

THE MONOCHROME TAPESTRY OF SOLO EXISTENTIAL TRAVEL IN 21ST CENTURY HOLLYWOOD: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *Solo existential travel films of Hollywood enjoyed their heyday in the first two decades of the 21st century with most of them emerging as cult classics that have inspired millions to venture out on backpacking trips. The solo travel beyond the margins of a materialistic society that promises the traveller some existential clarity, in theory, is a truly existential endeavour that lets the individual exercise their Sartrean freedom and responsibility. But a quick survey of the films produced by Hollywood over the decades reveals a rather stealthy racism within. Solo existential travellers in Hollywood films of the 21st century have predominantly been white Americans. Despite being a powerful tool to create one's meaning and authentic identity in society, solo travel is still an instrument of self-redemption that is kept away from people of colour, especially the black American community. The paper will look into the significance, relevance and consequences of this seemingly invisible omission. From an embodiment perspective, the paper will attempt to analyze the absence of racial diversity in the genre to shed light on why the coloured body is to find its space in Hollywood's tapestry of solo existential travel.*

Keywords: *embodiment, existentialism, travel films, Hollywood, racism*

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Introduction

Whilst being a ‘melting pot’ of diverse cultures, the USA has “tended to separate and segregate them from the masses, rendering them unassimilated because of racial discrimination” (Maddern, 2013, p.3). One of the reasons why the non-white communities find it hard to assimilate into the American cultural mosaic without losing their unique identity is the invisibility they face due to the absence of representation in various spheres of society (Kim, 2023; Wyly & Halloway, 2002; Onwuachi-Willig, 2018). In such a situation, arts emerge as a mighty asset that renders assistance in guaranteeing visibility to all ethnocultural communities that get shunned by the conspicuous white domination through a cultural resistance that demands cultural equity in a social tapestry that deems them invisible (Chang, 2024). Thus, inclusion and ample representation of people of colour in art arise as an issue of cultural power or equity and the cultural justice that the visibility provides emerges as “the healing of the erasure, suppression, and marginalization of people’s artistic and cultural practices” (Chang, 2024, p.24).

One of the most relevant and popular artistic tools that brandishes substantial power in influencing culture, promoting a certain type of cultural outlook and transmitting cultural stances in the US has been cinema aka Hollywood (Chen, 2023, p.843). In the US, cinema is not constrained by aestheticism but wields the power to invent hegemonic structures, reinforce the established authority, marginalize communities and propagate meanings that accommodate its preferences (Do Nascimento, 2019, p.27). Thus, to scrutinize, discern and question how Hollywood engages with race and racial representation is of utmost importance. This paper attempts to probe a specific genre of Hollywood, the under-explored yet promising category of solo existential travel films.

Despite its time-honoured ancestry, transformative corporeal travel is perceived as a phenomenon anchored in modernity, fueled by the idiosyncrasies of modern life such as alienation, escape, liberation, existential angst, etc. (Lean et. al., 2016). Hollywood films have also embraced this notion, crafting many movies on personal transformation, ranging from commercial hits like *Eat, Pray, Love* to eclectic and critically acclaimed creations like *Nomadland* (Harrill et. al., 2022, p.2557). The popularity of the transformative travel genre in Hollywood is attributed to how the audience could relate to a “trip leading to introspection and opportunity for personal growth” (Harrill et. al., 2022, p.2557; Sampaio, 2014). Notwithstanding their artistic and educational potential, transformative travel films lack diversity of representation (Harrill et. al., 2022, p.2565). Because “American film and American culture are considered mutually interdependent, each illuminating and providing a context for the other” (Sobchack, 1980, p.281) such an unvariedness in representation becomes all the more problematic.

Solo existential travel films are deemed as an audiovisual creation that makes use of the lived experience of the traveller to attain the concept of “touristic and communicative authenticity” (Argod, 2018, p.13). These films celebrate the intense physical voyage of a traveller, through trying terrains, to ascertain their authenticity and value autonomously. Here we get to see an amalgamation of embodiment and existentialism as it is a corporeal mobility that delivers the existential transformation. Denying the people of colour such an opportunity where their lived experiences could be brought on screen in all their complexity and subtlety is a blatant rejection of their existential angst and embodied subjectivity, and a denial of their interiority, reason and place in American society (Ndlovu, 2020, p.14).

Recalling a research gap *The Global Nomad* (Richards & Wilson, 2004) puts forth in its concluding chapter (p.272), this research paper inquires - Is solo existential travel exclusively reserved for those who can afford the physical and psychological vulnerability of moving to the margins of the society? The body that offers the currency of experience and perception to the traveller in their quest for existential authenticity dons the hues of race in this discussion. The paper will delve into the nuances of the monochrome structure of the solo existential travel genre of Hollywood to ponder on the immobility of the racialized body and the repudiation of its autonomous quest for existential authenticity.

Methodology

Solo Existential Travel – The Sartrean Perspective

Sartrean existentialism views the human being as primarily free, sans determinism, destined to be whatever they want (Thoibisana, 2017, p.123). Sartre defends existentialism as “a hopeful and optimistic expression of human freedom in the world” (Tubbs, 2013, p.480). Man is “condemned to be free” (Sartre, 2007, p. 38) and it is through his subjectivity, choices and actions that man gets to comprehend his purpose (Tubbs, 2013, pp.480-482). By his inherent freedom, man is bestowed with the responsibility to channel his actions to design his destiny without giving in to external forces (Adewumi & Jemilaiye, 2022, p.287). In his attempt to exercise his freedom and responsibility man is oftentimes pushed into a state of unrest or anxiety (Strasser, 1996, p.45). In such instances, travel has emerged as a powerful tool to overcome existential anxiety owing to its ability to enable existential avoidance and catalyze existential authenticity (Canavan, 2018, p.551).

Being able to travel unrestrainedly, and savouring the experience of it, emerges as a marker of an individual’s agency and empowerment (Douglas & Barrett, 2020, p.765). To fashion something out of the feeling of “nothingness”, one must, according to Sartre, construct meaning via how they live their life to experience

authentic existence (Canavan, 2018, p.562). The pursuit of self-actualisation through travel surpasses the mere avoidance of routine life's mundanity, to generate sensations of autonomy and introspection (2018, p.562). Here travel ceases to be a form of hedonistic consumption to emerge as a eudemonic experience (Kirillova et. al., 2017, p.23).

Solo transformative travel, due to its empowering and liberating nature emerges as the most existentially charged variant of transformative travel when viewed from a Sartrean perspective. An existential traveller is “fully committed to an ‘elective’ spiritual centre... [and] is phenomenologically analogous to a pilgrim” (Cohen, 2004, p.77). Solo existential travel provides an opportunity to introspect and reflect as well as engage in experiential learning through encounters and dialogues with the ‘Other’ (Morgan, 2010). Thus, in the context of this research paper, solo existential travel can be termed “sustainable travel embarked upon by a traveller for the primary and intentional purpose of creating conditions conducive for one or more fundamental structures of the self to transform” (Ross, 2010, p.55). Within the scope of solo existential travel, the individual facing existential angst does not wait in bad faith for a liberator but commands the reins of their own life. And it is explicitly on account of this that the lack of diverse racial representation in the genre becomes all the more problematic.

Embodiment

The blame for disjoining the concept of mind and body is imputed to Plato and Descartes (MacLachlan, 2004, p.2). Plato’s “truth” that remained in pure-disembodied forms and the Cartesian notion of *cogito ergo sum* led to the segregation of mental life and physical existence, thereby leading to an objectification of the body (p. 3). But later on, through the phenomenological tradition, the connection between body and mind was restored. Phenomenology claims that “consciousness can become ‘worldly’ only by being embodied within the world as part of it” (Zaner, 2012, p.vii). One of the pioneers who managed to provide the body with a firm footing in philosophy was the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Initially established in *The Structure of Behaviour*, the centrality of the body fortified its standing through his magnum opus *The Phenomenology of Perception* and went on to gain a more refined form in his incomplete final work *The Visible and The Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty situates his analysis on the Husserlian distinction between the corporeal body (*Körper*) and the lived body (*Leib*) (Mohajel et. al., 2021, p.294). The Pontian body is an intersubjective body that subsists as an enmeshing of the body and the world and it is by employing this body that we accomplish perception and consciousness (p. 294). The symbolic systems that cinema puts forth can alter the boundaries of the perceptible world and can thus “open new dimensions by extending the scope and radius of our actions, and by giving rise to new kinds

of meanings and entities” (Hoel & Carusi, 2018, p.28). Thus, in the context of the current research, the representations and stories in Hollywood do indeed have the potential to open up empowering transformative trajectories for people of colour and this in turn validates the analysis of absence from an embodiment perspective. The primacy of movement in the effectuating and experiencing of the lived body in Pontian embodiment theory also is pertinent and significant in garnering a better understanding of solo existential travel and the types of bodies involved in it.

Discussion

The Racialized Body- From Body-Schema Concerns to Bodily Alienation

The whimsical aspect of human embodiment is that we are simultaneously the body we *are* and the body we *have* (Wehrle, 2020, p.499). Being a body is marked by functional and temporal intentionality and having a body means having an object intentionality (Wehrle, 2020, p.506). To be a body thus is to direct consciousness towards the world through bodily action and tangible engagement and to structure experiences temporally. The lived body that engages with the world and facilitates perception has a realm that is not perceived but remains a precedent to explicit cognition or perception (Halák, 2021). This is termed body schema.

Be it when you button up your shirt, carry a tray across the room or use a spoon to carry the food from the plate to your mouth, you are being a body that acts without consciously reflecting on the corporeal engagement. This pre-reflective awareness of the spatiotemporal lived body facilitates an ease of mobility and action. This is why “the motor experiences of the healthy subject are characterized by their flexibility, spontaneity, and adaptability” (Cañas, 2019, p.205).

Merleau-Ponty put forth the notion of body schema to “highlight the bodily know-how that makes the correspondence between embodied subjects and their situations smooth and seamless” (Zeiler, 2013, p.71). Body schema is crucial to moving about, acting accordingly and exercising one’s freedom in solo existential travel. In everyday life, if the body schema functions properly, the body can remain in the background, enabling us to be comfortable in our skin and confident about our body’s ability to adapt and react to situations (Ataria & Tanaka, 2020, p.655). This comfort and confidence of being our own body is crucial when it comes to pushing the corporeal self out into the unknown to explore the world in the quest for existential transformation. When the body schema takes a back seat, the subjectivity of the body is affected and results in the body emerging as an object, where the thought of the body takes centre

stage in the perceptual world, resulting in a domination of the ‘body image’ (Ataria & Tanaka, 2020, p.656).

Franz Fanon puts forth this overpowering of the body schema by the body image as a result of the “white gaze” in his work *Black Skin, White Masks*. People of colour are forced to be aware and cautious of their bodies while engaging in regular activities like walking or taking up a seat at a restaurant due to the virus of racism that plagues the society (Zeiler, 2013, p.77). Placing the way someone else perceives us at the centre of living is according to Sartre “solidification and alienation of one’s[my] own possibilities” (Sartre, 1956, p.263). Being reduced to a mere object thus pushes the individual into a life of conformity and bad faith, unable or hesitant to venture out and exert his/her freedom and authenticity.

The overpowering body image, through recurrency, evolves into what can be termed as excorporation. It is a “bodily phenomenon that is caused by structures of social normativity pertaining to gender, race, and sexuality” where some “quasi-transcendental structure becomes an embodied obstacle for the subject” (Wellborn, 2020, p.2). The prying racist gaze triggers an excorporation of the body schema resulting in a “pervasive disorientation and weightiness – that is, an experience of bodily alienation” (Leboeuf, 2022, p.126). A person venturing out on a solo existential journey is bound to face bodily alienation during his/her travel through variegated interactions and experiences. But first-hand testimony could act as a “bridge between the merely descriptive and normative”, where one can move beyond the lived experience and challenge the established order which alienates the people of colour (Leboeuf, 2022, pp.126-127). The biggest challenge the racialized body faces in acquiring this window to bring about change is the hostility the space holds, denying him/her even the consideration of accessing it.

The Racialized Space

“The lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension” (Lipsitz, 2007, p.12). Racism often acts out in society through denial of or exclusion from spaces be it social, ideological or geographical. In the context of the solo existential travel films of 21st century Hollywood, the genre as well as the spaces the white existential traveller traverses to transform themselves denies access to people of colour. The journeys portrayed in the genre showcase individuals exercising their freedom and free will by leaving behind familiar spaces and venturing into unfamiliar ones (Sineokaya, 2020, p.1385). There is a physical space, a cultural space, an existential space and a cinematic space that is being established here. The traveller’s corporeal body that fills the physical as well as cinematic space, due to the intersubjective nature of the film viewing experience manages to communicate with the viewer’s body. Thus, people of colour need to have

existential travellers as well as existential travel experiences that they could connect and relate to based on similarities in lived bodily experiences. People of colour getting assimilated into the cinematic space of solo existential travel consequently becomes pivotal in incorporating ethnocultural diversity into the mindscape of the society.

Body schema has a spatial dimension that arises from its interconnectedness with the world instigated by the body's mobility and actions (Seamon, 2018, p.44). The lived body is hardwired to find its own space in the world and turn that space into a "zone of familiarity" or the world it has through habitual action (Jacobson, 2010, p.223). The zone of familiarity a white-American experiences while watching Christopher McCandless in *Into the Wild* or Julia Roberts in *Eat, Pray, Love* is non-existent for a person of colour. The habitual action of bringing in people of colour and their solo existential travel stories to the Hollywood landscape can thus create an existential world of their own for such communities, to venture out and win back their own meaning and authenticity.

The solo travel genre gained fitting prominence only by the beginning of the 21st century with *The Beach* (2000), and enjoyed its heyday all throughout the 2000s and 2010s. With movies such as *Into the Wild* (2007), *Wild* (2014), *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010), *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013), *Nomadland* (2020), etc., the genre flourished to emerge as one of the most popular cinematic genres through its remarkable integration of the marvels of travel and profound existential questions. The cult classic status of films like *Into the Wild* (2007) and *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010) and the plenitude of solo travellers they have managed to motivate, corroborates the significance of the genre when it comes to influencing American society and culture. Further exploration of the genre, brings to light a startling yet overlooked exclusion of people of colour. Through *Girls Trip* (2017) that celebrates extravagant group trips and *Green Book* (2018), a film that showcases the travels of a black musician and his white driver, Hollywood has indeed attempted to place the coloured protagonist in the genre. But the denial of the opportunity to be free and vulnerable on their own, which is evident in these films do raise innumerable questions about the limitations race forcefully imposes on the existential freedom of the coloured individual.

The white-washing of the solo existential travel genre forces the other coloured communities to be "in line" where they live out their lives in familiar spaces which determines what they can or cannot do (Zeiler, 2013, p.71). Such wrought iron orientations could only be challenged by something that can wake us from our slumber of conformity. The absence of people of colour in the space of solo existential travels of Hollywood, which has not yet been questioned, is thus an instance where the being 'in line' should be questioned to alter pre-existing racially charged orientations. As McDermott and Simmons point out about the spatialization of race, we are preprogrammed to consider certain spaces as just

belonging to the “blacks” or “whites” and cannot even question the internalized colonialism without strong external stimuli that force us out of our conformity (2013, p.163).

The exclusion of the coloured body from the space of solo existential travel films of 21st-century Hollywood creates a racialized space which perpetuates the Eurocentric colonizing view that creates and modulates conviction systems that tend to favour the white body over the coloured body. Thus, in this context, the denial of space to the people of colour to exert their coloured subjectivity in all its complexity becomes a reaffirmation of the colonial rejection of their interiority and reason (Ndlovu, 2020, p.14).

Conclusion – What a Coloured Future Holds?

Travel as a discipline has always favoured the white-bodies over the coloured bodies. Mobility emerges as the expression of the lived body in travel narratives. A feeling of buoyancy is produced as a result of the synthesis of the acting body, the surrounding, and the momentary feeling of being in balance, which the individual attunes to their capacity to move through the world (Kressbach, 2024, pp.201-202). Such moments provide the individual with an opportunity to strive to make some adjustments with the body and the self to attain some sense of balance (Kressbach, 2024, p.202). Despite being misfits, the coloured bodies are forced to fall out of equilibrium with their situations or milieus to become fully aware of their embodied existence in such situations (Eng, 2020, pp.356-357). The absent coloured body is robbed of this opportunity to attain that sense of balance in the world, a necessary need in the racialized space that brings about its bodily alienation. The study of the body is seen as “a useful starting point in examinations of how the singular body, that is the body which is unique and different from other bodies, can form and inform our embodied selves and influence our ways of interacting with others and the world” (Zeiler, 2013, p.69). Thus, the presence, the actions and the interactions of a body are of utmost importance in attaining a non-homogenised perception of the socio-cultural aspects of racial embodiment.

Cinema being a creator, propagator and regulator of meanings and perspectives, plays a crucial role in how bodies are perceived and how their actions and experiences are governed and circumscribed in our modern societies. Hollywood thus emerged as a powerful tool that hegemonized the cultural and ideological systems of the U.S. Even though Hollywood claims to be progressive and publicly condemns racism to support diversity, it is one of the most powerful and flagrant perpetrators of racism (Yuen, 2017, pp.49-50). The colourblind neutrality allows Hollywood to practice exclusionary methods and to divest themselves of any moral responsibility while steeping into bias and prejudice (ibid., pp.50-68). The fact that films starring people of colour managed to emerge

lucrative at the box office (Yuen, 2017, p.139) also points at the deliberate racism exhibited by Hollywood through their exclusion of people of colour from solo travel existential films.

The coloured communities being homogenized and being stereotyped or artificially introduced into pre-existing Eurocentric narratives does not empower them nor provide them the space to exert their own authentic identity or complexity. The lack of personal/ biographical insights into the lived experience of the coloured communities thus becomes one of the main reasons for the perpetuation of racism. The personal and complex existential stories that unravel alongside the corporeal presence and movement of the coloured body in the solo existential film thus emerge as a challenge against the colourblind racism of Hollywood and the racially charged ideological boundaries it purports. Challenging the racialized space that alienates their bodies and the reducing of their embodied subjectivities to objects becomes possible through the inclusion of their bodies in a space that is deeper than the mere material world of commodities and conformities.

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