



**UNIVERSIDAD DE JAÉN**  
Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

# History of the Representation of Black Women in the Hollywood Film Industry

**Alumno/a:** **María del Carmen García Sola**

**Tutor/a:** Prof. D. Paula García Ramírez  
**Dpto.:** Filología Inglesa

**Julio, 2021**

# **Table of Contents**

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Theoretical Framework .....</b>	<b>6</b>
• A historical review of racism after European colonialism: Key definitions.....	6
• Black representation in Hollywood’s history.....	8
• Storytelling and Cultural amnesia .....	12
• Gender in film: the double burden .....	13
<b>3. A vindication of Black Women celebrities .....</b>	<b>16</b>
• Cicely Tyson.....	19
• Viola Davis .....	24
<b>4. Advancements in the industry.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>5. Bibliography .....</b>	<b>31</b>

## **Abstract**

The aim of this investigation is to acknowledge the evolution and progress of one big misrepresented minority in the film industry until this time and the reason why it has been ignored for so many decades. Why is it crucial to have this representation in such media? A context and cultural analysis of the contrasted over-presence of white men in the big screen and the reason why many film industries are still focusing on audiences that only represent them. Is there an economic motive or is it a matter of the long-term story of racism and sexism rooted in the polemic concept of Hollywood?

With this study, I will briefly review the history of gender and racism of the last century in the United States to contextualize the misrepresentation of the black and female characters inside film and other media. Additionally, after acknowledging the background and to illustrate the need of representation, the investigation will focus on the history and achievements of two actresses who have lived and succeeded through decades; Cicely Tyson and Viola Davis.

Lastly, I will do a review of the last years in the industry with the objective to know what remains the same and what has improved.

## **Key Words**

Postcolonial feminism, double colonization, film industry, civil rights, gender perspective.

## **Resumen**

El propósito de esta investigación es reconocer la evolución y el progreso de una gran minoría poco representada en la industria del cine hasta la fecha y la razón por la que ha sido ignorada por tantas décadas. ¿Por qué es crucial tener dicha representación en este medio de comunicación? Un análisis contextual y cultural de la sobre-presencia contrastada del hombre blanco en la gran pantalla y por qué muchas industrias cinematográficas a día de hoy todavía se enfocan en audiencias que solo los representan a ellos. ¿Hay un motivo económico o se trata de la historia a largo plazo de racismo y sexismo arraigado en el polémico concepto de Hollywood?

Con este estudio, revisaré brevemente la historia de género y racismo del último siglo en Estados Unidos para contextualizar la falta de representación de personajes minoritarios en el cine y otros medios de comunicación. Asimismo, tras reconocer el trasfondo y para ilustrar la necesidad de representación, esta investigación se enfocará en la historia y los logros de dos actrices que han vivido y triunfado durante décadas; Cicely Tyson y Viola Davis

Por último, haré un repaso de los últimos años en en la industria con el objetivo de saber qué sigue igual y qué ha mejorado

## **Palabras Clave**

Feminismo postcolonial, doble colonización, industria del cine, derechos civiles, perspectiva de género.

## 1. Introduction

There is a recent and significant day in the Academy Awards that made a difference since it took place. It created a small revolution inside a world of spotlights and stars that mimicked the bigger one happening outside of it. This day is issued because of the lack of other ethnicities and minorities representation in the awards during two consecutive years, which left with a strong majority of white cast nominees. The situation was so absurd in a proportional relation with the quantity of black cast in Hollywood's films both in 2015 and 2016 that stars like Jada Pinkett Smith, Will Smith or film director Spike Lee made remarkable statements and refused to take part in the Awards that night. This prompted a movement, started by April Reign publicly referred as #OscarsSoWhite.

The idea of this work is both inspired by the boycotts that started in the Academy Awards back in 2015 and have been repeated numerous times since in many other American awards, as well as the persistent racism outside the filming industry. In addition, I am strongly incentivized by the recent Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality. There is a determined intention to gain more consciousness to so many of these situations in order to never be repeated again, in favor of highlighting how representation of all minorities is still necessary nowadays and can impact our everyday situations. However, I write this work in order to collect information that demonstrates the long history of racism in western society. Despite being a caucasian woman who supports postcolonial and intersectional feminism, I do not write this paper to put my voice above women who are part of other minorities or races, as it is not my case and it is they the ones who should be heard in the fight for civil rights and against racism. I approach this topic with the purpose of learning and sharing from the cultural and social study of the data collected to date.

This work will be structured in two main sections. Firstly I will put into context the history behind race in America; racism, segregation and why it is so ingrained in Western society to this day. Along with this, I will present a brief summary of last century US's history to contrast it with the black representation in cinema, how and why it evolved, the reasons for the industry to control cinema inversions, stereotypes, and the roles of female characters inside these movies.

After this, I will illustrate this context with the life and work history of two of the most known black actresses of the last century; Cicely Tyson and Viola Davis. To do so, I will

provide myself with articles, interviews, biographies and the main data of the productions that they have been part of in order to relate them historically.

The main objective of this research is to have a contrast between the past and present decades of cinema, representation of minorities and what it is expected to be in the future. This point will be thoroughly exposed in the conclusive part of the investigation.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this work, racism within Hollywood will be treated as the main topic. Therefore, for this, it will be necessary to briefly gather what has happened to date, in order not to lose sight of the historical context. There is a strong dilemma inside and outside the cinema industry when it comes to black and other minorities's representation. For that reason, racism is often empowered by the long history behind it and it is of great concern to remember the historical background that shows its evolution through the last century.

In this theoretical framework, a series of definitions within this context to be known will be reviewed. Later, the black representation in the cinema during the story will be put into an historical context. Having that mentioned, there will be a short summary of the evolution of a few genres, themes and stereotypes. Finally, the point of view of women in this story will be recognized, as well as their double struggle when it comes to race and gender.

### 2.1. A historical review of racism after European colonialism: Key definitions

It is utterly necessary to have in mind the background of racism and recognize its context in the US by going back through history. Every discussion about the topic involves a necessary definition for the concept of racism, colonialism, Third World and patriarchy, as this study will additionally address the woman question within the matter.

Firstly, we must consider that colonialism is not recent and has happened during the whole history of the world, but we would more specifically acknowledge its definition the way that is treated in Stam, R. & L. Spence's article *Colonialism, Racism and Representation*. Here it is defined as "the process by which the European powers (including the United States)

reached a position of economic, military, political and cultural domination in much of Asia, Africa and Latin America” (Stam, R. & L. Spence; 4). This process strengthened the slave trade and peaked after World War I and it was not reverted until the end of World War II with the end of the European colonial empires.

In the particular case of Third World, its definition is distinctly linked to the first given. There are a lot of different meanings given to the term and that have been created during last decades, but in this case it is going to be associated with the one that describes it as the set of countries that had colonial pasts, normally localized in Africa, Latin America or Asia. The general thought of relating developing countries as Third World has become a common wrong stereotype.

To be part of the third world consequently means that at some point there was a strong power difference that put these countries in a colonised and therefore ‘lower’ position, it developed both politically and culturally, and in this case it was not only a cultural contrast, but a racial one as well. According to *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*, Racism is normally known as “a person’s behavior determined by stable inherited characteristics deriving from separate racial stocks” (Schaefer, R.; 1113). These attributes are then evaluated in relation to ideas of superiority and inferiority, which would entail a separation between various groups determined by superiority. Here it is also mentioned that this social construction is a result of social, economic and political factors that have attributed the power to certain groups, while leaving others powerless. One could think that the ending of slavery after US’s Civil War could finally mean the freedom for other races in America, but for most white population, it changed nothing. From 1881 to 1964, Jim Crow Laws were the major example of marginalization by a legalized separation between races. After the abolishment of slavery, the laws were created to segregate Americans by race. There were separated neighborhoods and schools, signs of who was and who was not allowed to enter some establishments, marrying someone of another race was illegal, business owners could legally refuse service to people because of their race and those who broke these statutes could be punished.

Racism can develop into a behavior that shows the mentioned belief in form of discrimination and prejudice. It should be noted that the majority of residents both in the United States and Europe do not recognize themselves as racists nowadays; nevertheless, the immigrant policies are becoming more and more rigorous in both cases. In Western countries

it is still arduous to find a proper support for minority groups and their integration in the rest of the society. Many citizens are not even interested in the matter, others altogether consider as correct the prohibition of entry or integration to those that they do not consider “convenient”. However, consciousness about antiracism is already developing in most of these countries.

Last but not least, we will mention other type of discrimination that can equally be applied to other races. This work is focused in gender within the main topic, so it would be essential to add to our context how patriarchy has also withen the discrimination line when it comes to women of color. The term patriarchy is defined as a system of power, in which men have acquired power over women as a group. Originally this word meant “the rule of the father” from the Greek translation, referring to a system in which the father or the eldest man is the head and the descendants are recognized through a male line. There is a strong need to relate patriarchy to racism. Even having in mind all the feminist progression during the last decades, western society is still mainly patriarchal, neglects the feminist’s agenda and it only becomes as a double dilemma to racialized women.

Studies of postcolonial feminism have named this privilege issue as “double colonization”, a term associated with the women of the postcolonial world. It claims that they have a double oppression, both from the colonial and the patriarchal aspect. This term is thoroughly studied in Spivak G.’s essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. Through it, the author looks forward to giving a voice to those women that are part of various discriminations and are not able to ‘speak’, as a woman of a colonized society would not be able to make herself heard because of the power structure to which they are subjugated. However, I will insist on this question later on.

## 2.2. Black representation in Hollywood’s history

Colonialist representation of African American men and women does not begin in cinema or television. Previous to it, the historians interpreted a one-sided view of the colonization as a victory and a religious mission of a supposed enlightenment, followed by novels like *Robinson Crusoe (1719)*, in which the protagonist finds fulfillment and power through slaves. In Stam, R. & L. Spence’s work there is also a few mentions of anti-colonialist writings, like a satirical critic to the colonization of the Americas in *Gulliver’s*



*Travels* (1726) and a similar though is discussed in Conrad's short novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902).

The beginning of the moving picture coincided with a golden period of European Imperialism. The Third world was then portrayed as wrongly as possible. Stam, R. & L. Spence make a good mention of it:

“Third World peoples derive from the long parade of lazy Mexicans, shifty Arabs, savage Africans and exotic Asiatics that have disgraced our movie screens. Africa was portrayed as a land inhabited by cannibals in the Lubin comedy *Rastus in Zululand* (1910), Mexicans were reduced to 'greasers' in films like *Tony the Greaser* (1911) and *The Greaser's Revenge* (1914), and slavery was idealized, and the slaves degraded, in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). [...] Hollywood westerns turned history on its head by making the Native Americans appear to be intruders on what was originally their land, and provided a paradigmatic perspective through which to view the whole of the non-white world”.

(Stam, R. & L. Spence; 6)

During this time, *blackface* was also used in these films as another way of mocking black people. During the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; a new type of performance emerged, before cinema and even stage. As described in C. Smith's book *The Creolization of American Culture: William Sidney Mount and the Roots of Blackface Minstrelsy*, it developed across the United States, as a way of “*creolizing*” activities in which white teens and musicians learned and replicated African American performances on the streets. This appropriation contributed to the racial stereotypes. Soon enough these were taken into shows and acts that became popular for the general audience. Nowadays it is considered as a racist musical and theatrical genre from America named Minstrel. The way it aggravated the stereotypes was because of their portrayal of black people as lazy, happy-go-lucky and unintelligent caricatures and their roles taken by white people in make-up. When taken into the big screen, it only meant for the intolerance to spread even faster.

Therefore, the first inclusion of black people into the cinema was not to create a closer bond or humanize their lifestyle, but to share a portrait made by white creators, to amuse a white spectator in spite of the hate that they shared amongst other races.

Previously mentioned *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), is considered one of the most controversial films, not only because of the use of blackface but also because of its representation of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as heroic while African Americans as

unintelligent and aggressive. This film is usually taken as the best example to demonstrate the situation of self-validated racism of the period and to compare with the evolution of race and representation in filming to this day.

Summing up, an evolution of black representation in the Twentieth Century will be used by Scott E., in his work, *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era* and by Ndounou, M. *Shaping the Future of African American Film: Color-Coded Economics and the Story Behind the Numbers*. It is not only essential to learn the evolution within the film industry but also the context in which everything took place. I have collected some interesting data from both books.

During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the roles given to African American were only those of criminals or sexualized characters, sometimes combining the both of them. If their roles were considered “favorable”, it was only when they became the characters portrayed as servants or butlers for white masters, creating as a result a social position that was viewed as canonical. The Great Depression affected the whole country and had an uneven effect on African Americans. It was during this time when the case of the police injustice against nine African teenagers in the Scottsboro’s tragedy gained relevance to all public and started the Cultural Front, a progressive movement of many races that wanted to democratize American culture during the 30s.

The emergence of different groups and marches defending Civil Rights coincided with World War II, which became the main protagonist within all the films created between 1930 and 1960.

In 1941, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters organized a March for Civil Rights, supporting the end of discrimination within employment when it came to the low hiring of black Americans. President F. Roosevelt promised to end it with the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). This motivated an inclusion of black American imagery inside the U.S. wartime language. Nearly one million African Americans were serving, but in segregated armed forces. With this in mind, black people were also gaining representation in the film industry. However, it did not end with racism and segregation, lynchings to African Americans did not stop and the fight for Civil Rights was still very much necessary. As recorded by Scott E., the representation in cinema is divided into different ways. Some films defended black equality, like *Bataan* (1943), *Sahara* (1943) and *Crash Drive* (1943); these

films portrayed black soldiers in an integrated milieu. However, films like *Stormy weather* (1943), *Thank Your Lucky Stars* (1943), *This is the Army* (1943), and *Follow the Boys* (1944) also portrayed black soldiers, but segregated from the white setting.

When World War II ended, black inclusion promises stopped being a priority for the US government. Films that were looking forward to integrating the Black American community were delayed, the struggle during war time remained as incomplete and lynchings did not drop. “Hollywood studios made racial problem films, with their often incomplete, ideologically fractured messages about racial relations and integration. [...] like *Pinky* (1949), *No Way Out* (1950), and *The Well* (1951).” (Scott E.; 9)

The five main studios that controlled Hollywood’s golden age until the 40s used an approach that dictated and controlled all the aspects inside film production in order to “ensure the content and cultural values (of these films) to remain in the hands of a selected few, which happen to be predominantly white males” (Ndounou, M.; 10, 11). This was known as vertical integration. During the 50s, there was a major change inside the film industry; Paramount Decree ended the vertical integration in 1948 and the independent cinema became strongly symbolic, which brought the possibility of finishing with the stereotypical use of the black image in past films with the union of many new directors and film themes. Along with the end of vertical integration, the era of movements of Civil Rights, Black Arts and Black power was strongly taking part into the US’s history.

Following difficult periods during the 60s, Hollywood found a renovated era in filming after Melvin Van Peeble’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), a studio-produced B-picture film that presented for the first time a black protagonist facing white villains. This film, coordinated with the Black Power movement, started the era of Blaxploitation, a type of action film that mimics Van Peeble’s film argument. Not only its actors, but most of the cast of these films were also people of color.

The audience of Blaxploitation’s films was intended to be black as well, but they gained so much attention that it ended up appealing to all sorts of audiences, which brought profit and encouraged the genre during a whole decade. Blaxploitation movies gave a new type of characteristics to its black protagonists that are still used to this day, leaving behind the stereotypes of older ones. Nevertheless, the genre receded in the 80s simultaneously with

the reestablishing of the vertical integration within the film industry and its control of film content.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an association that protested and fought against the release of *The Birth of a Nation* back in 1915, also worked to analyze the representation of African Americans in the film industry after the 80s to the present times. They recorded testimonies of witnesses that lived exclusionary practices and that NAACP presented in 2000 and 2001. According to NAACP,

“It is inconceivable that anyone could deny the existence of racism in an industry that, after 50 years in business, cannot point to one black, Latino, or Asian-American who can green light a film, hire or fire a director or producer or sign a development deal”.

(CNN, 2001)

In this press conference, NAACP mentioned a still ongoing lack of diversity and a recommendation for more black representation in film both outside and inside the film industry. Other allegations that are still present are the racial distinction in the investments of the studios. NAACP calls for more black investors and powerful positions, but this would not affect the racism problem that there is still inside the studios.

The studios claimed that the difference of investment is due to the “international market appeal”, defending that black films or TV shows are going to be rejected or ignored in an international distribution. There are two main problems explained as well in Ndounou, M.’s book. First, when they mention “international market”, it only covers for Europe, India and a few Latin countries, leaving behind any African country, for instance, that could actually be interested in these shows; and secondly, by these allegations, they are also ignoring the African and black diasporic audiences both in Europe, India and South America. This is clearly a contradiction that questions the supposed reason of Hollywood to not give them a voice. “If it is truly business and not racism, it would seem that expanding the business in these active markets and consistently recognizing black audiences would be a higher priority for Hollywood. But this is not the case.” (Ndounou, M.; 15)

### 2.3. Storytelling and cultural amnesia

Another issue is presented when it comes to the storytelling, claimed to be manipulative. There is a term used by sociologists called “cultural trauma”. According to

Alexander, J. , cultural trauma is an empirical, scientific concept. It occurs “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group of consciousness” (Alexander, J.; 1). Cultural trauma would mark them personally; affect their way of living and future identity. In this case, it could happen both to black and white people and also develop some sort of responsibility in both cases. Rememory in the storytelling of films and other media could make the audience confront it, but industries are far from accepting the strategies of rememory and choose to change the stories as they would like them to be in order to avoid it. This creates a very well associated term called “cultural amnesia”. The definition would be the total opposite to cultural trauma. It approaches the past by losing the consciousness of history, cultural memory and blurring the personal identity, in this case, of an ethnic group.

The results of cultural amnesia in films are shown when the directors focus on “valuable” elements like action or violence and do not get any interest in changing the audience’s perception of African Americans that has been given in the previous decades. Cultural amnesia can develop into a preventive censorship; looking forwards to that interest in the profitable elements, the creators decide to rely on a white male star even inside African American films to generate more interest in the audience. Maybe it can increase the sympathy of many; however, it would also put into place a cultural amnesia that promotes white supremacy, not only inside the storytelling of the film in particular, but also outside, where the main star would gain the biggest part of the profit of the movie in particular.

The current organization inside the industry would always put a tougher situation for minorities like race, gender and class to gain representation or profit. The filmmakers find the possibility of making a movie more complicated if they want a major black cast, for instance. The audience would also have more trouble finding films that give them a proper access to the subject matter, whether it is proper black representation, female cast, etc, without encountering a limited resource or a storytelling censored with cultural amnesia. The ongoing management of these industries is maintaining the minorities in a harder path to achieve the same treatment as the privileged.

#### 2.4. Gender in film: the double burden

Due to the double colonization, it would be a harder struggle for a black woman to gain visibility in the media and, applied to the male centered world that Hollywood has

always been known as, creates an even broader line when the oppressions are multiplied by race. This is why it is considered that women have suffered a double burden by the white, male-centered society.

Oppression becomes marginality and marginality is accentuated by invisibility. When it comes to people of color, their presence in every type of popular culture, as mentioned, has been low, sporadic and full of stereotypes. Double burden is well explained in Jean, Y. & J. Feagin's introduction to *Double Burden: Black Women and Everyday Racism*. Here, they discuss how since the early nineteenth century black women have had a negative opinion partially because of social science publications. The initial characterization for the black females was mainly of "domineering matriarchs or exotic sexual objects". It is considered to still be perpetuated by "white (usually white male) social scientists, and even by a few black male social scientists trained by them" (Jean, Y. & J. Feagin; 7).

As a matter of fact, all kinds of media influence our everyday life. Society is one way or another indoctrinated by what they see and what the past generations have brought with them. It changes our way of thinking, what to believe and even affects our behavior. Society is partially constructed by the media, and this fact is just increasing nowadays, as everyone is attached to online social media from an early age. The need for representation then becomes crucial. Women have always been much less represented than men in all media, and when it comes to racialized women, they become almost invisible to society.

When it comes to gender, objectification is one of the heaviest burdens that have been attached to women regardless of their race or class. In the case of black women, it dates back to the eighteenth century. To put us into place it will be used Goldman. A. & A. Harris's example in *Black Women and Popular Culture: The Conversation Continues*. Saartjie Baartman, most known as the *Hottentot Venus*, was a South African woman from the tribe of the Khoikhoi who was taken against her will in 1810, renamed, caged and exhibited as a freak show across Europe. This was done after abolishing slavery in England and contrary to the complaints that some people gave, she was of huge interest and notorious to many because of her uncommon physical attributes. Not only was she treated like an animal, but also after her death she was dissected and analyzed in accordance with the period's theories of racial evolution, meaning that she was compared to an animal as well. Justified with the consideration of being a scientific interest, her skeleton and body cast were displayed in the Muséum d'histoire naturelle d'Angers. With the arrival of cinema, the exclusion and

demeaning images of black women were still being stereotyped in relation with exoticism and sexualization.

A style that was repeated in the presentation of female characters in filming during the first half of the twentieth century was the one that put a main subject and a secondary one, normally connecting the main with the leading white actress and the secondary with the shadowed black actress. Regester, C. introduces the concepts of this positioning as “Self and Other”. In these films, one of the main black actress’ functions was “by contrast in language, costume, and behavior, to illuminate or aggrandize the virtue, beauty, morality, sexuality, sophistication, and other qualities embedded in the “whiteness” of the white female actress and character” (Regester, C.; 2).

The both previously mentioned characteristics portrayed in historical writings and media about African American women were named as “Sapphire”, the “strong, unfeminine and rebellious matriarch disliked by black men” (Jean, Y. & J. Feagin; 9) and the “Jezebel”, the exotic, sexual female who is attracted to white men. To these, we can also add the “Mammy” stereotype that depicted the black women as motherly larger-sized figures of servants and nurses of the white family’s children.

There are several studies which show that these stereotypes were first developed in Spain by the sixteenth century. During the following centuries, African women and men were characterized by the Europeans as naked and with exaggerated sexual organs, which was the strong opposite of how the white females were depicted during that time, who followed a cannon of chastity and modesty.

From the 40s onwards, the mammy stereotype was less used, but the representation of the white actress’ shadow still was assigned for these actresses. If they appeared to overshadow the white female character or to gain the audience’s attention as entertainers, it happened by hypersexualization.

The image of the black actress was reduced to what the industry was only interested in, a sexualized portrait only prepared for the white-male gaze to see, leaving behind the talent.

“This was, after all, a period in which racial segregation was not just accepted— it was expected. The black actress had to be prepared for segregated practices on the studio lot and for accommodations inferior to her white associates”.

In the era of Blaxploitation, together with the Black Power, the women's liberation movements were taking into place. Indeed there was finally a representation of protagonist roles for black women, many of them even as the heroines of the movies. However, representing the characters of liberated women; black women were still very much subdued and did not fully represent this supposed liberation. They were both representing action heroines and sex objects, directed to the male gaze and the male audience.

The grotesque stereotypes have been exhibited consciously as well as unconsciously in every type of media until this day; normally they are more usual when it is produced by white authors. It not only represents how wrongly race has been depicted, but also demonstrates how whites consider themselves when positioned next to this interpretation of black people. Privilege is achieved in different levels of consciousness just because how ingrained is the image that they hold.

Other versions of the white and male centered gaze would be the most ignored one, which are the black woman's point of view and what mass media could offer to them.

### **3. A vindication of Black Women celebrities**

Nowadays, American and Western culture in general is increasingly giving attention to their celebrities. This fame is desired for many, and it includes the recognition and acceptance of the celebrity's achievements. The public admiration for their job is part of the 'American dream' and the reason why the ones who achieve it to the point of becoming famous, are so looked at by the standard public. People want to be like them, look like them and know everything that happens to them. However, this is a double-edged sword in a world that stills canonize bodies, gender roles and racial stereotypes.

What about the people who have broken that race and gender stigma? Black people had little references in cinema and any other media to see themselves being represented, especially for black women, whose depictions were created by not only white, but also male directors for so many years. Female and especially black female audiences have been mostly



ignored for the last decades when it comes to feeling represented. To this audience, discovering the few black actresses that made it to the top by refusing to have the stigmatized roles within a world that has objectified them through male lenses was a way to see themselves, to feel not only pictured but somehow more validated, to find inspiration within the heroines inside these actresses.

There are many who have paved the way so the present actresses can raise their voice even higher and with the presence that they deserve, seek decent roles and treatment and find success inside a world where they have to struggle next to the more privileged artists. The two main actresses that are going to be studied in this work are Cicely Tyson and Viola Davis. They have found the success and merit that they properly deserved, but their effort to achieve it was much stronger than other white counterparts. However, there are many that could not make it to their actual position, whether it is because they came in earlier generations or because they were not given the opportunity to show their best talents to the world. One of many examples of those who appeared too early is Hattie McDaniel.

Hattie McDaniel (1895-1952) won the first Oscar given to an African American actor, the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, when she performed the role as *Mammy* in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). It was also the first time a person of color was nominated for an acting Oscar. This victory, as well as her role, was undoubtedly bittersweet. McDaniel lived a career full of racial segregation and racism both inside and outside the movies she was in. As well as other black actors, she was not allowed to attend the premiere of *Gone with the Wind* because it was held at a whites-only theater. In the Academy Award ceremony, she had to sit at a separate table, at the back of the room. This segregation continued even after her death, her last wish was to be buried in Hollywood Cemetery and this was denied by the original owner because of her color.

The film itself, despite being well recognized and awarded, was as well criticized for its depiction of stereotyped black people and historical negationism that glorified slavery. McDaniel's role and her acceptance of many other roles that depicted her as a servant or a *mammy*, was also criticized by part of the black community who was starting to protest after releases of movies like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The NAACP not only fought against some wrong depictions inside the film itself before being released, but also complained about the stereotypes that she would portray in her role. This was extended to many other movies and her willingness to collaborate with a representation of a racial stereotype or agreeing to

the racial restriction of the period inside and outside her roles. She avoided controversy in order to seek a more decent life, was marginalized by a white industry and criticized by her own people, but there was still a black audience that recognized her advancement to be representative of a low progression that could allow more black actors to gain visibility or awards. However, it took 51 years for a black woman to win an Oscar again.

In order to introduce Cicely Tyson, it is necessary to have in mind Dorothy Dandridge too. They were born in almost the same period, but Dandridge's career had an earlier success. Dorothy Dandridge (1922 - 1965) was the first African American to be nominated for a leading role. Her nomination was for the movie *Carmen Jones* (1954). In the 1950s, after the success of the independent cinema, black movies started to emerge, but it was still a postwar era with an increasing economic prosperity that also brought its people to forget the promises of democratic freedoms, civil rights and equality. The racism and inequalities had barely changed and the Jim Crow laws were subject of strong discussions during this period, as more and more black people were starting to protest against segregation. The career of Dandridge has a lot to admire, but also it has always seemed and described by others as an unfulfilled dream. Her life was always compared to Marilyn Monroe's; they were sex symbols even before beginning to gain leading roles in cinema.

“Both women withstood deeply troubled childhoods. Both struggled with unsuccessful and abusive marriages. As performers they were personally discontent with their public personae (as fetishized sex symbols). Monroe shared with Dandridge the vexed position of being a female sex symbol in a religiously conservative, racially segregated, patriarchal visual economy and society”.

(Mask, M.; 21)

Even so, Dandridge always fought to obtain serious roles in films and refused to do many that portrayed her as a slave, sexualized her or put her in a supporting role. She represented an exoticized black sexuality to most of the white male spectators, and could also be sexualized by the black male audience, but for many African American females, she gave a fresh image to cinema, although acknowledging the mentioned objectification; Dandridge was not doing the role of the servant or the mummy as they were known to see, along with finally having leading parts in the movies. Losing her only nominated Academy Award, refusing to so many acting offers, the apathy of the industries to give prestigious leading roles to an African American woman and having a troubled personal life, ended up with bankruptcy and her tragic death caused by overdose of an antidepressant.

Many actresses like the mentioned were too close to find themselves a spot among other celebrities, but it was simply too early for them, and the social, political and economic climate of the United States rejected or forgot their capabilities. Cicely Tyson was lucky enough to survive in that tumultuous environment, to present the world black characters that had never been before in fairer representation to people of their race. What was impossible for women like McDaniel and Dandridge, was tough and a first time for Tyson, but thanks to each one of them, later generations were given an even fairer treatment, roles and criticism. It has always been a serious struggle, but it is widely accepted that their presence and representation is expanding by time and fight progress. Viola Davis being her successor is one of the first examples of this ongoing progression.

### 3.1. Cicely Tyson

Cicely Tyson (1924 - 2021) was an example of an actress that confronted the industry as Dandridge did, during later decades. She defied the stereotypical roles of blaxploitation films during their golden age in the 1970s, Hollywood itself, and still found the way to success and maintain her arduous job for almost seventy long decades. While Dandridge was at the peak of her career, Tyson was being discovered by modeling magazines when she was already in her thirties, something quite uncommon for a period that canonized and gave most jobs to women in their twenties.

Before being known by the rest of the world, Cicely Tyson already had a child at 17 and went through an unsuccessful marriage. Her youth was challenging, in her own autobiography *Just as I am* (2021) we are presented with an intimate side of her personal life, written by Tyson herself, the memoir collaborator and author Michelle Burford and a foreword by Viola Davis. With this biographical work, we are put into an historical context of more than a century of the United States' past, starting with the survival life of two immigrant parents who just arrived to this country and a young Tyson who was born a few years before the Great Depression.

We know by her words how each piece of context mattered for every “other” race in the US. The goal that she secretly put to herself was to not be part of any segregation, but to protest with her own accomplishments and grace. The motivation was not only her own experience with racism during her youth, but also because of the response that the world gave to her after the success of *Souder* (1972). Just at the beginning of her autobiography, Tyson

explains her own experience with the comments that she had to hear from a white audience that did not understand how black people could be or act similar to them, in a serious movie that just made them look natural.

“I made a conscious decision: I would use my profession as my platform—a stage from which to make my voice heard by carefully choosing my projects and portrayals. I could not afford the luxury of simply being an actress. [...] I was determined to do all I could to alter the narrative about Black people—to change the way Black women in particular were perceived, by reflecting our dignity. [...] the last thing in the world I intended to be was an actress for the cause [...] But the racial climate called for something more of me.”

(Tyson, C.; 24)

Tyson sets the year of the arrival of her parents to the US as the next in which *The Birth of a Nation* was being screened at the White House, 1918. She grew up in a family that accepted every shade of color, and in a nation that denigrated black beauty. There are many mentions of how their hair was considered messy, unkempt or dirty, a stigma that is still very well heard nowadays and has become a symbol to African American people. When it came to women, the only perception that white people had of them was those that were also portrayed in cinema; mammies and maids. “Subservient and ignorant, filthy and lazy - and yet somehow diligent, clean, and honorable enough to prepare their meals and rear their children” (Tyson, C.; 38). There was not an opportunity to seek a successful career and the vision that she had of herself was not of beauty; there was nobody to feel compared to in the media, the only comments that she heard from others were those of hate, racism, and body shaming at her school. What she and her siblings felt as representation when they were children, was a radio show that triumphed during the 1930s and 1940s called *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, presented by two white actors who characterized poor black farmers with racist clichés, similar to those in minstrel shows.

Tyson’s childhood was poor and the relationship of her parents abusive. There are many personal stories that she reveals to us in her book, but some of them are clear examples of the arduous situation of her family during this time. Cicely Tyson vividly mentions a day when she accompanied her mother when looking for a job as a maid in white families’ houses. This day marked a difference for her; the daughter would truly learn about the process that her mother had to go through every time to find a temporary job. She witnessed these women lined up in the streets being physically checked head to toe by the whites in order to

choose the most convenient to them. She recalls this vision and compares it with the inspection that decades before were made to the enslaved Africans once they arrived in America; “I’d never imagined that my own mother, a queen who wore her dignity as a splendid, flowing silk cape, could be in such a position. That someone so majestic would have to put up her labor for sale while casting her gaze downward in deference to white strangers” (Tyson, C.; 75, 76) .

The numerous situations of racism or segregation in the nation, of which she and her family had to hear throughout her childhood, must be recognized. During the Great Depression, the unemployment growth was 24 percent for white workers, but 50 percent for black workers. She was seven when the Scottsboro Boys were sentenced to death, eight when the Federal Housing Administration prohibited blacks from purchasing homes in white neighborhoods and she lived the forty years that lasted the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, a medical experiment that treated black men for supposedly bad blood but in reality used them as guinea pigs to study the effects of syphilis.

As difficult as it is to recall this country’s atrocities, it is essential that every American of every color does. It is critical that we connect that centuries-long ugly history with, in our times now, a cop’s knee on George Floyd’s neck and bullets riddling Breonna Taylor’s body.

(Tyson, C.; 83)

Her unexpected pregnancy when she was just a teenager made her mature abruptly, marry a man she did not love and be in a job that did not fulfil her. Things changed when she started making her own decisions; leaving her husband, starting a model job and leaving her mother’s home when she was prohibited from acting in movies were clear examples of the determination of this woman. Cicely Tyson followed her guts and the advice of her agent Warren Coleman, who convinced her that she had a knack for acting. It was him as well who recommended her to tell everyone else that she was a decade younger, and so she did, not letting the world know her true age until six decades after.

Tyson went to an acting workshop and it was during this early era of her career that she had to experience harassment within her own circle. Despite this and with the will to overcome this situation, she decided to keep going with her training. Unfortunately, the sexual abuse of women within the acting industry comes as no surprise to anyone who hears a story

of this level, especially when it comes to the period she was a part of. This event is, to her, recalled as the origin of a deep trauma.

“Contrary to the mythology surrounding the unflinching nature of African-American women, we, too, experience trauma. Black women —our essence, our emotional intricacies, the indignities we carry in our bones— are the most deeply misunderstood human beings in history. Those who know nothing about us have had the audacity to try to introduce us to ourselves, in the unsteady strokes of caricature, on stages, in books, and through their distorted reflections of us”.

(Tyson, C.; 153)

After the learning process, and having her model career as the best way to provide for herself and her daughter, she appeared in Broadway plays, minor movie parts and a role in the CBS TV series *East Side/West Side* (1963-1964). For this role, she became the only African American regular member of a TV cast and the first black woman to appear in television showing her natural hair. She dedicates a full chapter in her autobiography to this turning point for representation. The courageous decision to show her natural hair had a huge impact on the audience and even started a trend, supportive to many women who wanted to do the same with their own. “In minstrel shows, in books, on television, in kitchen-table conversations, our natural hair has always been under siege in a calculated campaign to devalue us.” (Tyson, C.; 197) Within many ways to devalue people of color, the way white people treated their hair was one that marked history. Something as vain as a woman's hair could mark her status and be related to her survival within a world that despised her naturalness and beauty.

Cicely Tyson’s year of stardom was 1972 and the movie was *Sounder*. She finally had the part that she deserved, a role that would let her be heard as she always wanted to. In *Sounder*, her name was Rebecca, the year is 1933, and she portrays the poor wife of a Louisiana sharecropper who is imprisoned for stealing food for his children. This was a turning point for Rebecca because she now has to provide herself for the whole family. For her acting in *Sounder*, Tyson was nominated for the Academy Award and the Golden Globe Award, both for Best Actress. This was the second time a black woman was nominated for this Oscar after Dorothy Dandridge’s, and this nomination was particularly shared with Diana Ross, another black actress, although none of them won that year.

Two years later, Cicely Tyson had another chance to represent the lead role of a woman that met her standards and ambitious will to be a role model. The television film was

*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974). She represents Jane Pittman, a 110 years old former slave who lives to see the movements of Civil Rights during the 1960s. In this movie and its original novel, her story is told and presented with a younger and an older Tyson. This character is described in R. McFadden's article in *The New York Times*; "At 110, she tells her story, the searing experience of a Black woman in the South. Then, in her only gesture of protest, she sips from a whites-only drinking fountain." (McFadden, R.)

Cicely Tyson appeared in 29 films, 68 television series and 15 theater productions. Most of her appearances in the big roles of these productions were well received, full of awards and nominations. The most recognizable of them are the three Emmy Awards for *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974), a Tony Award for Best Actress in a play in *The Trip to Bountiful* (2014) and the Honorary Academy Award that she received in 2018 in recognition of all of her past performances and a sixty years of a career that marked so many people in so many different decades of their life. In addition, Barack Obama's last Presidential Medal of Freedom was given to Cicely Tyson in 2016.

What she did not mention about her personal life until the publication of *Just as I am* (2021), she did when talking about her objective to give a fair representation to black women. As mentioned in this autobiography, and many interviews, she did not take part in any strike or protest for Civil Rights out on the streets, but she knew how to do it with this remarkable path. In the words of Morris, W. from *The New York Times*,

"Tyson knew her place. It was in our movie palaces and living rooms, but also at Black families' kitchen and dining room tables, an emblem of her race, a vessel through whom an entire grotesque entertainment history ceased to pass because she dammed it off; so that — in her loveliness, grace, rectitude and resolve — she could dare to forge an alternative."

(Morris, W.)

It is for this strong will to give life to her natural and beautiful characters that a very young Viola Davis was able to become so interested in the world of cinema and acting, as she openly describes in her foreword. We have no better example of what media representation can do than the life of Viola Davis after this early encounter with the character of Jane Pittman played by Cicely Tyson.

### 3.2. Viola Davis

Viola Davis, born in 1965, represents a prominent figure of the next generation of black actresses that followed the paths that others such as the mentioned above have paved. The recognition she has experienced is even greater, and she has been fortunate to find inspiration in women like Cicely Tyson. For Tyson, it was to take a leap of faith, but for Davis, seeing other women like her on television was just the encouragement she needed to have a dream to fulfill. Even so, her life was not easier just for being born later. Viola Davis has also experienced many difficulties during her childhood and because of Hollywood strong terms, but thanks to her perseverance, her will to get the actress life that she always dreamed of and the last decades' evolution inside the industry, we could consider that her voice has raised even higher.

Representation, to many, is key. The need for representation of every minority is exemplified by women like Viola Davis, who found hope in characters that had never been seen before and that could hardly find any medium to do so. Davis has many times recalled this memory of her childhood in interviews. For *The New Yorker*, she was questioned about her closeness to Cicely Tyson after her surprising appearance at 90 years old in the show *How to Get Away with Murder*. To this, Viola Davis mentions the same story that she has written in Tyson's biography foreword:

“Davis recalled the small family TV set at 128 Washington Street, with its portable aerial wrapped in tinfoil, around which she and her sisters crowded to watch Tyson in the 1974 TV movie of Ernest J. Gaines's “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman.” [...] Davis, who was nine at the time, said. “We couldn't believe what we were looking at. The fact that she looked almost exactly like my mother. The Afro. She was a black woman. That was one thing. But the other thing was how she transformed. [...] It was my first introduction to seeing craft at play and not just entertainment. We would try to imitate her in our rooms. We became obsessed with acting classes.”

(Lahr, J.)

This introduction to the world of acting was, by her own definition, what planted in her a seed that immediately took root.

“She was the manifestation of excellence and artistry, a dark-skinned, thick-lipped woman who truly mirrored me. I can pinpoint the exact moment when my life opened up, and it was there, in front of that set, that mine did. [...] Ms. Tyson gave me permission to dream”.



(Tyson, C.; 9, 10)

Viola Davis, as well as Tyson, had to grow up with the consequences of poverty. Her grandparents and ancestors were sharecroppers, her father a racehorse groom and her mother a maid or factory worker. Davis was the fifth of six children and when she was born, they had to move to an old town in Rhode Island, hoping her father would find extra work for the whole family. The town was highly populated, but her family were the first African-Americans to live there.

Their new home was not any better than the last one, she recalls all the encounters with rats in a very old building, sometimes living without heat or electricity and not being able to take hot showers in winter. This was something she felt ashamed of during her younger years, but nowadays she reveals this story with detail in many of her interviews, proud to show what her roots were and the love she has for her family. In AARP The Magazine, she shared the difficulties of cold winters, fears of rats and added stories in which they had to walk for hours for not being able to afford a car. Every time they walked, “people would throw things out of cars and call us [her and her siblings] the N-word. It was constant” (Davidson, S.).

Viola Davis never compares poverty with any other form of discrimination. To her, poverty is not about mistreatment, but about invisibility. She and her family at that time, lived with shame, pretending, lacking self-love or worth. Being just a child, she had to search for food in a dumpster or steal it. The last and only time she was caught stealing food was when she was nine years old. At home, none of these problems ended, there were also personal struggles, her father's alcoholism and domestic violence. Acting, among her siblings and later at school, was a way to escape from this life. She saw Cicely Tyson as a reference and by growing older and discovering that her beginnings were just as hard as Davis', a role model.

In 2020, Davis acknowledged to Vanity Fair that when she was that young, that lack of pride or dignity made her feel unworthy of “having a voice”. The women in her family, mother and sisters, were the ones who made her step out of that deep “hole”. They were the ones that made her feel beautiful for once.

“[They] looked at me and said I was pretty. Who's telling a dark-skinned girl that she's pretty? Nobody says it. [...] The dark-skinned Black woman's voice is so steeped in slavery and our history. If we did speak up, it would cost us our lives. Somewhere in my cellular memory was still that feeling—that I do

not have the right to speak up about how I'm being treated, that somehow I deserve it. I did not find my worth on my own."

(Saraiya, S.)

In contrast to actresses like Tyson, Viola Davis did have the opportunity to be awarded a full scholarship at Rhode Island College and later be chosen among thousands of people to study in New York at a prestigious acting school; the Juilliard School. Despite not being in complete agreement with the Eurocentric teaching of this school, it helped boost her career. Three years after graduating, she was nominated with a Tony award for her Broadway debut, with August Wilson's production *Seven Guitars*. In 2001, after years participating in other Broadway plays, her second time acting in another Wilson's production, *King Hedley II*, made Davis win her first Tony Award with great reviews praising her performance. In a play particularly dedicated to show African American life in the US, Viola Davis portrays a mother who fights for the right to abort.

While she succeeded on Broadway, her appearances in film during the early 2000s were still small, sometimes uncredited, others just with secondary roles. Probably the role that made her mainstream breakthrough was that of Ms. Miller in the film *Doubt* (2008). Her appearance in this film was less than 10 minutes and only during one scene, but that scene prevailed. Clashing with Meryl Streep, a few could stand out and definitely Viola Davis did it, as she received her first nomination for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. In 2010 she returned to Broadway and won another Tony in the play *Fences*, again by August Wilson. This time, her Tony was for best Leading Actress in a Play.

Another of the most recognised movies in which she has had a leading role and an Oscar nomination is *The Help* (2011). In the film, Davis plays Aibileen, an African-American maid of the 1960s who is able to tell to a white aspiring journalist and writer the story and the racism that she has faced while working for white families. Viola Davis found similarities between the characters of the maids and her mother and grandmother, in 2011 she told to Vanity that they both were "Women born and raised in the Deep South, working in tobacco and cotton fields, taking care of their kids and other people's kids, cleaning homes" (Hahn, K.). In 2018, she opened about the film and admitted that she later regretted taking that character. Still finding her family portrayed in the African American protagonists, she said to The New York Times "I just felt that at the end of the day that it wasn't the voices of the maids that were heard" (Murphy, M.).

Although the film was well received and has a good rating, it was also criticised for not being able to properly raise awareness about US history, ‘watering down’ the real issues and using Hollywood tropes that contribute to cultural amnesia. These tropes were described as those of “Magical Negro”, term used by film director Spike Lee to refer the African-American stereotypical friendly character that is presented to the narrative to marvelously help the white character and the “white savior” narrative, trope that depicts a white character rescuing non-whites, usually portrayed as a messianic figure. Almost ten years later, she said to Vanity Fair:

“Not a lot of narratives are also invested in our humanity. [...] They’re invested in the idea of what it means to be Black, but... it’s catering to the white audience. The white audience at the most can sit and get an academic lesson into how we are. Then they leave the movie theater and they talk about what it meant. They’re not moved by who we were. [...] There’s a part of me that feels like I betrayed myself, and my people, because I was in a movie that wasn’t ready to [tell the whole truth]”.

(Saraiya, S.)

In 2014, with *Annalise*, her role in the TV series *How to Get Away with Murder*, Viola Davis could finally find an opportunity to reshape a character to the way that she thought she deserved to be portrayed as. She helped as a producer to “expand the Overton window for Black women - to make moral ambiguity, bisexuality, and wigless, makeup-free grief part of the conversation” (Saraiya, S.). In 2015, she won an Emmy for this character, which made her the first African American actor to win for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series. The speech she gave when receiving this award was dedicated to the misrepresentation, and the need of more writers that dared to redefine what it means to be a black woman. First, she quoted Harriet Tubman, an African American woman born into slavery in 1822 who became an American abolitionist and made numerous missions to rescue more than 70 enslaved people.

““In my mind, I see a line. And over that line I see green fields and lovely flowers and beautiful white women with their arms stretched out to me over that line. But I can’t seem to get there no-how.’ [...] The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there”.

(Television Academy)

In 2017, Viola Davis won her first Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role as Rose Maxon in the film *Fences*. With this award, she has become the only African

American who has won the ‘Triple Crown of Acting’, which is winning an Oscar, an Emmy and a Tony in an acting category. Only 24 people have achieved it and Viola Davis is also the youngest. In 2020, she was again nominated for best actress in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (2020). Once again, she had the great opportunity of giving a voice to Ma Rainey, a blues singer of the 1920s and a kind of woman that wants to be respected above all. Davis knew how inspirational she was; “She’s earthy, sweaty, and demanding, her talent nearly outmatched by her ego. Heavysset, gold-toothed, and bisexual, Rainey required a transformation.” (Saraiya, S.) In total, she has been nominated four times to an Academy Award, which also makes Viola Davis the most nominated African American actress.

Together with her husband, Julius Tennon, they founded JuVee Productions, in order to produce new independent films and new projects for Davis. These projects had the objective to improve the public perception of African American life and characters. She explained to *The New Yorker* “It’s hard for people to see us beyond narratives that are didactic. I’m trying to change the landscape. And not just for me, for everyone.” (Lahr, J.) A goal imposed after years of colorism and racism in the industry, “I’ve played many best friends, crack-addicted mothers, next-door neighbors, or professionals with no personal lives. [...] There’s a limitation to how we are seen.” (Lahr, J.)

In 2020, like many others in the United States, Viola Davis protested after the assassination of George Floyd, reunited in the streets with her closest friends, she stood for hours with a sign dedicated to Ahmaud Arbery, another victim of police brutality. After being questioned by *Vanity Fair*, she declared:

“I feel like my entire life has been a protest. My production company is my protest. Me not wearing a wig at the Oscars in 2012 was my protest. It is a part of my voice, just like introducing myself to you and saying, ‘Hello, my name is Viola Davis’”.

(Saraiya, S.)

Viola Davis protesting against police brutality and the Me Too movement has always been dedicated not only to women, but to all the minorities that have not been capable of making themselves heard. Making the most of her platform, she has spoken for many women, in order to be the next one to appear on somebody's screen and inspire them, to make every woman of color see that they are not alone.

“I am speaking today not just for the Me Toos, because I was a Me Too, but when I raise my hand, I am aware of all the women who are still in silence. The women who are faceless. The women who don't have the money and don't have the constitution and who don't have the confidence and who don't have the images in our media that gives them a sense of self-worth enough to break their silence that is rooted in the shame of assault and rooted in the stigma of assault.”

(CNN, 2018)

#### 4. Advancements in the industry

The Hollywood industry needed decades of protesting and disagreement to begin giving voice to directors, writers and actors of color. The last two decades have seen an increasing number of black films, particularly since Obama began to govern as the first black president of the US. However, there is a visible line between the last years of his presidency and the beginning of Trump's.

A particular era that can be highlighted is that of films that came out during 2012 to 2014. Hollywood was noticeably interested in making movies about the black experience and history. New projects, many of them created by black filmmakers, gave hope to an industry eternally seen as racist. “Obama certainly is the main and culturally obvious impetus for this better-late-than-never new wave of black films. However, it is a bit more complicated than just the impact— as large as it is— of the first black president”, Introduces Izzo, D. in his book of essays *Movies in the Age of Obama*, to later add how the Great Recession of 2008 and anti-Republicanism boosted the probability of Obama's election. Still, racism and neo-racism has not seemed to decrease even after his mandate.

“Black cinema in the age of Obama is a two-way mirror; those standing on one side of the mirror are looking at *12 Years a Slave* as a horrible document of American slavery eliciting tears, pity, or shame, while viewers on the other side of the mirror feel nostalgic for the “good old days”.

(Izzo, D.; 10)

*With 12 Years a Slave* (2014) winning the Best Picture Academy Award and other films like *Django Unchained* (2012), *The Butler* (2013) or *Lincoln* (2012), finally the Afro-American population could find better representation without the same kind of bittersweet feeling that 1970s black movies left. Unlike Blaxploitation, these films presented better narratives, less

stereotypical roles, although having history converted into myths, they brought hope and empowerment to many. “We are not given the whole story of the quest for racial equality or popular hope for the future by the Obama inauguration or by the film *Lincoln*. We are given myth and perhaps myth gives us hope.” (McParland, R.; 39) Even after leaving a mark in an all-coloured audience and giving voice to many, they also left others with the feeling of unfulfillment. From the examples given above, *12 Years a Slave* is the film in which to find a closest representation.

“*12 Years a Slave* is adapted from a firsthand autobiographical account. *Birth of a Nation* was adapted from a Confederate romance, *Gone with the Wind* was adapted from a plantation novel, and *Django Unchained* was adapted intertextually from the Italian Western. [...] McQueen created a cinematic adaptation that does not ignore the traumatic nature of American slavery. In the words of his female lead, Lupita Nyong’o, McQueen’s film affects the spectator by “taking a flashlight and shining it under the floorboards of this nation and reminding us what it is we stand on” like no other film chronicling slavery”.

(Cameron, E. & L. Belau; 214)

In the same way that black cinema gained representation in ceremonies, years later, it was once again forgotten, recalling movements such as 2015’s #OscarsSoWhite, mentioned in the introduction to this study. According to the UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report, in response to this movement, “the Academy announced in 2016 an initiative to double by 2020 the share of women and people of color among its more than 6,000 members” (Hunt, D. & A. Ramón, 2020). Diversifying and adding new members to the academy over the last few years has left a statistical mark on the data collected by UCLA. With this yearly study, it has been proved during more than a decade that the audiences prefer content with diverse representation and that the profit from the movies does not follow the old Hollywood mentality of linking race or gender to commercialization. Additionally last year, for the first time,

“Women and people of color not only made progress in each of the major employment arenas considered in 2020, but in two of them — among leads and total actors — both groups either reached or came very close to reaching proportionate representation”.

(Hunt, D. & A. Ramón, 2021)

The most successful year on the diversity front, coincides with the most atypical year in the industry, with the pandemic making most of the film releases made via streaming

services. This relationship could be believed to have made an anomaly, so it is only a matter of time to discover if the goal of a proper equal representation is reached permanently and not as an isolated case. A few cases like this have happened before, after an increase in the representation of women and actors of color in 2018, 2019 returned with 19 of 20 nominees being white and no female director nominated despite having many critically acclaimed films. The same goes to the difference of representation between 2012-14 films in comparison to 2015-2016.

## 5. Bibliography

Alexander, J. , R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N.J. Smelser, & P. Sztompka, (2004). *Cultural trauma and collective identity*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>

Cameron, E. & L. Belau, (2014). *Under the floorboards of this Nation: Trauma, Representation, and the Stain of History in 12 Years a Slave*. In Izzo, D. (Ed.). *Movies in the age of Obama : The era of post-racial and neo-racist cinema*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>

CNN transcripts, (2001) *NAACP Speaks on Minorities on Television*. Aired August 15, 2001 <http://us.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0108/15/se.01.html>

CNN, (2018) *Viola Davis speaks at Women's March*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mM5ONxQxQu8>

Davidson, S. (2015, August/September). *Viola Davis Is Living Her Dream*. Retrieved June 28, 2021, from <https://www.aarp.org/entertainment/style-trends/info-2015/viola-davis-aarp-magazine.html?intcmp=ATMBB2>

Goldman, A., V. Ford, A. Harris, & N. Howard. (Eds.). (2014). *Black women and popular culture : The conversation continues*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>

- Hahn, K. (2011, December). *Davis uses history lesson for 'The Help'*. Retrieved June 28, 2021, from <https://variety.com/2011/film/news/davis-uses-history-lesson-for-the-help-1118046943/>
- Hunt, D. & A. Ramón, (2020). *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A tale of two Hollywoods* University of California. <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/hollywood-diversity-report-2020/>
- Hunt, D. & A. Ramón, (2021). *Hollywood Diversity Report 2021: Pandemic in progress*. University of California. <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/hollywood-diversity-report-2021/>
- Izzo, D. (Ed.). (2014). *Movies in the age of obama : The era of post-racial and neo-racist cinema*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Jean, Y. & J. Feagin. (1998) *Double Burden: Black Women and Everyday Racism* M.E. Sharpe [https://books.google.es/books?id=b0itjTP-2AkC&vq=double+burden&hl=es&source=gb\\_s\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.es/books?id=b0itjTP-2AkC&vq=double+burden&hl=es&source=gb_s_navlinks_s)
- Lahr, J. (2016, December). *Viola Davis's Call to Adventure*. Retrieved June 28, 2021, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/19/viola-davis-call-to-adventure>
- Mask, M. (2009). *Divas on screen : Black women in american film*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- McFadden, R. (2021, January 29). *Cicely Tyson, an actress who shattered stereotypes, dies at 96*. The New York Times. Retrieved June 26, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/28/obituaries/cicely-tyson-dead.html?searchResultPosition=5>
- McParland, R. (2014). *If Django and Lincoln could talk: James Baldwin goes to the movies*. In Izzo, D. (Ed.). *Movies in the age of Obama : The era of post-racial and neo-racist cinema*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Morris, W. (2021, January 29). *Cicely Tyson kept it together so we didn't fall apart*. The New York Times. Retrieved June 26, 2021, from



<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/arts/cicely-tyson.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>

Murphy, M. (2018, September). *Viola Davis on What 'The Help' Got Wrong and How She Proves Herself*. Retrieved June 28, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/11/movies/viola-davis-interview-widows-toronto-film-festival.html>

Ndounou, M. (2014). *Shaping the future of african american film : Color-coded economics and the story behind the numbers*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>

Register, C. (2010). *African american actresses : The struggle for visibility, 1900--1960*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>

Saraiya, S. (2020, July). *Viola Davis: "My Entire Life Has Been a Protest"*. Retrieved June 28, 2021, from <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/07/cover-story-viola-davis>

Schaefer, R. (2008). *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society, Volumen 1*. SAGE. <https://books.google.es/books?id=YMUola6pDnkC&q>

Scott E. (2015). *Cinema civil rights : Regulation, repression, and race in the classical hollywood era*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>

Smith, C. (2013). *The creolization of american culture : William sidney mount and the roots of blackface minstrelsy*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>

Spivak, G. (1993). *Can the Subaltern Speak? Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Harvester, 66-111. Print.

Stam, R. & L. Spence, (1982). *Colonialism, racism and representation*. Screen, 24(2), 2-20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/24.2.2>

Television Academy, (2015) *Viola Davis Gives Powerful Speech About Diversity and Opportunity. Emmy 2015*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSpQfvd\\_zkE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSpQfvd_zkE)

Tyson, C. (2021). *Just as I am: A memoir*. HarperCollins.