Committing Journalism While Black: Colorblind Casting and the Portrayal of Black Journalists

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Denzel Washington's commanding presence as a star reporter in "The Pelican Brief" makes journalism look far more glamorous than it is. And it makes being a Black journalist, or committing journalism while Black, look far easier than it is. The 1993 film adaptation of John Grisham's novel paired Washington, among Hollywood's most prominent Black actors, with Julia Roberts, among its most prominent white actors. Roberts insisted on co-starring with Washington, who plays a role written for a white man. By the mid-'90s, Washington had ascended to the Hollywood A-list, inheriting the mantle from the ever-dignified Sidney Poitier, and competing with white actors for roles. As Tom Hanks said in a 1995 Vanity Fair article about Washington, "Denzel does this amazing thing of completely crossing over." Washington's character, Gray Grantham, pursues an explosive scoop about the assassination of two U.S. Supreme Court justices. But his turn as Grisham's protagonist introduces complex questions about the presentation of Black journalists in film. Grantham is interchangeable with a white journalist with a few subtle exceptions: In a scene early in the movie, he wears a Howard University T-shirt. This quiet nod to the prestigious historically Black college reminds the audience that Grantham may be a white man in Grisham's book, but he's a Black man in the film.

The American film industry has produced less than a handful of major movies about Black journalists, compared to dozens featuring white journalists — from 1934's "It Happened One Night" to 2022's "She Said." So, there's not a large body of work to examine. White actors

could have portrayed the journalists in the three major films I'll explore — "The Pelican Brief," "The Bedford Incident," a 1965 Cold War thriller starring Poitier, and "Cloud Atlas," the 2012 time-bending epic starring Halle Berry. Even in the 1940 race film (movies produced for Black audiences) "Mystery in Swing," starring Monte Hawley and targeting Black audiences, the lead character is mainly interchangeable with a white journalist. Poitier is embedded on a naval destroyer during the Cold War, writing a profile of its recalcitrant captain. Berry portrays a reporter for an alternative newspaper who uncovers corruption at a nuclear power company. Hawley is a reporter with the Black Press, solving the murder of a famous jazz musician.

In the three major films, the leading roles transcend race. But what may be a sign of progress for the movie industry is a misrepresentation of the news industry. The color-blind casting obscures the marginalization Black journalists historically have experienced in newsrooms. Washington's ability to choose his stories implies an equal playing field for Black journalists in white newsrooms that didn't exist when the film was made and doesn't exist now. Poitier is a celebrated reporter embedded on a battleship when Blacks had only begun to desegregate white corporate media.

The portrayals are aspirational and, in the context of the past few years, feel slightly unrealistic. The racial reckoning following George Floyd's death in 2020 swept through powerful institutions, including journalism. Black journalists flooded Twitter (now X) with stories of career dreams deferred. A 2020 New York Times op-ed by two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Wesley Lowery sums up the spirit of the moment: "Black journalists are publicly airing years of accumulated grievances, demanding an overdue reckoning for a profession whose mainstream repeatedly brushes off their concerns; in many newsrooms, writers

and editors are now also openly pushing for a paradigm shift in how our outlets define their operations and ideals."

Though dated in their approach, the films have merits. They present Black journalists as crusaders for corporate and government transparency and accountability. Washington saves the integrity of the judiciary. Berry exposes the risks posed by a poorly built nuclear reactor plant. Poitier becomes a voice of accountability during the Cold War. Hawley is the outlier here, but even his actions, though riddled with ethical lapses, show a commitment to the community in which he lives. Washington's turn as Grantham is the meatiest of the roles, offering much to analyze. In "The Pelican Brief," he thrives as an established reporter at a fictional version of *The Washington Post*. His first scene in the film is with a Supreme Court justice, signaling his credibility and acceptance in a sacred den of American power. As the two men watch a protest on the court's steps from the security of the justice's office, the judge asks Washington whether the protesters are attacking his opinions. The familiarity between the source and reporter telepaths their mutual respect. By the time Washington teams up with Roberts, a law student who holds the key to the justices' assassinations, the audience has bought into how effortlessly he navigates spaces where Black journalists rarely appeared at the time — and, most importantly, that he belongs in those spaces. However, the drawback of this presentation is that Washington doesn't so much as encounter a microaggression inside or outside his newsroom. Those who don't know the hard-fought battles in white newsrooms that led to the creation of the National Association of Black Journalists in 1975 and the battle scars of the firsts to desegregate these newsrooms would think Black journalists have always been equal members of the white press pack.

Investigative reporting is a lofty space where Black journalists have historically been excluded. In 1993, when "The Pelican Brief" was released, a Black investigative reporter at a national legacy media organization was nearly unheard of. Only recently have Black journalists pierced these journalistic altitudes with groups such as the Ida B. Wells Society leading the way. Yet Washington's portrayal of a journalist signals racial awareness in other ways. Despite its largely aspirational presentation of Black journalists, the film hints that other Black people support his characters' professional success and that he represents them in his quest for government accountability. A brief interaction between Washington and an older Black maintenance worker — his Deep Throat in the White House — challenges the film's color-blind lens. As the elder shares a tip about presidential shenanigans, he radiates an almost paternal pride in Washington's success as a journalist. It's an unspoken moment of racial solidarity in a film that seeks to transcend race.

Like Washington, Berry's Luisa Rey, an investigative reporter for an alternative publication in the 1970s, exudes a sense of moral purpose. But in "Cloud Atlas," her commitment is more personal: her deceased father was renowned for his reporting on the Vietnam War. It's a small role in the grand sweep of the film in which Berry plays multiple characters. As Rey, Berry doggedly pursues a tip about a nuclear power company cutting corners in constructing a new nuclear reactor. (The role is Berry's second time playing an investigative journalist. In 2007's "Perfect Strangers," she's a muck-racking reporter for a New York City tabloid.) Tom Hanks, a sympathetic scientist, helps her.

It's challenging to separate Berry's character from the many problematic ideas in the film directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski and Tom Tykwer. The movie's theme of human interconnectedness, transcending race, time, and space, was celebrated by many critics.

However, some critics attacked the film as a failed experiment in subverting concepts of race and gender — for example, casting white actors in yellowface (playing Asian characters). Among Berry's characters are a Jewish socialite in the 1930s and an elderly Korean man in the future. In the context of the film, her characters' race and identity don't matter. There are no nods to her racial identity, as Washington manages in "The Pelican Brief." (The character of Rey is allegedly based on activist Karen Silkwood, who was killed in 1974 while attempting to leak information about a power plant to a journalist.) Still, Berry's journalist is pivotal to the film's narrative; she's one of many characters whose actions over time bend the universe toward justice, a central theme in "Cloud Atlas."

The producers and writer of "The Bedford Incident" wrote the part of the ship's medical officer with Poitier in mind. Instead, he requested the role of white journalist Ben Munceford, according to the American Film Institute Catalog. Although the part was written for a white actor, a 1965 film synopsis says, "The Navy permits Ben Munceford, a liberal Negro journalist, to come aboard to write a story about [U.S. Navy Capt. Eric] Finlander and his crew." In the film, which is based on actual incidents, Poitier is an acclaimed reporter embedded on a naval destroyer. His photojournalist differs significantly from the hard-charging investigative reporters Washington and Berry portray. Cleared by the U.S. Department of Defense to board the vessel as it patrols the North Atlantic Ocean, Poitier is politely tolerated but given no information by the captain, played by Richard Widmark or the loyal crew. As Munceford, Poitier is professional yet persistent in pushing the captain to be candid. He's an observer, sizing up the man and how he commands his ship until it's clear that the captain is endangering everyone onboard in a cat-and-mouse game with a Soviet submarine. Only then, and much too late to make a difference, does Poitier go from observer to moral participant in a fatal situation.

In the film, his race isn't a factor. (One reviewer noted it was his only movie in which his race wasn't part of the story.). However, casting a Black actor of Poitier's stature in the role no doubt influenced how audiences of the day viewed Black journalists. Famous for breaking color lines in cinema, Poitier does the same for the image of Black journalists. From the moment he drops from a helicopter onto the destroyer, he emanates credibility. Among the first Black male movie stars, Poitier was adept at respectability politics. He infuses Munceford with the same formidable reserve that often accompanies being a first: dignity, intelligence, and a presence that can convince even the most racist white person that you are worthy of respect.

How white audiences interpret the Black protagonists of "The Pelican Brief," "Cloud Atlas," and "The Bedford Incident" matters. The films about Black journalists working for white-owned media targeted white viewers. Mystery in Swing," a Hollywood race film released in 1940, is a departure from these films. Its main character was a Black reporter at a Black newspaper, and it targeted Black audiences.

In an article in the Pittsburgh Courier, an African American newspaper founded in 1910, the white filmmakers said they sought to "glamorize the Negro press" and show Black people in a range of occupations — doctors, police captains, attorneys, and entertainers. One can debate whether the film glamorizes the Black press, but it undoubtedly celebrates its role as a respected source of information and a respectable profession for Black people.

Reporter Biff Boyd lives in an all-Black world in which white people aren't a factor in daily life. When a trumpet player and well-known philanderer is killed, Boyd, played by Hawley, devises an elaborate trap to find the killer and save his girlfriend's father, a suspect in the murder. Operating more like a police detective than a journalist, he cuts a deal with a precinct captain to expose the murderer. Unsurprisingly, Hawley's boss fires him for violating journalistic

ethics by becoming part of the story. But that doesn't deter Hawley from solving the murder mystery. Hawley is the antithesis of Berry, Washington, and Poitier. He collaborates with the police captain, withholds information from his boss, gets drunk in public, and wisecracks his way through the film, like white journalists portrayed in movies like "My Girl Friday," starring Cary Grant as a dubious newspaper editor and "It Happened One Night," starring Clark Gable as a shady reporter.

Film critic Richard Corliss wrote in a 2009 article in Time magazine: "The 1930s had enough reporter movies to fill this whole list. Every actor capable of spitting out snappy dialogue was given a fedora and a press card to stick in his hatband." That wasn't the case for Black actors, but the genre appears to have inspired "Mystery in Swing." Black audiences got the same stories but starring people who looked like them, even though the familiar racist portrayal from white movies remained: dark-skinned Blacks were unsophisticated buffoons, the protagonists were nearly white in appearance and very urbane. In "Mystery in Swing," the brown-skinned butler for the slain trumpet player is one of two supporting characters who provide comic relief. While the film mimics the racial stereotypes found in white movies of the time, "Mystery in Swing" presents a Black middle-class world that was absent in Hollywood films. Biff may have crossed the line between journalist and boyfriend. Still, his ability to use his position as a journalist to solve a murder demonstrates the Black press' authority in the Black community.

Despite the many stories their careers could inspire, there are still too few examples of Black journalists in starring or even supporting roles in narrative films. A rare exception is the Jackie Robinson biopic "42," featuring Andre Holland as Wendell Smith, the legendary Black sports writer and mentor to Robinson and other Blacks who destroyed baseball's color line in the '40s. Recently, Ava DuVernay's "Origin" dramatizes journalist Isabel Wilkerson's book

"Caste," the author's intellectual journey to understand how race and social hierarchies interact. DuVernay emphasizes the importance of working inside and outside the studio system to create films with varied presentations of Black people. Similarly, film director Spike Lee has said that one of his goals as a filmmaker is "to portray different images of Black people."

There is no single Black story; there are many. Portraying the diversity among Black people and their experiences is the ongoing work in journalism and film.