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<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05889-3>

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Beyond colourblind casting: historical revisionism and Afrocentric blackwashing of Cleopatra in contemporary media

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Systemic oppression and racial hierarchies have historically dictated the representational paradigms of African Americans in media, legitimising reductive stereotypes. Recent shifts toward inclusivity have precipitated debates regarding the concept of colourblind casting. By scrutinising the controversy surrounding Netflix's *Queen Cleopatra* (2023) as a case study, this paper examines the tension between historical accuracy and Afrocentric representation. Through a thematic analysis of films and television series, the study critiques how colourblind casting in historical narratives often prioritises contemporary racial discourse over historical accuracy. Moreover, it argues that blackwashing possibly devalues Black identity to a marketable aesthetic, perpetuates colonial frameworks, and obscures systemic inequities. The study concludes by advocating for nuanced historical adaptations that centre Afrocentric heritage, which offers critical implications for media representation and scholars of racial discourse.

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Introduction

Throughout the history of media, systemic oppression pervasively and prejudicially controlled the visual depiction of African Americans. The legacy of these historical injustices continues to influence contemporary societal perceptions profoundly. Media crystallised into a formidable ideological tool which frequently reinforces stereotypes and narratives that align with hegemonic power structures. The persistent under-representation and stereotypical depiction of African Americans in media perpetuate racial stereotypes, shape societal perceptions of race, and consolidate extant biases (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Hyatt and Sanders, 1984; Edison and Yancey, 2010; Harwood and Anderson, 2002). Exaggerated behaviours and physical traits in negative portrayals contributed to the development of stereotypical beliefs and attitudes. In the same vein, media representations can amplify negative perceptions of African Americans, which in turn consolidates entrenched biases and perpetuates the marginalisation of minority communities (Klein and Shiffman, 2006; Donlon et al., 2005; Appel and Weber, 2017; Ford, 1997; Ward, 2002; Ward and Grower, 2020). The phenomenon of minority groups being consistently portrayed in lower-status roles and through enduring stereotypical representations carries profound ramifications for racial representation (Eschholz et al., 2002; Glascock and Preston-Schreck, 2004).

The portrayal of African Americans in media has seen a noteworthy amelioration in the past few decades. The unusual racial representation entrenched their presence in key roles within substantial films and television productions (Fain, 2015). This shift transfigures Black characters from peripheral and often stereotypical roles to central figures in mainstream popular culture. It reflects a broader identity-conscious approach that seeks to challenge and avoid traditional racial stereotypes and clichés. Movements such as *colourblind casting* and *racebending* have played a pivotal role in this evolution to foster a more inclusive representation of Black people across various media platforms. However, this progress has also incited controversy in adaptations where Black actors are cast as non-Black historical figures—a practice often labelled as *blackwashing*. The blackwashing of historical figures has elicited considerable debate. Online communities and scholars alike scrutinise its implications for historical accuracy and Afrocentric representation. These discussions have ignited broader conversations about the role of media in shaping racial discourse and the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers and content creators.

The contemporary mediascape is distinguished by a burgeoning range of communication platforms that diversify from traditional mediums such as film and television to modern digital platforms like streaming services and social media (McLuhan, 1964; Guillory, 2010; Strate, 2017; Johannes et al., 2022). Thus, this diverse divergence of media offers opportunities for representing marginalised voices and paves the way to greater creative freedom. These practices also propagate extractive representations of identity while facilitating contested historical narratives. This paper contends that colourblind casting in historical adaptations, while ostensibly progressive, perpetuates a form of historical revisionism that obscures Afrocentric perspectives and commodifies Black identity for mainstream audiences (Scott and Paprocki, 2023).

Through a qualitative thematic analysis of Netflix's docuseries Queen Cleopatra (2023), our research examines visual and narrative patterns to identify, analyse, and report themes related to racial representation and historical revisionism (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Naeem et al., 2023). The accentuation of the controversy surrounding Queen Cleopatra (2023) brings to light the mechanism of blackwashing practices that recurrently diminish the significance of authentic cultural heritage in the profoundness

of contemporary racial discourse. The study identifies blackwashing as a recurrent theme that devalues Black identity to a marketable aesthetic through a detailed examination of scholarly critiques of Afrocentric theory and colourblind casting. Ultimately, this paper calls for a more nuanced approach to historical adaptations which resists the commodification of cultural heritage and challenges the systemic biases that perpetuate racial and colour-based discrimination in mainstream media.

Historical trajectories and persistent tropes in Black representation

The minstrel show, America's first popular entertainment medium, entrenched derogatory stereotypes of African Americans through characters like Zip Coon and Jim Crow. These portrayals, rooted in archaic archetypes like Sambo, were disseminated through postcards, advertising, and children's literature, becoming deeply embedded in American culture by the early 20th century (Mellinger, 1992; Lemons, 1977). By the 1930s and 1940s, new stereotypes like Mammy and Uncle Tom reinforced narrow portrayals of Black individuals, dominating a film industry controlled by White filmmakers (Brown, 1982; Bogle, 1973; McClellan, 2021).

These historical narratives evolved into modern tropes like the *White Savior*, a pervasive archetype in which White protagonists liberate marginalised nonwhite characters, positioning them as passive recipients of White benevolence (Hughey, 2014). Related figures, such as the "magical Negro" (Cunningham and Glenn, 2009) and the "sassy" sidekick (Ruby, 2021), further diminish Black agency by casting Black characters as tools to advance White narratives. Scholarly critiques of White privilege (Perry, 2001; Vera and Gordon, 2003; Carroll, 2011) highlight how these tropes perpetuate the normalisation of White rationality and heroism, while Hughey's concept of *cinethetic racism* spotlights the contrast between stereotypical Black portrayals and idealised White masculinity (Hughey, 2009).

Despite counter-movements like the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement, which promoted positive Black imagery (Lemons, 1977), mainstream media continues to grapple with these legacies. Even nowadays, Black characters are often depicted as morally ambiguous sidekicks or confined to roles that echo historical subjugation (Dennis, 2009; Monk-Turner et al., 2010). While African American filmmakers have challenged these narratives through independent works and genres like Blaxploitation (Lawrence, 2007; Lyne, 2000), the persisting presence of tropes like the White Savior highlights the ongoing struggle for authentic representation.

Colourblind casting

Colourblindness, as a racial ideology, posits that race should not and does not matter in social interactions or policy-making, often framed as evidence of progress toward equality in modern democratic societies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin and Ducey, 2018). Rooted in the belief that society has transcended racial divisions, colourblindness assumes that individual effort and merit, rather than race, determine social outcomes (Hartmann et al., 2017). This ideology gained prominence in public discourse, especially following the election of Barack Obama, which was heralded as a marker of a post-racial America (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, 2011). However, scholars have critiqued colourblindness as a covert form of racism—referred to as *colour-blind racism*—that perpetuates White supremacy by ignoring systemic racial inequalities. Furthermore, it has been subjected to criticism due to its role in framing racial disparities as the result of individual

failings rather than institutionalised structures (Mueller, 2017; Burke, 2018).

A pivotal axiom of colourblind racism is the entrenchment that is founded in institutions to perpetuate White hegemony and privilege covertly and inadvertently (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Doane, 2014). Colourblindness obfuscates the historical and systemic roots of racial oppression by prioritising individual agency over structural racism, and it permits racial inequalities to endure under the guise of neutrality (Eberhardt and DiMario, 2020). This prioritisation resolves the tension between endorsing racial equality and the presence of a social structure designed to preserve White advantage as a cornerstone in the post-Civil Rights era (Forman and Lewis, 2006; Gallagher, 2008; Obasogie, 2013).

The implementation of a colourblind approach has garnered substantial criticism due to its deleterious consequences. Colourblindness subverts initiatives aimed at dismantling systemic racism and perpetuates stereotypes and biases due to its failure to recognise the realities of racial stratification and the particular needs of marginalised communities (Stoll, 2019). Moreover, colourblindness is correlated with heightened anti-Black prejudice and diminished participation in social justice initiatives, thereby further consolidating racial inequities (Yi et al., 2022). Therefore, Colourblindness operates as a mechanism that perpetuates racial hierarchies by concealing the structural and institutional dimensions of racism.

As a concept emanated from colourblindness, colourblind casting is a practice that was popularised in the mid-twentieth century to prioritise talent over physical appearance and skin colour (Thompson, 2006; Warner, 2015; Young, 2013). American director Joe Papp, who in 1948 articulated a vision of theatre and democracy free from racial discrimination, asserts that skin colour is a completely irrelevant issue to performance talent (cited by Epstein 1996). This approach accentuates the primacy of voice, language, movement and other performative elements over physical traits. Simultaneously, it strives to transcend racial boundaries in artistic representation (Elam, 1980). In the UK, colourblind casting gained traction with pioneering figures like Trinidadian actor Edric Connor, who became the first Black actor to perform with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1958. The approach primarily challenges traditional norms and promotes inclusivity (Rogers, 2013).

The tension between colourblind casting and commercial interests further complicates its implementation. Risk-averse decision-making in the entertainment industry often undermines the potential practices to challenge racial hierarchies, as studios and producers prioritise marketability over genuine inclusivity (Jowett, 2018). Furthermore, the implementation of colourblind casting, in the absence of intentional engagement with race risks, diminishes racial diversity to a mere aesthetic. It erodes cultural specificity and perpetuates post-racial politics that prioritise racial diversity over substantive representation (Warner, 2015). Although this approach appears superficially progressive, it perpetuates a sense of complacency in confronting systemic racism and colourism, as it obscures the structural inequities that continue to shape racial dynamics in media and theatre (Day, 2021; Headley, 2004).

Practically speaking, colourblind casting often elicits mixed reactions from audiences. While some viewers may overlook racial differences when no explicit statement about race is made, others scrutinise casting choices for underlying messages when an actor's skin tone appears to challenge or reinforce existing racial norms (Steigerwalt, 2009). For instance, the casting of a Nigerian actor as Henry VI in a historical production sparked backlash, with critics dismissing it as an "obvious untruth" and a "distracting irritation," highlighting the persistent resistance to non-traditional casting in historically White roles (Steigerwalt, 2009: 426).

Methodology and blackwashed adaptations

The practice of casting Black actors in roles traditionally reserved for White characters is driven by the ideology of colourblindness, which aims to minimise racial distinctions in the United States (Smith, 2013). Initially, it serves as a strategy to counter racial discrimination through institutional tokenism, thereby reducing accusations of racial bias (Catanese, 2011). This evolution signifies a transition in objectives from prior colour-blind hiring practices to current anti-racist endeavours, which are frequently denoted by the term "blackwashing" (Robinson, 2023).

Eminent television and theatrical productions have progressively adopted the casting of Black actors to depict historical figures from diverse cultural backgrounds. This trend of blackwashing seeks to disrupt traditional representations that have predominantly featured White actors. A salient example is Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015), which adapts the Founding Fathers of America through a diverse lens. The theatrical production prominently features a cast predominantly composed of Black and Latino performers (Fig. 1). Progressively, Channel 5's series *Anne Boleyn* (2021) (Fig. 2), featuring Jodie Turner-Smith, offers a unique adaptation of the mother of Queen Elizabeth I. *Queen Cleopatra* (2023) (Fig. 3), analogously, further illustrates this trend by depicting the Ptolemaic queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, as a Black woman. Furthermore, *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* (2023) (Fig. 4) reimagines Queen Charlotte as Black, continuing this trend of diverse representation in historical narratives.

Although these productions aspire to advance diversity and challenge entrenched narratives, historical accuracy remains a salient point of contention that looms over these adaptations.



Fig. 1 Christopher Jackson as George Washington. *Hamilton*. Dir. Lin-Manuel Miranda. USA. 2015. Source: The New York Times.



Fig. 2 Jodie Turner-Smith as Anne Boleyn. *Anne Boleyn*. Dir. Lynsey Miller. UK. 2021. Source: Channel 5.



Fig. 3 Adele James as Cleopatra. *Queen Cleopatra*. Dir. Tina Gharavi. USA. 2023. Source: Netflix.



Fig. 4 India Amarteifio as Queen Charlotte. *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*. Dir. Tom Verica. USA. 2023. Source: Netflix.

Advocates of colourblind casting view *Hamilton* as a cultural vanguard and a form of resistance that profoundly resonates with younger generations, who frequently conceptualise race and ethnicity in more fluid and dynamic terms. Nevertheless, historians and cultural critics have voiced concerns about *Hamilton*'s deficiencies in historical fidelity and complexity (McAllister, 2017). The blackwashing of Cleopatra in *Queen Cleopatra* (2023) has incited significant contention, which is further exacerbated by the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities' assertion that Cleopatra exhibited light skin and Hellenistic features, thereby amplifying the discourse on historical veracity and representation. On the same day that the Egyptian state-backed Documentary Channel, Al Wathaeqya, announced its plans for a counter-documentary. The secretary-general of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities denounced the portrayal of Cleopatra with African features and dark skin in the Netflix docuseries, stating that the docuseries "is considered a falsification of Egyptian history" (Saad, 2023).

This debate centres on the backlash, which presents contrasting views that see it as either an anachronistic imposition of modern racial constructs or an embodiment more aligned with contemporary racial discourse than with Cleopatra's ambiguous ancestry (Butler, 2023). Lately, blackwashing has garnered momentum among netizens and social media commentators, with this upsurge in criticism corresponding to the adaptation of historical figures devoid of African descent as Black characters. Illustratively, the Black reinterpretation of Anne Boleyn raises apprehensions that such portrayals may compromise the veritable depiction of Black individuals in historical contexts and skew audience perceptions, as highlighted by commentators in VOX ATL (2021). Discourses concerning historical representation and casting veracity have precipitated queries regarding the feasibility of White or Asian actors depicting prominent figures such as

Malcolm X or Hiram Rhodes Revels. Moreover, apprehensions about the blackwashing of British and European narratives accentuate the nexus between these tales and the cultural patrimony of their progenitor communities. Proponents contend that individuals of European lineage hold a rightful claim to their historical narratives.

In this study, patterns related to racial representation and historical revisionism are identified and refined into coherent themes. In such a vein, the conceptualisation of blackwashing historical figures in cinema signifies an emergent pattern discerned through data analysis. This process involves comparing sampled data to identify representations of social occurrences, including ideas, images, thoughts, and emotions (Glaser, 2002; Oliver, 2021). The qualitative thematic analysis examines the visual and narrative patterns to identify, analyse, and report patterns of themes within qualitative data. It allows for a detailed exploration of complex phenomena (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As Naeem et al. (2023) note, pattern identification is a critical step in thematic analysis, where keywords and visual elements guide the formation of broader themes.

Afrocentric Black Cleopatra

The historical depictions of Cleopatra have exhibited considerable variance across different epochs, being moulded by the dominant social and political milieus. During the Middle Ages, she was portrayed as a blonde, whereas the neoclassical era rendered her in a Hellenistic aesthetic. During the colonial era, Cleopatra was frequently depicted as a quiescent figure requiring European intervention (Issa, 2023). However, the latest portrayal of her embodied her as a Black queen from an Afrocentric viewpoint. Consequently, Egyptologist Zahi Hawass has accused *Queen Cleopatra* docuseries of *historical revisionism, cultural appropriation*, and blackwashing. He accentuates that no archaeological corroboration endorses claims of Cleopatra's African heritage and posits that the series may echo contemporary Black American discourse regarding ancestral affinities to ancient Egypt (Hawass, 2023). This debate persists in inciting considerable disputation within scholarly debate, as an abundance of new publications arises in reaction to the reemergence of controversy. To clarify the fundamental dimensions of this debate, it is crucial to conduct an exhaustive reappraisal of the constructs of Afrocentrism and Afrocentricity. Specifically speaking, it is imperative to critically engage with contemporary discourses concerning Cleopatra's African lineage and the alleged impact of Black Africans on the evolution of ancient Greek civilisation.

The proposition that Cleopatra possessed African heritage has historically engendered significant contention among scholars and cultural critics. This contention is primarily attributable to the proposition's association with Afrocentric interpretations, which are often perceived as attributing Black identity to historical figures from diverse cultural backgrounds. Since the inception of the civil rights and Afrocentric movements in the 1970s, the influence of these movements on Shakespearean scholarship has intensified the debate surrounding the racial identity of both the literary and historical Cleopatra. This debate is characterised by a recurring emphasis on Cleopatra's Macedonian Greek lineage, a point that has been reiterated with such frequency and conviction that it occasionally assumes a strident tone within the scholarly discourse (Daileader, 2006). Martin Bernal's magisterial work, *Black Athena* (1987), galvanised the debate concerning Afrocentrism, which illuminated the profound influence of Black Egyptian and Semitic cultures on the evolution of Greek civilisation. The pioneering research postulates that specific dynasties of pharaohs were of African lineage. The development of Afrocentric ideology reached an apex when

certain scholars claimed that Kemet (the Land of Blacks) and the true progenitors of Greek philosophy were not the Greeks themselves, but rather North Africans, often denominated as African Egyptians. This notion has been described by Afrocentric authors such as Amos N. Wilson as “the theft of history,” while George G. M. James has referred to it as a “stolen legacy” (Walker, 2001).

Molefi Kete Asante, a luminary in the realm of Afro-American studies, delineates Afrocentricity as a paradigmatic construct through which phenomena are subjected to critical scrutiny from the perspective of the African individual (Asante, 1991). This paradigmatic intellectual perspective exalts African agency within the expansive contexts of African history and culture, encompassing both transcontinental and transgenerational dimensions. Consequently, a sophisticated comprehension of geographical context becomes essential for the dissection of African culture and behaviour across literary, economic, political, and cultural spheres (Asante, 2007). Alkebulan (2007) articulates that the Afrocentric perspective differentiates Africana studies from other academic disciplines unequivocally. It accentuates its provenance in historical struggle, while simultaneously empowering African communities to challenge the predominant narratives of Western scholarship. Additionally, Cunningham (2010) expounds that in considering the persistent European representations of Egyptians, notably exemplified by Elizabeth Taylor’s portrayal of Cleopatra in the 1963 film, there are significant apprehensions regarding the dissociation of Egypt from the African continent and the systematic disregard for Black African contributions to ancient Egyptian culture. Moreover, Afrocentric scholars presume that Eurocentrists manifest an intense focus on particular elements of this discourse, notably Cleopatra’s Black ancestry, as a means of scrutinising the impact of ancient Egypt (Kemet) on the advancement of Greek civilisation (Alkebulan, 2007).

Opposition to Afrocentrism has been vociferously expressed by a cadre of scholars, including Lefkowitz, who argue that it endeavours to forge a connection with the ancient Greeks while concurrently diminishing their historical contributions by ascribing these accomplishments to the African civilisation of Egypt. Lefkowitz posits that the Afrocentric paradigm regards history as a pliant narrative that is amenable to reinterpretation by diverse nations or ethnic collectives (Lefkowitz, 1996). Furthermore, the Afrocentric viewpoint as explicated by ethnic ideologues often displays facets of Europhobia marked by separatism and feelings of estrangement and victimisation, as noted by Schlesinger (1998). He ascribes to Afrocentrism the claim that it imparts to students of African descent the notion that “Africans visited the Americas long before Columbus and that Cleopatra was of African heritage” (Schlesinger, 1998: 67). More recently, the controversy about the latest docuseries of Black Cleopatra attracted renewed interest, which has incited Egyptian lawyer Mahmoud al-Semary to lobby for a prohibition on the series. He contends that *Queen Cleopatra* has distorted “Egyptian identity” to advance Afrocentric narratives (Mohammed, 2023).

Colourblindness and cultural representation

Colourblind casting has encountered substantial criticism due to its theoretical and practical constraints. Scholars contend that the term itself is problematic, as it presumes the feasibility of disregarding race in a society where racial semiotics are profoundly interwoven into cultural and social frameworks (Anderson, 2006). The media’s failure to authentically represent Afro-American figures is evident in its neglect of the foundational pillars of Black cultural identity outlined by Stuart Hall: the Black experience, the “distinctive cultural repertoire,” and the counter-narrative (Hall,

1993). Rather than centring narratives on the historical struggles and diasporic odyssey of African Americans, the media often prioritises superficial diversity metrics, such as casting Black actors in roles of non-Black historical figures like Cleopatra. This approach deflects attention from the systemic marginalisation of African American voices and diminishes Black identity to a marketable aesthetic, rather than honouring its distinct cultural contributions. Despite Cleopatra’s Macedonian Greek heritage, the controversial adaptation *Queen Cleopatra* (2023) reveals how media industries often tokenise Black identities, which perpetuate colonial frameworks that reduce Black individuals to interchangeable props rather than recognising them as subjects with distinct histories.

August Wilson’s incisive critique of colourblindness as a manifestation of colonialism and imperialism further spotlights this paradox. Wilson (1997) contends that colourblindness “reinvent[s] our history and ignore[s] our presence or maim[s] our spiritual product” (498). He likened it to a superficial remedy that obscures deeper issues of exclusion beneath a façade of neutrality. His analysis elucidates the disjunction between casting decisions and their resultant performance practices; such a disjunction mirrors the intricate interplay between representation and institutional power (Catanese, 2011). Wilson argues that colourblind casting functions as a form of cultural mimicry that erases Black identity and history. Hence, blackwashing perpetuates a colonial framework that reduces Black representation to a superficial gesture by placing Black actors in roles originally conceived for White performers without addressing the systemic inequities or cultural contexts that shaped those roles. In addition, the paradox of this approach is posited in the involvement of Black actors in White-centric stories without interrogating the power dynamics that historically excluded them. For example, casting Black actors as the Founding Fathers, Ptolemaic, or British queen may manifest to challenge Eurocentrism; however, it essentially avoids confronting the contradictions of the historical reality of these figures—such as the Founders’ enslavement of Black people, Cleopatra’s Hellenistic identity, or the postcolonial viewpoint of racial power dynamics.

Moreover, Wilson’s critique highlights the exploitative nature of colourblind casting, which mirrors the logic of colonialism by commodifying Black identities. Just as colonial powers extracted resources and labour from subjugated peoples, media industries exploit Black actors to appeal to diverse audiences without ceding creative control or acknowledging the cultural labour required to reimagine White-centric narratives. Blackwashing imposes an unfair burden on Black artists to reconceptualise characters originally envisioned within a White cultural milieu (Gammon and Phan, 2024). Consequently, this approach precipitates a scenario wherein Black individuals are ensnared by the pernicious phenomenon of cultural mimicry. This discourse unveils that colourblindness in media is not a neutral or progressive strategy, but rather a colonial tactic that perpetuates White hegemony by superficially diversifying roles.

To attain genuine equity, media must transcend colourblind casting and engage with Black identities in ways that centre their experiences, interrogate systemic inequities and repudiate the colonial logic of cultural erasure. While colourblind casting aspires to foster inclusivity, its efficacy is constrained by its failure to engage with the profound structural and cultural dimensions of racism. The entertainment industry must confront and dismantle the systemic biases that perpetuate racial and colour-based discrimination to ensure that casting practices resonate authentically with the lived experiences of people of colour (Day, 2021; Warner, 2015).

Conclusion

While media serves as a powerful force in shaping cultural narratives and racial discourse, its attempts to advance equitable representation—such as casting Black actors in historically non-Black roles—often risk conflating contemporary racial politics with historically ambiguous contexts. The ostensibly progressive shifts toward inclusivity in 21st-century media, particularly through practices of colourblind casting and blackwashing, purport to challenge Eurocentric narratives. However, they often oversimplify the complex heritage of figures with contested ancestry, privileging visual diversity over a historically reliable representation of African heritage.

August Wilson's incisive critique of colourblindness as a form of cultural mimicry spotlights this paradox. The employment of colourblind casting—regardless of the critical interrogation of the power dynamics that historically shaped such roles in media—devalues Black identity as a performative gesture and echoes colonial strategies of cultural extraction. Blackwashing, as a theme of colourblind casting, imposes an undue burden on Black artists to reinterpret narratives inherently rooted in White supremacy. It overlooks the gist of the systemic racism that perpetuates inequities. The dialectical tension between the decolonisation of historical narratives and the preservation of their intrinsic complexity accentuates the exigency for media to adopt more sophisticated and deliberate methodologies. To attain genuine equity, media must engage with historical contexts in a manner that considers historical veracity and resists reducing Black identity to a superficial aesthetic. The case of *Queen Cleopatra* serves as a paradigmatic example which elucidates how Blackwashing can tokenise Black individuals. At the same time, it neglects their cultural contributions and historical struggles.

Media can achieve meaningful reclamation through historically grounded portrayals that honour the complexity of Black experiences. Films like *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Emancipation* (2022) demonstrate how unflinching depictions of slavery's brutality can foster historical consciousness without revisionism. Similarly, biographical works such as *Malcolm X* (1992) and *King in the Wilderness* (2018) centre Black agency while adhering to documented histories. Additionally, literary adaptations of works by eminent writers like August Wilson, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison offer another pathway to culturally rich storytelling. Their texts—rooted in African American vernacular traditions, sociohistorical critique, and lived experience—provide frameworks for narratives that resist Eurocentric distortions. By prioritising such sources, the media can move beyond superficial diversity and instead engage with the intellectual, cultural, and historical depth of Black life.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Received: 19 February 2025; Accepted: 1 September 2025;

Published online: 03 October 2025

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Acknowledgements

This work was funded by the National Social Science Project of China (No. 19BWW045). The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Author contributions

Conceptualisation: AJS and ML. Methodology: AJS. Data acquisition: QW, XY. Formal analysis: AJS and XY. Data curation: QW and XY. Validation: ML, AJS, QW. Writing and preparing the original draft: AJS, ML. Review and editing: ML. Revision: AJS, MLAs a corresponding author, I confirm that this paper has been read and approved for submission by all the authors.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Informed consent

Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

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