

# “We Definitely Are Going to Make Billions, but We Want to Do It in a Smart and Thoughtful Way”: Macro, Black-Cast Film Distribution, and the Barriers of Hollywood’s Industry Logics

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## **Abstract**

*During the mid-2010s and early 2020s, a series of controversies and social movements, including #OscarsSoWhite, #WhitewashedOUT, Black Lives Matter/#BlackLivesMatter, and #MeToo, brought Hollywood’s lack of diversity under greater scrutiny. Within this context, some producers, creators, and on-screen talent of color began to receive more job opportunities and gain greater attention and exposure. One figure who received exposure during this period was Charles D. King, a former talent agent who exited William Morris Endeavor in 2015 to establish Macro, a production and talent management company that has a purported mission to elevate the voices and visions of people of color in the screen industries and to cater to underserved audiences by producing work with more diverse stories. While the steady employment gains made by talent of color in Hollywood initially gave the impression that longer-term changes were on the horizon, however, the greater opportunities that talent of color were finding were arguably not a corrective to historical inequalities and racism in Hollywood but were a temporary public relations solution. Accordingly, this article scrutinizes notions of disruption that have cohered around King and Macro to show how public relations activities surrounding producers and talent of color can obfuscate continuities of Hollywood inequalities. To do so, the article explores some of the ways that King and Macro may depart from certain racist Hollywood industry logics, before conducting a qualitative analysis of a “great leader” discourse that frames King as a disruptive figure bringing about real change through the successful execution of his “master plan.” The article then*

*conducts a quantitative analysis of the theatrical distribution and box-office data of several Macro feature films to explore how they compare to White-cast productions and to what extent they adhere to longer-term trends.*

**Keywords:** Blackness, Entrepreneurialism, Film Distribution, Global Movie Box-Office, Charles D. King, Macro

## Introduction

In the mid-2010s to the early 2020s, a series of controversies and social movements, including #OscarsSoWhite, #WhitewashedOUT, Black Lives Matter/#BlackLivesMatter, and #MeToo, brought a lack of diversity in Hollywood under greater scrutiny. Regarded as an issue that urgently needed addressing by sections of the press and audiences, some producers, creators, and on-screen talent of color began to receive more job opportunities and gain greater exposure, with UCLA's annual diversity reports showing that Black talent made the most gains of any racial constituency.<sup>2</sup> One figure who received exposure during this period was Charles D. King, a former talent agent at William Morris Endeavor (WME), the largest talent agency in the world, who rose through the ranks to become its first ever African American partner. In 2015, King had exited WME to establish Macro, a production company that later launched talent management and venture capital investment arms that purport to elevate the voices and visions of people of color in front of and behind the screen while catering to underserved audiences of color by producing content with more diverse stories. Foregrounding this mission, King and Macro cultivated branded reputations as disruptors dedicated to improving diversity in Hollywood and the wider culture by championing talent of color and bringing to the screen more diverse authentic stories.

While the employment gains made by talent of color in Hollywood initially gave the impression that change was on the horizon, the greater opportunities they were finding were arguably not a corrective to historical inequalities and racism but were instead a temporary public relations solution.<sup>3</sup> Black talent of color benefited the most from the media attention on diversity owing to a Black/White binary, a representational frame that treats Black bodies as the most visible manifestations of racial diversity when defined in terms of a color difference from Whiteness and White people.<sup>4</sup> Taking into consideration this wider context, this article scrutinizes notions of disruption surrounding King and Macro to show how public relations activities around producers and talent of color can obfuscate continuations of Hollywood inequalities. King and Macro make excellent case studies because their brands, so focused as they are around issues of representation, diversity, and change, let us see how discourses of disruption concerning diversity are constructed and sometimes contradicted by the industrial realities.

The article is organized into three main sections. The first sets out some of the broad claims that King and Macro have made about their missions and outlines how they may depart from certain long-term racist Hollywood industry logics. The second conducts a qualitative analysis of promotional and critical discourse surrounding King to scrutinize an entrepreneurial discourse that has positioned him as a “great leader” bringing about change through

the successful execution of his “master plan.”<sup>5</sup> The third conducts a quantitative analysis of the theatrical distribution and box-office returns of several of Macro’s feature films using data available from IMDbPro and BoxOfficeMojo. The section compares the domestic and international trends around Macro’s Black-cast films, defined as features with mostly Black casts or Black leads who are not just part of a broader ensemble, and considers discrepancies between them and similarly budgeted, White-cast films. Consequently, the final section shows how Macro’s business remains constrained by longer-term, risk-averse, and discriminatory, Hollywood practices that limit the distribution of Black-cast films internationally with significant implications for Black cast and crew in terms of their equal access to production finance and jobs.

The article builds on a relatively wide range of academic literature. On the one hand, it draws from studies of Black cultural production that set out how race and Blackness are cultural constructions, and sites of contestation where Black cultural producers adopt a range of positions vis-à-vis ideas about the goals of Black cultural production and its relationship with White hegemony.<sup>6</sup> It also engages with scholarly work that considers these position-takings within a wider context where African Americans have remained disproportionately underemployed within Hollywood and many other business sectors despite claims about America becoming a post-racial society.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the article draws from different traditions of media industry studies, including political economy approaches that conduct top-down macro-level analyses of industry structures and processes within wider political and economic contexts,<sup>8</sup> and cultural studies approaches that conduct bottom-up analyses of a range of media industry participants’ position-taking and decision-making.<sup>9</sup>

The cultural studies tradition encourages us to recognize individual agency to consider how decision-making can sometimes shape institutional actions and cultural output while emphasizing that the positions that individuals adopt are always contingent on their roles within the wider contexts and corporate cultures. Political economy approaches explore how power dynamics and economic, cultural, and social implications stem from the wider contexts and macro-level industry structures to, for instance, show how the ownership of an increasing number of media companies is consolidated in the hands of a smaller number of elite, mostly White and male, individuals, who are, in turn, responsible for hiring the disproportionate number of White male executives to manage their companies, and whose relatively similar social positions play an outsized role in setting the culture and determining the strategies within them.

The article does not aim to prove that King and Macro are disruptors but instead contextualizes and deflates claims that they are disruptive that circulate in the promotional discourses around them to show how it obscures industrial and social realities. In doing so, the article defines disruption as a form of promotional rhetoric that involves making often vague claims that certain practices provide positive improvements to an industry, production, and consumption. The idea of disruption overlaps with the entrepreneurial discourse surrounding so-called great leaders as promotional discourse sometimes depicts the individual will of a few apparently talented and tenacious individuals as its driving force.<sup>10</sup> The proliferation of disruption discourses is also symptomatic of a neoliberal period when branding and marketing have become substitutes for actual product innovation, consumption replaces critical thought, and profound anxieties about financial collapse are explained away by seductive but

flawed explanations about why certain businesses thrive or fail.<sup>11</sup> For King and Macro, claims that their work is disruptive are based on notions that they improve the diversity of the industry and culture. Yet these claims arguably preserve neoliberal entrepreneurial logics, and they center on enhancing the visibility of people of color on and off screen rather than on overhauling systemic discriminatory practices.

Accordingly, the article conducts quantitative and qualitative analyses to reframe notions about the successful execution of King's master plan as a branded position taken to enhance his and Macro's exposure, while pointing out how this position-taking obscures the limits of what a Black-run independent company can achieve within a highly consolidated industry. The article uses Macro as a case study to argue that notions about Hollywood becoming more diverse, which appear to gain legitimacy when King speaks, obscures the continuation of certain discriminatory practices, including especially disparities between Hollywood's distribution of Black-cast and White-cast feature films. To do this, the article draws on theory about cultural intermediaries and gatekeepers before analyzing box-office data. As a result, the article shows how promotional and critical discourse warrants study as it is where ideas about the industry take shape while also providing an important reminder that such discourse needs to be approached critically.

## Macro and Hollywood's Racist Industry Logics

When Charles D. King and his wife, Stacey King, whose background is in fashion, launched Macro, he announced that they would focus on producing projects with authentic stories about people of color for "multicultural audiences."<sup>12</sup> After raising finance from investors including Laurene Powell Jobs's Emerson Collective, Macro produced feature films such as *Fences*, *Mudbound*, and *They Cloned Tyrone*; television series such as *Raising Dion* and *Gente-fied*; and documentaries such as *Dear Mama*, all centering around people of color and, more often than not, Black people.<sup>13</sup> Macro expanded into talent management in 2019 by launching Macro Management, which became M88 in 2020 after King's former WME colleague and partner, Philip Sun, joined the company. They subsequently announced some headline client signings that included Michael B. Jordan, Donald Glover, Ryan Coogler, Tina Mabry, and Issa López.

Since establishing Macro, King has taken on the role of being the company's figurehead and the face of its brand, invoking his agenting work to legitimate the company's mission. King has stated, "I've been sitting in these [Hollywood] rooms for the last 15 years. The studios aren't focused on it; the packagers aren't focused on it . . . There's a huge void and a huge opportunity."<sup>14</sup> Hence, when King and Sun launched M88, they declared that representing talent would "amplify the voices of artists and creators from the global new majority." Indeed, King bristles at the description of people of color as minorities, stating:

that's a term that doesn't even come out of my mouth. Our industry is global, our business is global, our thought process is global. That's why I even called my company Macro. There are others who thought it was small and niche – micro – but we think macro, the big picture. We think global.<sup>15</sup>

Evidently, King frames Macro's mission as socially and culturally beneficial *and* as a tremendous business opportunity. Thus, King states, "We definitely are going to make billions, but we want to do it in a smart and thoughtful way as we elevate communities while also doing good business."<sup>16</sup>

In these terms, Macro is part of the commercial Hollywood system but appears to break from its racist industry logics in four main ways. First, Macro seems to break from the logic that films and television series with authentic stories about people of color will not perform well in the mainstream marketplace because they cannot appeal to an imagined White middle-America and, more acutely, because they lack a universal quality to appeal to international audiences. As scholars such as Monica White Ndounou and Timothy Havens have explored, White culture has historically been seen as universal and suitable for being circulated globally, while the culture of people of color is regarded as particular and its global circulation restricted.<sup>17</sup> This has the circular effect of limiting the finance that is made available for films and television series with people of color, who then receive disproportionately fewer opportunities and lower pay than their White counterparts.<sup>18</sup> King gestures to the hardships that Black producers and creators face in securing finance for their productions when he recalls how Macro co-financed *Fences*. Noting that Paramount only agreed to provide distribution and 25 percent of the budget after Macro partnered with Bron Creative, a financing arm of Canadian studio Bron Media Corporation, to fund the first 75 percent, King stated, "If a film like that couldn't get made without Macro's and Bron's capital then that shows you the issues and the need for a company like Macro."<sup>19</sup>

Second, Macro breaks from tendencies for talent representation firms that specialize in representing people of color to be conceptualized as boutique. As Nancy Wang Yuen states, "When actors of color are denied access or are not prioritized by talent agents, their prospects are limited. The barriers get worse as the talent agencies grow in prestige."<sup>20</sup> The top agencies' undervaluing of diversity has contributed to creating a multitiered Hollywood system where smaller agencies with few connections to studio executives and directors often specialize in representing most talent of color who they are forced to submit for auditions for marginal and racially stereotyped roles.<sup>21</sup> This is symptomatic of challenges that Black businesses have historically faced in the United States, as they are often forced to target Black consumers while being granted limited access to wider markets.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Black businesses usually have finite lifespans as larger White-owned businesses, which do not face the same market restrictions, ultimately take over their most profitable areas of operation.<sup>23</sup> King, however, promises to make Macro into a billion dollar enterprise and states that his ambition is for it to have a wide cultural resonance like Disney and DreamWorks.<sup>24</sup>

Third, in a contemporary Hollywood industry where the number of talent agents of color remains disproportionately low,<sup>25</sup> Macro breaks from conceptualizations that the ideal talent intermediary is White. In his study of Black civil rights attorneys, Kenneth W. Mack found that Black communities often rejected Black attorneys because they thought that to succeed in a White-dominated system, it was necessary to align themselves with someone White.<sup>26</sup> These sentiments are echoed in the present day with, for example, agent Tiauna Jackson recalling that a Black female actor without any credits explicitly stated that she wanted a White agent because she thought it was necessary for her to succeed.<sup>27</sup> These



preconceptions create problems for agents of color who end up being caught between appealing to the needs of the White-dominated system and those of their own racial group. They are required to appear exceptional, representing the highest aspirations and greatest potential of their social group, and authentic, someone as much like the masses of their social group as possible.<sup>28</sup>

Fourth, Macro appears to break from “Hollywood’s plantation arrangement,” which is a system inherited from plantations where Whites, including slave owners, used Black bodies for White entertainment.<sup>29</sup> Hollywood’s plantation arrangement sees Whites disproportionately located at the center of Hollywood’s hegemonic economic structures, with mostly White male executives maintaining the power to greenlight productions and privileging works with the potential to appeal to White audiences.<sup>30</sup> It also sees relationships between African Americans and Whites rooted in a “tradition of ownership, guidance, and responsibility,” while people of color in Hollywood productions are regularly reduced to marginal roles with a lack of “emancipated consciousness.”<sup>31</sup> With teams made up mostly of people of color, Macro helps address a deficit in the number of talent intermediaries of color within Hollywood’s upper-echelons and may enhance the authenticity of stories told by creators of color and the visibility of people of color on screen. Consequently, King claims that Macro is equipped to challenge stereotypes in Hollywood productions: “Now you’ve got a collective community of artists – and even representatives and producers – with that level of consciousness, speaking up in ways that had not been heard before.”<sup>32</sup>

## Scrutinizing the Entrepreneurial Discourse

While Macro’s and King’s missions appear highly commendable, their rhetoric requires more scrutiny. Accordingly, this section conducts a qualitative analysis of the promotional and critical discourse surrounding King in the form of press reports and interviews. It especially scrutinizes how King cultivates a “great leader” branded reputation and entrepreneurial discourse, one that circulates prominently around industry senior executives who are disproportionately White men.<sup>33</sup> In doing so, the section draws on a critical media industry studies approach that, as Amanda Lotz explains, is useful for interrogating the narratives of “masterful executive plans” by recognizing executives’ “circumscribed agency,” and for considering how their position-taking reflects “presumptions about the commercial viability” of different creative work and how they adopt the priorities of their superiors.<sup>34</sup> Critically analyzing interviews also involves being aware that journalists have “negotiated relationships” with the industries they cover.<sup>35</sup> Journalists can provide favorable stories about their interviewees because they rely on them for insights on “behind-the-scenes” goings-on and gain reputational capital from their connections, while individuals working within the industry depend on journalists for certain types of exposure.<sup>36</sup>

Critical narratives that chart King’s rise from the William Morris mailroom to agency partner and Macro CEO position him as a visionary fulfilling his master plan. King recalls proclaiming that he would become the head of a diversified media company when he graduated from Howard Law 15 years earlier.<sup>37</sup> He talks about having been inspired to become

an entrepreneur after reading the biography of African American businessman Reginald F. Lewis, titled *Why Should White Guys Have All the Fun?*, and about how he decided to become an agent after discovering that media moguls such as David Geffen and Barry Diller began their careers in agency mailrooms.<sup>38</sup> King claims that before he accepted the position in the mailroom, he mapped out his entire career for his future wife and showed her a *Vanity Fair* article about media “titans” that started their careers the same way.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, he explains that he was very deliberate in joining William Morris’s prestigious training program because, as an African American, he wanted to be seen taking the same path as these “legendary people.”<sup>40</sup>

King also recalls his experiences working at William Morris. He asserts that he had to work harder than his White counterparts and began signing clients and building relationships with the agency executives even during his time working in the mailroom.<sup>41</sup> He purportedly crafted proposals about the shifting demographics in the United States and the impact that hip-hop and urban culture was having on popular youth culture, which the agency executives purportedly understood.<sup>42</sup> Key milestones in King’s ascendancy reportedly included his signing of DMX around the time that the rapper began starring in movies such as *Romeo Must Die* and *Exit Wounds*; signing Tyler Perry and packaging his first feature film, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, which he sold to Lionsgate in an “unprecedented deal” that saw Perry retain the rights before it went on to become a “massive hit”; negotiating finance and distribution deals for *Hustle & Flow*, which was written and directed by his client Craig Brewer, before it became the biggest sale ever at the Sundance Film Festival; and signing *Hustle & Flow*’s star Terrence Howard before he was nominated for Best Actor at the 2006 Academy Awards.<sup>43</sup> King’s accomplishments are presented in the critical discourse as manifestations of his supposedly exceptional vision and willingness to break from conventional industry thinking. Hence, one report summarized, “Where he went off script . . . King was becoming a kingmaker for black culture.”<sup>44</sup>

Portrayals of King as a “great leader” and narratives about his master plan are also reinforced by the critical materials’ general designs. King features on the cover of *The Quintessential Gentleman* magazine’s 2022 power issue in a producer’s chair above a tagline that reads, “The Most Powerful Man in Hollywood.” He is pictured by Waymaker in Macro’s casually styled offices alongside the headline, “A New Script,” and tagline, “Charles D. King is rewriting the Hollywood success story.” His interview with *Complex* is part of the media platform’s “Blueprint” series that sees interviewees providing career instruction based on their individual journeys. The video interview is organized thematically into “lessons” that include “Pay Your Dues” and “Capitalize on Disruption,” which appear as captions, as though teaching audiences a series of industry truths that King embodies.<sup>45</sup> Entrepreneurialism is foregrounded in the title of Chad Sander’s podcast, “Direct Deposit: What Happens When Black People Get Rich.” Appearing as a guest in an episode on “ways of staying free,” King describes freedom as a “state of mind” and points to a world of “endless opportunity.”<sup>46</sup> Bloomberg’s *Portrait* series, meanwhile, is presented as investigative journalism and described as a show that “subverts the traditional profile, going deeper by telling stories, both through and around a compelling leader.”<sup>47</sup> Bloomberg’s episode on King, titled “How This Black Mogul Is Disrupting the Movie Business,” makes the Macro CEO’s disruption of the industry appear to be a fact, as opposed to a discursive construction.<sup>48</sup>

At stake in the discourse surrounding King is the extent that Macro is perceived as autonomous of White Hollywood and whether King is capable of exerting agency to enact change. As Stuart Hall has famously stated, however, Black popular culture is a “contradictory space” and site of “strategic contestation” that cannot be simplified in terms of “simple binary oppositions.”<sup>49</sup> While King’s recollections imply he strategically navigated William Morris’ corporate culture, his work must be understood as having been shaped by the William Morris agency. Talent agencies create institutional cultures that socialize their agents, and King’s socialization occurred at a time when multiculturalism and diversity were already being reconceptualized as valuable marketing angles.<sup>50</sup> King bases his personal journey around models of White entrepreneurialism (with even the title of Lewis’s biography pointing to an adherence), and his decision-making was often underpinned by efforts to secure the validation of White executives.

In these terms, King’s comments about being understood by Hollywood executives can be interpreted in reverse to mean that *he* understood what *they* wanted. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that King’s proposals and work would be well received by senior executives seeking greater revenues in new markets. Yet rather than being a disruptive figure, King may have adhered to their narrow conceptions of Blackness. The unifying feature of King’s client roster was that his clients were mostly people of color, especially African Americans. While this could have stemmed partly from King’s own attempts to work with people with whom he felt a shared sense of identity, it is also symptomatic of executives’ segregated thinking, that is, their racially inflected preconceptions about what an African American agent’s work and career should look like. King also negotiated deals for features that would broadly fit into the hip-hop gangsta cycle, such as *Barbershop* and *Hustle & Flow*, but did so after it had peaked in the 1990s. While some scholars have noted that films from this cycle helped Black talent secure jobs, they point out that Hollywood executives who targeted young male audiences privileged them at the expense of more diverse representations of Blackness.<sup>51</sup> This exemplifies how King’s reputation as a disruptive agent was being retrospectively configured after he established Macro.

While the stories of Macro’s productions are arguably broader than those of the hip-hop gangsta cycle, the company still produces within certain parameters according to distributors’ particular expectations. More specifically, Macro cultivates prestige to legitimate its mission by leveraging notions about King’s exceptional taste and producing projects that can secure positive reviews and awards. While *Fences* was languishing in development since the late 1980s when Paramount acquired the rights for Eddie Murphy to star, King’s justification for Macro’s financing of the film, as described above, is underpinned by impressions about its quality that solidified after it garnered acclaim. Moreover, King’s interview with Bloomberg features Ted Sarandos, the co-chief executive officer of Netflix and a very powerful figure in the screen media industries who King had already enlisted to sit on Macro’s advisory board, recalling how the Macro CEO sold *Mudbound* to him by promising, “I know that you will get it.”<sup>52</sup> Sarandos says that King was proved right about the project’s quality, “as he always is,” because *Mudbound* became Netflix’s first “original” movie to be Oscar-nominated.<sup>53</sup>

Netflix is a company that has cultivated a branded reputation for disrupting the traditional media industries and offering consumers productions of exceptional quality of a kind that



seems neglected by Hollywood.<sup>54</sup> The Bloomberg interview sees the two chief executives engage in a mutually beneficial exchange that bolsters impressions of both men and their companies as tastemakers and disruptors. Yet King's pursuit of legitimacy is a strategic move typical of Black cultural producers' attempts to navigate an American cultural terrain that continues to be very ambivalent about Black cultural presence.<sup>55</sup> Attempts to cultivate prestige can be problematic, however, by perpetuating representational modes that are already regarded as respectable while limiting the forms that certain discussions can take and contributing to the marginalization of Black behaviors that deviate from White middle-class norms.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, King's and Sarandos's mutual exchange adds to the inflated impression of King's power within the industry. Yet Virginia Crisp and Roderik Smits distinguish between cultural intermediaries, such as King, and gatekeepers, such as Sarandos, by pointing out that although they work in the spaces between production and consumption and contribute to the creation of symbolic value, the former do not have much influence over distribution.<sup>57</sup> These distinctions matter because they provide a clearer picture of Macro's dependency on larger companies and reign in expectations about what King can really achieve.

While interviews provide King with an opportunity to highlight barriers that many Black people experience in their working lives, the entrepreneurial discourse contributes to neoliberal myths about meritocracy that present commercial success as tonics to inequality. King describes mailroom training as part of a routine requirement that everyone, and not just people of color, in the industry must work hard and suffer to succeed. "This is what you do in the industry, people pay their dues, start from the ground floor up," he says, as *Complex* offers the first lesson of King's blueprint.<sup>58</sup> Yet while King builds his brand around enhancing the visibility of people of color in Hollywood, diversity agendas that measure progress based on achieving representational parity can obscure Hollywood's systemic racism.<sup>59</sup> Hence, these neoliberal myths are particularly contentious when understood within a context where Black socioeconomic inequalities are used as evidence that Blacks have a poor work ethic and where the "great leader" discourse circulates disproportionately around White men.<sup>60</sup> Rhetoric about paying one's dues suggest that reward inevitably comes to those who work hard, but these impressions increase the likelihood of exploitation and frustrate people who get passed over unfairly for progression.<sup>61</sup> King also downplays discrimination in the industry by attributing his position as the lone African American in the mailroom to the training program's competitiveness and by describing the lack of people of color at the largest agencies as "just what the shape of the town was."<sup>62</sup>

Finally, the "great leader" discourse is problematic when it surrounds narratives of racial progress because it underrepresents the contributions of more anonymous activists, including a disproportionate number of women, and obfuscates the need for collective long-term planning and fortitude in bringing about change by suggesting that victories will inevitably accumulate once the "right" leader is chosen.<sup>63</sup> Whether or not King is the right leader to bring about gains toward social equality is entirely elided in the celebrations of him. Accordingly, King is arguably placed into a bind, as he is compelled to promote Macro by adhering to the media's entrepreneurial frameworks, which blunt social activism by relegating collective action and critical thinking by making progress under neoliberalism appear inevitable.

## Macro and the Distribution of Black Films

This section conducts a qualitative analysis of the theatrical distribution and box-office returns of several Macro feature films using data collected from IMDbPro and BoxOfficeMojo. More specifically, the section analyzes discrepancies between the films' domestic and international distribution and box-office returns and compares data around *Fences*, *Roman J. Israel, Esq.*, and *Just Mercy* to other films released in the same calendar years with similar budgets, those also in the \$20 million to \$30 million range, which also made at least \$10 million at the domestic theatrical box-office. Doing so, the section maps the distribution of several of Macro's feature films onto longer-term trends by building on the work of scholars such as Ndounou and Kim Minjeong and Rachelle J. Brunn-Bevel, who have analyzed data from sites such as BoxOfficeMojo and The Numbers to examine distribution patterns and box-office revenues of Black-cast films relative to White-cast films up to the early 2010s.<sup>64</sup> As a result, the section challenges the claims made in the promotional discourse about King's and Macro's purported disruption of the industry.

While primary data from distribution companies is rarely accessible, the analysis of distribution and box-office data sourced from sites such as BoxOfficeMojo has proven to be an effective method for analyzing market trends. A recent article published in this journal analyses such data to conduct a productive investigation of the specialty film market, while the article's author, Yannis Tzioumakis, cites Thomas Schatz's finding that databases such as The Numbers and BoxOfficeMojo provide "the most consistent, comprehensive and reliable" box-office data.<sup>65</sup> Such databases are, however, imperfect. IMDbPro and BoxOfficeMojo receive data from sources including film studios, distributors, and sales agents,<sup>66</sup> but Hollywood studios can misreport budgets and profits as they engage in "creative accounting" or seek to avoid a film being labeled as a flop.<sup>67</sup> In emerging markets, distributors may also have less rigorous methods for gathering box-office data.<sup>68</sup> To mitigate against these issues, data has been cross-checked using other sources and, in certain instances when comparing between the films in the datasets, it is necessary to limit the analysis to countries where information is available. Crucially, any potential limitations with the data are likely to be very minor in the context of the global distribution and box-office patterns being discussed and are very unlikely to impact the overall conclusions, given the significant differences in the findings, as we will see.

Distribution comprises myriad activities taking place at the micro-industrial, as well as the macro-industrial, levels. The major studios' Los Angeles-based home offices responsible for handling domestic distribution are divided into departments that deal with activities including theatrical distribution, nontheatrical distribution, exhibitor services, legal affairs, and financial administration.<sup>69</sup> The studios also operate international offices for overseeing the theatrical and nontheatrical distribution of English language titles in different sized markets.<sup>70</sup> As Havens and Courtney Brannon Donoghue have shown, distribution executives can play a substantial role in shaping which types of productions get green-lit or acquired as they feedback information about the types of productions that they understand as being the most likely to appeal to audiences in their different markets.<sup>71</sup> Havens' *Black Television Travels* shows how distribution executives adopt "institutionalized discourses" about race and

how, during an era of mass media, a discourse of “cultural universals” structured ideas about what appealed to audiences in the domestic and Western European markets that Hollywood executives prioritized. This contributed to marginalizing African American popular culture as executives appeared unable to “think outside the bounds of whiteness.”<sup>72</sup> These insights help establish that a film’s Black cast and representations do not cause box-office failure but that Black-cast films’ lower than average returns in international theatrical markets is driven by the racially biased preconceptions of studio and distribution executives that developed within a wider political economy that encouraged companies to target undifferentiated White audiences.

At the time of writing, Macro has produced 16 feature films. It does not act as a distributor, so it relies on other companies to get its films in front of audiences. Netflix acquired the exclusive rights to five, namely, *Mudbound*, *Tigertail*, *Really Love*, *Frybread Face and Me*, and *They Cloned Tyrone*. Six more were given domestic theatrical releases by major studios or their specialty divisions, including *Fences* (Paramount), *Roman J. Israel, Esq.* (Sony Pictures), *Just Mercy* (Warner Bros.), *Nine Days* (Sony Pictures Classics), *Judas and the Black Messiah* (Warner Bros./HBO Max), and *Blue Bayou* (Universal’s Focus Features). Of Macro’s five other features, *Sorry to Bother You* was released domestically by the independent producer and distributor Annapurna Pictures, *The Land* and *Farewell Amor* were given limited theatrical releases by AMC Networks’ IFC Films, and *Blast Beat* and *Young. Wild. Free* have not been distributed. Meanwhile, Macro’s two fiction television series, *Gentefied* and *Raising Dion*, were distributed by Netflix, and its two documentaries, *The Apollo* and *Dear Mama*, were released by HBO and FX Network/Hulu, respectively. In 2022, Macro also signed a first-look agreement for its feature films with Amazon Studios. Macro’s dependency on the major studios and streaming services for distribution is symptomatic of the increasing vertical integration in the screen media industries that has been allowed to occur under neoliberal governments since the 1980s and is a manifestation of the major distributors’ tendencies to spread risk to less powerful and more precarious independent production companies.<sup>73</sup> Macro’s subservient position undermines notions that King and his company can effectively disrupt the industry.

*Judas and the Black Messiah* was released simultaneously by WarnerMedia on HBO Max and in cinemas during the COVID-19 lockdowns, taking only just over 7.5 million dollars globally at the theatrical box-office. *Farewell Amor* made less than 5,000 dollars at the domestic box-office before it was released for streaming in Africa by Netflix and in most other territories internationally by MUBI. Given that streaming services do not usually release their viewing figures, and with two of Macro’s features not receiving distribution at all, the data on the global commercial performance of its features is limited. Of the 16, there are just six—*Fences*, *Roman J. Israel, Esq.*, *Sorry to Bother You*, *Just Mercy*, *Nine Days*, and *Blue Bayou*—with the international and domestic box-office data needed to make comparisons. As Table 1 shows, however, the disparities between these films’ domestic and international box-office takings are stark. The total domestic earnings for the six films at the theatrical box-office stands at \$124.7 million compared to a total of just \$23.8 million internationally, an 84 to 16 percent split. *Fences* earned the most domestically with a \$57.7 million gross return, while *Just Mercy* earned the most internationally with a return of \$14.9 million.

**Table 1.** Domestic and International Performances of Six Macro Productions

Film Title	Year	Budget	Total Box-Office	Domestic Box-Office	Domestic as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	International Box-Office	International as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)
<i>Fences</i>	2016	\$24m	\$64.4m	\$57.7m	89.5	\$6.7m	10.5
<i>Roman J. Israel, Esq.</i>	2017	\$22m	\$13.1m	\$12.0m	91.8	\$1.1m	8.2
<i>Sorry to Bother You</i>	2018	\$3.2m	\$18.2m	\$17.5m	96.3	\$0.7m	3.7
<i>Just Mercy</i>	2019	\$25m	\$50.9m	\$36m	70.7	\$14.9m	29.3
<i>Nine Days</i>	2020	\$10m	\$1.0m	\$0.7m	71.8	\$0.3m	28.2
<i>Blue Bayou</i>	2021	\$6.5m	\$0.9m	\$0.8m	85.8	\$0.1m	14.2
Totals with <i>Just Mercy</i>			\$148.5m	\$124.7m	84.0	\$23.8m	16.0
Totals without <i>Just Mercy</i>			\$97.6m	\$88.7m	90.9	\$8.9m	9.1

Discrepancies between the features provide a reminder that several variables can influence commercial performance, including genre, stardom (for which race is an important element but not the only one), source material, budget, marketing strategy, and critical acclaim. Broadly speaking, Macro's features are all specialty films, which tend to be made on low-to-medium-sized budgets and have character-driven stories, low-key aesthetics, and non-linear and open-ended narratives.<sup>74</sup> Geoff King posits that specialty films, including indie productions and so-called quality Hollywood films, exist on a spectrum ranging from the relatively avant-garde to the more mainstream and that the authenticity of the marketing is important in appealing to a core audience.<sup>75</sup> *Nine Days*, an unusual drama that tells the story of a reclusive Black man interviewing human souls for the opportunity to be born, and *Sorry to Bother You*, an absurdist comedy that follows a young Black male telemarketer who adopts a white voice and uncovers a corporate conspiracy that involves making workers part equine, lie at the less mainstream end. *Sorry to Bother You*'s release by Annapurna, which has a strong track record of working on some unusual specialty productions such as *Her* and *Spring Breakers*, may partly explain the film's significant success in the domestic market. *Nine Days* disappointed at the domestic box-office, however, despite the film's release by Sony's specialty division. This points to the substantial volatility at the lower end of the market where most low budget films struggle to gain traction, while a few breakouts can make very healthy returns. Conversely, *Just Mercy* resides at the more mainstream end because of its medium-sized budget and presence of stars, Michael B. Jordan, Jamie Foxx, and Brie Larson. In its depiction of a young Black male attorney's defense of people on death row, it also borrows prison drama conventions from popular films such as *The Green Mile* and *The Shawshank Redemption*.

Distributors also regularly give specialty films a platform release comprising a limited release targeting a core niche audience followed by a widening into more theaters after they garner acclaim and word-of-mouth builds. *Fences*' domestic distribution demonstrates how



important the awards season was. The film performed very well during the festive period but dropped off during January before Paramount widened the film's theatrical release going into February ahead of the Academy Awards. *Fences*' domestic success was probably also aided by its stars Denzel Washington and Viola Davis, who received acclaim for their performances, including Oscar nominations (with Davis winning best supporting actress), and by its source material, the acclaimed play of the same title by African American August Wilson. In contrast, *Roman J. Israel, Esq.* delivered disappointing returns at the domestic box-office following mixed responses from critics despite some praise for its star, Washington. The film's title might have also put off audiences by leading them to expect more of a biographical drama than the relatively conventional thriller that it is. A comparison between Macro's features and films with predominantly White casts, however, indicates that no variables were anywhere near as significant at the international box-office as race and the way that the films were treated by distribution executives because of it.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 show how *Fences*, *Roman J. Israel, Esq.*, and *Just Mercy* performed relative to other live-action and English language films with similar budgets that were released in the same calendar years. The tables show that the three Macro productions' returns from the international box-office as a percentage of their overall gross is below their datasets' total averages and even further below when other features with Black casts or leads are removed. Consequently, Macro's features and most of the other Black-cast films rank poorly compared to the White-cast films in the list when they are ordered according to this metric. Out of 22 films, *Fences* (10.5 percent) ranks 20th, with two other features with Black casts, *Barbershop: The Next Cut* (2.9 percent) and *Boo! A Madea Halloween* (2.2 percent), sitting below it. *Roman J. Israel, Esq.* (8.2 percent) sits 22nd of the 23 films in its dataset. Only *Boo 2!* (2.1 percent), the Halloween sequel that was created by and stars Tyler Perry, sits below *Roman J. Israel, Esq.*, while the two features directly above it, *Kidnap* (11 percent) and *Fist Fight* (21.9 percent), also have Black leads in Halle Berry and Ice Cube, respectively. Despite *Just Mercy* outperforming all other Macro films at the international box-office, it still places in the bottom half in its dataset (11th out of 17). All five of the Black-cast films in its dataset, including *Us*, which was the highest earner domestically, rank in the bottom eight when the features are ordered by this metric, which also make up 50 percent of the films that sit below the Macro production.

The discrepancies between the domestic and international takings for Macro's features are consistent with previous findings that Hollywood typically fails to distribute and promote Black-cast films as strongly as White-cast films in international theatrical markets.<sup>76</sup> The discrepancies indicate that the discourse of "cultural universals," which is inherently rooted in White culture, has restricted the international distribution of Black-cast films as it has Black-cast television.<sup>77</sup> The presence of other Black-cast films toward the bottom end of the scale when the features are ordered by their international returns as a percentage of their overall gross provides a reminder that the color-coded barriers that restrict the international theatrical distribution of Black-cast films is not unique to Macro. It is a paradox that in an era where studios increasingly focus on recouping costs and generating profits from international markets,<sup>78</sup> they still neglect the international market when it comes to the distribution of Black-cast films. It appears that the lore about Black-cast films not traveling is more powerful than the lore about the increasing importance of the international theatrical market.<sup>79</sup>



**Table 2.** Films with a US \$20–30–m Budget (Inclusive) Released during 2016 Ordered by Domestic Box-Office Revenue

	Film Title	Production Budget	Black Cast or Lead (Not Part of an Ensemble)?	Domestic Distributor	Total Box-Office	Domestic Box-Office	Domestic as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Domestic Earnings Relative to Budget (%)	International Box-Office	International as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Number of International Countries Listed
1	Hidden Figures	\$25.0m	Yes	Twentieth Century Fox	\$236.0 m	\$169.6m	71.9	678	\$66.3m	28.1	55
2	La La Land	\$30.0m	No	Lionsgate	\$447.4m	\$151.1m	33.8	504	\$296.3m	66.2	75
3	Bad Moms	\$20.0m	No	STX Entertainment	\$183.9m	\$113.3m	61.6	566	\$70.7m	38.4	58
4	Boo! A Madea Halloween	\$20.0m	Yes	Lionsgate Films	\$74.8m	\$73.2m	97.8	366	\$1.6m	2.2	4
5	The Boss	\$29.0m	No	Universal Pictures	\$78.8m	\$63.3m	80.3	218	\$15.6m	19.7	30
6	Fences	\$24.0m	Yes	Paramount Pictures	\$64.4m	\$57.7m	89.5	240	\$6.7m	10.5	22
7	Me Before You	\$20.0m	No	Warner Bros.	\$208.4m	\$56.2m	27.0	281	\$152.2m	73.0	36
8	Barbershop: The Next Cut	\$20.0m	Yes	Warner Bros.	\$55.7m	\$54.1m	97.1	270	\$1.6m	2.9	6
9	Money Monster	\$27.0m	No	TriStar Pictures	\$93.3m	\$41.0m	44.0	152	\$52.3m	56.0	59
10	Nerve	\$20.0m	No	Lionsgate	\$85.3m	\$38.6m	45.3	193	\$46.7m	54.7	67
11	Risen	\$20.0m	No	Sony Pictures	\$46.8m	\$36.9m	78.9	184	\$9.9m	21.1	36
12	Dirty Grandpa	\$25.0m	No	Lionsgate Films	\$94.1m	\$35.6m	37.8	142	\$58.5m	62.2	47
13	Mother's Day	\$25.0m	No	Open Road Films	\$48.8m	\$32.5m	66.6	130	\$16.3m	33.4	37
14	Hail, Caesar!	\$22.0m	No	Universal Pictures	\$63.6m	\$30.5m	47.9	139	\$33.1m	52.1	47
15	Florence Foster Jenkins	\$29.0m	No	Paramount Pictures	\$48.9m	\$27.4m	56.0	94	\$21.5m	44.0	37

(Continued)

**Table 2.** Films with a US \$20–30–m Budget (Inclusive) Released during 2016 Ordered by Domestic Box-Office Revenue (Continued)

	Film Title	Production Budget	Black Cast or Lead (Not Part of an Ensemble)?	Domestic Distributor	Total Box-Office	Domestic Box-Office	Domestic as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Domestic Earnings Relative to Budget (%)	International Box-Office	International as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Number of International Countries Listed
16	<i>Bad Santa 2</i>	\$26.0m	No	Broad Green Pictures	\$24.1m	\$17.8m	73.8	68	\$6.3m	26.2	24
17	<i>The Infiltrator</i>	\$28.0m	No	Broad Green Pictures	\$21.0m	\$15.4m	73.5	55	\$5.6m	26.5	25
18	<i>The Founder</i>	\$25.0m	No	The Weinstein Company	\$24.1m	\$12.8m	53.0	51	\$11.3m	47.0	46
19	<i>Triple 9</i>	\$20.0m	No	Open Road Films	\$23.2m	\$12.6m	54.5	63	\$10.5m	45.5	31
20	<i>The Light Between the Oceans</i>	\$20.0m	No	Walt Disney Studios	\$26.0m	\$12.5m	48.3	63	\$13.4m	51.7	54
21	<i>Café Society</i>	\$30.0m	No	Lionsgate	\$43.8m	\$11.1m	25.4	37	\$32.7m	74.6	43
22	<i>Nocturnal Animals</i>	\$22.5m	No	Focus Features	\$30.3m	\$10.7m	35.2	47	\$19.6m	64.8	49
								Total average		40.9	40.4
								Average without Black-cast films		47.6	44.5

**Table 3.** Films with a US \$20–30–m Budget (Inclusive) Released during 2017 Ordered by Domestic Box–Office Revenue

Film Title	Production Budget	Black Cast or Lead (Not Part of an Ensemble)?	Domestic Distributor	Total Box-Office	Domestic Box-Office	Domestic as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Domestic Earnings Relative to Budget (%)	International Box-Office	International as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Number of International Countries Listed
1 Wonder	\$20.0m	No	Lionsgate	\$315.0m	\$132.4m	42.0	662	\$182.6m	58.0	73
2 A Bad Mom's Christmas	\$28.0m	No	STX Entertainment	\$130.6m	\$72.1m	55.2	258	\$58.4m	44.8	62
3 A Dog's Purpose	\$22.0m	No	Universal Pictures	\$205.0m	\$64.5m	31.5	293	\$140.5m	68.5	64
4 The Shack	\$20.0m	No	Lionsgate	\$96.9m	\$57.4m	59.2	287	\$39.6m	40.8	42
5 The Darkest Hour	\$30.0m	No	Focus Features	\$150.8m	\$56.5m	37.4	188	\$94.4m	62.6	64
6 Atomic Blonde	\$30.0m	No	Focus Features	\$100.0m	\$51.7m	51.7	172	\$48.3m	48.3	67
7 Boo 2! A Madea Halloween	\$25.0m	Yes	Lionsgate	\$48.3m	\$47.3m	97.9	189	\$1.0m	2.1	8
8 Going in Style	\$25.0m	No	Warner Bros.	\$85.2m	\$45.0m	52.8	180	\$40.2m	47.2	38
9 Fist Fight	\$22.0m	Yes	Warner Bros.	\$41.2m	\$32.2m	78.1	146	\$9.0m	21.9	20
10 Kidnap	\$21.0m	Yes	Aviron Pictures	\$34.8m	\$31.0m	89.0	147	\$3.8m	11.0	26
11 Molly's Game	\$30.0m	No	STX Entertainment	\$59.3m	\$28.8m	48.5	96	\$30.5m	51.5	61
12 Rings	\$25.0m	No	Paramount Pictures	\$83.1m	\$27.8m	33.5	111	\$55.3m	66.5	52
13 Logan Lucky	\$29.0m	No	Bleeker Street Media	\$48.5m	\$27.8m	57.3	96	\$20.7m	42.7	65
14 Victoria & Abdul	\$21.0m	No	Focus Features	\$66.6m	\$22.2m	33.4	106	\$44.3m	66.6	56

(Continued)

**Table 3.** Films with a US \$20–30–m Budget (Inclusive) Released during 2017 Ordered by Domestic Box-Office Revenue (Continued)

Film Title	Production Budget	Black Cast or Lead (Not Part of an Ensemble)?	Domestic Distributor	Total Box-Office	Domestic Box-Office	Domestic as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Domestic Earnings Relative to Budget (%)	International Box-Office	International as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Number of International Countries Listed
15 <i>Rough Night</i>	\$20.0m	No	Sony Pictures Releasing	\$47.3m	\$22.1m	46.7	111	\$25.2m	53.3	43
16 <i>Sleepless</i>	\$30.0m	Yes	Open Road Films	\$32.9m	\$20.8m	63.1	69	\$12.1m	36.9	31
17 <i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Long Haul</i>	\$22.0m	No	Twentieth Century Fox	\$40.1m	\$20.7m	51.7	94	\$19.4m	48.3	15
18 <i>Chips</i>	\$25.0m	No	Warner Bros.	\$26.8m	\$18.6m	69.4	74	\$8.2m	30.6	27
19 <i>The Zoo-keeper's Wife</i>	\$20.0m	No	Focus Features	\$26.2m	\$17.6m	67.2	88	\$8.6m	32.8	43
20 <i>Father Figures</i>	\$25.0m	No	Warner Bros.	\$25.7m	\$17.5m	68.1	70	\$8.2m	31.9	27
21 <i>Flatliners</i>	\$20.0m	No	Columbia Pictures	\$45.2m	\$16.9m	37.4	84	\$28.3m	62.6	66
22 <i>Battle of the Sexes</i>	\$25.0m	No	Fox Searchlight	\$18.6m	\$12.6m	68.0	51	\$6.0m	32.0	18
23 <i>Roman J. Israel, Esq.</i>	\$22.0m	Yes	Sony Pictures Releasing	\$13.0m	\$12.0m	91.8	54	\$1.1m	8.2	20
							Total average		42.1	43.0
							Average without Black-cast films		49.4	49.1

**Table 4.** Films with a US \$20–30–m Budget (Inclusive) Released during 2019 Ordered by Domestic Box-Office Revenue

	Films with a 20–30–m Budget (Inclusive) Released during 2019 Ordered by Domestic Box-Office Revenue	Production Budget (Million Dollars)	Black Cast or Lead (Not Part of an Ensemble)?	Domestic Distributor	Total Box-Office Gross	Domestic Box-Office	Domestic as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Domestic Earnings Relative to Budget (%)	International Box-Office	International as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Number of International Countries Listed
1	Us	\$20.0	Yes	Universal Pictures	\$256.1m	\$175.1m	68.4	875	\$81.0	31.6	66
2	Glass	\$20.0	No	Universal Pictures	\$247.0m	\$111.0m	45.0	555	\$136.0m	55.0	55
3	Hustlers	\$20.0	No	STX Entertainment	\$157.6m	\$105.0m	66.6	525	\$52.6m	33.4	40
4	Downton Abbey	\$20.0	No	Focus Features	\$194.7m	\$96.9m	49.7	484	\$97.8m	50.3	57
5	Good Boys	\$20.0	No	Universal Pictures	\$111.2m	\$83.1m	74.8	416	\$28.0m	25.2	50
6	Annabelle Comes Home	\$30.0	No	Warner Bros.	\$231.3m	\$74.2m	32.1	247	\$157.1m	67.9	46
7	Yesterday	\$26.0	No	Universal Pictures	\$154.6m	\$73.3m	47.4	282	\$81.3m	52.6	63
8	A Madea Family Funeral	\$20.0	Yes	Lionsgate	\$74.7m	\$73.3m	98.0	366	\$1.5m	2.0	11
9	Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark	\$25.0	No	Lionsgate	\$104.5m	\$68.9m	65.9	276	\$35.6m	34.1	62
10	A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood	\$25.0	No	Sony Pictures	\$67.9m	\$61.7m	90.8	247	\$6.2m	9.2	23
11	Pet Cemetery	\$21.0	No	Paramount Pictures	\$113.1m	\$54.7m	48.4	261	\$58.4m	51.6	55

(Continued)



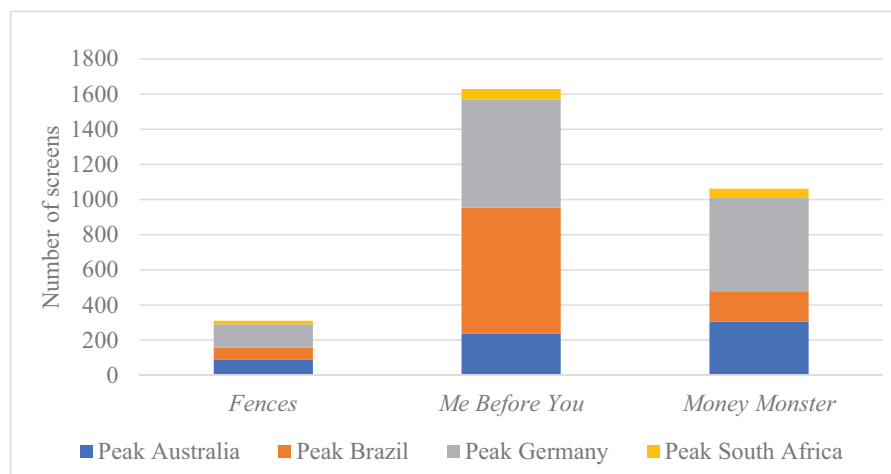
**Table 4.** Films with a US \$20–30–m Budget (Inclusive) Released during 2019 Ordered by Domestic Box-Office Revenue (Continued)

	Films with a 20–30–m Budget (Inclusive) Released during 2019 Ordered by Domestic Box-Office Revenue	Production Budget (Million Dollars)	Black Cast or Lead (Not Part of an Ensemble)?	Domestic Distributor	Total Box-Office Gross	Domestic Box-Office	Domestic as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Domestic Earnings Relative to Budget (%)	International Box-Office	International as Percentage of Overall Gross (%)	Number of International Countries Listed
12	<i>What Men Want</i>	\$20.0	Yes	Paramount Pictures	\$72.2m	\$54.6m	75.6	273	\$17.6m	24.4	16
13	<i>Little</i>	\$20.0	Yes	Universal Pictures	\$49.0m	\$40.9m	83.4	204	\$8.1m	16.6	21
14	<i>The Gentlemen</i>	\$22.0	No	STX Entertainment	\$115.2m	\$36.5m	31.7	166	\$78.7m	68.3	51
15	<i>Just Mercy</i>	\$25.0	Yes	Warner Bros.	\$50.9m	\$36.0m	70.7	144	\$14.9m	29.3	30
16	<i>The Hustle</i>	\$21.0	No	United Artists	\$97.4m	\$35.4m	36.4	169	\$62.0m	63.6	60
17	<i>The Art of Racing in the Rain</i>	\$20.0	No	Walt Disney Studios	\$33.8m	\$26.4m	78.2	132	\$7.4m	21.8	21
								Total average			
								Average without Black-cast films			
									37.5	42.8	
									44.0	48.6	

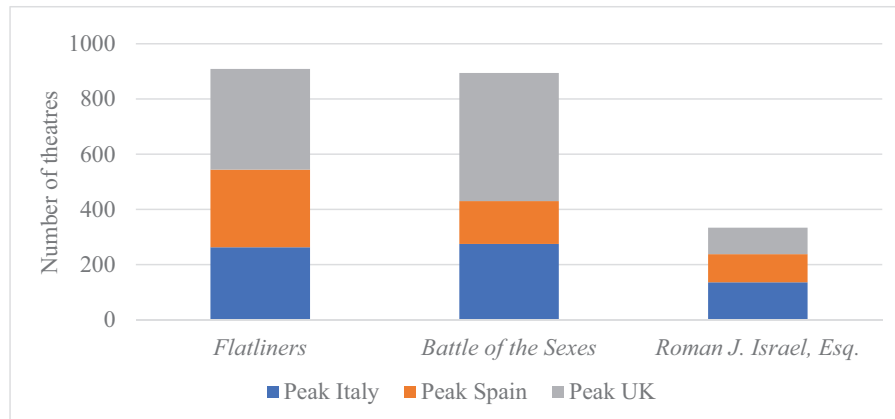
As Yuen explains, although Hollywood executives acknowledge the existence of racial inequalities, they often “deflect the blame onto colorblind factors.”<sup>80</sup> A prevalent tactic is Hollywood executives’ tendencies to blame the market.<sup>81</sup> Yet Tables 2–4 show that Macro’s productions were released in substantially fewer countries than the dataset averages. *Fences* (22) and *Roman J. Israel, Esq.* (20) were released in less than half that of their dataset averages when Black-cast films are removed (44.5 and 49.1, respectively). *Just Mercy* (30) fares slightly better but still compares unfavorably (48.6).

The three features were also released on fewer screens in most of the territories where the films were released. Charts 1, 2, and 3 show the peak number of screens that *Fences*, *Roman J. Israel, Esq.*, and *Just Mercy* appeared on in different countries with relatively large markets in their respective regions alongside two White-cast films that performed most similarly at the domestic box-office. Macro’s features were released on significantly fewer screens than the White-cast features, and these disparities add up to create vast differences in the films’ international market sizes. Even though Macro’s productions were released more widely in a few countries (for example, *Just Mercy* was on more screens in Brazil at its peak than *The Hustle* was), the margins in these instances in favor of Macro’s productions are nowhere near enough to balance out the overall discrepancies.<sup>82</sup> The number of theaters in which films are screened affects how widely available they are for most audiences and usually correlates closely with the distributor’s marketing spend. Accordingly, this data confirms that Black-cast films often perform poorly internationally because they are not properly backed by Hollywood distributors.

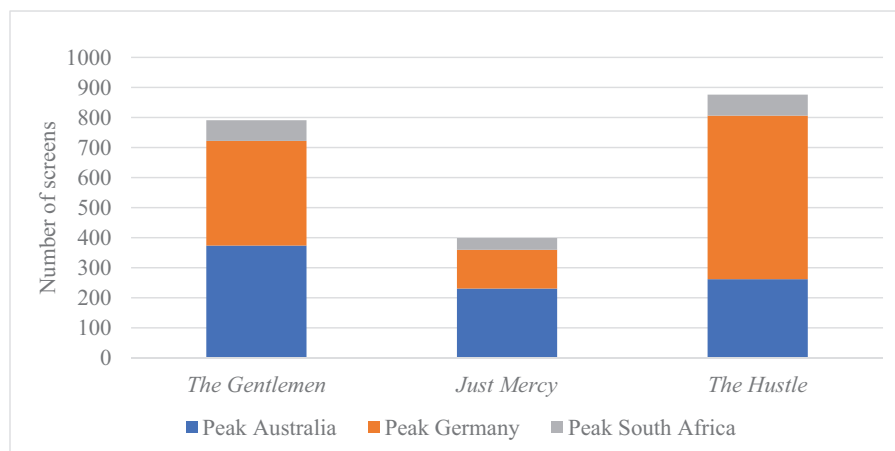
Yeun argues that Hollywood executives extrapolate the failure of projects with a cast comprising mostly people of color as the market failure of the entire racial group while “White male-led projects’ failures are treated as a result of something other than their race,” and, consequently, executives continue backing them.<sup>83</sup> Thus, even some features that made



**Chart 1.** A comparison of the cumulative number of screens for three features across four different countries



**Chart 2.** A comparison of the cumulative number of screens for three features across three different countries



**Chart 3.** A comparison of the cumulative number of screens for three features across three different countries

substantially less money back than Macro's productions at the domestic box-office were given greater opportunities to succeed at the international box-office. For example, *The Founder* and *Light between the Oceans* made only 51 and 63 percent of their budgets back at the domestic box-office, respectively, compared to *Fences*' impressive 240 percent return, yet they were both released in more than double the number of countries internationally and in significantly more theaters. The limited international distribution of Macro's features and other Black-cast films carries implications down the line because a successful theatrical release remains important in providing features with exposure and setting their value in subsequent markets, such as video-on-demand. Hollywood's aversion to risk, or what Kim and Brunn-Bevel describe as a "logic of safety,"<sup>84</sup> thus contributes to limiting the exposure

of Black-cast films and to sustaining the brand names of White stars while restricting the development of the brands of Black talent, including some of Macro's clients.

According to Kim and Brunn-Bevel, even though most discussions of globalization regard the global to be represented by US power and the local to be everywhere else, "local and global encounters are heterogeneous."<sup>85</sup> Consequently, Kim and Brunn-Bevel posit that people of color in the United States can be conceptualized as "a local point in a mediascape dominated by . . . Hollywood's global film businesses."<sup>86</sup> This helps delineate not only between Macro's productions and Hollywood's blockbusters but also between Macro's Black-cast features and other forms of specialty film. Thus, while Michael Newman has described American indie cinema as a form of national culture in part because American indie films often appear at prestigious international festivals alongside films from World Cinema,<sup>87</sup> the data around Macro's productions shows that international box-office returns as a percentage of world-wide returns is an area where a clear distinction exists between them and other specialty films, such as *La La Land*, *Hail, Caesar!*, and *Light between the Oceans*. This distinction goes beyond a simple indie cinema versus Hollywood cinema dichotomy to point toward a further stratification of US cinema where Macro's features are never only specialty because they are frequently, if not always, conceptualized as local due to their Blackness or, less often, Brownness.

## Conclusion

In 1991, during a period when more films with Black casts appeared to be being produced, Black filmmakers complained, as their predecessors had in earlier periods, that their films fell victim to inadequate distribution and marketing campaigns.<sup>88</sup> This article has shown that Macro's feature productions, like most others with Black casts released during the late 2010s and early 2020s, continued to be disadvantaged when it came to their distribution and marketing in international theatrical markets. The problem stems from Macro's dependency on the major studios for distribution and on the unrelenting and narrow-minded ways that executives involved in international theatrical releasing think that Black-cast productions cannot appeal to mass international audiences because they lack universal qualities. As a result, Macro remains stuck in a deep-rooted and vicious cycle holding back Black production, as the limited returns from the international box-office means that the company struggles to continue making features at the mid-budget level and is unable to fulfil King's ambitions of creating more mainstream productions at higher budgets, and as the company continues to operate in a highly segregated industry that challenges its very survival.

And yet, these are not the impressions that one gets from the promotional and critical discourse. Despite King's occasional comments about the need for more Black ownership in Hollywood, the discourse frames him as a very powerful (if not the most powerful) man in Hollywood, someone who is supposedly achieving his destiny by fulfilling his exceptional vision to disrupt the industry, and makes Macro appear to be a global company that is breaking barriers for Black talent and communities of color. King and his colleagues do not complain, therefore, about the inadequate international theatrical distribution that Macro's features

receive as much as their forebears did, while the discourse depicting Macro as a successful global business makes the situation appear rosy. Arguably, King's complaints are stymied by his attempts to build Macro's brand and court favor by ingratiating himself within the industry, while Hollywood's White-owned businesses and executives champion King because his Black body and narratives about his successful journey appear to offer proof of the industry's progress toward improving diversity. This reminds us why it is important to thoroughly scrutinize the position-taking of Hollywood executives, especially when they are filtered and disseminated through the trade press, which is so susceptible to the industry's PR strategies.

Whether streaming provides Macro with more opportunities to reach a global audience is difficult to determine given subscription streaming services' reluctance to release viewing data. The promotional rhetoric claims that streaming is beneficial, with King announcing Amazon's first-look deal with Macro as a way for sharing the company's on-going mission with a global audience and describing Amazon as sharing the same "long-horizon strategic [way of] thinking."<sup>89</sup> Yet several studies have shown that American-based subscription streaming services' global infrastructures are spread unevenly; that their cost and reliance on high-speed broadband often makes them prohibitive to poorer consumers, especially in the global South; and that niche content regularly gets buried under the most mainstream features and series.<sup>90</sup> The role of streaming in the distribution of Black-cast films represents a potentially fruitful avenue for future research. Further research might also delve deeper into how the discourse of "cultural universals" informs the practices of film distribution executives on the ground to explore to what extent the inherently white cultural discourse limits the distribution of Black-cast productions across screen media during an era of convergence.

Although the discourse surrounding King can sometimes be positive in the sense that it occasionally sheds light on the discrimination that people of color face in Hollywood and advocates for more diverse productions by framing diversity as advantageous culturally and economically, it is highly problematic as well. More specifically, the rhetoric of disruption surrounding King and Macro is built on shaky narratives about his past achievements and successful navigation of White corporate environments and makes change seem to be occurring even when it is not. The "great leader" entrepreneurial discourse reinforces neoliberal ideas about meritocracy in the industry that appear to justify the status quo and preserve unequal labor relations between most White men and people of color and women. In other words, the discourse of disruption surrounding the "great leader" is conservative, despite appearing progressive. The point is not to call out King for being some kind of hypocrite but rather to highlight the limitations of what a Black-run independent talent management and production company can achieve in a highly consolidated industry, and to highlight how notions of diversity anchored around narratives of individual success contribute to reinforcing impressions about a post-racial society that obscure structural issues and the continuation of Hollywood's racist logics.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Andrew Stubbs-Lacy is Senior Lecturer of Film Industries and Studies and Post-graduate Research Coordinator of the Department of Creative Industries at the University of Staffordshire. His monograph, titled *The Talent Management of Indie Authorship: From American Independent Cinema and Short "Films" to Pay-TV and*



*Streaming* and published by Edinburgh University Press in 2024, explores the roles that talent managers and producers play in packaging and promoting screen media products by constructing their clients and collaborators as indie-auteurs.

<sup>2</sup> Ana-Christina Ramón, Michael Tran, and Darnell Hunt, *Hollywood Diversity Report 2023: Exclusivity in Progress, Part 2: Television* (UCLA, 2023), 22; Ana-Christina Ramón and Darnell Hunt, *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods, Part 1: Film* (UCLA, 2020), 13, 18.

<sup>3</sup> See also, Ramón et al., *Hollywood Diversity Report 2023*, 66.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy Wang Yuen, *Reel Inequality* (Rutgers University Press, 2018), 22; Monica White Ndounou, *Shaping the Future of African American Film: Color-Coded Economics and the Story behind the Numbers* (Rutgers University Press, 2014), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Amanda Lotz, "Building Theories of Creative Media Industry Managers: Challenges, Perspectives, and Future Directions," in *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries*, ed. Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo (New York University Press, 2014), 28–9.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (University of California Press, 2005); Jacqueline Bobo, "'The Subject Is Money': Reconsidering the Black Film Audience as a Theoretical Paradigm," *African American Review* 50, no. 4 (Commemorative Issue) (2017): 839–50; Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Essential Essays*, vol. 2, ed. David Morley (Duke University Press, 2019), 63–82; Racquel J. Gates, *Double Negative* (Duke University Press, 2018).

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- <sup>12</sup> Natalie Jarvey, "Agent Charles King Exits WME to Launch Multicultural Media Firm (Exclusive)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 5, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/agent-charles-king-exits-wme-761010/>
- <sup>13</sup> Macro takes producer credits for some productions for which it contributes finance but for which it plays a very minimal role in the actual development and production. For example, Macro gained a producer credit for providing gap finance for *Fences*, which was produced by Todd Black, through his company Escape Artists, and the film's co-star and director, Denzil Washington, while Macro executives, King and Poppy Hanks, took executive producer credits.
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- <sup>15</sup> Rebecca Sun, "M88's Phillip Sun and Charles D. King Blaze Trail For 'Global Majority,'" *Diaspora*, May 17, 2021. <https://thediasporatimes.com/2021/05/17/m88-founders-phillip-sun-charles-d-king-macro-diversity-inclusion-representation/>
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- <sup>27</sup> Matt Donnelly, "Tiauna Jackson Becomes First Black Woman Elected to Association of Talent Agents Board," *Variety*, December 15, 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/tiauna-jackson-association-talent-agents-board-1235134308/>.

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- <sup>29</sup> Ndounou, *Shaping the Future of African American Film*, 31–34.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 7.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 31.
- <sup>32</sup> Sun, “M88’s Phillip Sun and Charles D. King Blaze Trail.”
- <sup>33</sup> Lotz, “Building Theories of Creative Media Industry Managers,” 28–9.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 28–32.
- <sup>35</sup> Mark Gallagher, *Another Steven Soderbergh Experience: Authorship & Contemporary Hollywood* (University of Texas Press, 2013), 112.
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- <sup>37</sup> Callahan-Bever, “How Charles D. King Won Oscars and Made Millions,” <https://www.staymacro.com/directory>, under Charles D. King.
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- <sup>39</sup> Thomas, “From Mailroom Employee to CEO.”
- <sup>40</sup> Thomas, “From Mailroom Employee to CEO”; Jason Kelly, “Portrait: How This Black Mogul Is Disrupting the Movie Business,” *Bloomberg*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2021-06-29/how-this-black-mogul-is-disrupting-the-movie-business-video>.
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