



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

European Joint Master's Degree Program

in English and American Studies

Second Cycle (D.M. 270/2004)

Final Thesis

**Engaging Activism on Screen:
Black Resistance to Oppression and
the Disruption of Master Narratives in
the USA through Netflix**

Supervisor

Prof. Simone Francescato

Assistant supervisor

Prof. Gabriella Vöö

Graduand

Yana Smolyannikova

Matriculation number

837961

Academic Year

2018 / 2019

Engaging Activism on Screen: Black Resistance to Oppression and The disruption of Master Narratives in the USA through Netflix

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	5
PART I Black Activism Occupying the Screen.....	7
CHAPTER I Introducing Black activism on screen.....	8
1.1. How new technologies shape activism to advocate for the black lives.....	8
1.2. Reaching the screen through Netflix: Virtual public space for black content	13
1.3. Manifesting a movement with an important manifesto: Unifying the twoness of American Negro.....	16
1.4. Strong Black Lead labelled Netflix.....	22
1.5. Strong Black Lead and its dialectic of resistance and emancipation.....	25
1.6. The challenges of emancipating blackness.....	33
1.7. The risks of commodification.....	37
1.8. Do we feel comfortable letting them narrate our story?.....	40
CHAPTER II Contextualizing the emergence of Strong Black Lead: Socio-political context defined by the imagery symbolism	43
2.1. The collective victory of Obama or the story of the <i>Extraordinary Negro</i>	45
2.2. Dichotomy of Obama and Black Lives matter.....	49
2.3. Obamacare and other reforms: most-racial America	53
2.4. <i>White rage</i> and the election of Trump	57
PART II Analyzing two Series on Netflix.....	61
Introduction: Disrupting the ‘Master-Discourse’	62
CHAPTER I Activism of Visual Resistance: The Humanization of the Criminal Stereotype of African Americans through <i>When They See Us</i>	65
1.1. <i>When They See Us</i> vs. the story of ‘Central Park 5’	66
1.2. The imagery of the criminal blackness: The Black Demon	76
1.3. The era of mass incarceration.....	81
CHAPTER II The emancipation of the Black Identity: Confronting ‘white fragility’ in <i>Dear White People</i>	87
2.1. The legacy of Blackface in a post-racial America.	88
2.2. Whiteness as property: Understanding ‘White Privilege’	92
2.3. Emancipating Blackness: Encounters with “White Fragility”	98

CONCLUSION.....	107
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	109
WORKS CITED.....	110
FURTHER READINGS.....	114
SITOGRAPHY*	116
AUDIO & VIDEO SOURCES	124

this page has been intentionally left blank

“Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is aimed at analyzing ‘Strong Black Lead’ movement, a Netflix content production project started in 2018, as a form of black activism and resistance on screen. This visual activism is examined through its main actions of occupying screen and opposing mainstream narratives in the USA. The latter, represents a pivotal role in reshaping the imagery associated with African American identity. This is achieved first through the humanization process of the characters presented and the emancipation of black identity from its mainstream depiction such as criminals and other perpetuated stereotyped versions of blackness through Hollywood and mass media.

The first section provides a cultural background to the movement. The first chapter analyzes the usage of new means, its objectives and the correlation with traditional representation of blacks within the cinematographic field. Additionally, it discusses the importance of being in charge of storytelling, why this shift has a political meaning and the possible obstacles in terms of commodification and that of the collision with mainstream narrative. The second chapter of this section instead, gives a brief insight into the socio-political from Barack Obama’s election to that of Donald Trump which is essential to comprehend the visual action of this movement.

The second section focuses on the analysis of two Netflix series produced by Strong Black Lead to demonstrate its political activism in advocating for black lives. The first chapter focuses on the docu-series *When They See Us* (2019) directed by Ava DuVernay which is employed as an example of the humanization of black identity. This series performs counter-storytelling action by exposing the criminal justice system as a racial oppression force justified and reinforced through black criminal stereotypes. This is demonstrated through the past recounting of the story by mass media in contrast to the real

facts represented in the series, the research on black criminal stereotypes and the reference to mass incarceration. The second chapter, on the other hand, is centered on *Dear White People* (2017-) directed by Justin Simien. It tackles the challenges of emancipating black identity in a society where black existence is shaped by white supremacy and its manifestations from micro aggressions to the major forces of oppressions. The analysis is presented through three key notions: the legacy of blackface, white privilege of Cheryl I. Harris and ‘white fragility’ of Robin J. DiAngelo.

PART I

Black Activism Occupying the Screen

CHAPTER I

Introducing Black activism on screen

1.1. How new technologies shape activism to advocate for the black lives

The word *activism*, according to the de Merriam-Webster and Cambridge Dictionaries online, is defined as follows:

⇒“a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue”;¹

⇒“the use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one”²;

⇒“the use of direct and public methods to try to bring about esp. social and political changes that you and others want”³

Activism as has been told, described, studied, painted, advertised, sang, sold and so on, can be expressed and eventually often disguised in many forms and shapes. Even though its meaning might be fixed in time as delineated in the above definitions, our history has witnessed that its manifestations and expressions are not. On the contrary, they are transforming and always evolving. Depending on the prefixed goals, activism has always adapted to the historical and socio-political context in which it has arisen, availing itself of the most innovative methods in order to enlarge its impact on society. No matter how abstract this concept might sound, one must take into account that the agents performing activism are people who are committed to transform the world by all means available.

¹ Definition of activism, Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Internet access: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/activism>

² Definition of activism, Cambridge Dictionary. Internet access: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/activism>

³Ibid.

The mass media have been an effective tool in shaping people's awareness of many social and political issues, and in enacting and reinforcing mainstream and dominant ideologies⁴ (here we can mention the notion of 'intentional misinformation tactic' and, propaganda and brainwashing as its extreme manifestations). Along with technological progress, the impact of various means of technology in our life has increased on a daily basis for our private and personal use. At the same time, it also found another utility, besides the trivial use of mass and social media as an asset largely employed, even abused, for less private and more collective engagement, as a challenge and resistance to imposed information. While the Internet has often been criticized and discredited for being a conflicting source of non-reliable information or mere space for entertainment, nonetheless, it has proved to be a powerful asset in creating a network to unite people fighting under and for the same cause. For instance, in the case of the recent prominent and, by now, highly recognizable grassroots movement Black Lives Matter. In fact, this social movement mobilization in United States and its very appearance in the political landscape globally, is normally associated with its creation through a hashtag⁵ circulating on Twitter in response to the acquittal of the policeman, George Zimmerman responsible for Trayvon Martin's death in 2013 and following street protests in Ferguson with the identical death episode of Michael Brown in 2014.

In the modern era, where social media are becoming an increasingly attractive field of analysis thanks to their crucial role in mobilizing people not only in United States but also in other countries such as Egypt during the *Arab Spring*⁶, it's important to comprehend

⁴Meyrowitz, Joshua. "Shifting Worlds of Strangers: Medium Theory and Changes in "Them" Versus "Us"*" *Sociological Inquiry*, January 1997, Vol.67(1), pp.59-71 [Peer Reviewed Journal]

⁵ Khan--Cullors, Patrisse. "We Didn't Start a Movement. We Started a Network" in Medium . February 23, 2016.

<https://medium.com/@patrissemariacullorsbrignac/we-didn-t-start-a-movement-we-started-a-network-90f9b5717668>

⁶ Here I'm referring to one of the books on the mobilization of the streets in Egypt with *Arab Spring in Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* by Paolo Gerbaudo (2012 Pluto Press)

and investigate beyond the superficiality with which these platforms are usually approached⁷ in order to question the authenticity of the ideas and information which circulates through these means, but especially to understand and recognize the multifaceted ways it shapes and reflects the mainstream narrative and therefore, perpetuates discrimination to which we, as individuals, are exposed to and being fed by⁸.

On this premise, we recognize the important role attributed to the social media and therefore of the role the Internet consequently plays in the rise of #BLM and of broader oppositional responses of the black community to the severe police brutality which targets them. Thanks to the immediate participation in the discourse and debate online, the protests could direct their attention to different and yet interconnected subjects bound by the same discrimination experience. This is how the protests over the impunity of police officers depicted more often as heroes than killers, has extended the attention also on how the brutalities were broadcasted. Those who expressed their indignation online wanted to defy the mainstream depiction of Black people from victims of brutality into thugs, demanding a shift in this narrative and the recognition of the value of black lives. The turmoil of the protest online circulated through Twitter with the name of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign⁹, one of the most prominent against the criminal imagery and stereotype. The

⁷ LeFebvre Rebecca Kay;Armstrong, “Crystal. Grievance-based social movement mobilization in the #Ferguson Twitter storm”
May 5, 2016 Research Article ;

⁸ *The intersectional Internet: race, sex, class and culture online* edited by Safiya Noble and M.Tynes Brendesha (New York, Peter Lang, 2015) is specifically aimed at the analysis of modern social medias and its effects of the representation of socio-political practices and structures transposed from the real to the virtual world reinforcing the concepts; it has contributed to the foundation of Intersectional Race Technology Studies, engaging in dismantling the reality of facts on “how discourses of technology are explicitly linked to racial and gender identity, all of which normalize Whiteness and maleness in the domain of digital technologies” (Noble et al. 2015: 6)

* the urge for this critical analysis was already a main drive for Safiya Noble’s studies fundamental in the understanding of racially compromised representation of deaths and catalyst moment of #BlackLivesMatter movement as article and studies behind “Teaching Trayvon: Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle” in *The Black Scholar*, 01 March 2014, Vol.44(1), p.12-29

⁹ Stampler, Laura. “Twitter Users Ask What Photo Media Would Use #IfTheyGunnedMeDown“ in Time.com August 2014
Internet access: <https://time.com/3100975/iftheygunnedmedown-ferguson-missouri-michael-brown/>;

social activism both online and offline which has been ignited by #BlackLivesMatter demanded all the partakers to bring awareness first online, declare the war against racial bias, and to spread a re-humanization of blacks through social media. The spark of debate and discussions in the virtual domain were ubiquitous and helpful for an organized movement such as Black Lives Matter. Thanks to the contribution of all Twitter users, moved by solidarity in some cases and in others moved by rage alimented by the grievances¹⁰ which followed a series of killings of black youth by law enforcement representatives mainly due to the fact that it repetitively remained unpunished. Lacking of funding and power, the virtual space guaranteed the mobilization of many¹¹ across the country (and beyond) to join the forces and ensure a place where the marginalized and silenced could be heard. What have been originated as dramatized actions online eventually expanded on the streets, followed by the protests of physical spaces and *'made sure no one could look away'*, so to speak in Angela Davis' words¹², including the government with the first African American president in the history of United States Barack Obama in chief.

If all of this has been achieved by the employment of social media platforms, imagine what happens when black activists (a group of people who intentionally and consciously commit to challenge the systemic oppression starting from the imagery associated to their blackness that white society produces and enforces on them) appropriate space on white-dominated screen from which they have been traditionally and historically

* see also (Noble;Tynes 2015: 37)

¹⁰LeFebvre Rebecca Kay;Armstrong, Crystal. "Grievance-based social movement mobilization in the #Ferguson Twitter storm" May 5, 2016 Research Article
Internet access <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816644697>

¹¹According to Gino Canella, documentary filmmaker, who cooperated with BLM5280 on short documentaries "social media offered a vehicle for a movement which lacked founding and power occupying space".

See more: Gino Canella (2017) Social movement documentary practices: digital storytelling, social media and organizing, *Digital Creativity*, 28:1, 24-37.

¹² "I like the idea of living the legacy of non-violence, but I also like Dr. King's idea of dramatizing the forms of oppression that exist and making certain that nobody can look away."

Angela Davis Mid-South Peace and Justice Center's 35th annual banquet, Memphis, 14th January 2017
<https://youtu.be/GMq0BQbeSBs>

marginalized through the sensationally successful platform such as Netflix. Contrary to the social media, this platform provides broader opportunities for conveying oppositional information and representation. The produced content blends simultaneously with ongoing open discussions between those who are in process of its very creation (writers, producers, actors) and the audience (its consumers) on Internet platforms such as YouTube, Twitter (normally confined within the domain of what has been named as Black Twitter¹³) and Instagram holding open discussions on the meaning of blackness.

¹³ Additional information on Black Twitter can be found in the article:
Ramsey, Donovan X. "The Truth About Black Twitter" in The Atlantic April 2015
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/04/the-truth-about-black-twitter/39012>

1.2. Reaching the screen through Netflix: Virtual public space for black content

The choice of presenting first the importance of the Internet over its artistic and cinematographic content of the activism hereby discussed is both intentional and justifiable expressively because of the pivotal role of this means. In fact, the activist rhetoric of counter-storytelling of resistance and identity emancipation reaches the screen, and therefore, impacts the society, through the streaming platform known as Netflix.

The description of this platform which can be found on its site defines itself as: a “streaming service that allows our customers to watch a wide variety of award-winning TV shows, movies, documentaries, and more on thousands of internet-connected devices”¹⁴. However, throughout the years, Netflix transformed from a small Northern American enterprise based in California, USA into a company which guarantees an instant access to an immense audience from over 190 countries all over the world to its contents online. It appears that only few countries are exceptionally excluded from its mainstream service because of the existing US sanctions towards Crimea, China, North Korea and Syria¹⁵. Many have speculated on what contributed to the success of this platform over its past 20 years of active service to its incredible popularity among youngsters (and not only¹⁶) that culminated into an invention of popular and widely used slang expression *Netflix and chill*¹⁷. This expression is widely used in the daily conversations, quoted, and hashtagged

¹⁴Netflix website. Internet access: <https://help.netflix.com/en/node/412>

¹⁵ “Netflix is not yet available in China, though the company continues to explore options for providing the service. It also is not available in Crimea, North Korea, or Syria due to U.S. government restrictions on American companies.” Internet access: <https://help.netflix.com/en/node/14164>

¹⁶ Netflix releases little information on their commercial performance but in 2018 the company confirmed the range of assiduous users is between 18-34 in USA, with increasing popularity also of those beyond the indicated age range. However, there are no available figures concerning the users on European continent for now.

Liesman, Steve. “Nearly 60% of Americans are streaming and most with Netflix: CNBC survey” in *CNBC* March 2018

<https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/29/nearly-60-percent-of-americans-are-streaming-and-most-with-netflix-cnbc-survey.html>

¹⁷the meaning and origins of the slang expression can be find on the dicitonary.com:

<https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/netflix-and-chill/>

it’s interesting to point out that it has been originated within Black Twitter domain;

among young people referring to the idea of spending time ‘relaxing in front of Netflix’. The frequent employment of this term consolidates an interlocked association between the actual act of viewing the contents available on the platform and therefore, the act of enjoying it as a sensorial experience within the company of the other half or family and friends. Given the popularity of this phenomenon, *Teen Vogue* considered important to conduct a survey on Netflix and its influence in the lives of young people within the range of 18-29 years old back in 2016¹⁸. The aim was to understand whether the impact so vehemently associated with the entertainment platform could be proved statistically. The results have shown that Netflix at that time was already considered to be "integral part of our personal lives" for those interviewed, including an interesting interference Netflix was spotted to bring into a couple life. The interlocked sensorial association turned out to be an external element which completed in a sense a couple intimacy (besides, the same expression is known for a more popular use of the term which has a seductive connotation). These findings confirmed that the streaming platform is a *cult* among its users and back in 2016 became normalization in the life of individuals¹⁹. Moreover, while its popularity was consolidated over time, its name was selected to represent a prominent entertainment feature in case of accommodations searching engines like on the worldwide famous platform booking.com.²⁰

Therefore, by opening the discussion on the significance of the Internet, we have to stress the vital role it plays in providing means, platform and investment first, before narrowing the focus on the content of counter-narrative transmitted on the screens by the black activism which will be discussed in the following sections. This innovative conduit

¹⁸ Papisova, Vera. "Netflix Is the Key to Long-Term Relationships, Survey Says" in *Teen Vogue* February 2016

Internet access: <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/netflix-and-chill-study>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Booking.com has chosen to display Netflix name over other streaming platform's as one of the features an accommodation can offer to a possible customer. This feature can be found on their official website: www.booking.com while making a research.

for the content results to be an incredible advantage for visual activism on one hand thanks to its worldwide accessibility, while, on the other thanks to a receptive and evolving audience which venerates Netflix in a form of culture. In fact, when speaking of audience, it's important to underline that the statistics related to its size based on the recent figures released by Netflix in April 2019 have reconfirmed the enormous impact it has not exclusively nationwide across Northern America but, above all, globally. Its membership numbers have reached over 150 million subscribers worldwide²¹, counting 60.1 million subscriptions only within US territory²². This increment boosted the profit amount which registered a growth of 22% in revenue in the last quarter at the company²³, reconfirming its primacy in the entertainment market.

In conclusion, the combination of profitability of similar online entertainment along with its increasing prosperity of generated incomes and numbers of subscribers (which happens to be connected to the new strategy of minority inclusivity productions), played an important role in this transformative moment for Netflix. This propelled new investment decisions from which they widely benefited thanks to Strong Black Lead project²⁴.

²¹ Pallotta, Frank. "Netflix added record number of subscribers, but warns of tougher times ahead" in *CNN Business* April 2019

Internet access: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/16/media/netflix-earnings-2019-first-quarter/index.html>

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The latter document on the commercial updates of Netflix released on 17.07.2019 and directed to its shareholders, highlights that one of the series produced through Strong Black Lead investment project which will be amply discussed in the next section and through the dissertations, mentions that *When They See Us* mini serie directed by Ava DuVernay resulted in 25m subscribers in its first 4 weeks after the release generating a global conversation on race

Internet access to the file:

https://s22.q4cdn.com/959853165/files/doc_financials/quarterly_reports/2019/q2/Q2-19-Shareholder-Letter-FINAL.pdf

1.3. Manifesting a movement with an important manifesto: Unifying the twoness of American Negro

“Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. We must remember that the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way” (Kelley, 2002: 9)

Likewise Robin D.G. Kelly has intentionally underlined in his book dedicated to the history of black imagination employed for the transformation of the society, what has to be considered as a ‘progressive social movement’ has an important mission in creating a different imagery of society (Kelley, 2002:9) Agreeing on Kelly’s view, we will see in this section how oppositionary imagery is employed by Strong Black Lead to justify their action as a possible progressive movement.

By taking this into account, we will argue that Strong Black Lead is not an accidentally formed group of people working for entertainment and consumption content. This is certainly not an objective conclusion one might come to from the observation of the emphasis which has been put into the denomination of their movement, leaving aside for now its actual actions. The movement puts forward a resolute vision of black culture and identity in its very name, revolving around the important choice which plays the position of the adjective strong. In fact, this very position gives an interesting connotation to the name in this case: ‘*strong*’ appears to be a quality chosen to prevail over the identification of its participants, contrasting the identifying adjective of their ethnicity ‘*black*’ which follows its strong affirmation. On one hand it dissociates the participants from being purely or merely identifiable as black and therefore, advancing a kind of protest against falling into a purely ethnic category. Therefore, it prevents the immediate association to the stereotyped (and s it

was mentioned earlier negative) version of blackness which immediately arises in the mind of a white audience but even in the black mind itself²⁵. While on the other hand, this specific word order operates almost as an oxymoron providing a new contrasting definition. Throughout the history of the United States being black equaled being an object, exploitable breakable and weak to his master. This concept from white perspective and awareness from black point of view was reinforced over centuries given that black bodies and spirits were and still today are affectedly breakable and severely abused. Starting from their slavery chattel, wearing plantation work to lynchings during civil rights era and nowadays reportedly targeted by racial profiling and stripped of their humanity (and often in the worst case scenario of their lives) by the law enforcement agents which are documented even today. The extreme perception of vulnerability of the black body (Ta-Nehisi 2015:14; Anderson 2016:158) and its subjugation has never gone away (Ta-Nehisi 2015:7) even though a ‘colorblind’ and ‘post-racial’ era has been proclaimed and professed as a new kind of faith in United States. The above explanation makes the juxtaposition of the two ideas a subversive and contrasting image employed to determine a new direction for blackness through its ‘lead’. This ending part of the denomination might be strictly interpreted at first as reference to the concept of ‘leadership’ and therefore, charging the partakers of the movement with an important power status to achieve the ultimate goal: to seek emancipation from the endorsed weak and denigrated perception of blackness into its beautifully strongly affirmed and validated form which has widely acclaimed *unapologetically black*’. The latter expression, in fact, appears to recall a reformulation of

²⁵ (Kendi, 2017: 327-330)

Please also refer to the prominent film defined also as a tribute to KKK: *The Birth of a Nation* by David Wark Griffith, 1915; Black men were portrayed as rapists and castigated by heroic white men; such ideology productions have its impacts in the nowadays depiction of men as we can see in the following article which can give an insight to several academic researches by Safiya Noble; for a brief overview please refer to Donaldson, Leigh. “When the media misrepresents black men, the effects are felt in the real world” *The Guardian* August 2015
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/12/media-misrepresents-black-men-effects-felt-real-world>

blackness that once has been a hope and motivation under Black Power of which has passionately spoken Stokely Carmichael during the Civil Rights movement era²⁶. However, instead of the traditionally associated meaning of the word ‘lead’, this denomination includes a cross-dimensional subversion of the predominant white narrative which forces a multilayered marginalization on the African American community including in the cinematographic field. It refers to the roles which are exclusively created for white performance while condemning the reduction of black inclusion in the scripts, marginalized to the remaining and scarce in numbers supporting and stereotyped forms designed by white producers. Therefore, by proclaiming themselves as ‘lead’, leading action becomes available to all the agents behind and on screen. It’s aimed at empowering black people in handling and guiding a new conversation towards the validation of black identity and black culture. Consequently, it is focused on creating a domain where people of color can see themselves in charge of such conversation and delineate its development and fulfillment, while at the same time creating opportunities for their infinitely diverse community to be represented as leading characters, especially because they are ‘not a genre’²⁷.

Strong Black Lead did not land on our screens without a public statement apart from their name which would anticipate their intentions. Indeed, a meticulously articulated and symbolically charged speech has been aired in shape of advertisement but which definitely has all the characteristics²⁸ to be spoken of as a proper manifesto of the movement:

²⁶ Here I’m pointing out the fact that such reformulation of the created oxymoron can’t help but evoke the concept of Black Power pronounced by Stokely Carmichael, chairman of SNCC during the Civil Rights movement era, which marked a radical separation from the Dr. King’s philosophy and the transformation of the ‘Negro’ into ‘Black’ in this discourse; (Kendi, 2017: 395-396); see also the documentary *King in the Wilderness* directed by Peter Kunhardt, Kunhardt Productions (2018) which underlines the rupture point in the Black civil movement leadership concerning Black Power;

²⁷ I’m referring to both manifesto pronounced but also to the podcast interview with Chris Green where he stressed the challenge of casting when black; “EP12: Part 1: Black Imagery in Films (Actor, Producer and Director Chris Greene joins EKing and Just-Ice to discuss Black Imagery in Films)” in *Unapologetically Black Podcast by Eking* Internet access: <https://anchor.fm/unapologetically-black/episodes/EP12-Part-1-Black-Imagery-in-Films-e1tjoc>

²⁸ Definition of manifesto according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary:

“This is a new day, built from the ground, broken by legends. A day for our generations to see untold experiences of our blackness. Representing a limitless range of identity, playing kings and queens of our neighborhoods, defeating larger-than-life force, trying to flip our world upside down. We stand up on any stage on every screen.

A day when black women are boldly the lead character whether inmates or scholars.

We are not a genre because there is no one way to be black. We are writing while black. Nuanced and complex. Resilient and strong.

This is not a moment, this is a movement. We are strong black leads.

Today is a great day in Hollywood.”²⁹

To comment on the concluding sentence of this manifesto in order to introduce the explanatory section on the meaning and the concept of this movement, I would like to go back to what one of the most important contributors to the black culture who was also the first African American woman to receive a Pulitzer and sequentially a Nobel prize, Toni Morrison, expressed as her personal opinion on the modern filmmaking. During a conference on Literacy, Libraries and Liberation in 2010³⁰ she was asked what she thought about the visual interpretation and film adaptation of novels in terms of African American representation. Her response was quite simple but extremely meaningful in a sense, although she did not express any extremist opinions, she gave a contrasting answer consisting on the reason why she did not like what has been produced so far linked to a direction which should be followed in filmmaking. She underlined that for her there was an intrinsic fear of the 'wild' creativity which characterizes African Americans since the

a written statement declaring publicly the intentions, motives, or views of its issuer. Internet access: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifesto>

²⁹ The manifesto can be viewed on YouTube, but most importantly, on its community platform page on Twitter; Internet access: <https://twitter.com/strongblacklead?lang=it>

³⁰ Angela Davis and Toni Morrison: Literacy, Libraries and Liberation
October 27, 2010, encounter held at NYPL, USA
<https://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/angela-davis-and-toni-morrison-literacy-libraries-and-liberation>

invention of ‘be bop’ and expressed her wish: “I wish it were possible to do more inventive creative, non-formulated Hollywood things”. This response should not be underestimated especially because it came nonetheless but from the writer of *The Bluest Eye*³¹, an intense and emotionally charged novel which contrasts the black ugliness to the white (mainstream) beauty. Toni Morrison recognized and urged for new ways of creation and liberation from Hollywood ‘patterns’. This statement has been made long before the recent applauded productions as *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013), *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), *Moonlight* (2016) *Get out* (2017), could prove to her that such a thing is possible. Her urge has been pronounced long before the new wave of productions hosted and promoted by Strong Black Lead movement in Netflix but most of all, Toni Morrison’s urge was one of the many voices who pronounced a similar desire on a deeper level. Likewise many other important figures for African American community, the recognition of the patterns in this case suggested the presence of an imagery of black people which was filtered by the white gaze and the twoness its projection caused to the African American identity.

“One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[..] The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self”. (Du Bois, ed 2003:4)

Here discussed striving of a double standard and perception of one’s self has been further studied and presented as similar concept:

“Du Bois posits that black identity in America is forged from an uneasy truce between dominant cultural definitions of blackness and a person’s knowledge of his own worth [..]Double-consciousness, then, is an assimilation of the vision of

³¹ *The Bluest Eye* written by Toni Morrison and published in 1970 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston

the oppressor into one's vision of the self - it is an internal struggle, one which colors not only one's behavior but one's identity." (Sturtevant, 1999)

From the double consciousness of W. E. B. Du Bois to James Baldwin's of *American Negro*³², their vision of American blackness reveals its contemporaneity and similarity to what perceived and voiced by Coates's (Coates,2015:43) interrogation on blackness³³ or Ibrahim X. Kendi longing for its unification (Kendi, 2017:505). All have the common factor of recognizing the imposed and restrained blackness aside its own existence. Consequently, their admission of this *twoness* inquires and requires a creation of a black identity which would be dissociated from the white counterfeit fabrication of blackness (meaning also its negativeness as anticipated previously).

A step towards the unity of the twoness is a step towards the liberation of black self.

As Ibrahim X. Kendi delineates the need:

"Black people need to be their imperfect selves around White people, around each other, around all people. Black is beautiful and ugly, intelligent and unintelligent, law-abiding and law-breaking, industrious and lazy - and it is those imperfection that make Black people human, make Black people equal to all other imperfectly human groups." (Kendi, 2017: 505)

Strong Black Lead was born out of this concept and gathered series in its content which might be at least a step towards the emancipation and affirmation of human identity rather than blackness vs. the fictitiously forged 'ugly', worthless blackness. This is exactly how Strong Black lead has just opened a new stage of great days for Hollywood.

³² Baldwin, James. James Baldwin : "Collected Essays : Notes of a Native Son / Nobody Knows My Name / The Fire Next Time / No Name in the Street / The Devil Finds Work / Other Essays" Library of America 1998

³³ Abramowitsch, Simon. "Addressing Blackness, Dreaming Whiteness: Negotiating 21st-Century Race and Readership in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*" in *CLA Journal* , Vol. 60, No. 4, SPECIAL ISSUE: Democratizing the Black Public Intellectual: The Writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates (JUNE 2017), pp. 458-478

Internet access: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26557006>

1.4. Strong Black Lead labelled Netflix.

As introduced in the previous sections, with the ongoing political scenario and technological evolution, the forms, the shapes of activism might find new dimensions to manifest and operate. It has been certainly the case of Strong Black Lead movement so platforms, Netflix, initiated in 2018³⁴. Its commercial debuted at the 2018 BET and honored the black culture of jazz legends. In fact, it was inspired by the notorious photo titled "A Great Day in Harlem" from 1958 which instead of picturing of the trending jazz musicians as its original version³⁵, pictured 47 talented actors, writers and directors participating in this project, which has been redefined in this emotional and straight-forward manifesto as a *movement*.

The commitment of this movement on more practical terms is to engage as many of black talented people as possible on screen and behind the scenes, for the producing of the scripts, the technical involvement of the crew off stage and the actors who would ultimately perform the bold and unapologetic blackness freed of its "veil" speaking in W. E. B. Du Bois' terms (W.E.B. Du Bois, ed 2003:3) in front of the whole audience³⁶. The fact that the stories, their scripts and the crew are predominantly made up of black people is strictly interconnected with the creation of authentic representation to infinite black and brown (we will see how this movement also encompasses also the experience of Latinx of USA especially when speaking of mass incarceration) experiences on stage/screen which would

³⁴ Sandberg, Bryn Elise. "Netflix Airs 'Strong Black Lead' Spot Two Days After Firing PR Chief for Using 'N-Word'" "Hollywood Reporter, June 24 2018 Internet access: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/netflix-air-strong-black-lead-spot-2-days-firing-pr-chief-using-n-word-1122979>

³⁵For those interested in viewing the original picture and its explanation please refer to this article: "A Great Day in Harlem: behind Art Kane's classic 1958 jazz photograph" the Guardian 17 December 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/gallery/2018/dec/17/a-great-day-in-harlem-behind-art-kane's-classic-1958-jazz-photograph>

³⁶Bennett, Jessica. "Netflix Further Commits to Diverse Storytelling With 'Strong Black Lead' Initiative", Ebony.com. Internet access: <https://www.ebony.com/exclusive/netflix-further-commits-to-diverse-storytelling-with-strong-black-lead-initiative/>

go beyond the traced boundaries and stereotypes so long displayed in the entertainment by the white domain of producers and distributors.

The Strong Black Lead movement complements the wave of political and social engagements in African American community which in recent years protested on streets with #BlackLivesMatter by resonating in its own manifesto the hashtag #a movement not a moment; it complements the effort to build and recollect Black history especially since the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C.³⁷ and further efforts in renaming the streets³⁸ and removing confederate monuments.³⁹ It conforms to the blackness representation in photography with “Vision & Justice”⁴⁰ and now, embraces the counter-storytelling on screen. The counter-storytelling is transmitted on screen thanks to talented directors: Ava DuVernay, the plurally rewarded director and creator of the documentary film *13th* on mass incarceration industry⁴¹; Spike Lee, the prominent figure of black independent filmmaking renaissance movement of the ‘80⁴² and Justin Simien, Sundance Award winner⁴³ are only few names of those to shape the narration. While, the latter is aggrandized by a generous number of dazzling performances

³⁷ Bunch, Lonnie. “The Definitive Story of How the National Museum of African American History and Culture Came to Be” *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2016.
also *Quincy*, documentary directed by Rashida Jones on the life of singer, record and film producer Quincy Jones, TriBeCa Productions 2018
Internet access: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/definitive-story-national-museum-african-american-history-culture-came-be-180960125/>

³⁸ Jerkins, Morgan. “‘For Us, by Us’: Inside the New Social Spaces for People of Color March 2019”
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/09/nyregion/social-clubs-nyc-people-of-color.html?searchResultPosition=2>

³⁹ I’m referring to the most famous protests due to the tragic events that happened in Charlottesville in August 2017. A collection of essays analyzing and reflecting on the meaning of those events could be found in the following book:

Howard-Woods, Chris, Laidley, Colin and Omid, Maryam. “#Charlottesville White Supremacy, Populism, and Resistance” Public Seminar Books in association with OR Books 2018

⁴⁰ De Stefani, Lucia. “Addressing the Representation of Black Culture in Photography” in *Times* May 11 2016
Internet access: <https://time.com/4323138/addressing-the-representation-of-black-culture-in-photography/>

⁴¹ *13th* directed by Ava DuVernay, Kandoo Films Production 2016

⁴² Mims, Sergio Alejandro. “A New Life: Independent Black Filmmaking during the 1980’s” in *Black Camera*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), pp. 3-4; Indiana University Press

⁴³ Justin Simien won the US Dramatic Special Jury Award for Breakthrough Talent for *Dear White People* 2014 Sundance Film Festival Announces Feature Film Awards Sundance Institute January 2014
Internet access: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140129024320/http://www.sundance.org/festival/release/2014-sundance-film-festival-announces-feature-film-awards/>

by the chosen actors as Jharrel Jerome, Carol Denise "Niecy" Nash, Logan Browning and many more.

In the shaping of this moment into a movement, other news worth to be mentioned here contributed to the significance of this investment project from Netflix: the remarkable signature of a multi-year contract with Barack and Michelle Obama⁴⁴. The former president and his wife committed through a contract to provide their monetary support for production of films and series on Netflix back in 2018⁴⁵. The newest releases on this topic by the press, confirmed that their dedication lays in the visual contribution to African American culture and history will be included into the streaming production not only on one unique occasion but multiple times. It was announced that a film is being produced on the Pulitzer's Prize winning biography by David W. Blight on Frederick Douglass⁴⁶, along with series including "*Bloom*, based in post-World War Two New York, the drama"[..] on "barriers faced by women and by people of color in an era marked by hurdles but also tremendous progress"⁴⁷. It has been dutifully underlined that Obamas took advantage of the 'virtual' public space to reinstate their legacy in education and improvement in USA⁴⁸, eventually contributing to the Strong Black Lead Movement.

⁴⁴ Santi, Christina. "The Obamas Sign Multi Year Production Deal with Netflix" in *Ebony* May 21, 2018
Internet access: <https://www.ebony.com/entertainment/obamas-multiyear-production-deal-netflix/>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom", Simon & Schuster 2018

⁴⁷ Koblin, John. "The Obamas and Netflix Just Revealed the Shows and Films They're Working On" in *The New York Times* April, 2019
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/30/business/media/obama-netflix-shows.html>

⁴⁸ "Netflix: Barack and Michelle Obama announce details of series" BBC 1 May 2019
<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-48121643>

1.5. Strong Black Lead and its dialectic of resistance and emancipation.

“Previous research insists that for an action to be considered resistant it must include both action and opposition (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Weitz (2001) defines resistance as including “actions that not only reject subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support that subordination” (p. 670). [...] ..resistance should be done in public, by the collective and within sight of the powerful. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) clarifies: Racism has created separate communal structure for African Americans, within which a culture of resistance may exist apart from the dominant structure (p. 226).[..] Often this culture of resistance does not appear to pose a direct threat to the dominant group, as the spaces in which marginalized groups congregate are often segregated from public view.” (Steele in Noble & Tynes 2015 :76-78).

Catherine Knight Steele is one of the scholars who have focused on the profound impact technology, and especially the Internet, has in replicating virtually the hegemonic narratives of the real world. One of the analysis to support this perspective concerned the act of blogging among the black women’s community as a social and political tool of resistance. In fact, she relied on the above mentioned studies to illustrate her point. By following Hollander & Einwohner (2014), we will analyze the Strong Black Lead reinterpreting the act of opposition in its subsequent forms of humanization and emancipation of identity. Therefore we will focus on the following two points which characterize Strong Black Lead as a movement of resistance:

➤action: which would translate into the actual virtually- physical movement of occupying the screen;

➤opposition to the mainstream narrative: this is the part of the disruption of the usual entertainment products on a terrain where the emancipation of the Black body from the stereotypes occurs simultaneously with the validation of various nuances of Black experience.

To start with the first point of action it's important to focus on the rebellious aspect of this act: occupying the screen as occupying an actual space from which black representation is historically marginalized or reduced into a palatable attraction for the public. The public space has always been a difficult space to navigate for black people simply to begin with the divisions of space which could be traced back to the plantation households, maintained with the segregation of Jim Crow which has targeted blacks with lynching, bombing and the formation of KKK and by now, the police brutality which can occur wherever in the open space without a warning. The public space projects itself beyond the physical understanding of reality replicating it on screen, on the cable TV domain and as well on the Internet. Not only the marginalization of black lives is an essential point here, but at the same time the way they are restrained in navigating predominantly white spaces. Coates has poured his black experience on paper trying to articulate his thoughts about living in a black body in this world, asking himself a rhetorical question with no possible answer for now: "*How do I live free in this black body?*"(Coates, 2015:12). By using his rhetorical question as critical lens, perhaps, it's possible to get closer to the core point here argued. In a world where black people are getting arrested because of simply crossing a street⁴⁹, driving⁵⁰, sitting in a car, going for a walk⁵¹, leaving an accommodation⁵², waiting at Starbucks⁵³, it's understandable that their freedom to move in the white spaces is very restricted if not nonexistent at all. As an inevitable consequence,

⁴⁹ "Walking while black" The Vox November 2017

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJFqvRwOis&feature=youtu.be>

⁵⁰ "Cuffed Without Cause (Extra Scene from 'Driving While Black')" Vice News April 2016

<https://youtu.be/se4aXahuGrw>

⁵¹ "A black hospital patient went on a walk. Then he was arrested." CNN July 2019

<https://youtu.be/w9eWry0r4DQ>

⁵² "Hear neighbor explain why she called 911 on black Airbnb guests" CNN May 2018

<https://youtu.be/JWhhGA-XeXw>

⁵³ Gayle, Damien. "Arrest of two black men at Starbucks for 'trespassing' sparks protests" in "The Guardian" April 16, 2018

Internet access: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/16/arrest-of-two-black-men-at-starbucks-for-trespassing-sparks-protests>

their expression of the self is limited because they are negated freedom of movement, perceived as a threat to their own existence. Most of the times they feel obliged to restrain their blackness in order to be accepted by society but also to simply survive everyday life⁵⁴. Therefore, ‘occupying’ a virtually public space is already a subversive act on its own due to its repercussion on society outside the screen delimitations.

Moving to the second aspect which characterizes this rhetoric, by taking into account the freedom of movement that black characters acquire on screen, we can argue that black representation will blossom into new and unexplored forms witnessed so far by the audience, especially because ‘blackness’ remains limited to what is comfortable and palatable for the white audience. After #OscarsSoWhite protest which exposed the marginalization occurring in the high ranks of glittery Hollywood world nationally and worldwide, black artists (and generally, black people) have had enough. Chris Rock’s opening monologue at the Oscars ceremony in 2016 has proclaimed it as ‘white people’s choice awards’ and denounced racism in the cinematographic field, which could not be denied given the lack of any nominees for black directors and actors category⁵⁵. Indeed, many of the actors (Will Smith, George Clooney, Reese Witherspoon to mention few names⁵⁶) have decided to not attend this ceremony as an act of protest towards the discrimination. Besides, Octavia Spencer and Viola Davis have both made it clear when they had the opportunity to speak up, that women of color were not lacking talent but opportunity, because no reward could be won unless there were roles written for black women⁵⁷. Most of the nominees for black artists were for supporting roles because black

⁵⁴ “The Courage to be Unapologetically Black | Skyra Rideaux | TEDxVermilionStreet” October 2017
<https://youtu.be/cKp2CQkp8c4>

⁵⁵ for a complete monologue please refer to: “Chris Rock's Opening Monologue”, Oscars March 2016
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqhVNZgZGqQ&feature=youtu.be>

⁵⁶ Cox, David. “#OscarsSoWhite: who is really to blame for the Oscars' lack of diversity?” February 2016
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/feb/25/oscarssowhite-right-and-wrong-academy-awards-audience>

⁵⁷ Child, Ben. “Ethnic-minority actors still struggling in Hollywood, says Octavia Spencer” in The Guardian August 2014

leadership on screen is still part of the exception. In fact, from early '50 to nowadays only 4 Oscars have been won by representatives of African American community in Hollywood for the best leading actor, against only 1 for the best actress inaugurated by Halle Berry. The remaining of the nominees and Oscars went all for supporting roles: 6 Oscars for best supporting actor against 8 for actress supporting role. Even though statistics and the absence of nomination are clear evidence, researchers tried to prove these results were deeply connected to the actual population proportion rather than due to discrimination⁵⁸, attempting to rephrase this exclusion from Hollywood ranks. Moreover, discrimination in the cinematographic field, it turns out, can be openly racist because a candidate can be turned down due to the skin color. This is justifiable in this sector by the fact that it would not work for the idea the employer is trying to sell as stated by Chris Green⁵⁹. Aside from this kind of discrimination, the formulation of a role which could be interpreted by a black persona has always to remain within the whites' understanding of blackness in the roles of an obedient servant or sambo (for example Jamie Foxx in *Django Unchained*(2012)), servile mammy (epic image of Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) who strikingly was the first African American woman to be rewarded for this role and awarded with an Oscar⁶⁰), sexualized figure of jezebel (some also argued that Halle Berry won Oscar

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/01/octavia-spencer-film-ethnic-minority-struggle-hollywood>;

see also:

“Viola Davis Gives Powerful Speech About Diversity and Opportunity Emmys 2015” in Television Academy September 2015

https://youtu.be/OSpQfvd_zkE

⁵⁸ J.T. “How racially skewed are the Oscars?” Economist January 2016

<https://www.economist.com/prospero/2016/01/21/how-racially-skewed-are-the-oscars>

⁵⁹ “EP12: Part 1: Black Imagery in Films (Actor, Producer and Director Chris Greene joins EKing and Just-Ice to discuss Black Imagery in Films)” in “Unapologetically Black Podcast” by Eking
Internet access: <https://anchor.fm/unapologetically-black/episodes/EP12-Part-1-Black-Imagery-in-Films-e1tjoc>

⁶⁰In a research article, Maria St. John explores the conceptual meaning that mammy figure plays in the cultural construction of whiteness from *Gone with the Wind* novel to its cinematographic representation by David Selznick which awarded Hattie McDaniel with an Oscar.

St. John M.F.T., Maria. ““It Ain't Fittin'” Cinematic and Fantasmatic Contours of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* and Beyond”, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 2:2, 2001v129-162

because her character in *Monster's Ball* (2001) followed jezebel trope⁶¹). These stereotypes did not come only from literature but directly from historical reality where slavery was originated: from the very organization of the plantation household⁶². The servile sambo was a supporting element in the master's narrative who fooled himself with the success of his actions to gain faith of his servant and on whom he relied for support. Mammy was an important figure as well inside the household of the master and was an extremely 'asexualized' figure, who raised white children and dedicated her life to them. And last but not least, Jezebel was the over sexualized figure whom no white men could resist, a stereotype invented to justify the sexual abuse towards enslaved women⁶³.

Apart from the traditional stereotypes discussed, other widely celebrated cinematographic tropes exist like 'white savior' which unfortunately still survived long after the Civil Rights Act. This pattern has been a recurrent leitmotiv in the cinematographic field because of its appeal to white audiences and demonstrates which representation feels more comfortable to them. While there have been previously examples of this trope as in *The Green Mile* (1996) for instance (Rome 2004:1305-1307), it's one of more recent Hollywood representations to be chosen as a signifying white trope discussion by Robin J. DiAngelo. Her formulation of white fragility concept⁶⁴ in whiteness studies has been based on the film *The Blind Side* (2009) for which Sandra Bullock has received an

⁶¹ "#OscarsSoWhite and The Legacy of Halle Berry" in Be Kind Rewind February 2019

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEberAZhZy4&feature=youtu.be>

"Berry won best supporting actress for her role as an overly sexed temptress in *Monster's Ball*, in which she has wild, passionate sex with the bigoted prison guard who executed her husband.[..]"

(Rome 2004:1227-1228)

Jezebel stereotype is also mentioned by J. Simien within the list of the evolved stereotypes in modern TV shows (Simien 2014:435)

⁶² For a better understanding of a plantation household please refer to: Clark, Erskine. *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* Yale University Press, 2005.

⁶³ "Key sexual myths established during and immediately after slavery have given rise to widely entrenched images of black women. The Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire stereotypes are defined primarily by their "dysfunctional" sexuality and motherhood. The Mammy is generally an asexual, overweight, and middle-aged figure whose maternal qualities are expressed through her expert care for white women's children (at the expense of her own). The Jezebel is defined by her excessive, exotic, and unbridled sexuality. The Sapphire is the symbolic antithesis of the "lady": loud, excessive, and irrepressible. She refers indirectly to sexuality by signaling black women's supposed unladylike status." (Rose 2004:390-391)

⁶⁴ This point will be further discussed in section II of the dissertation. Please refer to Chapter 2, 2.3.

Oscar for her leading role (DiAngelo 2018-96). According to DiAngelo, the white savior is the only acceptable image Whites have when tackling racial interaction. *The Blind Side* depicts a charitable white woman who rescues a Black teenager from a dysfunctional and unstable life in foster care by encouraging him in the only field he succeeded, sport. Therefore, Sandra Bullock, in the vests of white savior, possessed all the characteristics of a smart, noble and successful woman taking care of a poor, dumb portrait of a black teenager. Unsurprisingly, the black child figure only quality was excellence in sport, thus confirming the general racially biased belief of inhuman body strength of African Americans. The fact that the story which staging reinforced the stereotypes of the circulating images on mass media was received with such enthusiasm by the audience and was acclaimed as Oscar performance, only reconfirms and proves DiAngelo's point.

Another latest cinematographic release of white savior pattern was staged with *The Green Book* (2018). The movie appears to revolve around the life story of the jazz pianist Don Shirley focusing on his encounter and interaction with his Italian American driver. The latter also plays a function of a protective bodyguard for the musician and welcomes the artist to his family in this protective culmination at the end of the film. What followed as inevitable consequence to the white savior trope outside the screen, was the choice to present the protagonist nominee supported Viggo Mortensen' character instead of the performance of the Black artist Muhammad Ali⁶⁵.

Strong Black Lead enters the entertainment production world as a response to this exclusion and aims in creating content reclaiming the right of black audience, who is the main addressee. Likewise Adrienne Carter, one of the writers who takes part in this movement, plainly explains in one of her interviews why she has chosen a writing career over pursuing one in acting, which was her first passion: because of the difficulties, faced in

⁶⁵Buchanan, Kyle. "They're Leading Actors, Except When It Comes to the Oscars" in The New York Times 2 November 2018 Internet access: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/02/movies/oscars-leading-supporting-actor.html>

the castings for actresses in finding black roles (the few available were negatively stigmatized: crack head, hooker, baby mama coming from slams of big cities and connected to the oversimplified and brutalized experiences of teenage mothers, drug addicted and prostitutes). Her ‘writing was the only choice’ she had to ‘change the narrative’⁶⁶. It is evident how in Adrienne Carter’s case this need generated on an individual level fits a collectively recognized need. By shifting from the individual space and taking part in Strong Black Lead, the action is aiming to impact society collectively.

The discussed necessity to recover black identity from its marginalization and recurrent ‘categorization’ requires as well a transformation through self-validation. The latter consist in providing a full recognition of all black experience as African American in the USA ‘because there’s no one way to be black’ as Strong Black Lead’s manifesto declares. What characterizes most of the productions distributed and created under Strong Black Lead is the richness of human experiences they commit to show through their series. The act of inclusion naturally becomes that of human dignity restoration. It targets multiple levels of narration because it's not limited to the plots of the stories but it is also presented through the actor’s human nature. This inclusionary action defies all existing discriminative prejudices: from race because includes characters of all cultural backgrounds, to class because we witness the variety of social statuses represented, and even gender because of the many leading roles assigned to women. Most importantly, gender becomes fluid on and off screen when the leading roles are assigned to transsexual actors/actresses. Including the mini-series directed by Ava Duvernay *When they see us* (2019), emblematic of the police’s power abuse towards young male blacks, widens the narration on the impact these events have also on the family of imprisoned boys. One of the mothers of the young protagonists is

⁶⁶ “Adrienne Carter, part of the awesome writer's room for #FamilyReunion, breaks down the feeling of being the only Black woman in the room for years and why it's time to dissolve the negative tropes that so many like her face.” in Strong Black Lead Twitter July 2019
<https://twitter.com/strongblacklead/status/1153345987437576193>

played by a transsexual woman, Carol Denise "Niecy" Nash. When gender is fluid, the sexuality can be as such as well: Nola explores her sexuality from dating men into dating women in *She's gotta have it* (series, 2017-) by Spike Lee; gay relationships come up in *Dear White People* (series, 2017-) by Justin Simien; or transsexual desires are expressed in *Pose* (series, 2018-)⁶⁷. This activism is profoundly inclusive, taking into account all black experience regardless of gender, class, and sexual orientation. Thus it's a complementary visual activism for the inclusiveness professed by #BlackLivesMatter which demanded validation of the humanity of all those who were negated it. It resonates Alicia Garza's words on #BlackLivesMatter:

“an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”⁶⁸

Furthermore, no social role is vilified or omitted because the range of characters play a full array: university students, inmates, artists, politically engaged people, young writers, and so on to affirm that blackness is not entirely restricted to the slams of big cities or to its proliferation of criminality, nevertheless the latter experiences are also presented and given a human value they are usually deprived of.

⁶⁷ *Pose* is not a purely Netflix production because it's produced by FX but is also included in and referred to Strong Black Lead choice of contents on Netflix

⁶⁸ Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” in Feminist Wire, October 2014, <http://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

1.6. The challenges of emancipating blackness.

The act of validating African American experience (including other minorities following the path of #BLM), however, triggers on the other hand a more complicated reaction from whites. In fact, literature and academic essays have shown to what extent African American existence is intrinsically intertwined with the oppression from micro aggressions to more articulated and perpetuated practices of the institutional racism embedded in structures of the institution of the country. Therefore, we have to consider the impossibility, at least for now, of affirming their ‘self’, as rearticulated form blackness, by dissociating it from the oppression their experience on daily basis. Meaning that the validation of their own experience cannot be attempted by extracting it outside the reality they experience.

There have been cinematographic attempts to rework the concept of blackness in other environments, but even fantasy realms cannot guarantee immunity from the past perpetuated in the present. We will discuss two examples which can prove this point.

Marvel has recently released *Black Panther* (2018), a fantasy/science fiction movie which presented a glorified version of blackness: it possessed royal blood and a superhero power in the imaginary Wakanda kingdom of Africa. It was the first story of a black superhero with predominantly black cast which made history as the ‘year’s highest-grossing film in USA’⁶⁹. But we shall see how even in this case, the emancipation of the black identity is expected to fail. The film significantly distinguished itself from previous Marvel productions and was nevertheless met with excitement by the public and Marvel fans. These factors combined guaranteed enormous success at the global box office⁷⁰, but its

⁶⁹ Abad-Santos, Alex. “2018 belonged to Black Panther. And it could change Marvel’s future.” in Vox December 2018 <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/12/11/18119694/black-panther-success-2018-marvel>

⁷⁰ Desta, Yohana. “Black Panther Is Officially a \$1 Billion Hit” in Vanity Fair March 2018 <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/03/black-panther-box-office-billion-dollars-china-marvel>

success has been dismissed as ‘exceptional success’ or anomaly⁷¹. As to say, plural similar film productions centered on black superpower cannot be invested in and reproduced because it’s a rare anomaly that it could appeal to the public. It falls under the prejudice that blackness cannot be attractive as a product or essence neither in real life. In fact, what initially seemed to be a purely theoretical dismissal was realized by Marvel fans in response to the passage of the title in Marvel from a white Captain America to the new embodiment with Sam Wilson, a black character. A hashtag campaign electrified Twitter with #takebacktheshield and #notmycaptain expressing the disappointment of Marvel fans with this choice⁷², which can be interpreted as protest to the ‘profanation’ of the holy figure of Captain America, similarly to the political backlash witnessed in the last presidential elections⁷³. Therefore, Marvel is the best example of how fiction still shapes reality in a country such as the United States.

Backlash often follows black participation on screen or stage even fictional worlds in the shape of intellectually empowered individuals on screen or stage even in fictional worlds. An analogous can be found in the venerated British story of wizardry: *Harry Potter* saga. Hermione Granger, one of the main protagonists of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* play (2016), previously played by Emma Watson in the cinema saga for all the 8 books, on this occasion has been casted as a black actress, Noma Dumezweni. Even though the fandom of Harry Potter has imagined Hermione as black in art form⁷⁴, the choice of this casting has been met with rage when it came to represent Hermione on stage. JK Rowling, the creator of the fantasy saga, has egregiously avoided any possible tension

⁷¹ Abad-Santos, Alex. “2018 belonged to Black Panther. And it could change Marvel’s future.” in Vox December 2018 <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/12/11/18119694/black-panther-success-2018-marvel>

⁷² Dittmer, Jason. “What can Captain America teach us about the state of US politics?” in Huck Magazine May 2017

<https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/reportage-2/can-captain-america-can-teach-us-state-us-politics/>

⁷³ Reed, Isaac Ariail. “Jefferson’s Two Bodies Interpretations of a Statue at the University of Virginia” in “*Charlottesville: White Supremacy, Populism, and Resistance*” (p.65-85). OR Books 2018

⁷⁴ Bennett, Alanna. *Seeing A Black Hermione In 2018 Is A Reminder Of What Fandom Can Build* in BuzzFeed News April 2018

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alannabennett/seeing-a-black-hermione-in-2018>

when interviewed on Hermione's race⁷⁵. However, according to Eddo-Lodge, the backlash which followed this peculiar choice in the casting openly unraveled much worse truths about the racist ideas. She pointed out how the representation by a black performer would have been a deviation from the main narrative when the debate over the ethnicity of the character took place specifically due to the fact that '*white is default*' and reinforcing the belief that the protagonist's most salient characteristic of extreme intelligence has been reserved only to white people (Eddo-Lodge 2017:137-139).

To underline the challenge to the emancipation of blackness I offer a broader understanding of the various difficulties this act withholds in itself. If blackness cannot be freed of the oppressive structures and manifestation in the fictional domain, as I have demonstrated, it is presumably impossible to emancipate it when the representation touches more realistic issues of black life in white dominated spaces. When the latter experiences are represented, they operate on a more sophisticated level by both defying mainstream and challenging white perception on one hand, while on the other operating as catalyst for open conversation on the indissoluble reality of a systematic racism rooted in the same system and the people.

Therefore, when applied to USA current socio-political scenario, it opens up a debate in a society which, in less than a decade, moved from a 'colorblind' faith where speaking and accusing of racism was a taboo into a country which hosts open hostilities against different ethnicities and promotes policies against these communities. It's defiance to the whole society because it involves all of the topics which are normally erased from conversation to push the revolution off the screens.

⁷⁵ Ratcliffe, Rebecca. "JK Rowling tells of anger at attacks on casting of black Hermione" in *The Guardian* June 2016
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jun/05/harry-potter-jk--rowling-black-hermione>

Strong Black Lead's production offers a space for conversation and debate on racism, expecting political engagement against these practices. We might even come to the conclusion that if none of the above predicted consequences could be generated in the minds of the audience, at least, such productions will ensure more awareness both on the black and white side of the consumers, which hopefully then, will mature and take action.

1.7. The risks of commodification

While creating a wide online network through Instagram and Twitter to complement and reinforce the mission of inclusionary stories broadcasted on Netflix, all the participants have to be aware of its possible risks. Even such dedicated innovative wave of creations can result in the commodification of Black experience. In one word, oppositional creation could become a profitable product for consumption.

The literal commodification occurred for centuries of slaves' bodies repeats itself on less explicit levels starting from cinematographic sector as it occurred with Blaxploitation but also elsewhere in history of art, entertainment, music (hip-hop, rap), sport, even porn. Once again it has its deeper roots in chattel slavery revealing its complications nowadays. In fact, Strong Black Lead partakers are well acquainted with similar precedents in the cinematographic field such as black film production known for its smartly combined term 'Blaxploitation'⁷⁶. This phenomenon has been brought up by the content production team to educate the audience on the online platforms as Twitter and Instagram on one hand⁷⁷, while on the other strengthening the meaning of their objective. To simplify this statement, a controversial debate which was opened concerning an original Netflix production *Orange is the new black*⁷⁸ (2013-2019) can be taken as an example. The series revolves around the life and love affairs of female inmates. While the soap opera elements are present in the series, the series brings to the screen taboo topics touching the untold reality of women

⁷⁶ Blaxploitation is a term which refers to Hollywood production in the '70 with Black protagonists. The new wave of productions have been motivated by the market research and the increasing demand of Black comparison on stage which guaranteed Hollywood incomes in a financially unstable period.

Lott, Tommy L. "A No-Theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema Author(s)" in *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Black Film Issue (Summer, 1991), pp. 221-236
Published by: African American Review (St. Louis University)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3041684>

⁷⁷ "The term "Blaxploitation" was created in the 70's. The genre allowed for Black protagonists to "overcome the man" and films often incorporated most of the same elements of Police Crime, Kung-fu, Horror, and great soundtracks

<https://twitter.com/strongblacklead/status/1007368625634697216?lang=en>

⁷⁸ *Orange Is the New Black*, 2013 -2019 Distributed on Netflix

incarceration and abuses occurring within prison walls⁷⁹. Therefore, it happens to uncover the intersectional discrimination women are subjected to in the national prisons. By exposing it through the characters, they successfully transmit their intensified vulnerability simultaneously due to both gender and race. Despite its candid and at the same time straightforward purpose of bringing to the light spot women's seclusion on screen, *Orange is the New Black* has been also severely criticized and fallen into a disgraceful category of so called 'trauma porn'⁸⁰. This critique considers the series as a purely consumption production regardless of its primary objective. According to it, the series is a consumption product and of extreme success specifically because it contains more content related to experiences which the audience is unlikely to face in their real life. It affirms that due to this, it generates curiosity and attraction to similar content, favorably increasing the consumption of the dramatic experiences told⁸¹. In accordance with this interpretation, even the worst experiences of black women can be commodified by the society and virtually consumed as once their bodies and spirits similarly to how they have been historically consumed by their 'masters'.

In spite of this allegation, this series has been a catalyst for discussion and above all, for political engagement. In fact, the life stories presented in the series have recalled much

⁷⁹ Goldberg, Leslie "Netflix Sets Premiere Date for Jenji Kohan's 'Orange Is the New Black' " April 2013 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/netflix-orange-new-black-premiere-date-jenji-kohan-448610>

⁸⁰ Lewis, Rachel Charlene. "From Representation to Tragedy Porn, Did 'OITNB' Fail Its Marginalized Viewers?" in Bitch Media July 2019 <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/did-orange-is-the-new-black-fail-black-viewers>

See also: Todd VanDerWerff Emily; Ray-Harris Ashley. "Orange Is the New Black celebrated diverse women. It also exploited their stories." in Vox August 2019

<https://www.vox.com/2019/8/7/20754146/orange-is-the-new-black-diversity-final-season-review>

See also: Shackelford, Ashleigh. "Orange is the New Black is Trauma Porn Written for White People [spoilers]" in Intersectional Feminist Media June 2016

<https://wearyourvoicemag.com/entertainment-culture/orange-is-the-new-black-trauma-porn-written-white-people>

⁸¹ According to the information released by Netflix in 2019, *Orange is the New Black* is one of the most watched original Netflix series: over 105 million users have (at least) partially watched it.

Hunt, Rachel. "How 'Orange Is the New Black' Became Netflix's Most-Watched Original Series" July 2019 in Showbiz Cheat Sheet

<https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/orange-is-the-new-black-most-watched-original-series-netflix.html/>

attention and prompted people into action with The Poussey Washington Fund⁸². The latter was created as a crowd fundraising by the creative team in honor of the favorite fictional character of the series who is killed in prison by a correctional officer. The aim of the fund is to address criminal justice and policy reforms, leaving a legacy in the real life in a fight against the real oppressor out of the boundaries of the show and the screen⁸³. “ There are people who might not have a personal relationship with black lives matter, but they know Poussey”⁸⁴ - in the words of Samira Wiley, the actress who embodies Poussey, can be perceived the importance of creating similar content especially because it can move the audience for greater and realer cause. Entertainment engages people and creates bridges between fiction and reality through empathy. At this point, it’s evident that the risk of commodification is a risk the producers and the partakers of Strong Black Leas are willing to take.

⁸² Poussey Washington Fund:

<https://www.crowdrise.com/o/en/campaign/pwf/pousseywashingtonfund>

⁸³ Ibid.

Strause, Jackie. ”Orange Is the New Black' Launches Criminal Justice Reform Fund” Hollywood Reporter July 2019 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/orange-is-new-black-launches-poussey-washington-fund-1226972>

⁸⁴ Strause, Jackie. “Orange Is the New Black' Star Talks Taking on Black Lives Matter, Her Character's Tragic Fate” Hollywood Reporter June 2016 [hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/orange-is-new-black-season-four-spoilers-poussey-dies-samira-wiley-interview-904495](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/orange-is-new-black-season-four-spoilers-poussey-dies-samira-wiley-interview-904495)

1.8. Do we feel comfortable letting them narrate our story?

The Oscar nominated and winner of several awards documentary film *13th*⁸⁵ directed by Ava DuVernay, one of the fundamental visual artists not only inside the Strong Black Lead movement but also a significant contributor to African American community, has explored many facets of the prison industrial complex in the United States. One of the most striking leitmotif accompanying any discussion on Black liberation from institutional oppression has emerged in this sentence voiced by one of the interviewees of the documentary: ‘Do we feel comfortable with people taking the lead of a conversation in a moment when it feels right politically?’⁸⁶ The question is unequivocally addressed to the African American audience. The same interrogation tends to distance the position of African Americans from ‘them’ - the hypothetical white savior. It blandly refers to presidential candidates who appear to show their interest in Black community at a convenient timing, as it happened with presidential candidate of 2016 Hillary Clinton, a woman who called Black youth with a racially charged epithet “super predators” back in ‘96 (Ransby 2018:648). Similarly, this question challenges the audience to get engaged themselves into activism for their own liberation and requires them to reflect whether they could rely on someone else to take at heart their condition. In other terms, to believe in ‘white savior’ trope⁸⁷, passively relying on them and deny themselves their political agency.

The USA has already engaged in this debate throughout history especially during the Civil Rights Era between and also within the black community. Nevertheless, while this still appears to be an eternal debate, one of the most recent re-emerged ones on the right to lead a conversation on Black liberation is worth to be mentioned here. That is the escalated

⁸⁵ *13th*. Documentary film directed by Ava DuVernay, Kandoo Films Production 2016

⁸⁶ Corey Green in *13th*

⁸⁷ see chapter I: 1.5. Strong Black Lead and its dialectic of resistance and emancipation.

circumstances due to the transracial claim of Rachel Dolezal in 2015(Jerkins 2018:44)⁸⁸. Being a university professor of Africana Studies and NAACP representative, Rachel actively participated in the local protests with BLM and has helped to draw attention to the protests. She managed to amalgamate in the African American community thanks to her aesthetic efforts to resemble to black women with traditional African-American hairstyles and most of all, by mimetizing her skin tone. However, once her true origins confirmed her white descendancy and belonging, which has been broadcasted nationally, there was an immediate cultural impact. As a result of it, black rage and a more extended confrontation on the entitlement of discourse in promoting black agenda has arisen in the United States⁸⁹.

While Rachel was proclaiming herself a transracial to defend her choice of representing herself as black woman⁹⁰, a fact that underlines her inability to comprehend the racial polarization of the society she lived in, studied and including taught about, the country was facing a fierce debate on the racial privileges to invent such a term. Black people never had the privilege to trespass openly racial categories. There have been few unique stories of ‘racial passing’⁹¹, throughout the history and most of them remained untold⁹². However, once truth was revealed, black origins could not be erased. Similarly, in our current history, nor the fame or monetary abundance could guarantee them the

⁸⁸Netflix has recently produced and uploaded a documentary on Rachel’s claim: *The Rachel Divide* directed by Laura Browson, Netflix 2018

⁸⁹ McFadden, Syreeta. “Rachel Dolezal's definition of 'transracial' isn't just wrong, it's destructive” in The Guardian June 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/16/transracial-definition-destructive-rachel-dolezal-spokane-naacp>

⁹⁰ Page, Lisa. “Passing or Transracial?: Authority, Race, and Sex in the Rachel Dolezal Documentary” in Beacon Broadside May 2018 <https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2018/05/passing-or-transracial-authority-race-and-sex-in-the-rachel-dolezal-documentary.html>

⁹¹“ Racial passing, a largely unrecorded and historically elusive phenomenon” (Hobbs 2009:12)
“Passing functioned as a crucial channel through which African Americans envisioned the attainment of physical and personal freedom and insisted on their own humanity.” (Hobbs 2009:36)

⁹²Hobbs, Allyson ; Holt, Thomas (advisor)”When black becomes white: The problem of racial passing in American life” in *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing 2009
Also see: “The chosen exile of racial "passing"”: Allyson Hobbs at TEDxStanford
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIulfoJPnq0>

acceptance (Rome 2004: 78) as we have discussed with Obama's most-racial presidency⁹³ or even when popular black artist as Beyoncé make a reference to black history⁹⁴. Moreover, such transracial claims made by whites encompasses a repeatedly discussed phenomenon of 'appropriation' of black bodies (Jerkins 2018:47). The importance of being in charge of a discourse, therefore, is an aspect which lies at the heart of Strong Black Lead and signifies much more than this. To be in charge and to control the events and own fate, even own body, has a political meaning.

⁹³ see chapter II: 2.3. Obamacare and other reforms: most-racial America

⁹⁴ Here I'm referring to the tribute made by Beyoncé to Black Panthers at the Super Bowl 50 in 2016 and the following reaction of the audience to it classified as 'outrageous' due to the reference to violence for racial advancement.

See Elgot, Jessica. "Beyoncé unleashes Black Panthers homage at Super Bowl 50" in The Guardian February 2016

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/feb/08/beyonce-black-panthers-homage-black-lives-matter-super-bowl-50>

see also: "Beyonce Attacked By Conservative Media For Unapologetically Black Super Bowl 50 Performance" by African Diaspora News Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKZGcrxRAhdUi58Mdr565mw>

CHAPTER II

Contextualizing the emergence of Strong Black Lead: Socio-political context defined by the imagery symbolism

This chapter will give a brief introduction on the political environment of the United States which contributed to the emergence of the visual activism here presented. Given that our discussion involves mostly the repercussions of visual culture, the political scenario will be also approached in visual terms. Starting from the crucial victory of the first black president of the United States whose symbolic entrance in the American history and its physical into the white house was acclaimed as the beginning of a ‘post-racial’ era by scholars, to conclude with the election of the ‘first’ White president (to borrow Coates’ expression). We will see that the image of a powerful black man, the ultimate representative of the American nation, has been defied on many occasions during his government not only by the white counterparts but also by the same people who ranked on the top list of his electors. An image of post-racial America and the first black president has been contrasted by the uprising of a movement aimed at recognition of black lives. In fact, a grassroots movement under the name of #BlackLivesMatter originated as a culmination of the desperation black community experienced daily at the same moment the first black president was in command. However, besides the protests inside and outside White House, Barack Obama won another mandate. This resulted in a further degradation of the racial relations within the country. The nation’s complicated relationship with race due to its past, intentionally meant to be erased thanks to ‘colorblind’ policy, has come up to the surface especially during Obama’s presidency. His elections and political operations have been extremely racially skewed as demonstrated by Michael Tesler. This resulted into the

election of Donald Trump, the first White president as a reaction to the ‘profanation’ of the wholly body president’s figure represents for the United States as suggested by Coates.

2.1. The collective victory of Obama or the story of the *Extraordinary Negro*⁹⁵

“Ironically, racist Americans of all colors would in 2004 begin hailing Barack Obama, with all his public intelligence, morality, speaking ability, and political success, as the Extraordinary Negro.” (Kendi 2017: 483)

“In February 2007, Time magazine speculated that African Americans were expressing greater support for New York senator Hillary Clinton because of questions over whether Obama was ‘black enough’. It couldn’t be because they saw Obama as a long shot. It had to be that they did not see Obama as ordinary Black like them, meaning inarticulate and unclean and unintelligent.”(Kendi 2017:489)

Leadership was in its critical phase for African American community since the Civil Rights era as demonstrated by Robert C. Smith⁹⁶ and therefore, of extreme importance when Barack Obama was elected as the first black president in the history of the United States in 2008. He was the embodiment of the collective progress of African American community, a watershed in the political scenario of the country and a consolidation of a ‘post-racial’ era in USA according to scholars⁹⁷. His election was followed by the extreme

⁹⁵ Ibrahim X. Kendi dedicated a chapter (n.37) to the meaning and the importance of election of Obama recalling the image of extraordinary Negro. Kendi, Ibrahim X. *Stamped from the beginning/ The definitive history of racist ideas in America* Nation Books New York 2016

⁹⁶ Robert C. Smith essay “System Values and African American Leadership” included in the collection by Marable, Manning and Clarke, Kristen. *Barack Obama and African Empowerment /The rise of Black America’s new leadership* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009) gave a perspective on the absence of leadership in African American community but even further from there, the lack of engagement. According to his analysis based on a research done for his book “We Have No Leaders: African-Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era” (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) this situation was a transition from protest to accommodation. The American values system accepted rather than challenged in order not to disbalance the ‘system’s elite’.

⁹⁷“That an African American family inhabits the White House, an edifice built by slaves in 1795, is a powerful example of the transformation of racial attitudes and realities in the United States.” (Taylor 2016:173)

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains that ‘colorblind’/ post-racial society assumes that race is no longer to be considered as an impediment for the advancement in the USA. However, she confirms that this assumption had more negative implications than positive by impeding state intervention power towards discrimination in comparison to the Civil Rights movement. (Taylor 2016: 187-195)

This concept created of a post-racial America, however, has been a controversial field of research especially focused on Obama’s presidency. *Post-racial or Most racial?: Race and Politics in The Obama Era* by Michael Tesler The University of Chicago Press 2016 was one of the books which delineated the skewed perception of Obama’s presidency based on surveys and figures coming from the statistics.

happiness which poured into the streets under the forms of manifestation all over the country, celebrating the advancement of the collective victory which Obama represented. For *The Butler*⁹⁸ (2013), a film which reminisced the significant stages in the black American history, the election of Obama was a culmination point of the film but as well a defining moment⁹⁹ for African Americans through the eyes of Cecile¹⁰⁰. Indeed, its magical moment could not have been better emphasized through the eyes of Cecile, a man who has witnessed the ‘Negro’ origins from its condemnation to the plantation work, through the Civil Rights movement era to the election of the first black president.

Even though Obama’s election and first administration were coronated by the scholars as the culmination of the post-racial era, his very election has been a peculiar event. Mainly it was due to his education and ability to transcend the race impact on his white part of electorate thanks to it. In fact, Obama’s campaign was focused on a racial-neutral rhetoric and based on the specific effort to make him be perceived from the white voters as a candidate ‘*who happened*’ to be black rather to be identified as black by them (Marable in Marable & Clarke 2009:4; Coates 2018:124). Moreover, according to Alim & Smitherman analysis of the linguistic aspect in shaping the politics and racial perception, Obama’s strength relied on his refined intellectual and linguistic abilities among which his ability in ‘*style-shifting*’(2012:6). This latter linguistic ability guaranteed him absolute success in appealing to whatever ethnicity his audience would identify with because they felt emotionally connected. This meant, eventually, that he had a greater chance to be perceived as a candidate who was well educated, spoke standard English (meaning that he did not engage or resonate to the white audience in connection to the vernacular English

⁹⁸ *The Butler* directed by Lee Daniels, distributed by The Weinstein Company 2013

⁹⁹Here I am evoking the title of the book by Kathleen Ann Clarke titled *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration & Political Culture In The South, 1863-1913* on the history of celebration after African American emancipation

¹⁰⁰The fictional representation of the real butler of the White House whose story has inspired this creation in *The Butler* (2013)

which bears negative connotation; the latter was associated to the black community, as demonstrates the quotation at the beginning of the section). Obama's erudition distanced him from the negative stereotype associated with black people and his linguistic skills would effectively translate into success among white voters on one hand (Alim & Smitherman 2012:20). On the other hand, it rather resulted in a negative impact on those who sought for African American representation, mainly due to Obama's played racial-neutrality or, depending on the point of view, inclusionary and union rhetoric. He was polemically targeted and doubted of being 'black enough' as Kendi puts it in the previous quotation, by representatives of the black community. The doubt laid in relying on Obama's identity, therefore questioning his belonging to African American community. This implied his understanding first of the plagues which aggravate black lives and eligibility as representative for taking actions to alleviate them (Marable in Marable & Clarke 2009:5; Kendi 2017: 489). The rhetoric of 'Yes We Can', therefore, acquired different meaning for those who were attending his political rallies based on their ethnic identification, nevertheless the message perceived by all of them would be that Obama articulated in his speech calling the audience, we may say nation, 'A More Perfect Union' . The results of the post-election polls revealed that Obama had won thanks to his egregious capacity of dialogue of inclusion. His ability to speak truly and make himself relatable to all communities regardless of their origins, guaranteed him support from all ethnic communities of the United States (number 1 on the list of African Americans). Due to this fact, his election has been proclaimed as the "most diverse electorate in U.S. history"¹⁰¹. With such a contradictory election on one hand and promising on the other, Obama initiated the path for the African American community as the first black president into the White House. This is indeed a symbolically charged watershed in USA racial history mainly

¹⁰¹ "Dissecting the 2008 Electorate: Most Diverse in U.S. History" in Pew Research Center April 2009
<https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2009/04/30/dissecting-the-2008-electorate-most-diverse-in-us-history/>

because he was the first African American entering a physical place which has been historically a symbol of white supremacy, built and served by black people, while running office for 2 mandates in a row (2009-2017).

An enormous quantity of critical analysis of Barack Obama's extended presidency has been produced by scholars and it would be compelling to take a position on the quality and efficiency of his 'performance' as a president. However, it would be necessary to mention a few important points concerning his mandates.

2.2. Dichotomy of Obama and Black Lives matter

“While it may be surprising that a Black protest movement has emerged during the Obama presidency, the reluctance of his administration to address any of the substantive issues facing Black communities has meant that suffering has worsened in those communities over the course of Obama’s term of office.” (Taylor 2016: 301-303)

The emergence of Black Lives Matter has been reported as a pinnacle of black rage towards police brutality in terms of physical inflictions, seclusion and namely deaths of black people. The rage had deeper roots in the past marked by centuries of violence practice perpetuation which continued in the newly renamed ‘colorblind’ era of the United States history. Yet, this moment of uprising for black community rights was highly distinguishable from others which characterized the Civil Rights for instance. In fact, this time the culmination of rage has been provoked by the government inaction, at the very moment when the first black president was for a second time in command.

As it is well-known, Black Lives Matter’s story has been retold and written countless times by the press by remarking the events that sparked its creation. This often meant that the importance of the organizative work behind has been significantly reduced to inexistence. It laid behind the founders of the movement Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, whose commitment to the cause has shaken the web as a tidal wave and materialized the virtual protest into a physical one on streets. The movement has been innovative because, although it has started by standing and speaking up for the rage in the names of male blacks, its approach to it was far way more articulated than the former movements from the Civil Rights era. For instance, it offered a ‘decentralized’ movement based on internal coordination (Taylor 2018: 3616). In addition, it relies on the new concept of analyzing oppression as ‘intersectional’ dimensions inspired by Crenshaw’s studies, and

similarly developed insights from Combahee River Collective Movement (Ransby 2018: 2457). But mostly, its founders relied on their own experience of discrimination due to factors of race, class, gender, sexuality¹⁰². In fact, Black Lives Matter have been successful in redirecting attention of the systemic discrimination traditionally focused on what Black men endured from the law enforcement agents tracing a parallel of a bigger system of oppression to that achieved through prison complex industry. They were able to offer a broader view of the interconnecting and intersecting discriminations concerning women, LGBT community, without leaving aside all those who would identify with oppression. Their achievements put on spotlight events which often occurred unmentioned. Thanks to #SayHerName campaign attention has been brought to the state violence performed at the expenses of black women¹⁰³ and more effort followed for queer and transgender. Not only did they speak truth for those whose life did not matter because at the bottom of the social constructions in US, but they also extended the understanding of freedom further to all ethnicities, asking emancipation from capitalism and terror it promotes in Palestine.

The most fascinating explanation provided to this obvious dichotomy in the moment where the movement has arisen, was given by activist and scholar Angela Davis. Angela Davis is a myth and an icon who has contributed and is continuing to contribute to the emancipation of black people all her life, and no one better than her could grasp the understanding of this evident dichotomy. During an interview on her political views she has

¹⁰² Two of #BLM leaders are notoriously Black queer women. Their own experience is a drive towards an upheaval of human conditions for the collectivity. As Barbara Ransby writes “cofounder Patrisse Khan-Cullors talks openly about her family’s experiences with poverty, the criminal justice system, and the police in her public interviews and writings.” (Ransbury 2018:1884).

¹⁰³ #SayHerName was a campaign launched by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea Ritchie. It was aimed at raising awareness on the erased deaths and violence episodes against black women. This was based on empirical evidence, a report published by the founders of the campaign. Khaleeli, Homa. “#SayHerName: why Kimberlé Crenshaw is fighting for forgotten women” in *The Guardian* May 2016
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/may/30/sayhername-why-kimberle-crenshaw-is-fighting-for-forgotten-women>

The most discussed case connected to this movement is the one of Sandra Bland, recalled in a recent documentary *Say Her Name: The Life and Death of Sandra Bland* directed by Kate Davis, David Heilbroner, HBO distribution 2018.

openly stated¹⁰⁴ that even though Obama's presidency had many flaws in her opinion, it was thanks to his presidency that the rise of such movement has been made possible. In other words, the fact that Black Lives Matter had received recognition by the government and have been asked to sit at the table with the government representatives and their needs (expressively the needs of those for whom they advocated) being heard and enacted could not have happened unless a receptive counterpart as the chief in command of the country was open and willing to embrace it. In fact, Barack Obama participated in the NAACP national convention stating his objectives aimed at reforming the criminal justice system (Taylor 2016: 396). However, it's important to underline that this was made possible by black voices of the movement, by their actions (for instance the shutdowns of production, services) and not because of a deliberate initiative of Barack Obama.

Conversely, it's important to add, as Michelle Alexander clarified in her investigation over the mass prison complex, that no president, with no exclusion of Barack Obama, can be exempted from being responsible of the aggravated power institution of the prison industry complex (renamed by her as a 'New Jim Crow')¹⁰⁵. This consideration is evidence based. According to the statistics available, the record number of convicted since the '70 has reached its peak during Obama's presidency with a significant increase of African American among the convicted with the highest number¹⁰⁶. This was a result of

¹⁰⁴ "Angela Davis on Feminism, communism and being a Black Panther during the civil rights movement"; 25 May 2018; Channel 4News interview

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3q_qV5mHg0&t=669s

¹⁰⁵ Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow/ Mass Incarceration in the age of Colorblindness* The New press New York 2010

¹⁰⁶ According to the figures illustrated in the Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin published in 2014, during 2013 there was an increase of 400% of those sentenced since 1971. It is true that the trend was initiated by Obama's predecessors; however the peak was reached under his mandate.

<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p13.pdf>

While, according to the NAACP Criminal Justice Fact Sheet "[...] Though African Americans and Hispanics make up approximately 32% of the US population, they comprised 56% of all incarcerated people in 2015." <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>

marijuana persecutions conducted by Obama's Justice Department which outnumbered all his predecessors results on 'war on drugs' while conflicting with the vigent laws¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁷ Riggs, Mike. "Obama's War on Pot" in The Nation October 2013
<https://www.thenation.com/article/obamas-war-pot/>

2.3. Obamacare and other reforms: most-racial America

“Arguably, race has been and remains the most intractable problem in the United States. Race defines and shapes the dichotomous social and human relations that have historically specified the juxtaposition of the supremacy, right, privilege, and morality of the “white” and the “non-white”. In specific terms, race is a marker that describes, informs, and bounds white and non-white people within structures of power and domination. If we accept race as a social construction, then we must also accept it as a category by which all groups in the American society are identified. We must also understand that while whites possess race, they are not *raced*. To be *raced* in the American society is to be identified as non-white. Historically, this especially has been the case for black people.” (Hill in Marable & Clarke 2009:133)

The role that racial aspect of Obama’s identity played in the presidential elections of 2008 has already been discussed previously in 2.1. However, the impact of such racialized perception of Obama continued further during both his mandates until reaching a peak point in the racial division of the country with the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

While transracial and post-racial are terms employed by scholars and promoted by mass media when describing Obama’s success in the presidential elections, they actually came from the elaborated effort in presenting Obama’s presidential campaign as such (Hill in Marable & Clarke 2009:134). Obama embraced the color-blind rhetoric and underlined his purpose to serve the entire America countless times (Hill in Marable & Clarke 2009:143; Coates 2018:316), however, this could not stop his identity in shaping the politics in a negative manner.

“Mass politics had become more polarized by racial attitudes since Barack Obama’s rise to prominence. That is, the election of President Obama helped usher in a “most-racial” political era where racially liberal and racially conservative Americans were more divided over a whole political positions than they had been in modern times” (Tesler 2016:3)

As Michael Tesler affirms, the racialization of American politics in terms of racial attitudes and race increased significantly despite the efforts of neutral race rhetoric of Barack Obama and we shall see, how the identity obscured the intents of reforms or aggravated racial meanings in other situations.

“Obama was selected amid widespread panic and, in his eight years, emerged as a caretaker and measured architect. He established the framework of a national healthcare system from a conservative model. He prevented an economic collapse and neglected those largely responsible for that collapse. He ended state-sanctioned torture but continued the generational war in the Middle East. [...] He was not a revolutionary. He steered clear of major scandal, corruption, and bribery. He was deliberate to a fault, saw himself as the keeper of his country’s sacred legacy, and if he was bothered by his country’s sins, he ultimately believed it to be a force for good in the world. In short, Obama, his family, and his administration, were a walking advertisement for the ease with which black people could be fully integrated into the unthreatening mainstream of American culture, politics, and myth.”(Coates 2018 :XV)

Taking distance for now from the meaning that Obama withholds for the African American integration into the mainstream, this extract from Coates offers a glimpse into the achievements of Obama which are often disregarded. In fact, Obama is more frequently associated with the Affordable Care Act (A.C.A.) reform here mentioned rather than any other¹⁰⁸. This reform is also associated heavily with his name as “Obamacare” and therefore, reinforces racialized meaning by associating his identity to it. Although the aim of this reform is to extend healthcare to American citizens excluded from it, it has been extremely racialized by public opinion. Misinformation of the population and Republican

¹⁰⁸ Dimock, Michael. “How America Changed During Barack Obama’s Presidency” in Pew Research Center January 2017
<https://www.pewresearch.org/2017/01/10/how-america-changed-during-barack-obamas-presidency/>

party's opposition contributed to the divisional opinion on it.¹⁰⁹ However, according to Michael Tesler it was predominantly due to the fact that African American community was perceived as the main beneficiary of this policy (Tesler 2016:34). One of Tesler's investigations involved a series of surveys on the emotional perception of health reform legislation among the participants. Those interviewed were asked to express their opinion on the reform by attributing the act either to Obama or Clinton's reforms of 1993. As the results of experimental surveys have shown, "anti-black attitudes did in fact become a significantly stronger predictor of opposition to governmental health care after Obama became the face of the policy" (Tesler 2016:8). In the meantime, as its consequence, the same reform has been denounced negatively as 'reparations' alluding to the demands of the Civil Rights era (Coates 2018:198). Additionally, Obama has been criticized as 'food stamp resident'¹¹⁰ (Coates 2018:196) on the same basis, that of racial bias.

Unfortunately, the similar racialized perspective continued haunting everything that surrounded Obama, even including his dogs¹¹¹ (Tesler 2016:89). This has inevitably applied to the speech and therefore, Obama's position in regards to Trayvon Martin's death in 2013¹¹². As Coates observes: "The moment Obama spoke, the case of Trayvon Martin passed out of its national-mourning phase and lapsed into something darker and more familiar - racialized political fodder" (Coates 2018:121).

¹⁰⁹ Dropp, Kyle; Brendan, Nihan. "One-Third Don't Know Obamacare and Affordable Care Act Are The Same" in New York Times February 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/upshot/one-third-dont-know-obamacare-and-affordable-care-act-are-the-same.html>

¹¹⁰ Kessler, Glenn. "Barack Obama: the 'food-stamp president'?" in *The Washington Post* December 2011 https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/barack-obama-the-food-stamp-president/2011/12/07/gIQAzTdQdO_blog.html

¹¹¹ Tesler conducted an experiment on public opinion concerning the image of presidential pet Bo by comparing its popularity to those of Clinton's, Kennedy's. The results have shown that racial resentment played a role in the ranking associated with Obama's dog (Tesler 2016:90).

¹¹² Bredy, James. S. "Remarks by President on Trayvon Martin" in The White House/ President Barack Obama July 2013 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin>
Cohen, Tom. "Obama: 'Trayvon Martin could have been me'" in CNN July 2013 <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/19/politics/obama-zimmerman/index.html>

In this specific situation, Obama's position was extremely fragile, that of a man walking on the line of racial division. On one hand he could identify with the victim of the systematic oppression, whereas on the other he could employ the federal power to make amends. But he was careful the way he enacted it and therefore, disapproved by those who expected a lot of him¹¹³.

To conclude this brief overview of the most-racial era during Obama's presidency, a most powerful quotation from Coates will, perhaps, highlight how metaphorically speaking the racial identity was used as lenses both consciously and unconsciously employed: "The irony of Barack Obama is this: He has become the most successful politician in American history by avoiding the radioactive racial issues of yesteryear, by being "clean" (as Joe Biden once labeled him) - and yet his indelible blackness irradiates everything he touches." (Coates 2018:122).

¹¹³ As discussed in 2.2. #BlackLivesMatter originated because of the desperation reached due to the inaction of the government concerning the police brutality.

2.4. *White rage*¹¹⁴ and the election of Trump

“The symbolic power of Barack Obama’s presidency - that whiteness was no longer enough to prevent peons from taking up residence in the castle - assaulted the most deeply rooted notions of white supremacy and instilled fear in its adherents and beneficiaries. And it was the fear that gave the symbols Donald Trump deployed - the symbols of racism - enough potency to make him president, and thus put him in position to injure the world.” (Coates 2018:XVI).

In a society which was built on slavery and inevitably marked by it, and therefore, by a theory of Blacks’ biological inferiority, whiteness was not only a physical characteristic but a foundation of the rights to citizenship. However, the rise of a Black president has served as a powerful image in the lives of the offspring of those initially deprived of those rights. In fact, for Coates, its compelling power can be expressed as materialized from a wild collective dream where the only existence of the black president could have been in a utopic representation of the world or more often associated to a joke¹¹⁵.

While Barack Obama’s identity has been questioned from his very first presidential election and further racially polarized his politics, another aspect of his identity has been repeatedly targeted in a most sophisticated racial attack: his right to citizenship. The starter of this ‘birtherism movement’ discrediting Obama’s citizenship has been nonetheless than the next president to take office in 2017, Donald Trump. The false premises that Obama could not exercise his power as president because he ‘might not be’ a citizen of the United States was a much revealing attack from a racially discriminative point of view than any previous on him. If we consider that the primate right to citizenship historically has been

¹¹⁴Anderson, Carol. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* Bloomsbury USA; 1 edition (May 31, 2016)

¹¹⁵ “Before Barack Obama, the ‘black president’ lived in the African American imagination as a kind of cosmic joke, a phantom of all that never could be” (Coates 2018:125)

whiteness itself as demonstrated in the factual requirement¹¹⁶, then “America has still never had a black president.” (Coates 2018:134).

It has been statistically proven that ““cultural anxiety” as one of the primary reasons many voters pulled the lever for Trump” as mentions Jared Loggins (Loggins in Howard-Woods, Laidley and Omid 2018:27) . This underlines once again the importance that cultural representation plays in the minds of people and the level on which it impacts the reality in the United States. If racial integration was indeed “an assault on whiteness” (Coates 2018:131), similarly, scholars and historians as Ibrahim X Kendi and Carol Anderson agreed that the election of Obama’s successor was a response to it. To them, this is an evident backlash which follows each significant act of progress for African Americans and therefore, as such was not a surprising outcome of the election but rather a predictable consequence in history. In Kendi’s words:

“[...] But I am less concerned about Trump’s first 100 days - or last 100 days for that matter - than what Trump’s election reveals about America’s racial history.

If Barack Obama came to embody America’s history of racial progress, then Donald Trump should come to embody America’s history of racist progress. And racist progress has constantly followed racial progress.

[...] This history has prepared me for Trump and all the other Trumps that could rise one day on the timeworn back of bigotry.” (Kendi 2017: XI)

The history here mentioned by Kendi is the one Carol Anderson has thoroughly investigated in her thesis on the ‘white rage’, a silent, invisible force which works through institutions and laws provoked by the black advancement (Anderson 2016:3) since the Civil

¹¹⁶ “The Naturalization Act of 1790 restricted citizenship to persons who resided in the United States for two years, who could establish their good character in court, and who were “white””
Harris, Cheryl I. “Whiteness as property.” in *Harvard Law Review* 1993
Episode 1 from “The history of us with Morgan Freeman”, Revelations Entertainment, Netflix 2017

War. Anderson demonstrated how white rage has manipulated the recent presidential elections based on the objective of “putting back a White president into the White House” through the slow disfranchisement of African American voters and annihilation the effectiveness of the Voting Rights Act (Anderson 2016:144) starting from 2008¹¹⁷. As she states:

“Barack Obama’s election was a catalyst for a level of voter suppression activities that had not been seen so clearly or disturbingly in decades.” (Anderson 2016:148)

“[...] the result was that in the 2014 midterm elections, the United States had the lowest voter turnout since 1942. So many of those who had been mobilized and energized in 2008 were now disillusioned, demoralized, and, in many cases, disfranchised, and most simply stayed home.” (Anderson 2016: 155)

On the other hand, another consequence of a black president election was the extreme physical vulnerability of the African American community, starting from Obama himself. According to Anderson, “In Obama’s first year in office alone, there was a 400 percent increase in death threats, as compared to those received by one of the least popular presidents in American history, George W. Bush.” (Anderson 2018:156). In conclusion, white rage was operating on all its levels.

In such context, the metaphorical image of the ‘assaulted castle’ of Coates can be integrated with Isaac A. Reed’s interpretation of the ‘profaned’ president body. This interpretation is based on the two king’s bodies: social and political (Reed in Howard-Woods, Laidley and Omidi 2018:71) applied to that of the president. When we consider the presidential body as the extension and ultimate representation of the nation and therefore,

¹¹⁷As Anderson explains, the Voter ID law was one of the disenfranchisement tactics adopted by the states with a high percentage of African American minorities such as Alabama and Georgia for example. Along with the law enactment, offices in charge of similar bureaucratic processes have been closed in the targeted black areas. Early voting has been suppressed or routes to the voting ballots have been shut down in certain areas as in Florida, mass emailing *tactique* known as ‘voter roll-purge’ and “Crosscheck” database employment have been the decisive factors in the election of Trump.

its people, Obama's skin color acquires a deeper meaning. Due to this country's past, it signified a literal 'profanation' of the wholly body. And as a result, Trump's election is the restoration of the sacred body which has been profaned (Reed in Howard-Woods, Laidley and Omid 2018:7)¹¹⁸: that of America's first white president (Coates 2018:344).

¹¹⁸ A similar situation of the sacred, profaned body has been discussed in the Marvel Fandom in 1.6 relating to Captain America.

PART II

Analyzing two Series on Netflix

Introduction: Disrupting the ‘Master-Discourse’

This introduction will provide the necessary key points in regards to the disruption of the ‘master-discourse’ carried out by Strong Black Lead which will be analyzed in this section.

“When I was four, I asked my mum when I would turn white, because all the good people on TV were white, and all the villains were black and brown. I considered myself to be a good person, so I thought that I would turn white eventually. My mum still remembers the crestfallen look on my face when she told me bad news.

Neutral is white. The default is white. Because we are born into an already written script that tells us what to expect from strangers due to their skin color, accents and social status, the whole humanity is coded as white. [...] Those who are coded as a threat in our collective representation of humanity are not white. The messages were so powerful that the four-year-old me had already recognised them, watching television, noticing that all the characters who looked like me were criminals at worst and sassy sidekicks at best.” (Eddo-Lodge 2017- 85)

The mainstream ‘master’ narrative applied to the United States historical context, is a narrative which constantly reinstates, reinforces and perpetuates the belief of racial inferiority by all means available. In this research, the focus point is to demonstrate how the activism of Strong Black Lead, being a visual project of the successful streaming platform Netflix, exposes such narrative while humanizing and dignifying the lives of oppressed African American community. On this premise, the digital storytelling employed, simultaneously acquires the meaning of counter-storytelling as discussed in 1.5. The power and meaning this new representation conveys to the naturally neglected and deprived of humanity minority groups, operates as a disruption in the ‘master narrative’. The latter term can also be explained as ‘majoritarian stories which distorts and silences the experience of people of color’ (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002:29).

“We define the counter-storytelling as a method of telling stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further struggle for reform. Yet, counter-stories need not be created only as a direct response for majoritarian stories [...] Storytelling and counter-storytelling... help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance.” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002:29)

As Ibrahim X Kendi examines in his book *Stamped from The Beginning*, the history of a majoritarian story in the USA can be traced back to the origins of slavery on its continent. The extreme brutalization of people of color, transported as beasts in the ships and subsequently traded as objects and exploited as free labour, could not meet the ethical and moral requirements of Christianity. Therefore, an ideology of racial inferiority based on the different skin color has been deliberately fabricated to justify the brutality inflicted on people of color. Conversely, this system of beliefs expressively justified on one hand while on the other benefitted its creators in the opposite sense elevating them. It served as a foundation to whiteness. Despite the fact that abolishment eventually took place within the whole North America in 1863, the dismantling of the beliefs which classified inferior those of darker skin color has yet to be completed. Likewise, different form of oppression has substituted slavery as suggested by Michelle Alexandre¹¹⁹ and Carol Anderson¹²⁰. While the reproduction of this very ideology followed the same pattern. As it has been argued above, the imagery employed by mass media has been very influential in reinstating the worthlessness of African Americans as human beings: from the description of their encounter with the police to the overrepresentation as criminals throughout the mainstream

¹¹⁹ Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow/ Mass Incarceration in the age of Colorblindness* The New press New York 2010

¹²⁰ Anderson, Carol. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* Bloomsbury USA; 1 edition (May 31, 2016) Kindle Version

media discourse. To make the point of how the contemporary dominant narrative results to be parallel to the current one, the example of *The Birth of a Nation* (1905) would be the most explanatory to select. This film represented the romanticized version that the Confederates opted to tell of the pre- and after Civil War (not sparing the eulogized foundation of KKK), but exceptionally it set the path of what would become the dominant association to crime of the black men. The fact that we have witnessed the production of a black history under the same name in 2016¹²¹ underlines the definitive importance of counter-storytelling. In such a context, counter-storytelling is desperately needed and employed to reverse the long perpetuated beliefs of racial inferiority by offering a new perspective of the minority group. This section will analyze through two series in terms of act of counter-storytelling performed by Strong Black Lead based on two concepts: that of humanization and of emancipation of black identity.

¹²¹ *The Birth of a Nation* by Nate Parker distributed by Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2016
Scott, A.O. "Review: In Nate Parker's 'The Birth of a Nation,' Must-See and Won't-See Collide" in New York Times October 2016
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/07/movies/the-birth-of-a-nation-review-nate-parker.html>

CHAPTER I

Activism of Visual Resistance: The Humanization of the Criminal Stereotype of African Americans through *When They See Us*

This chapter analyses the series *When They See Us* directed by Ava DuVernay for Strong Black Lead Netflix project as an act of counter-storytelling and, therefore, resistance against a master narrative in the USA. The series is based on real facts that occurred back in 1989 of what became a worldwide famous criminal case of the conviction of five young black and Latino teenagers. While, after serving their time in prison it has been proved none of them has been involved in the crime, their innocence hasn't been sensationalized as their culpability has been. Ava DuVernay has chosen to present their story as a means to restorative justice not only for the five men but to all black community by its extension. Therefore, the choice of this series for my analysis is crucial due to the several themes it tackles: black criminal stereotype imagery, the single perspective of the facts recounted by media content makers, mass incarceration and justice system. In fact, this story is exemplary of the mechanism of racial dominance over minority groups as African Americans and Latinx in the USA. This chapter will explore the counter-storytelling and the exposure of the racially biased system of justice created to oppress them.

1.1. *When They See Us* vs. the story of ‘Central Park 5’.

“The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story to become the only story [..]

The consequence of a single story is this: it robs people of dignity, it makes our recognition of an equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie¹²²

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nigerian writer, has exposed master narratives describing their effects based on her own life experience as Nigerian woman living in the United States. She emphasizes that, when a single story is created and reinforced, it converts into the only lenses through which the reality is filtered. As its result, stereotypes and myths are generated in relation to nationalities, ethnicities, social classes, gender and so on. Due to the rigidity of its angle, the single story tends to dismiss further aspects and therefore, it deprives people of humanity and reduces them purely into a caricature. *When They See Us* (2019) disrupts the endorsed image of criminality employed to report on this case and recreates the protagonists’ multidimensionality as human beings. At the same, it becomes a means to provide restorative justice to their image which as well implies of black and Latino community for which they once became negative signifiers.

This mini-series is a documented story produced and directed for Strong Black Lead by Ava DuVernay, a prominent figure in the cinematographic field and contributor to African American visual arts. It’s mainly aimed at providing to the public an accurate account of the famous crime story occurred in New York in April 1989. The case bears the name chosen by the press at the time as “Central Park Jogger Case” due to its victim and

¹²²“The danger of a single story” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie at TED Global 2009
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

location: a woman (known as Trisha Meili) who was attacked and raped while jogging in Central Park. The story narrates a wrong conviction based on racial targeting and coerced confessions used as evidence of five black and Latino adolescents between 14 and 16 years old: Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana Jr and Korey Wise. All men have served over 10 years in average for the crime they haven't committed before the actual acquittal took place in 2002. Despite the acquittal, they remained criminals in the opinion of many¹²³, unable to shake off the only story which alimented the hate against them by the press. The series recounts the facts from the day of their arrest until the day of their exoneration in four emotionally intense capsule-episodes. For the first time, the series, present the facts from perspective of those who have been wrongly accused and convicted as teenagers¹²⁴. Besides reversing criminal stereotypes, it also revives discussions over the importance and worth of black lives. Moreover, it provides a glimpse into justice system and mass incarceration. What occurred to this group of boys starting from the way the news have manipulated public opinion from the beginning remains extremely relevant today as it has been in case of the descriptive language employed by the killer of Trayvon Martin. In the case of Central Park Five as they have been known until now, the power of images evoked by words conditioned the perception of the voluble audience consolidated a long existing myth of black rapist since the lynching time¹²⁵. Such imagery and conceptual association undermined their appearance as human beings and prevented the public opinion from allowing the benefit of the doubt on their alleged involvement in the crime. Additionally, as the story has been sensationalized by the press and mass media, the increasing pressure on prosecutors and detectives following this case

¹²³ "Their innocence never got the attention that their guilt did"

Craig Steven Wilder in "The Central Park Five" (2012) Sundance Selects

¹²⁴ The very introduction of this series by Oprah was :"*When They See Us* is a gripping, dramatic telling of the story for the first time from the perspective of the men and their family "in *Oprah Winfrey Presents: When They See Us Now* Netflix 2019

¹²⁵This statement will be examined further in the next section 1.2.

resulted into the conviction of this young group mainly because the conviction fitted convincingly a broader narrative in the USA of the criminal black and Latino youth of that time. As a consequence, the whole justice system and the public opinion operated against the teens and efforts of their families and the communities. A fact that has been exemplary to the fate of black and Latino youth of the country. To support with evidence the thesis here presented, a reference will be made to Natalie Patricia Byfield's studies on the construction of the Jogger case in terms of racial consciousness by the media¹²⁶. The case study was an examination of 251 article samples produced by the press during the three phases of the famous criminal case. Such analysis aimed at demonstrating the way the press has manipulated the outcome of the case (conviction of the five young men) due to the lexicon used when describing the facts even though they came from the defense sources. The study demonstrates that the racial indicators were mostly words which employed underlying allusions to the racial category¹²⁷ such as location Northern Central Park, Harlem but also through the repetitive usage of terms as: "predator, wolfpack, savage, pack, black, Latino, white, racial tension, race of black source, race of Latino source, animal, and feral" that evoked visual concepts in the readers' minds (Byfield 2008:176). Additionally, the term 'wildin'¹²⁸, unknown beyond black community until then, was employed to

¹²⁶ Byfield was particularly sensitive to the topic as representative of African American community herself but also especially because she has been one of the journalists involved in the early coverage of the news at the time. Both factors contributed to a in-depth analysis from as insider and outsider of the same time who comprehends the journalist job, knows the dynamics behind it and is African American.

¹²⁷ DiAngelo explains that racially coded language is one of the forms white exercise racism while maintaining a positive image (DiAngelo 2019:43).

¹²⁸ The term 'wildin' referred to the act of engaging consciously in social disorder for fun but also as a form of protest. Besides being an urban phenomenon, it was employed in black literary naturalism. However, the term gained an extremely negative connotation in the aftermath of the Central Park Jogger case and has been added to Oxford English Dictionary in 1993 as:

"wilding, n.: The action or practice by a gang of youths of going on a protracted and violent rampage in a street, park, or other public place, attacking or mugging people at random along the way; also, an instance of this." (Mexal 2013)

Whites have conveyed their own meaning to the term which once again compassed the savage, uncivilized blackness.

For further discussion of the term please refer to:

underline the savageness of the teens and of the crime. As a consequence, the term gained a negative connotation due to the Central Park Jogger case.

The cognitive language evoked by the descriptive images, therefore, has played on the deepest fears of the general white public, that of criminal youth from the poorest black and Latino neighborhoods of New York City. As Byfield states:

“These findings have implications for studies of sex crime cases where race is also a feature of the case. These findings suggest that within the media, the jogger was not an iconic representation of crimes against women; she was an iconic representation of an attack against an important social institution. In a sense, the "jogger" may have represented the vulnerability of corporate America. The attackers likewise became an iconic representation of whom or what could launch an attack. More importantly, the findings show that in the construction of meaning in mass mediated communication, terms typically associated with one concept can become stand-ins to create meaning for other concepts. In this case, gender was also a stand-in for race.” (Byfield 2008:208)

Byfield, due to her professional background as journalist herself, has been involved in the early news coverage of this event. She demonstrated in this research that the group of boys have been condemned to prison since day one:

“It's standard practice in news media to use the term "alleged" with reporting on charges or accusations brought against someone before a conviction [...] The infrequent use of the term "alleged" is a violation of journalistic standards and ethics and possibly, thus far, one of the most manifest signs that the public got a very limited representation of the events in the park on the night of April 19. One of the noted reasons for the limited representation of events to the public was the particular failure to incorporate a multiplicity of perspectives when the story was being shaped.” (Byfield 2008: 235-236)

Mexal, Stephen J. “The Roots of “Wilding”: Black Literary Naturalism, the Language of Wilderness, and Hip Hop in the Central Park Jogger Rape” in *African American Review*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Special issue: Hip Hop and the Literary (Spring 2013), pp. 101-115 Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23783604>

In fact, the term “alleged” appeared only in 12 times (=5 percent) in the samples taken for the analysis, allowing no margin of doubts over the implication of boys in the crime (Byfield 2008:188)¹²⁹.

Another factor to contribute to the magnitude of the impact this story had on the nation, was also due to its forced sensationalism reinforced by minor and bigger newspapers and Medias in general. Byfield underlines that there were registered about 3,254 rapes that year in New York City, however none of those has gained such visibility as the Central Park Jogger case:

“The amount of emphasis that generally speaking the news media—and specifically at *The New York Times* and *Daily News*—placed on the coverage of the story was extremely high. About 64 percent of the stories in the sample were prominently placed.[..]In sum, frequent prominent placement indicates the level of importance media content makers assign to a particular story. While the amount of emphasis placed on the story changed somewhat during different periods of the coverage, the CPJS consistently got prominent placement indicating to readers that it should be interpreted as a very important story.” (Byfield 2008:188-189)

The prominence of the case, the word choice and absence of alternative account of the story has been ingeniously transferred by Ava DuVernay on screen. Even though docu-series are the dramatized version of real facts, they challenge the authenticity with which the entire story has been tackled in three main ways. First of all, the knowledge of the justice system operation and mass incarceration. Ava DuVernay has previously directed *13th* (2016), a documentary on the political history of the USA which required extensive knowledge on mass incarceration and prison industry complex alongside with the research on black criminal stereotypes. Secondly, such background allowed the facilitation of core facts concerning the Central Park Five (coercion of the confessions, trial, press linguistic

¹²⁹ While Byfield’s studies are focused on the analysis of 251 article samples, Burns comes to the same conclusion within hers (Burns 2019:1052)

choices, prison experience). And lastly, the emotional authenticity transmitted by the actors' performance. The last part was particularly targeted in order to show the vital multidimensional humanity of the real men who were deprived of their identity as such. As a result of this approach, truth on the case has been finally released and the Exonerated Five could recover their image in front of the public. In this correlation, this Netflix product boldly advocates for a recovery of the identity of the boys put on trial starting from the title. "When they see us" as a title is mostly self-explanatory: this is when the audience, stripped of the conditioned opinion, finally gets to see the real "them". As result, the originally created 'single story' of mass media, is reviewed within a pluralistic perspective from all the involved. Particular attention is brought to the family mechanisms, often left aside, unraveling the impact that events had on them. The humanization process was one which has been meticulously worked on by the actors thanks to frequent encounters with the real men and their families.

While their penal record was cleared in 2002, only in 2016, almost 30 years after their conviction, a settlement has been reached with the City of New York¹³⁰. However, the recovery of their image hasn't been sensationalized as their juridical process has been. In fact, mass media maintained a skeptical position towards the innocence of the men, even after the confession and physical evidence of the real offender has been acknowledged¹³¹. The case, since, has been studied and presented as documentary and in a book by Sarah Burns. However, the public opinion has continued to vacillate.

¹³⁰ The five men have filed a civil right suit in 2003.

¹³¹ One of the most influential people who have openly declared that they believe the Exonerated Five to be guilty still today is nonetheless the current president of USA, D. Trump. Trump, has an acknowledged, strong connection to the period of the Central Park 5 Case. He, as one of most popular people on TV at that time, has publicly asked for the death penalty reinstatement spending over 80 thousand dollars in advertisement to promote his request. This moment has been captured in the series to create a great impact on the audience. Together with Trump's call for the death penalty, the parents of the convicted have the chance to express their feelings to this attack.

For further reference please consult: "When They See Us: Trump stands by 1989 Central Park Five comments" in BBC News June 2019

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48687356>

“News coverage on TV:

-Details didn't matter because there was no script. They were coming downtown from a world of crack, welfare, guns, knives, indifference and ignorance. They were coming from a land of no fathers. They were coming from the wild province of the poor, and driven by a collective fury brimming with the rippling energies of youth, their minds teeming with the violent images of the streets in the movies. They had only one goal: to smash, hurt, rob, stomp, rape. The enemies were rich. Their enemies were white.” (*When They See Us*: Episode 2, Season 1)

While the first episode was focused on introducing the actual facts of the crime accusation, interrogations and the boys themselves, the second episode is based on the trial representation with its dynamics behind the scenes until the conviction of the boys. At the same time, this episode portrays the mass media approach when providing the facts to the public. The extract above gives an understanding of the conceptual attachment similar statements withheld: it recalls the image of uncivilized, underdeveloped, criminal neighborhoods, racialized due to their color and referred to as a land of no-fathers. The last one is an implicit reference to one of the most controversial writings on addressing African American conditions in the USA back in 1965 under the title *The Negro Family Report* but most commonly known as Moynihan's report by borrowing its name from its actual writer, Patrick Moynihan¹³². Its main contention was that the instability of the black family undermined its social and economic upgrading. The instability per se was caused by the lack of fathers who abandoned the families or due to the out-of-wedlock children who were already born and grow without a father figure. Since then, Moynihan's report became a

¹³² This report was written by Moynihan in order to push the government to take action on the national agenda. In Moynihan's opinion, poverty was a direct effect of the black pathology (Alexander 2012:45). This theory has been largely supported by scholars (even among African American community) and has become a common and popular belief among the nation. Still today people tend to dismiss the system of discrimination due to which black people are relegated to this condition. For further discussions on interpretation of Moynihan's report please refer to: Geary, Daniel. *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and its Legacy* University of Pennsylvania Press 2015

point a justification and support for the common belief of dysfunctional families in black communities which are recurrent even today. However, a different family image is transmitted by the series of a caring family and two of the fathers (Antron's and Raymond's) are especially present in the lives of their sons. While mothers are presented extremely powerful and resourceful as in the case of Yusef.

On the other hand, the series depicts the protests in which prominent activists from Harlem engaged and a recurrent motto echoes throughout the episodes: "Protect Black Youth! They were framed!" (*When They See Us*: Episode 2 Season 1). It triggers a parallelism in the minds of the viewers of the past miscarriage of justice to the recent protests on streets for black lives by Black Lives Matter. At the same time, it reflects the previously discussed findings by Byfield on the manipulated, master narrative:

"Activists and community leaders from Harlem outside the court:

-We are here to assert the position for the families and many in our community that there is injustice happening here. Injustice occurred in that precinct when young boys, underage boys, were questioned without their parents, and were coerced by police and prosecutors to make false confessions, leading to where we are today

-We are here to point the finger at the white press who have failed. You have failed to properly investigate this. You have failed to ask the right questions."

"-You have been spoon-fed a story and you've eaten it up.

-But we're not here for stories. We're here for the facts. For the truth. The facts are that these boys are not a wolf pack. They are not animals. They are not thugs. These boys, they are ours and we will fight for them."

"-Conclusions were made - quickly." (*When They See Us*: Episode 2, Season 1)

While black community was supporting the boys, Latino community has stepped back abandoning Raymond Santana. According to Sarah Burns, who has published a book and released a documentary on Central Park Jogger case, this was due to the community

history. Because it was new to the city, according to Burns, the community was more keen on accepting police authority and especially reluctant to defend due to the nature of the crime. (Burns 2019:2285) The series shows to what extent the influence of the news coverage was convincing to the public. Even Santanas family members that Raymond believed he was guilty:

“Raymond’s uncle: Everybody getting trouble from everywhere in this family. How could a rapist be in our family?”

Raymond’s father: He is not a rapist. Don’t say that.

Raymond’s uncle: That’s what they say. That’s what we have to hear all the time.”
(*When They See Us*: Episode 2 Season 1)

Raymond’s conversation with his father once back from prison is particularly revealing on this topic:

“Raymond Jr: When everything was going on, I couldn’t really follow what was happening. I didn’t get it. Inside, I started reading the articles, how they wrote them against us from the first days, all the transcripts, the straight-up lies they told. I watched my tape. I don’t even know who that f** kid is. I don’t even recognize myself.

Raymond Sr: I know, Ray, I know, but what those people stole from you, you can’t buy back. Can’t buy back, not with money, not with hustling, not with none of that sh**. Okay? ‘Cause it’s gone, it’s done. But you don’t gotta be what they said you were.” (*When They See Us*: Episode 3 Season 1)

In addition to the docu-series, Netflix has produced an Oprah Winfrey’s special to reaffirm the prominence of the series per se. It consisted in an encounter between Oprah with the troupe (actors, director) and the exonerated men Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana Jr and Korey Wise. The previously mentioned continuity and blurred line between present and past, the series and reality is

taken on another level as it extends to a further discussion on the injustice experienced as consequence of racism, tracing parallelisms between the past country's situation and its present.

1.2. The imagery of the criminal blackness: The Black Demon¹³³

“The false narrative, disseminated by the police and the media, was swallowed whole by the public because it conformed to the assumptions and fears of the city and the country. Everyone bought the story. But the fact that so many continue to promote this narrative tells us that even though we live, as some like to say, in a “post racial” society, the racism that fueled the original rush to judgment persists, and that we have not evolved enough from the days when even the suggestion that a black man had raped a white woman could lead to a lynching.” (Burns 2019: 66)

The series states clearly that boys were victims of racial profiling. In fact, the only identity they are allowed to have is the one which corresponds to their skin: that of a black demon. In the case of Central Park Jogger was an impressive reinforcement on the national level of dominant ideology. It has reconfirmed once again that white is superior to black, pure and noble compared to black’s deficiency and moral deviation. The need to denigrate blackness in reality has its reproductions on screen as well, a circumstance especially prolific during that decade.

“The racist stereotyping of African American citizens has been used as a device by the white power structure to reinforce the subordinate status of minorities throughout American history“ states Dennis Rome (2004:920-921), a scholar who have researched the criminal association of Black Demon. As blacks have gained emancipation from slavery, new forms of racial dominion have been elaborated. Since then, criminality was a resourceful alternative, a tool employed to strip blacks from their freedom and any citizenship rights. The patriarchal system effective in the southern states at the time were reluctant to accept the transformation of a childish Negro, uncivilized and dependent on the white man into a fully independent individual. Indeed, the fact that black men could have

¹³³ Reference to the title of one of the sources used to demonstrate the thesis here discussed: Rome, Dennis. *Black Demons: The Media's Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype (Crime, Media, and Popular Culture)* Praeger 2004 Kindle Edition

access to white women as maximum confrontation to the basis of white patriarchy. And, it resulted into lynching mobs:

“It is no accident that lynchings used to enforce white dominance were often based on the allegation that the victim of the lynching had raped a white woman, nor is it coincidence that many of the men on death row in the southern states at that time were African Americans convicted of raping white women. The images and subsequent sequent beliefs caused by this travesty of justice created an image in the minds of many Americans that African American men are violent brutes who could not be trusted, hence the creation of the black demon.” (Rome 2004: 752-753-754)

Ava DuVernay’s documentary *13th* (2016) explains that the image of black rapist was highly influenced by the release of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The film reinforced the concept of southern chivalry, racial superiority of whites and purity of white women. Frederick Douglass had already advanced the theory that the image of black rapist was a fabricated justification for the violent lynching mobs (Rome 2004-66). However, it was Ida B. Wells, a notorious journalist, who investigated the attainability of these rape accusations that concluded into lynching. Thanks to her research the veracity of this claim has been overthrown by evidence. She demonstrated that the rape claim was untrue in the majority of the cases (Rome 2004:705; Burns 2019:1191). Unfortunately lynchings of black men of all ages continued until Emmett Till’s death has been a catalyst further African American reaction.¹³⁴ With the Civil Rights movement, a new association of crime has been formed, that of civil disobedience. The political discourse targeting poor communities “was on drugs” and “get tough”¹³⁵ approaches lead the nation to what the country is facing today¹³⁶ essentially because “The group that defines the law and controls public opinion is the group

¹³⁴ Emmett Till’s death is commonly associated with the new rise of Civil Rights phase

¹³⁵The term war on drugs have been coined by R. Nixon and used as a national campaign against crime by Ronald Reagan in 1982

¹³⁶ The era of mass incarceration and biased racial profiling although within a ‘colorblind’ law as investigated by Michelle Alexander.

that will define criminal images and control the punishments for all groups, not the least of which will be their own.” (Rome 2004:639-640). According to D. Rome, medias impact fortified the need for similar policies in the minds of the audience through trending reality-based programs on *Law and Order* where blacks were shown most of the time as suspects, engaging in violent behavior against authorities or handcuffed, while white counterparts were policemen. As D. Rome affirms: “[...] the media tend to influence public perceptions of crime in at least three important ways: (1) by making crime a national problem, (2) by selectively reporting crime news to the public, and (3) by perpetuating criminal stereotypes in the entertainment media.” (2004:936). The increasing popularity of similar broadcasted ‘reality-based’ shows on crime, resulted in a loss of conscious distinction between fiction and reality: “First, nonfictional images have greater impact than fictional ones. Second, the more a message or theme is repeated, the more influential it becomes. Third, the closer the crime is to home, the more it may generate fear among viewers.”(Rome 2004:1087-1089).

The ramifications of criminal imagery impact are the ones represented in *When They See Us*:

“Linda Fairstein: Every young black male who was in the park last is a suspect in the rape of that woman who is fighting for her life right now.” (*When They See Us*: Episode 1, Season 1)

“Linda Fairstein: You go into those projects and you stop every little thug you see. You bring every kid who was in the park last night.” (*When They See Us*: Episode 1, Season 1)

African American children don’t stand a chance to be considered as such because they are systematically categorized as ‘thugs’:

“Raymond: We was just out. It was a nice night. That’s all. We was just hanging out. They say ‘boys will be boys’ When they say boys, they are not talking about us. They are talking about other boys from other places. When did we ever get to be boys?” (*When They See Us*: Episode 3, Season 1)

The internalized concept of racial deviance and criminality can be still seen operative nowadays. In fact, Trayvon Martin and many others whose death has not reached the news coverage have occurred only because they did fall in the category of ‘thugs’. However, the internalization of this criminal stereotype appears to have an influence among African Americans. Blackness seems to be irreconcilable with any other characteristic and black youth is susceptible to the interiorization of such image and adopting it as an act of rebellion¹³⁷. However, *When They See Us* speaks from the heart of black community, its family and gives hope:

“Yusef: People hate us out there.

Sharonne (Yusef’s mother): They hate your brilliance. They hate your beauty. They hate us. But we are not going to hate ourselves.”¹³⁸ (*When They See Us*: Episode 3, Season 1)

¹³⁷ “Psychologists have long observed that when people feel hopelessly stigmatized, a powerful coping strategy - often the only apparent route to self-esteem - is embracing one’s stigmatized identity” (Alexander 2010: 171)

“get on tough” approach has been supported by African American communities especially because they started to believe the stigma (Alexander 2010: 208)

¹³⁸ Besides, the rise of the Black Power, Black Panther party is one of the examples where black beauty of the city has been first admired, imitated and then, criminalized by the government. An insightful documentary about the evolution of the party and their impact on the culture at the time is: *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* directed by Stanley Nelson Jr. Firelight Films 2015



When They See Us Episode 3, Season 1. Netflix



When They See Us Episode 3, Season 1. Netflix

1.3. The era of mass incarceration

“The law and order perspective, first introduced during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement by rabid segregationists, had become nearly hegemonic two decades later. By the mid-1990, no serious alternatives to the War on drugs and “get-tough” movement were being entertained in mainstream political discourse. Once again, [...] a new system of racialized social control was created by exploiting the vulnerabilities and racial resentment of poor and working-class whites. More than two million people found themselves behind bars at the turn of twenty-first century, and millions more were relegated to the margins of the mainstream society, banished to a political and social space not unlike Jim Crow, where discrimination in employment housing, and access to education was perfectly legal, and where they could be denied the right to vote. [...] Ninety percent of those admitted to prison for drug offenses in many states were Black or Latino [...] The New Jim Crow was born” (Alexander 2012: 58)

The humanization process that the series here discussed tackles works on both levels: individual for Antron, Kevin, Yusef, Raymond and Korey and collective given that they became signifiers of their communities. Moreover, the series becomes a catalyst for reflection on humanity’s encounter with the justice system, within and outside the prison walls.

First, the public was introduced to the interrogations of the youngsters led by the detectives. Coerced by force and psychological tricks, kept within the precinct without food until they finally confessed on the promise to be released. Michelle Alexander argues that in most of the cases concerning under young people eighteen have no awareness of their legal rights and representation, which at last translates into the acceptance of plea deal (Alexander 2010:86). Once accepted it, the person has been marked as a felon, many aspects of the citizenship rights are denied:

“Barred from public housing by law, discriminated against by private landlords, ineligible for food stamps, forced to “check the box” indicating the felony

conviction on employment applications for nearly every job, and denied licenses for a wide range of professions [...] locked out of the mainstream society and economy - permanently.

No wonder, then, that most people labeled felons find their way back into prison. According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics study, about 30 percent of released prisoners in its sample were arrested within six months of release. Within three years, nearly 68 percent were rearrested at least for a new offense. Only a small minority are rearrested for violent crimes, the vast majority are rearrested for property offenses, drug offenses, and offenses against the public order” (Alexander 2010: 94).

This aspect has been explored in the series as each of the men is shown when facing the aftermath of the felony conviction.

“Barber: Do you have a state license? How you gonna do that when you’ve been incarcerated?

Yusef: I can’t get a license?

Barber: Not in no certified occupation. Bus driver, teacher, EMT. No, once you’ve been inside, man, they got you. And they keep you.” (*When They See Us*: Episode 3, Season 1)

While Yusef understands that he cannot longer aspire to his dream job as a teacher, Raymond faces a rawer reality. Unable to find any job, he turns to the only resource left for him on the streets as a drug dealer. He loses it and goes back to prison. The audience, however, understands that it was not his choice but the only alternative left for him outside the prison walls.

“Raymond Jr: I can’t be something I’m not. I ain’t citizen. They don’t want me to be. I don’t even want to be. I’m somewhere I don’t know. Half in, half out. No matter where I go. “ (*When They See Us*: Episode 3, Season 1)

The only one able to find a job is Antron, because he could apply with his cousin's name so his criminal record could not be tracked during job application (Burns 2019: 2822). While, Korey Wise's fate, on the other hand, represents the fate of those kids who are beyond the juvenile age but still within the adolescence and are convicted as adults. His experience in prison was especially different because he ended up in Rikers Island (known as Galligan's island¹³⁹). There, Korey, unlike the other of the group, could not access any educational program and had comprehension difficulties long before entering prison. He experiences brutal attacks by the inmates and by prison guardians. In order to survive he decides to remain within solitary confinement, which also meant ceasing any possible human interaction. His part of the story reminds that of Kalief Browder¹⁴⁰, and for sure, also many others, whose story did not make it to the screen. One of the scenes which the viewer can feel his desperation is where his brother's death announced to him by the prison chaplain:

“Chaplain: We are here to make sure you are okay, Korey.

Korey: Me?

Chaplain: Yes, we are here for you.

Korey: You're here for me. Uh, nah, I'll be here forever sir, I'm not sure what you mean.

Chaplain: If there's anything..

Korey: I'll be here forever sir I don't know what you mean! Nobody give a f** about me.” (When They See Us: Episode 4, Season 1)

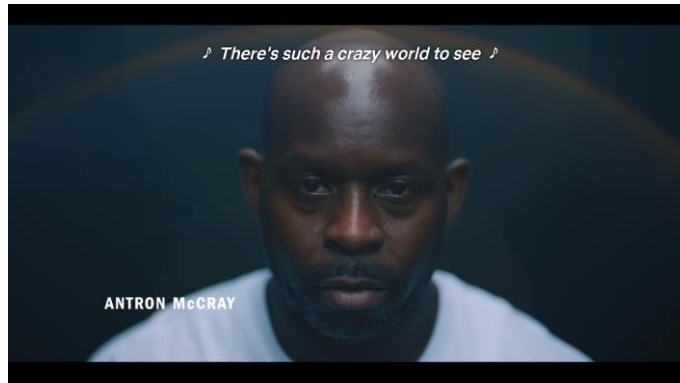
¹³⁹ This name is introduced in the second episode of the series underlying the extreme difficulty which the defendants would face because of judge's Galligan's reputation of siding with the state during most of the trials

¹⁴⁰ Kalief Browder's story was sensationalized unlike most of the people who get into the system never accepted to plead guilty. There was no evidence for his culpability either. However, he was sent to Rikers Island without a trial at the age of seventeen and spent about two years within the isolation unit For further reference.: *Time: The Kalief Browder Story* Viacom Entertainment Group, Netflix 2017

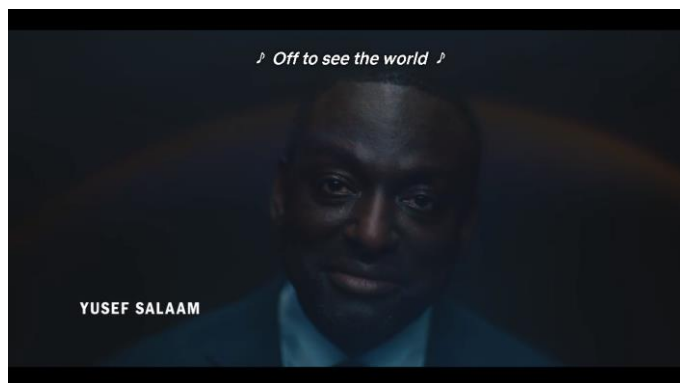


When They See Us Episode 4, Season 1. Netflix

Although the entire visual representation done by Ava DuVernay of the Exonerated Five story bears a strong emotional impact, it reserves one of the most poignant moments to the end of it. This is where the audience meets the real protagonists of the justice miscarriage on screen. There is a transition from the actual actors who played the men as adolescents to the image of Antron, Yusef, Raymond, Kevin and Korey as they are now. Such image contraposition reveals the continuity between the story witnessed by the audience on screen and the reality. At the same time, the actors are replaced by images of, filmed raising their heads and chins up high and showing the tattoos they have. Metaphorically, they are finally allowed to recover their dignity and they do so by choosing to show the marks they bear from this story. In overall, this closing image leaves the audience questioning the reality they live in and the blurry boundaries of the fictional and real worlds.



When They See Us Episode 4, Season 1. Netflix



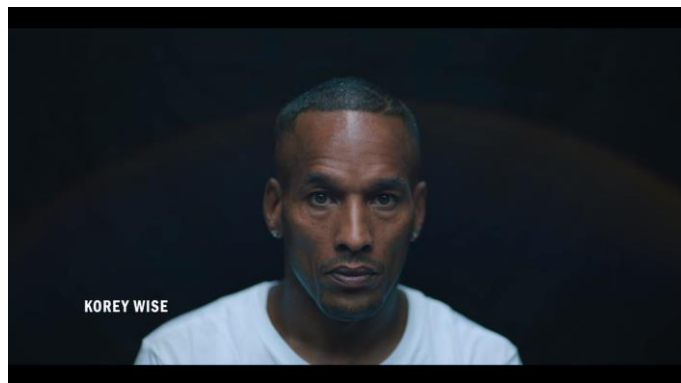
When They See Us Episode 4, Season 1. Netflix



When They See Us Episode 4, Season 1. Netflix



When They See Us Episode 4, Season 1. Netflix



When They See Us Episode 4, Season 1. Netflix

CHAPTER II

The emancipation of the Black Identity: Confronting ‘white fragility’ in *Dear White People*

This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the series *Dear White People* (2017-) directed by Justin Simien. For practical purposes, the analysis will be restricted mainly to its first season as this latter encompasses a plurality of relevant topics. The series is a revival of the eponymous film directed by Simien, which was a winner at the Sundance Festival 2014. It’s a fictional story which revolves around the life of mostly black students at an imaginary Ivy League university campus in a post-racial America. It is contemporary and reflects the reality happening off screen with which the audience can identify. In fact, it contains multiple references to politics and almost recreates its dynamics within the campus. However, *Dear White People* is a satire of politically transgressional nature starting from its title and ending with each of the dialogues within the series. It attempts at showing what it is like for blacks to navigate white spaces in the acclaimed colorblind era. I will analyze how this series tries to emancipate black identities from traditional stereotypes and what challenges this emancipation implies in the interaction with white people. I will resort to three key concepts strictly interconnected: black face legacy, white privilege and the concept of ‘white fragility’ according to R. J. DiAngelo. By employing these three concepts, I will show that racial supremacy still shapes the identity of blacks outside and within their community and represents the massive challenge and obstacle to its emancipation.

2.1. The legacy of Blackface in a post-racial America.

“Sam White on campus radio:

-Dear White People, here’s the list of acceptable Halloween costumes: a pirate, slutty nurse, any of our first 43 presidents. Top of the list of unacceptable costumes: me. Winchester couldn’t get through 2017 without blackface?

[..]

-Look, For those of you who thought our ivory tower was immune to this type of sh*t WAKE UP WAKE UP..(alarm clock ring sound follows)” (*Dear White People*: Episode 1, Season 1)

The first episode of season 1 begins in a complicated moment for the Ivy League imaginary campus: that of a blackface party hosted at its campus in a post-racial era.

Despite the fictional nature of the series, its opening topic has a strong reflection in the USA history and a political commentary through it:

“Kelsey: [..]But After the blackface party I was so traumatized. I mean, racism here? I still can’t believe it.

Joelle: No one could see it coming.

Reggie: I thought President Obama fixed all of that.” (*Dear White People*: Episode 5, Season 1)

Racism and its expressions are unthinkable to be found in an educational institution. In fact, most of the time blackface appears to be treated as a ghost from the country’s past. Instead, it recurrently reappears over the centuries in the North American universities, including in the recent so called post-racial era.

“Black Caucus gathering - its members exchanging their opinion randomly:

-Post racial my ass. Everyone said we were crying wolf but this is our proof.

- A bunch of white kids dressing up like us.. this is some real sh*t
- Guys do you know what is this? This is racism.
- What a revelation Kelsey. Somebody should write this down, paper boy you got that?
- I just thought this kind of thing only happened in the '50s or in BuzzFeed articles.. I don't feel safe.”(*Dear White People*: Episode 1, Season1)

This dialogue shows what the USA has negated so far on the blackface: its contemporaneity and consistency. Apart from the blows from its past within the yearbooks (as it happened in case of a Virginia Governor and other important figures of Virginia¹⁴¹), there have been evidence of a blackface “resurgence” over the past two decades¹⁴² among fraternities on various campuses across the United States. This chain of events raises a crucial question on why this phenomenon regained popularity especially on campuses. Universities are acknowledged as places where the intellectual consciousness of their students is shaped and as such, they mirror the complex mechanisms of society. In this perspective, the renewed manifestation of blackface reveals the deepest truth about society’s nature: a reinforcement of white identity¹⁴³ or/and an internalized compulsion to domain and control blacks. In fact, while blackface tradition dates back to the black minstrelsy of antebellum America, it was also the very first encounter whites had with the performance of blackness in entertainment (Simien 2014:366; Fitzhugh Brundage 2011:45). It consisted of a theatrical and musical performance of white actors in disguise who sang and performed what was supposedly the black culture for the delight of white audience. The

¹⁴¹ Ralph Northam, Virginia Governor, has been in fact one of the people in the epicenter of the blackface scandal. Harris, Adam. “Yearbooks Aren’t the Only Place to Find Blackface on Campus” in *The Atlantic* February 2019

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/02/ralph-northam-college-campus-blackface/582373/>

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ Tawil, Randa. “Why blackface remains popular on college campuses” in *The Washington Post* February 2019

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/02/11/why-blackface-remains-popular-college-campuses/>

term ‘supposedly’ emphasizes the idea that black culture represented on these occasions was filtered through whites engaging in black minstrelsy, who had the faculty to construct their own version of it according to their need. In fact, according to the studies done on this subject, the nature of black minstrel was much sinister than its purely exotic appealing to white audiences. It worked as a sort of fortification of the dominant race ideology, similar to the one appearing on TV today discussed previously.

“The erasure of black identity as a historical fact, perhaps even a psychological necessity, is a precondition for the American tradition of blackface minstrelsy. Thus disparagement lies in the cultural system of privileging representation over reality and in the systems of power and oppression that allow such privileging to become the standard. The matter is more profound than the mere question of racial disparagement as popular entertainment; at issue is the work that blackface performed in a society that essentially felt compelled to evict black people from their own skin and then allow pretenders to take up residency there” (Fitzhugh Brundage 2011 : 45)

Fitzhugh Brundage explains that in its reality, the popularity of blackface minstrelsy performances was powered by the social anxiety in which it has flourished due to the urge to distinguish the elite class through its uptight behavioral standards from the rising bourgeoisie¹⁴⁴. In these terms, black minstrelsy offered a momentary “release” and “transgression” (2011:48) to the elite class enacting those considered as inappropriate behaviors and providing a comparison with those which consolidated class superiority.

“Repeatedly presented as incapable of maintaining even the most basic standards of decorum and dignity, comic black caricatures amused parlor dwelling Americans and eased middle- class uncertainty by marking the woeful extremes of social failure. Unchecked and unchallenged for decades, these images informed and influenced attitudes about black identity by importing devastatingly racist

¹⁴⁴Fitzhugh Brundage notices that this was strictly linked to the changing realities with the adoption of industrial means (2011:47)

ideology into the American home in the guise of harmless entertainment.”
(Fitzhugh Brundage 2011: 54)

Thus, white identity built its position in the racial hierarchy on the inferiority of the black figures and reinforced this notion through show representation. Black identity was reduced to a well defined caricature to be laughed at and to be disapproved of. Due to its significant success among white audience and profitability, the antebellum shows here mentioned found their way in a refined form in modern TV production “as embodying black identity to the actor’s broad gestures fully eclipsing the black body—the black figure in the mind of white viewers becoming caricature, becoming cartoon” (Fitzhugh Brundage 2011:48).

In fact, according to Justin Simien, the creator of *Dear White People*, black stereotypes aired on TV today have deep roots in the minstrelsy tradition. He remarks that there are correlations between its past forms and their new adoptions as for instance: “Hood” Celebrity is the version of Sambo, Housewife is Mammy, The Player is Mandingo, The Bitch is Sapphire, The Crazy Bitch is the exaggerated version of Jezebel, Zip Coon becomes the Gay Pet, The Black Expert is The Magical Negro¹⁴⁵ (Simien 2014:414-457). Once again, the reaffirmation of white superiority occurs through its opposition to the black deviant nature largely employed by white executives on TV.

¹⁴⁵ibid

2.2. Whiteness as property: Understanding ‘White Privilege’

To grasp what the renewed manifestations of Blackface within and outside universities circles reveal about society today, it’s crucial to introduce the concept of white privilege. White privilege, is the intrinsic foundation of white supremacy and therefore, racial domination within the United States. One of the prominent contributors to the critical studies on race directed to white privilege is Cheryl I. Harris. Harris, affirms that the binary coded racial construction of white vs. black is an evolved form of the past binarism of free vs. slave, which was a foundation of social hierarchy (Harris in Crenshaw et al. 1995:278). At the same time, she exposes the subtlety through which this construction of race operates in the modern era:

“[..]whiteness can move from being a passive characteristic as an aspect of identity to an active entity that - like other types of property - is used to fulfill the will and to exercise power. The state’s official recognition both of a racial identity that subordinated blacks and of privileged rights in property based on race, elevated whiteness from a passive attribute to an object of law and a resource deployable at the social, political, and institutional level, to maintain control. Thus, a white person, “used” and enjoyed” whiteness whenever she took advantage of the privileges accorded white people simply by virtue of their whiteness when she exercised any number of rights reserved from the holders of whiteness. Whiteness as the embodiment of white privilege transcended mere belief or preference; it became usable property, the subject of the law’s regard and protection. “(Harris in Crenshaw et al .1995:282)

In this explanation, white privilege is a default (by now) property, which encloses further advantages that people of white skin color can enjoy above the ‘others’. Harris affirms:

“The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness; [...] The courts played an active role in enforcing this right to exclude determining who was or was not white enough to

enjoy the privileges accompanying whiteness. [...] The law relied on bounded, objective, and scientific definitions of race - what Neil Gotanda has called "historical race" to construct whiteness as not merely race, but race plus privilege."(Harris in Crenshaw et al. 195:283)

Therefore, if whites represent the majority of those in control of institutions, they exercise their right to exclude through legal means, which is usually referred to as a system (from there - systemic racism). The consequences of this racial exclusion are to be found in laws, policies, ideologies (DiAngelo 2018:22). As Sam White, the provocateur of the series suggests: "My jokes don't incarcerate your youth at alarming rates or make it unsafe for you to walk around your own neighborhoods. But yours do. When you mock, or belittle us, you enforce an existing system." (*Dear White People* Episode 1, Season 1) Given that black people are excluded from the places of any decision making, any form of micro aggression in a shape of joke becomes a natural ramification of an existing system of racial discrimination.

White privilege, in fact, is the distinct treatment that guarantees a white student, Addison, immunity from the police officer at the party in the series. Whereas, a black student, Reggie, turns immediately into a suspect and is pointed a gun because of the angry tone used to respond to the officer in Episode 5 (Season 1). In the series, Reggie subsequently tries to process the trauma through a poem, stressing this concept: "A Bullet Held Me Captive, Gun In My Face, Your Hate Misplaced, Light-Skin, White Skin But For Me, Not The Right Skin." (*Dear White People* Episode 6, Season 1)

While the topic of racial profiling and criminal stereotype has been previously tackled in Chapter I (part II), it's interesting to point out how the situation acquires a new meaning from a perspective of white privilege. Although the majority of whites remain obscure to their white privilege because it has become an internalized concept since their birth, a recent study of Pinterest images has showed that there has been a wave of racial

awareness and solidarity which arose after the national tragedy of Trayvon Martin's death¹⁴⁶.

Besides the most common binary vision of white privilege, *Dear White People* demonstrates its natural extension within the black community itself, and how it operates especially among women. The phenomenon is commonly referred as colorism, a term traditionally associated to Alice Walker¹⁴⁷ which follows exactly the same pattern of white privilege in juxtaposition to black skin. Light skin, in this case, acquires a higher position in the hierarchy compared to the darker shades of black and relies on advantages over the darkest. This phenomenon is mostly evident among women essentially due to the beauty standards which recognize whiteness as its ultimate expression (Rose 2004:11). The impact of internal discrimination played on shades of black color is presented through the chasm between two of the main protagonists of the story, Sam White and Coco (Colandrea) Conners. The first, biracial and light skinned, becomes very vocal as advocate of BSU¹⁴⁸ on campus while the latter, darker-skinned directs her efforts to be as much non-black as she can. Coco disapproves Sam White for her militant and extremist approaches in igniting the atmosphere on campus through the radio and reaches a peak:

“Coco: Normally I would not dignify your rants with a response but today your entry-level black rage is particularly galling, Rosa Sparks. Tell me, is using your radio show to drag other black women part of your revolution?”

Sam: If it brings truth to the masses, yes. I drags who needs dragging.

Coco: Imagine the reaction if your divisive revolutionary drivel were coming from the mouth of a real sister.

Sam: Oh, (laughing) a real sister?

¹⁴⁶ Amankwah Yartey, Franklin Nii. “Race, solidarity and dissent in the Trayvon Martin case: a critical analysis” in *Visual Studies*, 31:1, 50-62, 2016

¹⁴⁷ The creation of word colorism and its meaning here presented is traditionally associated to Alice Walker in 1982

¹⁴⁸ Black Student Union

Coco: (grinning) You get away with the murder because you look more like them than I do. That's your light skin privilege. Until you acknowledge that, shut the f*k up, about who's woke or not." (*Dear White People* Episode 4, Season 1)



Dear White People Episode 4, Season 1. Netflix

Colorism, which is the natural manifestation of white privilege within black community itself, shapes the life of a black person in relation to their own identity. Therefore, the choices they can make mostly depend on the self-awareness of their own color within and outside of their circle. The juxtaposition of two personalities of Sam and Coco demonstrates to what degree white privilege allows Sam to remain unpunished for being representative of a polemical radio show¹⁴⁹ on campus. While the audience gets a hint of Sam's origins (she comes from a middle class family and hasn't learnt of her different appearance until she was in third grade), Coco on the other hand has been born "woke"¹⁵⁰ as she explains. The reason is due to both her dark shade of black and the place of origin

¹⁴⁹ Radio show is named *Dear White People* which becomes the title of the series

¹⁵⁰ According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary term "woke" comes from African American Vernacular English and means being awake, aware of social issues which started being associated with #BLM in 2014 and changed its function from a simply descriptive adjective to one that acquired meaning of action and participation in the activism against racial injustice.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/woke-meaning-origin>

Being woke or not becomes a requirement for students on campus in the series discussed by the protagonists and eventually leads to the creation of an app to allow them rate their peers in relation to their awareness and action (Episode 4, Season 1).

which is South-West of Chicago¹⁵¹. The different life experiences of the two girls influenced by these factors play the key role in forging their identity. Sam becomes the activist on campus promoting herself as black (and eventually using ‘biracial’ card for convenience¹⁵²). She feels the pressure of her peers to be as black as possible and even writes an article named “Don’t Fall in Love with Your Oppressor: A Black Girl’s Guide to Love at Winchester” finally ending up dating a white guy. Coco, on the other hand, ambitious with long term political aspirations, is completely aware of how the system can prevent her from seizing life opportunities because of her blackness. She makes herself more ‘palatable’ and refined to be accepted and recognized by white people (for example through make up, expensive wigs to domain her natural hair, hanging out with white elite and adapting constantly her linguistic choice of expressions when speaking). She stresses how she realized this to be the only option she had when growing up because with one glance at her (skin) people automatically assumed that she was not intelligent, undereducated and poor. Her act of self-preservation is mistaken for assimilation¹⁵³ by others which causes friction in the relationship between Sam and Coco but is seen as such also by others of Black Caucus members.

While this example provides a perspective on a more sophisticated way that white privilege operates within the same black community, there are some more blatant examples

¹⁵¹ Chicago is one of most prominent cities in the USA for a long story of black segregation, poverty and criminality. Please refer to the following sources:

*Diamond, Andrew J. *Mean Streets: Chicago Youths in everyday struggle for Empowerment in the multicultural city 1908-1969*; University of California Press 2009

*King in the Wilderness directed by Peter Kunhardt, Kunhardt Productions 2018

**The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* directed by Stanley Nelson Jr. Firelight Films 2015

¹⁵² Sam is confronted by black caucus when they discover that she is secretly dating a white guy. She tries to justify her choice explaining that technically she is biracial and therefore, it’s not so polemical.

¹⁵³ Interestingly, assimilation in the series has a negative connotation. The insistence on being woke among Black Caucus at the campus plays on the negative meaning to this word when mentioned as treachery to one’s own community and identity. Despite its negativeness, all black protagonists adapt their language in correlation to the environment and who they are addressing. They are code-switching and by doing so, they are assimilating even if occasionally.

too. Rashid, a student from Kenya and a Black Caucus member, is repeatedly mocked by his friends for his language, accent and cultural habits:

“Rashid: Sam, I was saying nothing because it is none of my business what goes on behind your sheets.

Al: It’s between your sheets, Rashid.

Rashid: I speak five languages. You speak one, barely. Do not correct my English.

Al (mocking Rashid’s accent): Do not correct my English!” (*Dear White People* Episode 1, Season 1)

However, this character is able to reinstate his validity as equal to his peers. He is the one who questions American culture from a broader perspective of an outsider.

Given the mechanisms here presented, racial hierarchy can’t be considered only as an external force which delineates white vs. black. It also infiltrates the black community defining each role and identity.

2.3. Emancipating Blackness: Encounters with “White Fragility”

The protagonists of *Dear White People* represent the limited choices blacks have in this society. Black Caucus members are represented when speaking about self-preservation, assimilation, black militants also known as the version of ‘unapologetically’ black. The last option can be seen as extremely empowering because it’s an act of freeing blackness from all white conditionings and unleashing its true essence. However, not everyone can afford the risks this choice brings as Coco clarifies to Sam. The latter, who can balance between black and white interchangeably, chooses blackness and gains the fame of a provocateur on campus.¹⁵⁴ However, what is perceived as provocative are her attempts to lead open discussions on blackness from a black person’s perspective. She starts by openly taking position and refusing to “double down” on her blackness. This means protesting the assimilation and tacit acceptance of white supremacy for self-preservation. Her radio show sets the campus on fire mainly because openly presents facts which are considered taboo and are unintentional acts of racism, micro aggressions as the following:

“Professor: Slavery in America. Anybody would like to volunteer to lead the discussion?”

Narrator: As one of the few black faces in mostly white place Sam has become used to episodes like this...

Professor: Anyone with some special connection to the material?

Narrator: ...and runnings like this:...

College white mates:

¹⁵⁴Sam White is also referred to as “hot head” by the Dean, who is also a black and paternal figure *a la* Cosby Show. Besides being frequently mentioned in the series, *The Cosby Show* representative can be found in the paternalistic figure of the black Dean Fairbanks. He educates his son Troy to comply with all “educated black” criteria to be an exemplary version of blackness and condemns Reggie for being attacked by the police because he implies it was his fault. Bill Cosby has been severely criticized by Coates in one of his essays because it promoted the white vision of black individual responsibility and black pathology instead of drawing attention to the system of oppression. For further reference: “This is How We Lost to the White Man. The Audacity of Bill Cosby’s Black Conservatism” in *We Were Eight Years in Power. An American Tragedy* One World ed 2018

- You look like Beyoncé
- Storm from the X-Men
- What are you?" (*Dear White People* Episode 1, Season 1)

Contrary to her friend/non friend Coco, Samantha's skin privilege guarantees her freedom of choice when it comes to her own identity. She chooses to embrace her blackness with extreme enthusiasm to reassert herself in the first season. Even though there are episodes where peer pressure within the black caucus might be challenging for her (when her love affair with a white guy is discovered), those are nothing if compared within those presented by her white peers:

"Sam receiving a call during her radio show:

Caller: I just want to say that I find your show highly offensive and divisive. We need to come together at times like this.

Sam: Are you a white male?

Caller: Why? Race is a social construct.

Sam: I'll take that as yes. I didn't create the divide, I'm just calling attention to it.

Another caller: Dear White People? Even you have to admit that your show comes off aggressive.

Sam: Dear White People is a misnomer. My show is meant to articulate the feelings of a misrepresented group outside of majority. I get it, the realization that you contribute to a racist society can be unsettling but you sound like a grown ass woman to me. Next. "*(Dear White People* Episode 1, Season 1)

In spite of Sam's intentions, her attempts are destined to fail. At the beginning of the series the show is almost shut down and substituted temporarily because it's considered too provocative and even discriminatory by the white university mates, due to its name. The white backlash, in the shape of an immediate negative reaction from white mates that Samantha and her friends witness within the fiction, has interestingly been the same one

witnessed by the author and director Justin Simien in reality. People claimed reverse racism against whites through Internet and the #boycottNetflix wave¹⁵⁵. It's not a coincidence that there is an extreme analogy between the fictional world Simien created and the one off screen. In fact, Simien has clearly stated that the show is about black students experience in an Ivy League college. And, his message is that talking about black experience can't be disconnected from their experience within white spaces. During an interview, Simien explained that the choice of the name was due to the fact that "there's no way to be black in America without constantly having to explain or protect or defend yourself."¹⁵⁶ This statement is persistent in USA history and is the core topic in the series. Despite all the attempts of being truthful to themselves, all of the characters take decisions to navigate the white space and the world in different ways which shapes their opinion when confronting blackface resurgence at the campus:

"Black Caucus gathering:

Kelsey: Just to play devs, all my white friends are talking about it.

Reggie: So all your friends?

Kelsey: Yelling at people who are already on our side using hashtags and marches?
Cathartic though it may be, it just makes us look angry.

Reggie: We are angry Kelsey." (*Dear White People* Episode 1, Season 1)

This dialogue is another example of how the black community, even in the fictional realm, discusses its possibilities when confronting their rage for blackface party within campus. It shows the consideration they give to the whites before taking any action. It is a vicious circle and decisive factor in shaping their identity as a person who would rather

¹⁵⁵ Ugwu, Reggie. "Why the Creator of 'Dear White People' Is Doubling Down on Identity Politics" in The New York Times May 2018

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/02/arts/television/dear-white-people-creator-doubles-down-on-identity-politics.html>

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*

choose assimilation and wear a mask by accepting the rules of society than risking it all in order to be real. DiAngelo's critical studies on 'white fragility' will be employed to prove this argument.

Given the academic background in racial field studies and that of whiteness, DiAngelo has been offering her expertise as a consultant for organizations¹⁵⁷. The gap between the theoretical studies on the subject and the real manifestations could be reduced while she participated in the workshops for organizations aimed to tackle racial issues within the workplace. The workshops were actual educational trainings on topics such as whiteness and racism. From there, the experience gathered at these workshops on racial discourse allowed her to collect and analyze a psychological overview of the internalized beliefs the participants have on racism and the wide range of reactions among which she has recognized a stable pattern. Supported by the critical racial studies along with the data collection done, she formulated the concept of "white fragility". "White fragility" is the mechanism of auto-defense that white people display when confronting racial topics. She explains that even though such a mechanism is provoked by the discomfort of a white person, it's not a synonym of weakness but a real weapon used to maintain racial control (DiAngelo 2019:2).

"White fragility is much more than mere defensiveness or whining. It may be conceptualized as the sociology of dominance: an outcome of white people's socialization into white supremacy and a means to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy. "(DiAngelo 2019:111-112)

DiAngelo recognizes that the impossibility of a dialogue on racial discrimination and racial superiority are mostly due to key notions as: the racial internalized ideology in

¹⁵⁷For further information on Robin J. DiAngelo please visit her website: <https://robindiangelo.com/about-me/>

United States which recognizes white as superior and default, lack of understanding of white privilege, the reinforcement of ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, colorblind era, binary vision of racism as good person vs. bad person. All the factors listed prevent white people from seeing the racism in action, it blames the blacks for not being good enough to achieve (famous ‘play by the rules’ concept), and creates a racially coded language to perpetuate the invisible force of racial domination.

One of the most evident examples of white fragility (besides the reactions to Sam’s radio show discussed above) can be found also in its more representative scene between one of the black protagonists and a white peer. In the Episode 5 (Season 1) Reggie has a discussion with his white friend over the use of word ‘nigger’. His white friend, Addison, host of the party where the scene takes place, insists that it’s appropriate for him to use the word as long as he is singing along to a rap song. While, on the other hand, Reggie is trying to reason with him and educate Addison that this is inappropriate in either way. Because Addison does not accept a different uptake on the topic, the scene escalates almost immediately from a friendly discussion into a violent encounter between the two:

“Addison: I just don’t like being called a racist.

Joelle: Again, he never said you were a racist. He just said don’t say that word.

Addison: I’m not some redneck. ‘Cause that’s what you’re thinking of me, Reggie?

Kurt: Yeah Reggie, you call your friend a racist and yet you’re surprised when he is upset?

Reggie: Yeah, we are friends but suddenly I’m supposed to give you nigga dispensation?

Addison: Dude, I didn’t do anything wrong. It’s a song. Hell, it’s in the title. What am I supposed to do? Hum?

Reggie: Yes, nigga.

Kurt: Com'on, Reggie. You don't want him using his white privilege to rewrite black art, do you?

Addison: Come on man, I been good to you. You're at a party at my house, drinking my booze, and now you attack me? Can't anybody just have fun anymore?

Reggie: I'm sorry massa, we didn't mean to ruin your fun, now.

Addison: Sure, back to slavery. It always comes back to slavery.

Reggie: Okay, now I'm calling you a racist." (*Dear White People* Episode 5, Season 1)

DiAngelo formulated a list of most common aspects of conversation which she calls "racial triggers" for "white fragility" (DiAngelo 2019:100). Any reference to those during a conversation might imply a white person's implication to racism and therefore, triggers a defense mechanism here discussed as "white fragility". In this scene, at least three of them can be spotted. First, Addison feels challenged by Reggie when the latter openly speaks of his discontent relating to N-word usage. Secondly, Addison can't emotionally stand a suggestion that he might be labeled as a racist. This reaction comes from his internalized understanding that being racist is an intentional act of hate towards black people reconnecting to the binary vision of racist equals bad person. Thirdly, Addison insists on his point of view on the matter, disregarding what impact it can have on Reggie. By this, implying that his opinion outweighs Reggie's and therefore is inferior, less important than Addison's. These mentioned three factors are core to white fragility manifestation:

"White equilibrium is a cocoon of racial comfort, centrality, superiority, entitlement, racial apathy, and obliviousness, all rooted in an identity of being good people free of racism. Challenging this cocoon throws off our racial balance. Because being racially off balance is so rare, we have not had to build the capacity to sustain the discomfort. Thus, whites find these challenges unbearable and want them to stop." (DiAngelo 2019:112)

Another point raised in the heated argument between the two, is the annoyed comment of Addison “It always comes back to slavery”. While the lack of education of Addison in this specific subject is evident, it also reiterates a common opinion shared among whites. The racial past of the country tends to be dismissed as regards to its consequences in the present. Any reference as regards to this topic is discouraged in order to prevent a manifestation of ‘victim mentality’ among blacks (Wise 2012:517). Supported by the claim that it’s a colorblind era, there is automatically no necessity to have similar conversation. Moreover, any suggestion is met with irritation¹⁵⁸ because beliefs of individualism and meritocracy remove any possible responsibility from white people towards black community. Again, black identity and black experience continuously collide with white superiority.

“Sometimes being carefree and black is an act of revolution” is the phrase pronounced by Joelle, another female protagonist, to convince Reggie to give himself a break from being ‘revolutionary’ and enjoy the moment to join them at a party. Paradoxically, when Reggie decides to ‘just be’ is taken aback by reality. The same option to be black and carefree that night, is negated to him because Reggie faces one of the worst nightmares a black person can face in real life. He is pointed a gun by a policeman at the campus party while having an argument over the N-word usage with his white friend. The very act of being black and carefree is not an option because it’s negated by the system.

Reggie’s traumatic experience happens right after the death of a white fellow student engaged in sport and seems to eventually upset the whole students at the campus regardless of the color of their skin. Subsequently, the dreadful discrimination he faces in

¹⁵⁸ The series represent constructed dialogues which reflect the reality of facts in the USA. Please refer to the documentary directed by Alex Stapleton *Hello Privilege. It's Me, Chelsea* Condé Nast Entertainment 2019 The documentary contains random casual interviews to white people in regards to white privilege.

For further academic discussions please refer to:

Wise, Tim. *Dear White America. Letter to a New Minority* City Lights Publishers Kindle Version (2012)
DiAngelo, Robin J. (Autor), Foreword by Dyson, Michael Eric. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (English Edition) Beacon Press 2018

front of the whole party appears to be dismissed when Winchester Independent¹⁵⁹ leaks information on the person who called the police (who happens to be nonetheless than Sam's white boyfriend). The blame is suddenly reversed on Gabe, the white boyfriend, and the indignation misses its main target which is the systemic oppression of black people. While the rage of the black students appears to be redirected towards a revolutionary protest at the campus, Dean Fairbanks accepts to organize an assembly to address the issues raised by the event. Black Caucus decides to protest, using the only resource black people have ever possessed but when arriving at the building where the assembly is held, they meet other protesters , their white peers protesting to make the campus safe again from alcohol and those protesting with Pastiche (the campus newspaper which has "supposedly" thrown the blackface party¹⁶⁰):

"Protesters outside the assembly:

-Winchester stop and think no one else should die from drink"

-We pay tuition to this place get your guns up out of my face

-Black Lives Matter so do Blue We've got sh*t to whine up to!" (*Dear White People* Episode 10, Season 1)



Dear White People Episode 10 ,Season 1. Netflix

¹⁵⁹ The students campus newspaper at Winchester

¹⁶⁰In the series the blackface party invitations are sent out by Sam White who hacked the account of Pastiche. Pastiche has indeed been planning to throw a blackface party but put it on hold. Sam wanted to unmask the real racial relations at the campus and sent the invitation herself.

Sam, the leader of black protesters, both surprised and discouraged, understands that their protest won't be heard. "Are they All lives mattering..?"¹⁶¹ explodes Sam. In fact, the only means that was available to Black Caucus has been appropriated by others, dismissing the importance of their petition. The event reconnects with the off screen reality reminding of the protests enacted after the appearance of Black Lives Matter. J. Simien recreates the real world dynamics within the fiction where the only difference is that black protagonists can voice their opinion. However, the season ending shows that even in the fictional world black experience is inevitably dismissed. In conclusion, black existence is dismissed.



Dear White People Episode 10, Season 1. Netflix

¹⁶¹All Lives Matter was the reaction to #BLM and represents. For further reference:
Viney, L-Mani S. "Here's why it hurts when people say All Lives Matter" in Vanity Fair July 2016
<https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/07/black-lives-matter-all-lives-matter>

CONCLUSION

This dissertation aimed at demonstrating how Netflix content production under the name of Strong Black Lead operates as a political visual activism for black lives within the United States context. First, it showed how this form of political activism avails itself of new technological tools, such as a worldwide streaming platform and the Internet, in order to advocate for black lives, similarly to recent political actions like the grassroots movement #BLM and the Arab spring. This has been described as the action of occupying the screen. Secondly, the analysis of the Strong Black Lead's manifesto and the resistance against master narrative for a new emancipation provided an overview to the possible risks of commodification of African American life, and the possible challenges in re-claiming the representational power in the socio-political context.

The analysis of the two Netflix series have been employed as examples to demonstrate to which extent the action of humanization and emancipation against the master narrative is possible in the current context. In the case of *When They See Us*, the humanization process of black criminal has been tackled. The series' visual attempt of restoring justice for its protagonists after 20 years of undeserved conviction has been analyzed as equal to restoring the humanity of African American community, whose signifiers they became. On the other hand, *Dear White People's* fictional satirical representation of black students' life in an Ivy League campus was analyzed in terms of an emancipation of black identity. The analysis presented has shown how black identity is intertwined with the social construction based on white superiority and how any attempt to dismantle from its mechanisms are turned down by the rhetorics of 'white fragility'.

In conclusion, we can argue that black activism on screen showed to be complementary to political action of #BLM, in challenging prejudices against black identity

that the African community still faces today: the criminal stereotype association which leads to police brutality and the impossibility to escape from the stereotype because conditioned by the racial supremacy internalized by American society as a whole.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to start by saying that I'm very thankful for the academic and life journey I had the opportunity to experience with Joint Degree Program. It opened a whole new world to me in Paris and it accompanied me on a further journey in France and even in Spain.

I would like to thank all the Professors who contributed in creating the intellectually stimulating environment I was inspired by. A special thanks to: Professor Francescato who patiently supported my work from abroad and to Professor Gimeno from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona for encouraging me in pursuing my research. Thanks to Professor Newbold for being a very efficient point of reference for Joint Degree students.

Thank you my grandparents, my parents, my spouse and my dearest friends. Thank you for having my back and letting me pursue my dreams. I'm glad you have been by my side and saw me growing through this journey.

WORKS CITED

Abramowitsch, Simon. "Addressing Blackness, Dreaming Whiteness: Negotiating 21st-Century Race and Readership in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*" in *CLA Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 4, *SPECIAL ISSUE: Democratizing the Black Public Intellectual: The Writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates* (JUNE 2017), pp. 458-478. College Language Association.

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow/ Mass Incarceration in the age of Colorblindness* The New press New York 2010.

Alim, H. Samy; Smitherman, Geneva. *Articulate While Black : Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U. S.* Oxford University Press USA - OSO 2012.

Amankwah Yartey, Franklin Nii. "Race, solidarity and dissent in the Trayvon Martin case: a critical analysis" in *Visual Studies*, 31:1, 50-62, 2016.

Anderson, Carol. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* Bloomsbury USA; 1 edition (May 31, 2016) Kindle Version.

Baldwin, James edited by Dell, Diana J. *Memorable Quotations: James Baldwin* Kindle Version for Amazon 2012.

Baldwin, James. *James Baldwin : Collected Essays : Notes of a Native Son / Nobody Knows My Name / The Fire Next Time / No Name in the Street / The Devil Finds Work / Other Essays* Library of America 1998.

Brock, André. " "Who do you think you are?": Race, Representation, and Cultural Rhetorics in Online Spaces." in *Poroi* 6, Iss. 1 (2009): p.15-35.

Burns, Sarah. *The Central Park Five: A story revisited in light of the acclaimed new Netflix series When They See Us, directed by Ava DuVernay* Hodder & Stoughton 2019 Kindle Version.

Byfield, Natalie Patricia. "The construction of the Central Park Jogger Story: Racial consciousness in America at the turn of the 21th century" Fordham University, in *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2008.

Canella, Gino. "Social movement documentary practices: digital storytelling, social media and organizing," *Digital Creativity Volume* 28:1, 24-37 2017.

Carrington, Ben. *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora* (Published in association with Theory, Culture & Society) SAGE Publications Ltd; First edition (September 14, 2010).

Chattoo, Caty Borum. "Oscars So White: Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Diversity and Social Issues in U.S. Documentary Films (2008–2017)" in *Mass Communication and Society*, 21:3, 368-394 2018.

Coates, Ta--Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel and Grau Press 2015.

----- *We Were Eight Years in Power. An American Tragedy* One World ed 2018

Davis, Angela. *The Meaning of Freedom: And other difficult dialogues* (City Lights Open Media); City Lights Publishers 2012 Kindle Version.

Delgado, Richard. "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative" in *Michigan Law Review* 87 (1989): 2411.

Diamond, Andrew J. *Mean Streets: Chicago Youths in everyday struggle for Empowerment in the multicultural city 1908-1969*; University of California Press 2009.

DiAngelo , Robin J. (Autor), *Foreword by Dyson,Michael Eric. White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (English Edition) Beacon Press 2018 Kindle Version.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk* Modern Library Inc; Edición: Centenary ed 2003 Kindel Version.

Eddo-Lodge, Reni. *Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race* Bloomsbury Circus 2017.

Ferriter, Courtney D. "The Uses of Race and Religion James Baldwin's Pragmatist Politics in The Fire Next Time in James Baldwin" in *Review* 1 September 2016 .

Fitzhugh Brundage, W. *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930 (H. Eugene and Lillian Youngs Lehman Series)* University of North Carolina Press; 2011.

Geary, Daniel. *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and its Legacy* University of Pennsylvania Press 2015

Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as property." in *Critical Race Theory. The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* The New Press 1995.

Hobbs, Allyson; Holt, Thomas (advisor)"When black becomes white: The problem of racial passing in American life" in *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing 2009.

Hollander Jocelyn A.; Einwohner Rachel L. "Conceptualizing Resistance" in *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Dec., 2004), pp. 533-554 Springer.

Holmes, Caren M. "The Colonial Roots of the Racial Fetishization of Black Women," in *Black & Gold: Vol. 2* 2016.

Howard-Woods, Chris, Laidley, Colin and Omid, Maryam. *#Charlottesville White Supremacy, Populism, and Resistance* Public Seminar Books in association with OR Books 2018.

Jerkins, Morgan. *This will be my undoing/ Living at the intersection of black, female, and feminist in (white) America* HarperCollins Publishers 2018.

Kelley, Robin D.G. *Freedom Dreams: The Radical Black Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press. 2003.

Kendi, Ibrahim X. *Stamped from the beginning/ The definitive history of racist ideas in America* Nation Books New York 2017.

LeFebre, Rebecca Kay;Armstrong, Crystal. *Grievance-based social movement mobilization in the #Ferguson Twitter storm* May 5, 2016 Research Article .

Lott, Tommy L. "A No-Theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema Author(s)" in *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Black Film Issue (Summer, 1991), pp. 221-236 Published by: African American Review (St. Louis University).

Marable, Manning and Clarke, Kristen. *Barack Obama and African Empowerment /The rise of Black America's new leadership* Palgrave Macmillan 2009.

Mexal, Stephen J. "The Roots of "Wilding": Black Literary Naturalism, the Language of Wilderness, and Hip Hop in the Central Park Jogger Rape" in *African American Review*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Special issue: Hip Hop and the Literary (Spring 2013), pp. 101-115.

Meyrowitz, Joshua. " Shifting Worlds of Strangers: Medium Theory and Changes in "Them" Versus "Us"" in *Sociological Inquiry*, January 1997, Vol.67(1), pp.59-71 [Peer Reviewed Journal].

Mims, Sergio Alejandro. "A New Life: Independent Black Filmmaking during the 1980's" in *Black Camera*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), pp. 3-4; Indiana University Press

Noble, Safiya Umoja; Tynes Brendesha M. *The intersectional Internet: race, sex, class and culture online*. New York, Peter Lang, 2015.

Noble, Safiya Umoja. "Teaching Trayvon: Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle" in *The Black Scholar*, 01 March 2014, Vol.44(1), p.12-29.

Ransby, Barbara. *Making all black lives matter, Reimagining Freedom in the twenty-first century* University of California Press 2018 Kindle Edition.

Rome, Dennis. *Black Demons: The Media's Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype (Crime, Media, and Popular Culture)* Praeger 2004 Kindle Edition.

Rose, Tricia. *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy* Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2004 Kindle Version

Simien, Justin. *Dear White People: A guide to inter-racial harmony in "post-racial" America* Simon & Schuster 2014 Kindle Version

Smith L, Stacey; Choueti, Mark; Pieper, Katherine. "Inequality in 700 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race, & LGBT Status from 2007 to 2014" in *Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative USC Annenberg School for communication and journalism*.

Solorzano, Daniel.G & Yosso, Tara J. "Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research" in *Qualitative Inquiry* 8 Number 1 2002 23-44 Sage Publications.

St. John M.F.T., Maria. "'It Ain't Fittin'" Cinematic and Fantasmatic Contours or Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* and *Beyond*", *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 2:2, 2001v129-16.

Stratton, Greg. *Transforming the Central Park jogger into the Central Park Five: Shifting narratives of innocence and changing media discourse in the attack on the Central Park jogger, 1989–2014* in *Crime Media Culture* 2015, Vol. 11(3) 281–297.

Sturtevant, Victoria. "'But things is changin' nowadays an' Mammy's gettin' bored': Hattie McDaniel and the Culture of Dissemblance" in *The Velvet Light Trap*; Madison, Wis. Vol. 44, (Fall 1999): 68.

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* Haymarket Books 2016 Kindle Version.

Tesler, Michael *Post-Racial or Most-racial? Race and politics in the Obama era*. The University of Chicago Press 2016.

Thompson, Debra "An Exoneration of Black Rage" in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 07/2017, Vol.116(3), pp.457-481.

Waters, Mary C. and Ueda, Reed and Marrow, Helen B. *The New Americans/ A guide to Immigration since 1965* Harvard University Press 2009.

Wise, Tim. *Dear White America. Letter to a New Minority* City Lights Publishers Kindle Version (2012).

FURTHER READINGS

Bercaw, Nancy D. *Gendered Freedom: Race, rights and the politics of household in the Delta (1861-175)* University Press of Florida 2003.

Berry II, Stephen W. *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South* Oup USA 2004.

Bynum, Victoria E. *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South (Gender and American Culture)* The University of North Carolina Press 1992.

Cashin, Joan E. "Households, Kinfolk, and Absent Teenagers: The Demographic Transition in The Old South." In *Journal of Family History* 25 (April 2000): 141-57.

Clark, Erskine. *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic*. Yale University Press, 2005.

Clinton, Catherine. *Southern Families at War: Loyalty and Conflict in the Civil War South*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Clinton, Catherine. *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Clinton, Catherine and Nina Silber. *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Faust, Drew Gilpin. "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War." In *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990): 1200-1228.

Frantz Parsons, Elaine . *Ku-Klux* University Press of Florida 2003

Glymph, Thavolia. *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Howd Hall, Jacquelyn. "Long Civil Rights Movement and The political Uses of the Past" in *Journal of American History*, Volume 91, Issue 4, March 2005, Pages 1233–1263.

Klarke, Kathleen Anne. *Defining moments, African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South* University of North Carolina Press New edition 2005.

Francis Ming, Megan. *Civil Rights and the Making of Modern American State* Cambridge University Press 2014.

Northup, Solomon. *12 years a slave* Graymalkin Media 2014.

Schultz, Jane E. "Seldom Thanked, Never Praised, and Scarcely Recognized: Gender and Racism in Civil War Hospitals." In *Civil War History* 48 (September 2002): 220-236.

Srole, Leo and Warner, Loyd W. *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945.

Whites, LeeAnn and Alecia P. Long. *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation and the American Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009.

SITOGRAPHY*

“2014 Sundance Film Festival Announces Feature Film Awards” in *Sundance Institute* January 2014.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140129024320/http://www.sundance.org/festival/release/2014-sundance-film-festival-announces-feature-film-awards/>

““A More perfect Union” speech delivered 18 March 2008 in Philadelphia by Barack Obama” in *American Rhetoric*.

<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobamaperfectunion.htm>

Abad-Santos, Alex. “2018 belonged to Black Panther. And it could change Marvel’s future.” in *Vox* December 2018.

<https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/12/11/18119694/black-panther-success-2018-marvel>

“Adrienne Carter, part of the awesome writer's room for #FamilyReunion, breaks down the feeling of being the only Black woman in the room for years and why it's time to dissolve the negative tropes that so many like her face.” in *Strong Black Lead Twitter* July 2019. Internet access: <https://twitter.com/strongblacklead/status/1153345987437576193>

Bennett, Alanna. “Seeing A Black Hermione In 2018 Is A Reminder Of What Fandom Can Build” in *BuzzFeed News* April 2018.

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alannabennett/seeing-a-black-hermione-in-2018>

Bennett, Jessica. “Netflix Further Commits to Diverse Storytelling With ‘Strong Black Lead’ Initiative” in *Ebony* 2018.

<https://www.ebony.com/exclusive/netflix-further-commits-to-diverse-storytelling-with-strong-black-lead-initiative/>

Brinkhurst-Cuff, Charlie. “Orange Is the New Black stars: 'I couldn't watch. I had to turn away' “ in *The Guardian*; June 2017..

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/jun/05/orange-is-the-new-black-stars-taystee-crazy-eyes-sophia>

Buchanan, Kyle. “They’re Leading Actors, Except When It Comes to the Oscars” in *New York Times* November 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/02/movies/oscars-leading-supporting-actor.html>

Bunch, Lonnie. “The Definitive Story of How the National Museum of African American History and Culture Came to Be” in *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2016.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/definitive-story-national-museum-african-american-history-culture-came-be-180960125/>

Bundles, A’Lelia “Know your history: Understanding race in the US” in *Aljazeera* August 2015.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/08/race-history-ferguson-150814082921736.html>

Carson, Anne E. “Prisoners in 2013” in *Bulletin for U.S. Department of Justice* 2014.
<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p13.pdf>

Child, Ben. “Ethnic-minority actors still struggling in Hollywood, says Octavia Spencer” in *The Guardian* August 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/01/octavia-spencer-film-ethnic-minority-struggle-hollywood>

Cohen, Tom. “Obama: 'Trayvon Martin could have been me'” in *CNN* July 2013.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/19/politics/obama-zimmerman/index.html>

Cornwell, Rupert. “Eugene Allen: White House butler who worked for eight US presidents” in *The Independent* April 2010.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/eugene-allen-white-house-butler-who-worked-for-eight-us-presidents-1937391.html>

Cox, David. “#OscarsSoWhite: who is really to blame for the Oscars' lack of diversity?” in *The Guardian* February 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/feb/25/oscarssowhite-right-and-wrong-academy-awards-audience>

De Stefani, Lucia. “Addressing the Representation of Black Culture in Photography” in *Times* May 2016.

<https://time.com/4323138/addressing-the-representation-of-black-culture-in-photography/>

Desta, Yohana. “Black Panther Is Officially a \$1 Billion Hit” in *Vanity Fair* March 2018.
<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/03/black-panther-box-office-billion-dollars-china-marvel>

Dimock, Michael. “How America Changed During Barack Obama’s Presidency” in *Pew Research Center* January 2017.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/2017/01/10/how-america-changed-during-barack-obamas-presidency/>

“Dissecting the 2008 Electorate: Most Diverse in U.S. History” in *Pew Research Center* April 2009.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2009/04/30/dissecting-the-2008-electorate-most-diverse-in-us-history/>

Dittmer, Jason. “What can Captain America teach us about the state of US politics?” in *Huck Magazine* May 2017.

<https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/reportage-2/can-captain-america-can-teach-us-state-us-politics/>

Dockterman, Eliana. “The True Story of 'The Butler'” in *Times* August 2013.
<https://time.com/2219/what-the-butler-really-saw/>

Donaldson, Leigh. “When the media misrepresents black men, the effects are felt in the real world” in *The Guardian* August 2015.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/12/media-misrepresents-black-men-effects-felt-real-world>

Dropp, Kyle; Brendan, Nihan. “One-Third Don’t Know Obamacare and Affordable Care Act Are The Same” in *New York Times* February 2017.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/upshot/one-third-dont-know-obamacare-and-affordable-care-act-are-the-same.html>

Elgot, Jessica. “Beyoncé unleashes Black Panthers homage at Super Bowl 50” in *The Guardian* February 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/feb/08/beyonce-black-panthers-homage-black-lives-matter-super-bowl-50>

Fantasia, Giuseppe. “Christopher Lambert: "Trump? Un esempio. È l'unico politico che fa quel che ha promesso" in *Huffington Post Italia* July 2019.
https://www.huffingtonpost.it/amp/entry/christopher-lambert-trump-un-esempio-e-lunico-politico-che-fa-quel-che-dice_it_5d3499b3e4b004b6adb162b3/#

Garza, Alicia. “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” in *Feminist Wire*, October 2014.
<http://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>

Gayle, Damien. “Arrest of two black men at Starbucks for 'trespassing' sparks protests” in *The Guardian* April 2018.
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/16/arrest-of-two-black-men-at-starbucks-for-trespassing-sparks-protests>

Goldberg, Leslie “Netflix Sets Premiere Date for Jenji Kohan's 'Orange Is the New Black’” in *Hollywood Reporter* April 2013.
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/netflix-orange-new-black-premiere-date-jenji-kohan-448610>

Harris, Adam. “Yearbooks Aren’t the Only Place to Find Blackface on Campus” in *The Atlantic* February 2019.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/02/ralph-northam-college-campus-blackface/582373/>

Haygood, Wil. “Why Won’t Blackface Go Away? It’s Part of America’s Troubled Cultural Legacy” in *New York Times* February 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/arts/blackface-american-pop-culture.html>

Hunt, Rachel. “How ‘Orange Is the New Black’ Became Netflix’s Most-Watched Original Series” in *Showbiz Cheat Sheet* July 2019.

<https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/orange-is-the-new-black-most-watched-original-series-netflix.html/>

Isaac C., Jeffrey. “We Must Defeat Trump” in *Public Seminar* July 2019 .

<http://www.publicseminar.org/2019/07/we-must-defeat-trump/>

J.T. “How racially skewed are the Oscars?” in *Economist* January 2016.

<https://www.economist.com/prospero/2016/01/21/how-racially-skewed-are-the-oscars>

Jackson, Jenn M. “Black Lives Matter: Not a Moment, But a Movement” in *AAIHS* November 2018.

<https://www.aaihs.org/black-lives-matter-not-a-moment-but-a-movement/>

Jerkins, Morgan. “‘For Us, by Us’: Inside the New Social Spaces for People of Color” in *New York Times* March 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/09/nyregion/social-clubs-nyc-people-of-color.html?searchResultPosition=2>

Jerkins, Morgan. “Harlem's mission to rename streets after black women before it's too late” in *The Guardian* September 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/sep/12/harlem-street-names-women-new-york-mission>"

Jerkins, Morgan. “Of Blackness and beauty” in *Long Reads* January 2019.

<https://longreads.com/2019/01/16/of-blackness-and-beauty/>

Jerkins, Morgan. “Why White Women Keep Calling the Cops on Black People Rising racial fear and resentment is slowly creating a new 21st century version of Jim Crow” in *Rolling Stone* July 2018.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/why-white-women-keep-calling-the-cops-on-black-people-699512>

“Key findings on Americans’ views of race in 2019” in *Pew Research* April 2019.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/09/key-findings-on-americans-views-of-race-in-2019/>

Kessler, Glenn. “Barack Obama: the ‘food-stamp president’?” in *The Washington Post* December 2011.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/barack-obama-the-food-stamp-president/2011/12/07/gIQAzTdQdO_blog.html

Khaleeli, Homa. “#SayHerName: why Kimberlé Crenshaw is fighting for forgotten women” in *The Guardian* May 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/may/30/sayhername-why-kimberle-crenshaw-is-fighting-for-forgotten-women>

Khan-Cullors, Patrisse. “We Didn't Start a Movement. We Started a Network” in *Medium* in February 2016.

<https://medium.com/@patrissemariacullorsbrignac/we-didn-t-start-a-movement-we-started-a-network-90f9b5717668>

Koblin, John. “The Obamas and Netflix Just Revealed the Shows and Films They’re Working on” in *New York Times* April 2019

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/30/business/media/obama-netflix-shows.html>

Lewis, Hilary. “Oscars: A Look Back at the African-American Winners” in *Hollywood Reporter* February 2016.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/african-american-oscar-winner-oscarssowhite-870533/item/hattie-mcdaniel-african-american-oscar-870535>

Lewis, Rachel Charlene. “From Representation to Tragedy Porn, Did “OITNB” Fail Its Marginalized Viewers?” in *Bitch Media* July 2019 .

<https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/did-orange-is-the-new-black-fail-black-viewers>

McFadden, Syreeta. “Rachel Dolezal's definition of 'transracial' isn't just wrong, it's destructive” in *The Guardian* June 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/16/transracial-definition-destructive-rachel-dolezal-spokane-naacp>

McKenzie, Jean-Philippe. “The Team Behind Netflix’s Strong Black Lead Wants to Bring More Melanin to Your Queue” in *The Oprah Magazine* August 2019.

<https://www.oprahmag.com/entertainment/a28634227/strong-black-lead-netflix-team/>

McMillan Cottom, Tressie. “Brown Body, White Wonderland/To celebrate herself, Miley Cyrus used other women’s bodies as a joke—women who look like me” in *Slate* August 2013.

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/08/miley-cyrus-vm-a-performance-white-appropriation-of-black-bodies.html>

Metcalf, Stephen. “Black Culture as Commodity, Pop Culture as Racial Eraser” in *Observer* August 2002.

<https://observer.com/2002/08/black-culture-as-commodity-pop-culture-as-racial-eraser/>

NAACP, Criminal Justice Fact Sheet for NAACP

<https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>

“Netflix: Barack and Michelle Obama announce details of series” in *BBC News* May 2019

<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-48121643>

Opam, Kwame. “Marvel is replacing Steve Rogers with the new, black Captain America” in *The Verge* July 2014.

<https://www.theverge.com/2014/7/16/5878527/marvel-is-replacing-steve-rogers-with-the-first-black-captain-america>

Page, Lisa. "Passing or Transracial?: Authority, Race, and Sex in the Rachel Dolezal Documentary" in *Beacon Broadside* May 2018.

<https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2018/05/passing-or-transracial-authority-race-and-sex-in-the-rachel-dolezal-documentary.html>

Pallotta, Frank. "Netflix earnings for the first quarter 2019" in *CNN* April 2019.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/16/media/netflix-earnings-2019-first-quarter/index.html>

Pousse Washington Fund

<https://www.crowdrise.com/o/en/campaign/pwf/poussewashingtonfund>

Ramsey, Donovan X. "The Truth About Black Twitter" in *The Atlantic* April 2015.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/04/the-truth-about-black-twitter/390120/>

Ratcliffe, Rebecca. "JK Rowling tells of anger at attacks on casting of black Hermione" in *The Guardian* June 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jun/05/harry-potter-jk--rowling-black-hermione>

Riggs, Mike. "Obama's War on Pot" in *The Nation* October 2013.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/obamas-war-pot/>

Rose, Steve. "Black films matter – how African American cinema fought back against Hollywood" in *The Guardian* October 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/13/do-the-right-thing-how-black-cinema-rose-again>

Rosentiel, Tom. "Post-Election Perspectives" in *PEW Research Center*, November 2008.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/2008/11/13/postelection-perspectives/>

Sandberg, Bryn Elise. "Netflix Airs 'Strong Black Lead' Spot Two Days After Firing PR Chief for Using 'N-Word'" in *Hollywood Reporter* June 2018.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/netflix-air-strong-black-lead-spot-2-days-firing-pr-chief-using-n-word-1122979>

Santi, Christina. "The Obamas Sign Multiyear Production Deal with Netflix" in *Ebony* May 2018.

<https://www.ebony.com/entertainment/obamas-multiyear-production-deal-netflix/>

Sava, Oliver. "Captain America showcases Ta-Nehisi Coates' superhero evolution" in *AUX Club* June 2019.

<https://aux.avclub.com/captain-america-showcases-ta-nehisi-coates-superhero-e-1835731395>

Scott, A.O. "Review: In Nate Parker's 'The Birth of a Nation,' Must-See and Won't-See Collide" in *New York Times* October 2016.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/07/movies/the-birth-of-a-nation-review-nate-parker.html>

Shackelford, Ashleigh. “Orange is the New Black is Trauma Porn Written for White People [spoilers]” in *Intersectional Feminist Media* June 2016.

<https://wearyourvoicemag.com/entertainment-culture/orange-is-the-new-black-trauma-porn-written-white-people>

Smith, David. “Trump's tactic to attack black people and women: insult their intelligence” in *The Guardian* August 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/10/trump-attacks-twitter-black-people-women>

Smith, Nigel M. “The 13th: inside Ava DuVernay's Netflix prison documentary on racial inequality” in *The Guardian* September 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/sep/26/the-13th-trailer-ava-duvernay-netflix-prison-race>

Strause, Jackie. “Orange Is the New Black' Star Talks Taking on Black Lives Matter, Her Character's Tragic Fate” in *Hollywood Reporter* June 2016.

hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/orange-is-new-black-season-four-spoilers-poussey-dies-samira-wiley-interview-904495

-----”Orange Is the New Black' Launches Criminal Justice Reform Fund” in *Hollywood Reporter* July 2019.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/orange-is-new-black-launches-poussey-washington-fund-1226972>

Tawil, Randa. “Why blackface remains popular on college campuses” in *The Washington Post* February 2019.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/02/11/why-blackface-remains-popular-college-campuses/>

Todd VanDerWerff, Emily. “Netflix is accidentally inventing a new art form — not quite TV and not quite film” in *Vox* July 2015.

<https://www.vox.com/2015/7/29/9061833/netflix-binge-new-artform>

Todd VanDerWerff Emily; Ray-Harris Ashley. “Orange Is the New Black celebrated diverse women. It also exploited their stories.” in *Vox* August 2019.

<https://www.vox.com/2019/8/7/20754146/orange-is-the-new-black-diversity-final-season-review>

Ugwu, Reggie. “Why the Creator of ‘Dear White People’ Is Doubling Down on Identity Politics” in *The New York Times* May 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/02/arts/television/dear-white-people-creator-doubles-down-on-identity-politics.html>

Vann R. Newkirk. Adrienne Coates, Ta-Nehisi. How Insightful Is Dear White People? in *The Atlantic* May 2017.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/05/dear-white-people-season-one-roundtable/526920/>

Viney, L-Mani S. “Here’s why it hurts when people say All Lives Matter” in *Vanity Fair* July 2016.

<https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/07/black-lives-matter-all-lives-matter>

“When They See Us: Trump stands by 1989 Central Park Five comments” in *BBC News* June 2019.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48687356>

Williams, Theron. “Sam Wilson – The Unpopular Captain America” in *TheronWilliams Blog*

<http://theronwilliams.me/sam-wilson-the-unpopular-captain-america%EF%BB%BF/>

*All websites consulted between June 2019 and February 2020

AUDIO & VIDEO SOURCES

“#OscarsSoWhite and The Legacy of Halle Berry”, in *Be Kind Rewind* February 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEberAZhZy4&feature=youtu.be>

13th directed by Ava DuVernay, Kandoo Films Production 2016

“A black hospital patient went on a walk. Then he was arrested”. in *CNN* July 2019
<https://youtu.be/w9eWry0r4DQ>

A class divided, PBS 1985
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/class-divided/>

“A conversation on Race and Privilege with Angela Davis and Jane Elliott, 6 September 2018; Social Justice Solution Series Conference at the University of Houston, Texas USA”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0jf8D5WHoo>

Accidental Courtesy: Daryl Davis, Race & America directed by Matt Ornstein, PBS TV series 2017

“Angela Davis on Feminism, communism and being a Black Panther during the civil rights movement; 25 May 2018;” in *Channel 4News* interview
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3q_qV5mHg0&t=669s

“Chris Rock's Opening Monologue, Oscars March 2016”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqhVNZgZGqQ&feature=youtu.be>

Cuffed Without Cause (Extra Scene from 'Driving While Black') Vice News April 2016
<https://youtu.be/se4aXahuGrw>

Dear White People directed by Justin Simien, Lionsgate Television, Netflix 2017

“EP12: Part 1: Black Imagery in Films (Actor, Producer and Director Chris Greene joins EKing and Just-Ice to discuss Black Imagery in Films)” in *Unapologetically Black Podcast by Eking*
<https://anchor.fm/unapologetically-black/episodes/EP12-Part-1-Black-Imagery-in-Films-e1tjoc>

“EP14: Part 2: Black Imagery in films and...(Writers, Directors and Producers Keith Collins II and India Perkins join Just-Ice and EKing for Part 2 of the discussion on Black Imagery in films and TV)” in *Unapologetically Black Podcast by Eking*
<https://anchor.fm/unapologetically-black/episodes/EP14-Part-2-Black-Imagery-in-films-and-TV-e2139k>

Episode n1 “The racial Wealth Gap” in *Explained* by Ezra Klein, Joe Posner Netflix 2018

“Hear neighbor explain why she called 911 on black Airbnb guests” CNN May 2018
<https://youtu.be/JWhhGA-XeXw>

Hello Privilege. It's Me, Chelsea Condé Nast Entertainment 2019

Hidden Figures directed by Theodore Melfi, Fox 2000 Pictures 2016

King in the Wilderness directed by Peter Kunhardt, Kunhardt Productions 2018

“Let’s get to the root of racial injustice: Megan Ming Francis at TEDxRainer March 2016”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-aCn72iXO9s>

“My Black Year: Maggie Anderson at TEDxGrandRapids June 2014”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFBEoIQutSc>

My descent into America’s mep-Nazi movement & how I got out: Christian Picciolini at TEDxMileHigh December 2017

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSH5EY-W5oM&t=2s>

Oprah Winfrey Presents: When They See Us Now Netflix 2019

Paris is Burning directed by Jennie Livingston, Miramax Films 1991

Pose directed by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals, Netflix

Quincy documentary directed by Rashida Jones, TriBeCa Productions 2018

Remastered: The Two Killings of Sam Cooke directed by Kelly Duane, IMDb , Netflix 2019

Say Her Name: The Life and Death of Sandra Bland directed by Kate Davis, David Heilbroner, HBO distribution 2018

She’s Gotta Have it directed by Spike Lee, 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, Netflix, 2017 -

The Birth of a Nation by Nate Parker, Bron Studios, Mandalay Pictures, Phantom Four, Tiny Giant Productions 2016

The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution directed by Stanley Nelson Jr. Firelight Films 2015

The Butler directed by Lee Daniels, distributed by The Weinstein Company 2013

“The Courage to be Unapologetically Black | Skyra Rideaux | TEDxVermilionStreet October 2017”

<https://youtu.be/cKp2CQkp8c4>

“The danger of a single story Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie at TED Global 2009”

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

“The future of race in America: Michelle Alexander at TEDxColumbus October 2013”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQ6H-Mz6hgw>

The history of us with Morgan Freeman, Revelations Entertainment, Netflix 2017

“The Power of Privilege: Tiffany Jana at TEDxRVWomen February 2014”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0acvkHliZs>

The Rachel Divide directed by Laura Browson, Netflix 2018

Time: The Kalief Browder Story Viacom Entertainment Group, Netflix 2017

“Understanding my Privilege: Sue Borrego TEDxPasadenaWomen December 2016”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIRxqC0Sze4>

VICE Special Report: Fixing the System produced by Pixsystem, Sandblad production 2015

“Viola Davis Gives Powerful Speech About Diversity and Opportunity Emmys 2015 in Television Academy September 2015”
https://youtu.be/OSpQfvd_zkE

“Walking while black” The Vox November 2017
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJFqvRwOis&feature=youtu.be>

“We Talk to Interracial Couples 50 Years after Lovigin v. Virginia” (HBO) June 2017
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RseBL4eC0ok>

When They See Us directed by Ava DuVernay, Harpo Films, Tribeca Productions, ARRAY, Participant Media, Netflix 2019