***American Fiction*: Cultivating Critical Thinking Through Black Representation in Film**

Abstract

This paper examines how *American Fiction* (dir. Cord Jefferson, 2023, United States) represents Blackness in a way that cultivates critical thinking. The film satirizes the cultural landscape in which Black representation is often shallow and based on stereotypes that feed into the White consumer's imagination. However, rather than being prescriptive about what constitutes "good" Black representation, the film presents multiple perspectives by delving into the ironies and contradictions within the Black artistic community and the broader societal reception of Black representations. It portrays the difficulties Black artists face when navigating the tension between authentic representation and commercial success, calling into question who has the authority to determine what constitutes "good" Black representation. The film encourages critical thinking about the value of representing Blackness both in contexts of affluence and competence, as well as in contexts of oppression and struggle. The film intentionally leaves debates unresolved, encouraging the audience to critically consider multiple viewpoints. It is argued that truly productive representation demands the viewer to question the representation, rather than to passively accept or reject it. Through analysis of ideas in *American Fiction*, the present article argues that engaging the audience's critical thinking by using varied representations and multiple perspectives is a productive way to represent Blackness in film.

The Cultural Landscape of Black Representation

At the beginning of *American Fiction* (dir. Cord Jefferson, 2023, United States), the main character, Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, sits in front of his college classroom, delivering a lecture on the literature of the American South. The first representation of Blackness in the film, other than Monk himself, is "Flannery O'Connor and the Artificial Nigger," written on the board. Brittany, a White student, makes her opinions very clear: “We shouldn't have to stare at the n-word all day... I just find that word really offensive” (0:01:13). Monk explains to her that the word should be understood in the context in which it is used and remarks, “With all due respect, Brittany, I got over it. I’m pretty sure you can, too” (0:01:36). Brittany storms out of the classroom, tears streaming down her face.

This scene begins the film’s journey of critiquing the use of diverse Black representations for diversity's sake, with a singular focus on political correctness. Our culture focuses on Black representations that are frivolous and surface-level without concern for the critical context behind these representations. Brittany, emblematic of the modern college student swept up in this cultural zeitgeist, cannot see past political correctness as a metric for judging Black representation.

The film satirizes this new breed of frivolous Black representation that claims allyship with diversity movements. In one scene, an executive asks Monk to serve on a panel of judges only because, “Like many American institutions,” he says, “mine was recently rattled by the notion that our lack of diversity has led to a blind spot in our work. So, we’re kind of trying to remedy that and, to that end, I was wondering how you might feel about being a judge for this year’s award” (0:58:13). What ends up happening when Monk is a judge is all the more emblematic of today's culture: the White judges on the panel claim so adamantly that they need

to listen to more Black voices which, in their mind, means picking Monk's "Black" book *Fuck,* replete with flat, unnuanced, stereotypical Black representations, to win the literary award. Ironically, when the two Black voices in the room pipe up and dissent, knowing how ridiculous the book is, one of the three White judges silences them: "Well, it's two versus three, so *Fuck's* the winner" (1:41:26). The camera pans out to a silent room, with the three White judges on one side, and the two overruled Black judges on the other, hitting home the hypocrisy of Whites who advocate for inclusivity in the most misguided of ways, ending up, just as before, as the gatekeepers of Black representation.

George Floyd's death led to the seeming grand American awakening to the existence of racism in the country. Corporations scrambled to determine what they could do to show their allyship to the Black struggle and publication companies churned out books in response to market demand for content even tangentially related to the Black plight. Suddenly, books on racial issues dominated bestseller lists, with books like Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*, Jennifer Harvey's *Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America*, and Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race* seeing unprecedented sales increases just days after protests began. Anti-racist reading lists circulated the web, and the industry satisfied concerned White consumers' appetites for Black stories, no matter the type. They began to indiscriminately embrace every representation of Blackness, without concern for whether consuming these narratives would have any actual impact on creating social change or dismantling structural racism. While books like these may have offered guilty White consumers some engagement with racial issues, most damning was their frivolous adoption by the mainstream that created a surface-level response to deeply rooted racial issues. In the White imagination, Black people are little more than symbols of inferiority and oppression, othered by

the segregated contexts in which Americans exist. White people so rarely have a pulse on Black life, and hence lack the requisite discretion for identifying productive Black representations.

To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with books like these, as if they all belong to some to-be-damned category, like "DEI," as the current administration suggests,[1] with Trump declaring: "I ended all of the lawless so-called diversity, equity, and inclusion bullshit."[1] It is vital we understand the more deeply corrosive effect of indiscriminately censoring these works. This has swung the pendulum so far in the opposite direction, as to create an overcorrection worse than the effects of superficial engagement with Black representations. But trivial, indiscriminate production and consumption of Black representations was, during the time of filming, and will always, warrant some critique. Monk certainly thinks so. In a scene in the film, Monk, in a hotel room, is incredulous when he sees a Black History Month program claiming to show "the diversity of the African American experience." Yet the movies being honored during the program show the gang violence of *Baby Boy*, slaves lined up in *Antebellum*, a teen mother in *Precious*, police brutality in *Straight Outta Compton,* the crack-smoking Chris Rock in *New Jack City*, and gun violence in *Boyz 'N' the Hood.*

Monk goes to a literary conference and sees much of the same in how our culture eats up un-nuanced, surface-level Black representations just because they satisfy pop-culture's desire for anything Black. Monk is disappointed to see only a handful of people at his talk, with barely any audience response. Come to find out, all the conference attendees are at Sintara Golden's talk, where she is discussing her new book, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto.* Monk goes over to see what all the fuss is about. When he arrives in the hall, he witnesses Sintara reading an excerpt, which goes on to purvey stereotypical Black representations to the point of caricature, with African American Vernacular English used to an outlandish and irresponsible degree. Monk giggles,

expecting to see her stereotypical representation of Blackness challenged and condemned, only to see the audience give Sintara a standing ovation, with a White woman being the first to stand. The critic reviews that roll in for Sintara call her book "painfully real," "urgent," and "raw."

It is from the widespread acclaim for these (misguided, in Monk's view) Black representations in Sintara's book that Monk decides to conduct an experiment. Frustrated by watching stereotypical portrayals of Black life embraced, Monk writes his satire called *My Pafology,* later renamed *Fuck*. This satirical exercise is not meant to be taken seriously or even published; it's an act of private protest against what he sees as the industry's failure to recognize authentic Black literary voices. Monk has fun choosing to use the utmost stereotypical representations of Blackness and ratchets them up to a new level. "It's got deadbeat dads, rappers, crack, and he gets killed by a cop in the end. I mean, that's 'Black,' right?" (0:40:41), Monk asks his literary agent, sure that the farcical nature of his work won't get it published anywhere. Surely, Monk thinks, the excessive use of stereotypes about Black urban life will make it clear that the novel is just a parody. On the contrary. Monk is shocked when the book gets published, heavily marketed, and is nominated for the prestigious literary award. Monk's satire is taken literally and seen as a work of genius, and he is thrown into the whirlwind of the fame that results from his "masterpiece." And so, the film hits its stride. It begins from there to represent Blackness by way of cultivating critical thinking in the questions it raises and the multiple perspectives it presents.

Who Can be the Arbiter of Good Black Representation?

The film is not didactic or prescriptive and Monk's perspective is not seen as dogma. Although Monk rightly raises important questions about the current existence of frivolous stereotypical representations of Blackness in the media, what necessarily makes Monk the arbiter

of good Black representation? Maybe Monk doesn't see representations of Blackness existing in contexts of inferiority and oppression as important, because he doesn't relate to those stories; these stories are highly real, but Monk comes from a family of privilege — a family of doctors where he stands out only by the letters behind his name: Ph.D. instead of M.D. Monk feels personally attacked by the stories of Black trauma because he can't relate to them — so much so that he writes the satirical, *My Pafology,* in tongue-in-cheek sanctimony. These representations of Blackness, which are highly real, are so unsettling to him because they are unrelatable.

Percival Everett, the writer of *Erasure*, the book *American Fiction* was based on, notes that Monk is similar to him, as he also came from a family of doctors and may have had an “un-stereotypical” Black experience in America. In an interview, Everett explained: "I grew up with doctors. My grandfather, father, and uncles were doctors. My sister is a doctor," noting that when people say his characters' experiences aren't "the Black experience," he responds, "I'm Black, and that's my experience."[2] The same could be the case for Cord Jefferson, the director of *American Fiction*, who said the moment he read *Erasure*, he felt as if the book had been written for him. The book was so relatable, in fact, that he went to Everett's front door with his idea for the film. But no matter the experiences Jefferson or Everett had that may make them keen on criticizing the culture’s fascination with Black trauma, the film does not necessarily say that anyone can necessarily be the arbiter of good Black representation.

In the film, Monk is not shown to be all-knowing in his prescriptions for what good Black representation is. In fact, Monk is often the only one who holds his particular view, while others around him have different, equally valid perspectives on what constitutes good Black representation. The romantic relationship between Monk and his girlfriend, Coraline, is used as a vehicle through which the film explores differing perspectives about representation within the

Black community. Despite both being experientially knowledgeable and well read about the Black experience, they maintain fundamentally different views on what constitutes valuable Black art. Monk bitterly castigates Coraline for liking *Fuck: "*It didn't offend you? …. People, apparently like you, devour this slop like pigs at a dumpster to stay current at fucking cocktail parties or whatever" (1:22:54). But how can he be so mad at her positive impression of the book? This is the same woman who earlier seemed to him to be a great judge of good representation; Coraline had remarked to Monk, regarding his earlier books, that he "write[s] women well; they're not hot-house flowers" (0:42:32). Monk was quite happy to hear that he had represented women well, according to Coraline, a good arbiter of productive representation in Monk's view, since she agreed with him that time. The movie asks us who is on point regarding good representation. It is impossible that Coraline, someone just as educated and as well-read as Monk, could only know what good representation is when it comes to women, but be totally clueless when it comes to what good representation is of Black people. Is Coraline so wrong to like *Fuck*? Is the mass audience *all* misguided in their interest in the book?

A key scene that speaks to how *American Fiction* represents Blackness in the context of critical questioning, as opposed to being prescriptive of what type of Black representation is best, is in a conversation between Monk and Sintara. At this point in the film, they are the two hand-picked Black panelists pondering whether *Fuck* should win the literary award. During a lunch break, Monk gets his first opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation with Sintara, whose book, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, Monk detests, despite it being highly regarded by the mass audience. Monk asks Sintara what she thinks about *Fuck,* and to his surprise, she says she finds it "pretty pandering," to which Monk agrees. Finally, Monk thinks someone is on the same page with him about how Blackness should and should not be represented. But friction remains in

Monk's disagreement with Sintara's representations of Blackness in her own book. Even though Monk admits to never having read Sintara's book, his sanctimony makes him feel as if he is the one who can conclude that it is irredeemable in the way it represents Black people. But Sintara enlightens him with the context behind why she wrote the book. She is merely playing the game: She knows that there is a market that does, unfortunately, want surface-level representations of Blackness, and she conforms to it. And she doesn't just do it frivolously. She speaks to how her book is, in fact, based on extensive research within the Black community, something that Monk has never done. Sintara challenges Monk on why paths to commercial success should be closed to Black authors simply because their books appeal to White audiences. This harkens back to an earlier quote from Coraline to Monk, criticizing his idea that he is the lone all-knower of productive Black representation, and everyone else who likes the "garbage" that is out there is misguided: "One day," Coraline says, "one day maybe you'll learn that not being able to relate to other people isn't a badge of honor" (1:23:30).

Like in many cases, we settle here in the realm of the *both/and,* instead of the *either/or.* Both Sintara and Monk are right in their own ways. Monk is certainly right that you can go too far in creating stereotypic Black representations, which may be irredeemable merely by how egregious they are at face value. But Sintara, who writes those types of representations, also has a case too, as a foil to Monk. She questions if Monk, someone who is blinded by his own individual lens, can truly say how far a representation of Blackness needs to go before it becomes problematic. Yes, there are some aspects of stereotypical Black stories that do seem to flatten Black life, but Black life according to whom? Indeed, the Black life Monk knows is different from the one Sintara knows, and they will therefore have different ideas of what makes a productive Black representation. The truth lies somewhere in the middle ground — a middle

ground which encourages critical thinking in the audience in the way it represents Blackness. *American Fiction,* by demonstrating these two ends of the spectrum using these foils, does this brilliantly.

The conversation between Monk and Sintara ends in a way that promotes critical thought about what type of Black media representation is best. Monk, coming from the stance that Black people should no longer be represented in contexts of inferiority and oppression, says, "I see the unrealized potential of Black people in this country" (1:39:18). But Sintara replies: "Potential is what people see when they think what's in front of them isn't good enough" (1:39:26). Sintara, here, suggests that 'negative' representations in her work, like other mass-produced Black stories, may actually reflect the reality of the Black experience and are essential to represent. Maybe Monk is really the one who is out of touch and idealistic with what constitutes good representation. Indeed, Monk never had the upbringing in the oppressive circumstances that so many Black Americans do. And the film, despite its often-heavy-handed jabs at the misguided representations of Blackness that exist today, makes it clear that Monk is not necessarily the arbiter of productive Black representation merely because he is well-educated. Jefferson, the film's director, elaborates on the purpose of this scene:

"I really hope that people walk away from that scene not knowing who is right and who is wrong. I really wanted to give voice to the idea that this is some people's lived reality. Sintara says, 'Maybe you've been in the ivory tower of academia for so long that you forgot that some people's lives are hard,' that's an important point that she makes."[3]

So, Jefferson in this film—and especially in this scene—rather than being didactic in saying what good Black representation is, encourages critical thought and the consideration of multiple perspectives on what type of Black representation is best. Monk's issue that "Books like [*Fuck*] aren't real" and that "They flatten Black people's lives" (1:22:40) is certainly valid. But how valid is it if the mass audience seems to find at least some value in them? Maybe there is at least some value in the "negative" representations he decries, even if most of the appreciation may be coming from White consumers he views as misguided.

The Fallacy of Positive Versus Negative Black Representation

The main thing Monk gets wrong is that productive Black representations have never been about a positive versus negative dichotomy. There is no way Monk could somehow speak on behalf of the Black community as if any singular object exists[4] and make the panaceic plea for only "positive" images. There is such futility, in fact, in attempting to create productive representations of Blackness merely by representing Black people in positive contexts, that these types of efforts end up being just as reductive as any others. Striving to create only positive representations of Blackness, therefore, is a form of implicit racism itself, flattening lives just like the "negative" portrayals of Blackness that Monk decries.

Smith articulates the issues with the positive/negative dichotomy in Black representation.[5] First, it makes a false presupposition that there is a consensus about what positive and negative representations mean in the first place. To some like Monk, representations in which Black people are shown to be successfully assimilated into middle-class suburban White culture (like he came from) are positive. Although fallacious in many ways, this "we are like everyone else" idea is seen by some to be a positive representation of Blackness. Smith argues that this lack of consensus reveals how the positive/negative framework is inherently

subjective and context-dependent, shaped by the viewer's own social position and experiences. What one community celebrates as positive progress, another may critique as assimilationist erasure of cultural identity.[6]

Second, Smith articulates that the notion of some monolithic positive representation precludes the nuanced debate necessary for that representation to be productive.[7] The idea that there is any singular way to represent Blackness focuses viewer attention on a “type-by-type” categorization of representation rather than inspiring the more important questions around what kind of narrative or ideological work that representation is performing in the world. Contrary to what Monk believes, representations of Blackness that are negative to him can, without question, be used for good when critical questioning about the systemic issues that produced these representation frames is encouraged in the audience. Smith encourages us to ask how representations function within broader power structures and social contexts.[8] A representation's productivity depends not on whether it appears "positive" or "negative" at face value, but on whether it generates critical engagement with the historical and systemic forces that shape Black life.[8]

Finally, Smith notes that the positive/negative distinction runs the risk of essentializing racial identity, denying its dynamic, intersectional relation to various other identity components, including class, gender, sexuality, and religion.[9] Building on Smith's concern about essentialism, Hall takes this critique further by examining the broader ideological consequences of such categorizations.[10] Hall points out what happens when we lean toward essentializing Blackness, what is really a variable sliding signifier: The positive/negative debate about "Black" representations mistakes “what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic" and valorizes “the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct."[11] For Hall,

since essentialist thinking oversimplifies Black identity, it actively reinforces the racist logic it claims to oppose by treating race as a biological fact rather than a social construction.[12] This is why Hall insists on understanding Blackness through its cultural complexity, resisting any attempt to reduce it to a fixed, universal experience.[13]

The trappings of Black representations which merely seek to uncritically portray Blacks "positively" speak to how there could never be such a thing as a universally "positive" Black representation. Take *The Cosby Show*, for example, with its naive insistence on the "positive" portrayal of the Huxtables as racially transcendent "normal" people. Jhally and Lewis speak to how a seemingly positive representation of Blackness there did nothing to challenge dominant societal values but was instead implicit in proposing that Black people could only succeed by assimilating into White culture.[14] As Ott and Mack discuss, this process of assimilation happens when media represent racial minority groups in a positive light, while simultaneously stripping them of their own cultural identities.[15] In the attempt to create "good" representations, they portray Black people in good socioeconomic standings like their White counterparts, but issues of political struggle for that equality are virtually absent, except for the possibility of a "special episode." This type of insistence on positive-only Black representations is nothing more than what Jhally and Lewis refer to as "enlightened racism," which valorizes assimilation into the White middle-class world and demeans other (and often more common) forms of Black culture in America.[16]

Other trappings of even the most well-intentioned representations of non-dominant cultures are discussed by Shimakawa, who explores the phenomenon of the Soundwalk tours in the mid-2000s, which offered guided neighborhood walks in New York.[17] Shimakawa analyzes how Soundwalk's tours, in their well-intentioned efforts to provide listeners with a deeper, more

'authentic' experience of various neighborhoods through sound, inadvertently othered and stereotyped the experiences of the racial groups living in those neighborhoods.[18] While Soundwalk's projects aimed to engage with complex issues of identity, their failures reveal the challenges of navigating the representation of race and gender in ways that avoid oversimplification and stereotypes.[19] Without an insistence above and beyond the representation itself, toward one that considers the negotiated, critical questioning of the representation in the audience, any representation, on the surface positive or negative, runs this risk.

Hall argues that any kind of a "monolithic Blackness" misses the mark; productive representation must engage with the diversity and heterogeneity of Black subjectivities.[20] This argument extends his earlier critique of the positive/negative binary. Just as Hall warns that such binary thinking mistakes what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic, his rejection of monolithic Blackness reinforces that Blackness is far from a fixed identity category.[21] *American Fiction*, by using multiple perspectives about Black representation, addresses this well, especially when it asks questions surrounding the burden of representation.

Mercer describes the burden of representation: when Black artists have only a limited space in which to work and limited opportunities in which to find be heard, each creator is burdened with an inordinate pressure to create something ‘representative’ and to create a statement that ‘speaks’ for the Black community as a whole.[22] The burden is felt because it is impossible to say everything all at once, just as it is unthinkable to imagine that a single film could be totally representative of a particular community.[23]

American Fiction, instead of attempting to bear this burden and proclaim that its representations are the right way to represent “the Black community,” intentionally leaves room for various narratives to be told from different perspectives. Sintara’s ideas have at least some

credence, since she does note to Monk that her work was developed through extensive qualitative research in the community — maybe the types of representations in her work were, in fact, more in-touch than Monk's.

The film goes out of its way to show that Monk is mistaken in believing that he can bear the burden of representation successfully and that his ideas about positive Black representations are the panacea to "misguided" forms of representation. Monk fails to realize that there is value in the representations he scoffs at. Indeed, how could he have written *My Pafology* in the first place, if not for so many of the Black movies he scoffed at, and for Sintara's book that inspired him? Through the multiple perspectives about productive representations of Blackness, including from those with whom Monk engages, like Coraline and Sintara, the film does not try to bear the burden of representation or to be didactic in prescribing what type of Black representation is best.

The Audience's Role in Representation

The audience and the broader cultural context play just as crucial a role in the effectiveness of the representation as the representation itself. It, therefore, must be considered, and critical questioning must be inspired when creating any productive representation.

In Monk's blind sanctimony about what constitutes a good representation of Blackness, he writes a spoof scene in *My Pafology* that is supposed to have every negative aspect of Black culture. In a surrealist moment, what Monk writes literally comes off the page and is acted out on screen brilliantly by Keith David, playing Willy, a visibly drunk, embattled father, and Okierete Onaodowan, playing Van Go Jenkins, the rageful gun-toting son. Van Go breaks into soliloquy:

“I hates this man. I hates my mama. And I hates myself. I'm seein' my face in his. I see the ape that all them stupid girls were afraid of, yeah. I see my long arms hangin’ down. And I see eyes that don't care what happens tomorrow. I see myself rockin' back on my heels, just like this baby, just waitin', and waitin', and waitin', and waitin’ for sumthin that I’m not even gonna recognize when it comes. Death is my only cure. I heard that before. I been hearin' it. And I’m hearin’ it now. I see...I see my Mama cryin’, I see her screamin' in my dreams. I see my babies. I see my- I see my daddy. I see myself” (0:37:58).

The stereotypically negative representation of Blackness here, though, is directed and acted so brilliantly, that, at the Twin Cities Film Festival, although most in the audience giggled at first at the ridiculousness of the stereotypes being represented on screen, almost everyone soon settled into a stirred fixation. This observed response aligns with documented reception of the film at the festival, where one reviewer described it as "hands down the best film of the festival"[24] and where it went on to win Best Feature Film, as voted by the audience.[25] Such audience engagement reveals what the scene’s on-the-surface negative representation of Blackness really ended up being: an emotional conversation between a father and son.

Even though Monk tries to spoof the culture that fetishizes Black trauma, he unintentionally goes against his aim. Monk writes through his own lens — one that is shaped by his own emotional experiences with his father. Monk cannot escape the fact that his own art, even if satirical, comes from a real and relatable place. Monk, though he giggles at this melodramatic and stereotypical representation of Blackness, thinking that it is farcical, forgets that even representations that seem stereotypic can have meaning too because it's not the representation, itself, that determines whether it will be productive — it is what mode of thinking

it stirs up in the audience. Here, although a stereotypical portrayal of Blackness is made, the scene actually transcends stereotypes and makes the audience critically reflect about the Black experience in America. The “bad” representation works because of its nuance.

American Fiction is successful, in part, because it has a tremendous grasp on the cultural context in which the film, and the events therein, take place. Productive Black representation is not fixed or monolithic but a contested and negotiated field of articulation that can have different effects depending on the historical context.[26] By cultivating the audience’s emotional reaction to what Monk thought was a mere spoof, the film forces reflection on the actual versus intended effect of Monk's scene. Jefferson here uses our own reaction to the scene to stimulate critical questioning about what type of Black representation really is best. Rather than heavy-handedly encouraging the audience to feel as Monk does — that his writing is goofy — the film cultivates an emotional response. It so starkly contrasts Monk's intended effect that it forces critical questioning as to whether any single person can truly be the judge of what type of Black representation is most effective.

This contrast between the audience response and Monk’s intended effect of his representation is the best example I have ever seen of a “negotiated reading,” that Hall suggests is inspired by productive representation.[27] Hall's encoding/decoding model recognizes that meaning is not simply transmitted from creator to audience but is actively produced through the encounter between text and viewer.[28] The negotiated reading occupies a crucial middle ground in Hall's framework, acknowledging that audiences are neither passive recipients who absorb intended meanings wholesale, nor purely oppositional readers who reject everything presented to them.[29] In a negotiated reading of a representation, the viewers of a representation partly accept the intended meaning (just as we giggled at first) but also resist and modify it in places based on

our own position (just as it ended up striking an emotional chord).[30] This negotiation happens because viewers bring their own lived experiences to bear on what they watch, creating a complex interplay between the text's preferred meaning and the viewer's interpretation.[31] Hall argues that negotiated readings reflect the reality of how most audiences actually engage with media—selectively accepting some elements while questioning or recontextualizing others based on their own situated knowledge.[32] This type of decoding stands in contrast with dominant, preferred, or hegemonic readings, in which the viewer decodes the message in complete alignment with the encoder's intended meaning, and oppositional readings in which viewers understand the intended meaning, but decode it in a contrary way based on their own beliefs and values.[33] In the context of *American Fiction,* this negotiated space is precisely where the film's productive representation of Blackness operates—inviting viewers to question, reflect, and form their own judgments rather than accepting any single perspective as authoritative.[34]

Negotiated readings are elicited when representations of Blackness encourage critical thinking, as opposed to being tendentious and forcing the audience to believe a certain thing about the valence of the representation. Productive representations of Blackness in film must encourage the audience to ask questions of the representation, just like in Jefferson's masterful scene. In this case, we are the audience to Monk's work, and we respond differently to Monk's intention, just like the culture does to *Fuck* in the film, itself.

This scene, perhaps more than any other, encourages the audience to question and think critically about what makes an effective Black representation and to question whether Monk, himself, is misguided in his ideals. This effect of cultivating critical thinking is part of what allows *American Fiction* to represent Blackness productively. The changing reactions to the scene in the audience make one understand that it's not about the representation, itself, that

contains inherent meaning baked in. Just like Hall's suggestion,[35] the film fosters active reader engagement, compelling the audience to discern their own meaning from the representations by paying attention to incidental features. This approach shifts the focus from a singular, often superficial, interpretation of the central figure, to a more nuanced understanding of the scene and its broader implications.[36] Any productive representation of Blackness evokes some level of active reader engagement. It asks questions of the viewer rather than tries to feed answers. When this happens, it is the audience who raises the question about representation and answers it themselves. This is better than the arbiter of good representation—whether Monk, Everett, or Jefferson—trying to define what makes Black representation good or bad.

Critical Questions About Critical Representations

We mustn't slip into relativism, an ever-tempting way to evade making any suggestions at all about nuanced issues like Black representation. Just because any Black representation can have a range of outcomes, doesn't mean we should say any type of representation goes, so long as it encourages this ambiguous and certainly highly idiosyncratic act of critical thinking. There are two questions that arise if there is apparently no such thing as "good" or "bad" Black representation and if no one can even decide, in the first place, what either of those ends of the spectrum would mean: First, why not represent Blackness in any way at all? And second, what aspects of critical thinking make it an estimable goal of Black representation?

We can answer the first question by more closely examining Sintara's own rationalizations for why she would produce a work like, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto,* whose title, alone, warrants some level of condemnation. Sintara claims that she is merely giving the market what it wants— "Is it bad," she asks, "to cater to their tastes? They're the ones buying the manuscripts" (1:38:06). And maybe she's right. What's the problem with catering to the mass

audience and creating a book that adheres to the popular culture of the present day, even if it risks representing Blackness in an unproductive way? What Sintara fails to understand is something Baldwin realized long ago: “The popular culture is created by the fantasies of very ill people, and these fantasies have nothing to do with reality.”[37] So, although Sintara has a point and does make a reasonable case to Monk that he certainly doesn't have all the answers on what productive Black representation is, it also seems no more productive to adhere to the clearly misguided popular culture, which subscribes blindly to stereotypic Black representations.

There has been much work that has corroborated the view that market forces of the cultural zeitgeist are far from an estimable ideal to strive for when creating Black representations. Hall, for example, has critiqued market-driven approaches to representation that rely too greatly on consumer demand.[38] This purely contractual view of the media-society relationship seriously misreads the terrain on which the struggle for good representation takes place.[39]

Using market forces alone to drive Black representation so often brings forth stereotypical portrayals. When Monk debates his agent about whether to release his work, his agent raises something deeply affecting. He asks whether Monk's mother—who has Alzheimer's and is moving into a care facility costing thousands per month—needs financial help. It is this practical reality that becomes the impetus for Monk to release his work that even he deems as nonsense. When economic necessity drives Black representation, there is no guarantee that representation will produce critical thinking in any form.

Addressing the question regarding the aspects of critical thinking that make it an estimable goal of Black representation, *American Fiction’s* answer lies in its use of multiple perspectives. Some critics have interpreted *American Fiction* to be a didactic suggestion that

Huxtable-like depictions are more realistic representations of Black life,[40] as opposed to others. But that does not seem to be what the film is doing. Jefferson has made it clear that when he initially read *Erasure*, he was waiting for a conversation between Monk and Sintara, so that Monk's ideas about Black representation could be challenged. Though that conversation never happened in the book, Jefferson intentionally inserted the scene where Sintara brings forth valid critiques to Monk's perspective to ensure that his film contained multiple perspectives on what constituted productive Black representation.

Despite following the main character, Monk, who does, indeed, have ideas that Black representation should transcend contexts of inferiority and oppression to those of competence and affluence, the film is not prescriptive in saying that Monk's perspective is best. The film's representations of Blackness are not only good in the way they counter stereotypical ones found historically in film, but in that they do not say that this type of representation is necessarily better than any others. The film therefore challenges the type of Black representation it puts forth using characters like Sintara.

Today, it is more important than ever for all Black stories to be told. Indeed, we are in an era that has gone beyond 'wokeness' to now making 'wokeness' illegal, with states across the nation banning books that can teach Black children about their history. *American Fiction* is simply arguing that we need not doggedly rehash the same types of representations and treat them as gospel. Jefferson says himself, "The fun thing about a movie is when people walk away and discuss and debate it."[3] He wants people asking, "Here's why I think Monk is right; here's why I think Monk is wrong,"[3] as opposed to spoon-feeding them a message. *American Fiction* merely strives to "give voice to these kinds of conversations and let people take from it what they may."[3] So, we mustn't misinterpret Monk's portrayal as a member of the Black elite to

suggest that Jefferson feels as if Black representation is better off existing in these types of privileged contexts. He wants to encourage critical thinking by using multiple perspectives on Black representation in the film. He does not claim to have the answers and does not want to issue guilty or not guilty verdicts. I believe he achieved this well.

We can also think beyond the conversations between the characters within the film to the broader aspect of how they, themselves, are represented and how these representations encourage critical thinking by way of their varied representational frames. *American Fiction* shows tremendous nuance in the representations of Blackness it displays, as opposed to portraying Blackness in a monolithic way. Certainly, it does follow an affluent family of Ivy League-educated doctors and lawyers. But at the same time, they are cocaine-sniffing, cigarette-smoking, and all have myriad personal flaws. Jefferson is not insistent on creating “positive” representation to rebel against all the “bad” ones in Black film history.

At the same time, nuance is granted even to the cocaine-sniffing Cliff who, as a gay Black man, adds another dimension to the film's critically contextualized portrayals of Blackness. On the surface, Cliff embodies several characteristics that might be interpreted as "negative" representations in less thoughtful films: he struggles with substance abuse and he's at a low point with his finances, career, and relationships. Even his sexuality could have been used as it has been in other filmic portrayals as something to be critical of. Yet rather than presenting these aspects as negative traits, the film provides the critical context behind Cliff's character development. We see how Cliff has struggled with lack of acceptance from his parents since childhood, whose disapproval of his sexuality created lasting wounds that feed into his adult behaviors. This context prevents viewers from making simplistic judgments about his character, instead encouraging a deeper understanding of the factors that shaped him. By exploring his

complex relationship with his family and sexuality, the film resists flattening the gay character into a monolith as has been done historically in a bitterly stereotypical fashion.

In one telling scene, Monk's mother mistakes Monk for Cliff, calling him a "genius.” The film makes it clear that genius is not reserved only for just the unblemished, “socially acceptable” Black representation. Cliff’s portrayal demonstrates a commitment to showing flawed, multifaceted characters rather than only sanitized "positive" Black representations. The film can do this because it narrows its focus onto family relationships — the mundane yet contextualizing aspects of Black representation — rather than dwelling on Cliff's rough edges, which could have otherwise been sensationalized or even criticized at face value.

Indeed, it is the simple family dynamics that are made intentionally to be central in how the film represents Blackness. There's a beautiful extended shot of the family photos on the wall showing mundane — but equally as important — Black stories that yearn to be told. At one point in the film, the camera lingers on a photo of a Black child who was participating in Kenneth and Mamie Clark's Doll Studies. In the photograph, he reaches for the White doll instead of the Black doll when he has asked which doll he wants to play with the most. This study, which later provided scientific evidence that segregation was inherently unequal in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, illustrates how negative societal representations can instill negative self-perceptions in Black children.

The film ponders these issues not only through these introspective moments, but also through Monk’s whirlwind journey as a man thrust into fame due to the success of his book. At one point, Wiley, the White production executive that mercenarily preys on Monk's story, watches Monk run away from a dinner after hearing sirens outside. Wiley figures it must be because of Monk’s fear of the police. In reality, Monk runs out of concern for his ailing mother.

Again, we see multiple angles encouraging critical thinking about representation. Just like the Doll Study showing that negative self-perceptions can be instilled from negative societal representations, this scene points to how the contexts in which we witness groups portrayed shape our reality of the world. Wiley, disconnected from Black life and nuanced representations of it, sees Monk as nothing but a Black criminal who must be running from the police. Wiley's lifetime of seeing constant representations of Blackness being associated with crime has erroneously shaped his perceptions.

So, in both the mundane and the melodramatic, there is intentionality to encourage critical thinking about Black representation, and neither type of storyline is followed more or less than the other, regardless of what an audience may see as more entertaining. Instead of following the nuanced, emotional narratives within a Black family, the film easily could have represented Blackness in the most sensationalized way and followed the drama that shows Monk being swept up into the publishing and film industry. But throughout, the more human story is represented. It is touching that it is the understated family storyline that resonated deeply for so many, with critics noting how the emotional family elements "strike a chord that anyone in the audience can relate to" and describing the film as working "as both a sharp satire and an affecting family drama."[41] When we represent groups in nuanced and multifaceted ways, as opposed to ones that are monolithic, only then can the audience engage in the reflection required to be able to think critically about the representation, taking them beyond accepting and naturalizing flat, stereotypical, unidimensional, sensationalized portrayals.

The Irony of a Critical Film's Critical Acclaim

There is a long tradition of debate going back even a century now as to how Blackness should be represented on screen, with reformers long before *American Fiction* seeking to put

forth representations of affluent Black characters to counter the representations of poverty, suffering, crime, and violence that had been more commercially appealing.[42] So, nearly a century later, is it a straw man for *American Fiction* to poke fun at these stereotypically negative representations of Blackness and make the claim that they are pervasive enough today to be satirized so ruthlessly in the 2020s? Indeed, the "hood gangsta era" ended twenty years ago,[43] and was much more relevant in 2001 when Everett wrote Erasure, the book *American Fiction* is only now adapting. Could a book called, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* really have been met with acclaim today? Probably not. It would likely be reprimanded by even the most naive White consumer, because it was obvious even to our largely White audience at the Twin Cities Film Festival that it was over-the-top. I don't think anybody today would really like that type of work.

But *American Fiction* is a satire, so it exaggerates the contemporary cultural context to make its point. The culture it critiques is the one we know too well — one that pays lip service and makes frivolous concessions to DEI, without having a clue about what types of real changes need to be made to improve the lives of the Black community. Our culture feels absolved so long as we can appear, on the surface, as allies of the movement, post Black squares on Instagram when a Black man dies at the hands of police, or appear to be remorseful and open to any type of Black cultural production, no matter how problematic the representation is. This reality is why the representations of Blackness in this film that counter today's widely accepted ones are useful.

The irony of the film supposedly speaking against the very industry that it received *Best Adapted Screenplay* from at the 96th Academy Awards is not lost either. There is certainly an element here of the phenomenon Monk himself went through in the film, as he tried to make something that nobody was really supposed to like, yet won awards for it. (It is worth noting that Everett himself expressed frustration that readers universally agreed with *Erasure*, remarking,

"The only thing that ever pissed me off is that everyone agreed with it."[44]). Is it just another case of White people once again getting the final say in what is good Black representation, just like they did when they over-ruled Monk and Sintara to give *Fuck* the literary award? Surely, if the film was effective in condemning representations perpetuated by the film industry, it would have been condemned, in return, by that same industry, and certainly would not have won Best Adapted Screenplay. Surely, it should have been so disconcerting to production companies at pitch meetings that it should never have been made in the first place. Could it be that a film with truly productive representations of Blackness would lie wholly outside the current cultural realm, with a zeal so revolutionary that would preclude any production company's interest in its creation? Maybe. But how does a creator completely rebel against the very system they're relying on to communicate their ideas? Some concessions need to be made. Indeed, if one totally boycotts the industry, seeking to exist only in the margins, their art will never make it to the screen, let alone be promoted sufficiently to be seen by others who would get the chance to critically inquire about its contents. All creators work within the confines of a system that they have very little control over. All that can be asked of a film, especially one that faces the burden of representation like *American Fiction,* is to make a nudge from within by doing things differently. The film's central achievement is engaging the audience's critical thinking by using varied representations and multiple perspectives. *American Fiction* does not seek to be the arbiter of productive Black representation—and that is precisely what allows it to cultivate the critical questioning necessary for productive engagement with Black representation in film.

But while the film garnered significant acclaim from predominantly White institutions and critics, its reception among Black audiences was notably mixed. On the one hand, viewers were delighted when Jeffrey Wright and Sterling K. Brown, long-underappreciated by the

mainstream (though long-respected amongst the Black community) finally received acknowledgment, and Erika Alexander's inclusion represented a welcome recognition of her talents. But things like the soundtrack proved divisive, with some viewers finding it refreshingly different and others questioning how well it represented Black musical traditions. Then, despite receiving NAACP Image Award nominations, the film failed to win any of these awards. It's almost as if the film created something similar to Monk's book; White audiences ate it up, but Black audiences not as much. Perhaps Cord Jefferson brilliantly executed a meta-commentary where the joke is on every mainstream outlet that enthusiastically praises the film. Just as the White literary establishment in the film unknowingly celebrates Monk's satirical novel that mocks their limited understanding of Black life, the predominantly White body of film critics may be celebrating a film that satirizes their very own consumption patterns. The mainstream is the consumer of the "Black" movie just like the White publishers in the film ate up Sintara and Monk's "Black" books—but they don't realize the joke might be on them. Fascinatingly, the reception to the film mirrors the central narrative conflict within it.

Conclusion: Representation Matters, But What Type?

American Fiction promotes critical thinking about Black representation in film. But it does not seek to be the arbiter of productive Black representation. It does not seek to make Monk the arbiter of what that means, and it uses foil characters to question his belief that he can be.

The present paper, itself, does not seek to be prescriptive about what makes productive Black representation in film, and only makes note of ways that *American Fiction* points us toward productive Black representations through critical frames. By making the case that critical thinking is produced through representations of Blackness in *American Fiction*, and that critical thinking is an admirable product of Black representation, I do not seek to sidestep the question of

what type of representation could be best because, as we have seen, this is an impossible question in itself. The very point of good representation is that there is no single type that is best, meaning that productive representation cultivates critical thinking about the nature of representation itself rather than prescribing a particular approach. So, the answer itself lies in the acknowledgment that even our most well-intentioned and well-researched recommendations for Black representations are only just that: recommendations. This is why we simply must be satisfied in articulating why promoting critical thinking about Black representation is admirable and in describing what that looks like. *American Fiction* is successful here in many regards.

Representation matters, but what type? The present paper argues that the type of representation that is most effective is one that is situated in the critical context. Such representation inspires the viewer not necessarily by way of incessantly representing Blackness in "positive" frames, but by giving the audience the opportunity to think critically about the representation that is in front of them. The type of representation on the surface matters less than how it stimulates the interpreter to critically engage with it. As we have seen, representation is nothing without the interpreter[45] and that interpreter deserves an opportunity to be stimulated to think critically about the representation so that they can derive insight no matter the representation frame. Representation is a peculiar thing in the way it wields such a remarkable potential to shape the minds of consumers for both good and ill. Any productive representation of Blackness will not be so dogmatic as to think that it has the solution, but will instead force people to ask questions about the representation it puts forth.

At the end of the film, Monk, now a big-shot, fresh off his new movie deal, stops in a red convertible on the set of yet another misguided Black filmic representation: Wiley's *Plantation Annihilation,* a story of "murderous slave ghosts." When Monk's car stops on set, he locks eyes

with one of the Black actors in the film who plays a slave. Even though Monk, at his very core, knows the world would be better off without these types of movies, he nods to him in solidarity before his car pulls away.

Here are two Black men in a system in which they can't express themselves fully, and are pigeonholed into what the market wants of them. Big-shot Monk, who is making a movie his book is based on, is really no different, in the end, to the early-career extra playing the slave. They both are talented artists in their own right, even if the art that they put out is restricted by the culture they are part of, and even if the quality of their output has little relation to what there ends up being a market for. There is at least an ounce of something captivating in Monk's *My Pafology*, or in that Black actor's freedom of artistic expression even just for a second within the misguided film, or even in the movies Monk scoffed at, from *Baby Boy* to *Antebellum*. So long as we use representations of Blackness to stir up that ever-admirable — and all-the-while idiosyncratic and ambiguous — ideal of critical thinking, we have the potential to turn these discussions into something tangible that shapes Black representation for good.

Notes

1. Remarks captured on video, January 2025, https://youtube.com/shorts/rms9_pINjdc?si=bbhlaQqmWyO_IpiZ. In a matter of weeks since returning to office in 2025, President Trump ordered schools to adopt "patriotic education" and threatened to retract all federal funding for schools that teach about systemic racism. Dana Goldstein, "With Sweeping Executive Orders, Trump Tests Local Control of Schools," *The New York Times*, January 30, 2025. The order sought to create an education that depicts the American founding as "unifying, inspiring and ennobling" and emphasizing how the United States "has admirably grown closer to its noble principles throughout its history." To withdraw support for students of diverse backgrounds, the administration announced it had removed or archived hundreds of guidance documents, reports, and training materials that were previously crucial for schools to set and maintain diversity standards. Z. Montague, "New Administration Highlights: Judge Calls Trump's Birthright Citizenship Order 'Blatantly Unconstitutional'," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2025. The Department of Education sent letters to schools and universities nationwide warning them to comply with the new anti-DEI directives or risk losing federal funding. A.P. Dillon, "Letter Directs Schools to Eliminate DEI," *North State Journal*, February 2025, https://nsjonline.com/article/2025/02/letter-directs-schools-to-eliminate-dei/. The education department also faced severe cuts under Musk's cost-cutting efforts, totaling over $900 million and specifically targeting the department's research arm, the Institute of Education Sciences. Z. Montague and Dana Goldstein, "Musk Team Announces Millions in Cuts to Education Dept. amid Legal Pushback," *The New York Times*,

February 11, 2025. Musk's team announced they had "terminated" 89 contracts and 29 grants associated with diversity and equity training. Further, the new administration announced the dismissal of 11 complaints related to books being banned. Z. Montague, "Education Dept. Ends Book Ban Investigations," *The New York Times*, January 24, 2025. Despite 10,000 public school book bans occurring in 2023-2024 alone, a large proportion of these bans have targeted books written by or about people of color. M. Dunbar, "US Education Department Ends 'Hoax' Investigations into Book Bans," *The Guardian*, January 27, 2025.

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7. Smith, "Introduction," 1–12.
8. Smith, "Introduction," 1–12.
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10. Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" [1995], in *Essential Essays, Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora*, ed. David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 150–163.
11. Hall, "What Is This 'Black,'" 150–163.
12. Hall, "What Is This 'Black,'" 150–163.
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14. Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, "White Responses: The Emergence of 'Enlightened' Racism," in *Enlightened Racism*, ed. Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 10–26.
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