

Different Shades of Black:

A Critical Exploration of Black Caribbean Representation in American Film

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Background

Many studies conceptualize race and ethnicity as the same, using the terms interchangeably (Tukachinsky, 2015; Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). The 2020 Census, however, identified 62 unique ethnic groups within the Black population, with 42.3% reporting themselves as belonging to a non-American ethnic group. This included approximately 2.6 million Caribbeans. The present research sought to examine the depiction of Black Caribbean identity in American film and how these representations are perceived by Black Caribbean Americans. People with a shared racial identity may be perceived similarly due to appearance, but the history, culture, and experiences associated with their ethnic identity plays a major role in how they relate to and make sense of the world around them (Hall, 1992; Butterfield, 2004).

Looking at how Black Caribbean Americans respond to American media requires analyzing how it is circulated across the African diaspora. Previous literature finds that American media does not exist in a vacuum, but is ubiquitous across the world (Shiple, 2009; Thomas, 2004). This circulation of culture is multidirectional, with media flowing both to and from the Caribbean (Thompson, 2015). It is also essential to note the potential psychological effects that accompany media representation. Scholarship examining how Black Caribbeans respond to the American landscape is scarce but has found lower levels of perceived discrimination among Black Caribbean Americans than African Americans, as well as changes in perceptions over time (Case & Hunter, 2014; Head & Seaborn Thompson, 2017). Given the size of the Black Caribbean population, as well as their unique American experience, it is imperative to analyze how they are depicted in American film and how they interpret and respond to media representations.

Research Questions and Argument

Research Questions

1. What are the different ways in which Black Caribbeans are represented in popular American film?
2. How do Black Caribbean Americans perceive Caribbean representation in American film? How accurate do they rate depictions?
3. Do Black Caribbeans and African Americans consume and internalize media messages differently? If so, what are some of the explanatory factors?
4. How does consumption of non-American African diasporic media affect the identity construction of Black Caribbeans living in the United States?

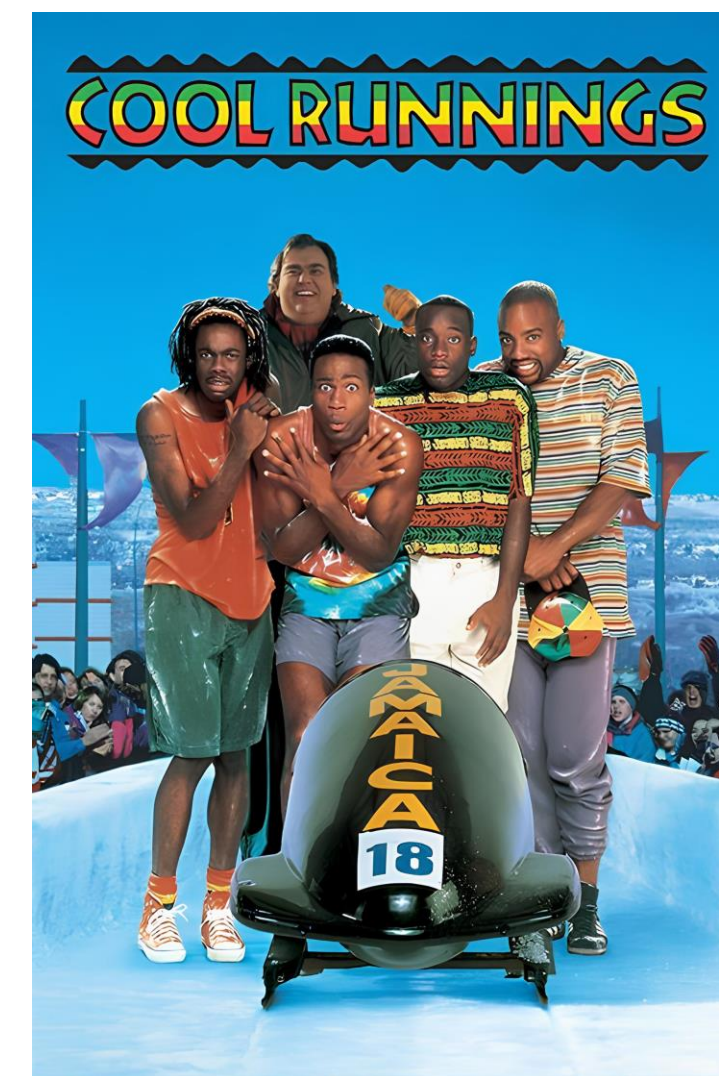
Argument

- Cultural differences in film are subsumed under the larger Pan African symbolism of maintaining unity and harmony within the African diaspora.
- Black Caribbeans, especially Jamaicans, experience “un-visibility” (Thompson, 2015). They are hypervisible through stereotypical representations but rendered invisible — or what this project identifies as “a back thought” — otherwise.

Methodology

The research methodology was divided into two parts:

- A textual analysis of *Cool Runnings* (1993), *Black Panther* (2018), and *Bob Marley: One Love* (2024), three films with prominent Black Caribbean representation. Films were selected based on the on-screen presence of Black Caribbean characters or actors, box office success, and production by an American film studio.
- Three one-hour long focus groups with 5-8 Black Caribbean Americans, Black Jamaican Americans, and African Americans.



Results

Textual Analyses

Surface level cultural markers: each film used accent/language, clothing, and location to convey something about the culture that they attempted to depict. The films featuring Jamaican identity also included Rastafarian religion.

- **Bob Marley: One Love-** Bob Marley is visible, but being in exile, Jamaica is removed from the background. With an emphasis on his iconicity as a symbol of unity and peace, the film masks cultural differences under a larger theme of African diasporic harmony.
- **Cool Runnings-** As a slapstick comedy, the film is overly dependent on stereotypical tropes to depict Caribbean culture. Nevertheless, it was very progressive in the representation of different Black ethnicities in the 1990s.
- **Black Panther-** The film attempts to address negative Black stereotypes through an Afrofuturistic lens but erases Black Caribbean identity in the process.

Focus Groups

- Black Caribbeans rarely saw their identity in the media, and when it was present, it focused on surface level details: *it's like...a back thought from what I've seen. Like it's not really noticeable at all* – Black Caribbean
- Black Jamaicans observed the hypervisibility of stereotypes: *I was going to look at a job in a hotel, like housekeeping, and they hear say me ah Jamaican. They did not give me the job because them ah say 'them Jamaican ah thieving people'* – Black Jamaican
- The media influenced the relationship that Black Caribbeans had with their ethnicity at a young age: *People didn't find like any point or interest of finding out more behind like my Blackness or like, where I'm from. How does my culture impact me? So I... never really went more in depth about like finding out more stuff about my culture. I was kind of just like surface a level...Black student and then later on I went on to that path* – Black Caribbean
- Older Black Caribbeans used American film to become accustomed to American culture: *I remember when I came, I came in the '70s, and ...I saw this movie called Roots. And right away I hate White people* – Black Jamaican
- Black Caribbeans and African Americans both noted that the media portrayed their identity in a negative light: *stuff you see on the news, like shootings and robberies and stealing cars and stuff. And like, they like sets the stereotype and like, it makes other people, like, think that's just all we are* – African American
- All Black Caribbeans participants consumed Caribbean media regularly: *I definitely feel like more connected, more in tune...Like if we don't know... what's going on like your country of heritage, I feel like something's a little off or disconnected* – Black Caribbean

Discussion and Conclusion

Implications

- This study revealed the role of the American media as a source through which Black Caribbeans become accustomed to American society and a place where non-Black Caribbeans learn about the culture. It highlights how media representation can shape the reality of immigrants.

Future Research

- How do immigrants' experiences vary based on age at the time of migrations?
- What factors impact how multigenerational immigrants consume and interpret media?

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