are illustrated in all the above, including Kendrick Lamar's music videos. His music is yoked together with his lyrical acrobatic flow, which serves as a social commentary device for highlighting the inconsistent racial and ambiguous prejudices followed by intricacies within African American individuals portraying the institutionalized and prevalent racism in America, often operating beneath the surface of contemporary America's psychologies.

## CONCLUSION

"Black and white discourses on blackness seem to be valuing the same things—spontaneity, emotion, and naturalness—yet giving them a different implication." "Black discourses see them as contributions to the development of society; white discourses see them as enviable qualities that only blacks have."     - from Richard Dyer's *White (1997)*

Like I mentioned in the beginning, the objective of this research paper is not to hurl charges of racism but rather to learn how to decode, deconstruct, and represent race images and sounds better. The metamorphosis of cinematic representation for people of color has moved several miles from where it began, but cases like Nicholas Tyler emphasize the concurrent need for contemporary filmmakers to comprehend and exhibit the aesthetics utilized by numerous avant-garde filmmakers, black cinema's historicity, and several other forms of visual culture representation to allow the diverse nature of black subjectivity to permeate the racial fabric of Hollywood.  Black cops murdering Nicholas in a traffic stop is a direct reversal of the narratives of George Floyd or even Rodney King, as well as the continuation of similar aberrations. So, with this kind of narrative shift, an urgent need arises that can be addressed by the cinematic medium by encompassing elements from visual culture, digital media, and video installations to render a piece of work that is able to curate a spectatorial affect through its melodramatic aesthetics.

Stuart Hill explicates, that an ethical framework of representation is attainable as the logic of enunciation is always rendered by assimilating the historical codes and positioning of multiple digressions corresponding to a peculiar time and space. Similarly, Linda Williams also prognosticates the culmination of older forms of race melodrama through a matrix of collective responsibility, shared consciousness, and a coherent solution over "the Manichean adverbial circling of victims and villains." These guidelines, which are constantly changing with the beat of temporality, are made comprehensible through the projects listed and analyzed above.

Following the same template, recent films like Spike Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* (2021) represent a lens of racial history during the Vietnam War—the African American soldiers' POV—and even Elegance Bratton's *The Inspection (2022)*. Through an exploration of the melodramatic mode within three genres, i.e., magical realism, drama, and superhero sci-fi, I've delineated a structure of the melodramatic mode that is entirely aspirated through the insertion of archival footage, unraveling apocryphal narratives, multi-layered sound designs, inclusive and wholesome black characters, hip-hop histrionics, trepidations of trauma, memorialization through images, the digital aesthetics of cybernetic systems, scores of rich colors, and the exhibition of the poesis of trauma through which the spectator feels the euphoric feeling of pride and representation. Emerging under the shadows of Denzel Washington, Viola Davis, Morgan Freeman, Halle Berry, Samuel L. Jackson, Angela Bassett, Sidney Poitier, Oprah Winfrey, or maybe Will Smith (but he stands canceled), a battalion of black actors demanding characters that transcend the cliched narratives of drugs, crime, slavery, misrepresentations, biopics, and the white supremacist perspective (the trajectory of Griffith's) wait patiently. To annul the conclusions of the Mckinsey report analyzed in the beginning of this paper, projects such as "Strong Black Lead," initiated by Spike Lee and Ava Duverney, are fundamental while simultaneously incorporating numerous new-media installations' aesthetics in the melodramatic mode to celebrate the black pulchritudinous. The tagline of this project, i.e., "We are not a genre because there's no one way to be black," represents an unerring disclaimer for issues of representation in cinema and possibly ends another genre of "white savior obsession" in Hollywood.

And finally, let's hope that these trends can and will eventually become a way of life because, as Oprah rightly said, "*All my life I had to fight."*

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