The tropes that birth the hero

It is admirable that *Bonhoeffer* endeavors to highlight Black life. But one must be careful that the Black life of one's representation is not playing in the dark of caricatured Black people.

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David Jonsson, Clarke Peters, and Jonas Dassler in *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Spy, Assassin*

Several years ago, I wrote a book about the impact of the academic year Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent in Harlem in 1930–31. He was a foreign exchange student, albeit a

very unusual one: he had completed a PhD by age 21 and a habilitation (a second dissertation) by 24, which qualified him for a faculty position in the German academy before he arrived at Union Seminary at age 24 for one last year of study.

He was clearly a different kind of student from his peers at Union, not only in his age and accomplishments but also in the interests that brought him there. In his own words, he came to the States to “learn theology as it has developed under completely different circumstances than our own in Germany.” He was searching for something that he described as “a cloud of witnesses.” In New York, he encountered a political faith witness that left its mark on him from that moment forward and helped inspire his lifelong effort to dislodge Christianity from its attachments to lethal authoritarian forces in Germany.

This is where I connect with Bonhoeffer: in his impulse to dislodge Christianity from sources that make the faith indistinguishable from harmful ideologies and practices. I approach the study of Bonhoeffer constructively, through the lenses of the Black church and Black theology, a tradition of the Christian faith that he found deeply inspirational while he was in New York. He was inspired by the lack of compartmentalization that he saw in Black Christianity, that it places one’s whole being under the gospel—with no space for the separation of faith and politics or of public and private life. Additionally, he was impressed by Black Christians’ ability to disentangle Jesus from historically lethal forces that appropriate him as an avatar for devious and harmful purposes.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I offer my account of *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Spy, Assassin.* The independent film was acquired by Angel Studios for broad distribution. There is a widespread assumption that it is an adaptation of the biography by the far-right provocateur Eric Metaxas; it is not. Some have also speculated that it may be based on my book, *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*. That is also not the case. Although I can see the influence of my book on screenwriter and director Todd Komarnicki’s depictions of Bonhoeffer’s experiences in Harlem, he engages that work with an interpretation and a creativity all his own. As such, the movie’s representation of Bonhoeffer is uniquely the product of the filmmaker’s imagination.

I spent two days on the set while the movie was being filmed, and I was even an extra in a church scene. I also helped one of the film’s executive producers locate genuine Bonhoeffer quotes to help distinguish his real words from statements falsely attributed to him.

It took a while for me to appreciate just how different artistic and academic representation are. Apart from the acronyms in the screenplay that I did not understand, it was challenging to follow the way a scene is crafted to show a concept rather than explain it. The film takes license with Bonhoeffer's story—placing him in settings and experiences that the real Bonhoeffer never knew—in creative fidelity to his historical experience without putting the audience through tedious explanation.

For example—without spoiling anything—in one scene the film uses music to demonstrate an idea of empathy, an idea I also describe in my book. Bonhoeffer has arrived in New York, still grieving tremendous war losses in his family and his home country. He enters Harlem in that state and is changed by what he experiences there. In the film all of this is creatively illustrated. Bonhoeffer makes an empathic connection with Harlem's Black jazz community through the medium of music—a stand-in for empathy itself—blending songs as dissimilar as oil and water. Yet in this imaginative representation they intermingle effortlessly to form something new, unique, and beautiful. The blending turns Bonhoeffer into something more than he was before.

This is an artist's rendering of Bonhoeffer becoming a student in Black Harlem, through exposure to Black Church and Harlem Renaissance artists and intellectuals. (If you watch the film, be on the lookout for the character Walter's favorite song. It represents more than it appears to.)

I also have my objections to the movie, and they are not what others have alluded to elsewhere. My concern is not primarily about how accurately the film represents scenes from Bonhoeffer's life—I recognize that the film is a work of art. I am also not concerned that Bonhoeffer is depicted as jettisoning theology for political activism. This does seem silly to me—he was a brilliant theologian until the very end—and there is certainly plenty of room to critique it. But it is not what I object to in the film.

I am most concerned with the representation of Black and Jewish people, minoritized demographics routinely caricatured in film and other media. My concern is best characterized by what Toni Morrison describes as "playing in the dark," in her short book of that name. *Black* and *dark* are phenotypically racial categories. They serve as the hypervisual and fictional backdrop by which the White, normal protagonist can be seen.

Both Blacks and Jews are darkened figures that aid Bonhoeffer in renewing himself as a nonracist, non-Aryan German. They figuratively produce him in the story. That work is accomplished by a troping of the film's non-White people. The work that the Jew does is different than what the Black does, but they are similar; thus they are both the dark, fictitious backdrop. In New York, Bonhoeffer is liberated from White supremacy; in Germany, he is liberated from Aryanism. The Black and the Jew become tropes to represent this transformation—a figurative rebirth from the dark womb. This is the imaginative invention of Bonhoeffer. Those who view the film are meant to undergo their own reproduction.

Historically, Black and Brown people are depicted in these stereotypical ways as conceptual props to aid in the creation of the White protagonist. This is what Toni Morrison describes as *Africanisms*, "the denotive and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people." Africanisms are the literary and artistic mechanisms that habitually invent and reinvent perceptions of Black people in any given White depiction of Black life—in film and in literature—in order to make the protagonist a hero. Such representations are always also in service to hierarchies that structure our life together in the United States.

The White hero almost always needs this prop. He doesn't develop his special qualities on his own; they are bestowed through encounters with "the Magical Negro," a term popularized by filmmaker Spike Lee. This trope is an Africanism. The White protagonist is a troubled figure who becomes a moral hero—a powerful figure, a wise figure—by an encounter with this self-sacrificial, uniquely powered Black figure, who appears on the scene at a crucial moment and, using their magic, empowers the White hero.

Sometimes the Magical Negro has supernatural powers, like John Coffee in *The Green Mile* or Bagger Vance in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. Sometimes he's endowed with simple-minded wisdom, like Mark Twain's Jim, who bestows upon the protagonist the ability to be the story's moral hero. In the plotline of this Black caricature there is no way for the protagonist to become the hero he will be without an encounter with the Magical Negro.

As I researched Bonhoeffer's experience in Harlem, I was eager to learn and to introduce the world to the real story of Albert Owen Franklin Fisher: one of a handful

of Black students at Union with Bonhoeffer, and the one credited with introducing him to Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. To know Fisher is to have a more accurate depiction of Black life at that time and space. It also recovers Fisher, and thus Black life, from standard Africanisms that inform the racial, sexual, capitalist hegemony of a Eurocentric imagination of Black people.

In the film, Bonhoeffer's friend Fisher has no background to speak of. His first appearance is with the developed protagonist, Dietrich, whom he refers to as "D," in a manner that is dissonant with the ethos of the historical Fisher's educated Southern, Black Baptist family manner. The film's Fisher is sassy, colloquial, and wise. At another point in the film, Bonhoeffer is a victim of racist violence and is comforted by Fisher, who has daily knowledge of such experiences. That strange moment when a Black man is comforting a White recipient of White racist violence leaves the moviegoer puzzled. Although the intention seems to be to demonstrate Bonhoeffer's experience of empathy in Harlem, it is near impossible to escape turning Fisher into a Magical Negro in the process.

The same representational challenge happens with Abyssinian Baptist. The viewer is not made aware of how deeply the congregation was embedded within the political life of the Black Harlem community, advocacy undertaken for Black civil rights, and relief for Black people crushed by the Great Depression. The viewer will not know that Abyssinian pastor Adam Clayton Powell was a founding member of the National Urban League, which was formed in the effort to aid Black migrants making their transition from the violently racist South to the differently racist North during the Great Migration. Nor will they know that Powell maintained an active role in the NAACP as a stalwart advocate for Black people in what was both a watershed moment and a deeply distressing moment in Black history. The complexity of that space where Bonhoeffer sought to "learn theology as it has developed under completely different circumstances" matters, if we are to avoid the common problem of troping.

The historical Bonhoeffer met the Black social gospel at Abyssinian Baptist, with its emphasis on the well-being of the whole person, as opposed to being merely a community with an evangelical emotionalism about Jesus. Gary Dorrien describes the Black social gospel as the ongoing post-bellum tradition of the antebellum Black abolitionist Christian message. With the Black social gospel there is no possible way to separate the political and the theological—not when one is calling out to God for relief from state-sanctioned bondage and abuse. Only Whites can contemplate

salvation without concern for the politics that target dark people. The historical Powell did not have that luxury, and neither did his church.

Additionally, the Yale-educated giant in the pulpit did not know the fears of being chased by gangsters or the police; nor did he know a dramatic evangelical conversion. Such caricatures remove the complexity one must engage to know real Black people in a White racist world. Unfortunately, it is the tropes that give birth to the mythic White hero.

I offer this analysis to help readers think through a set of questions: Why this film? Why now? And most importantly, why is the film done in this way, which is to say, in the way of the trope?

These are questions about the reception of Bonhoeffer. It is a most noble gesture that the film endeavors to highlight Black life in the reception of Bonhoeffer in our space and time. But as I have explained, one must be careful that the Black life of one's representation is not playing in the dark of caricatured Black people. The question of race is on one side of this problem, and the question of nation-state is on the other. How has the film been conceived to address our present moment of racial and national crisis?

Today we are, like Bonhoeffer was, witnesses to evil appearing in what he called "the form of light, of beneficence, of faithfulness, of renewal." We are experiencing another appearance of terrible contradictions characteristic of a nation that refuses to address its historical racial trauma. We know our contradictions. We ignore them when interactions with our real neighbors are lodged inside stereotypes. We disregard them when the nation views the traumatic past through a contrived narrative of mythic greatness. And rather than confront the evil in the cavern of contradictions without looking away, our national community refuses to address it—and thus the trauma returns repeatedly, and we are reconstituted in repressed trauma.

We must do better. And we will—if we engage the world as it really is, contradictions and all. Not as we create it in our imagination.

This film may bring more attention to Bonhoeffer on American soil than any other medium has. It will have a broad viewership—and it should. You should go see it. Once you have, remember that it is an artistic depiction—and if it interests you, pick up a book about him. Watch a documentary. Learn from his complicated Christian

efforts to resist fascism in his day so that he can help us address the evils of our time. I’m sure the historic Bonhoeffer would be pleased with that.