

**Jhonni Dixon**  
**Sacred Heart Greenwich**  
**NYU – Tisch School of the Arts**

**First Place**  
**Essay #9**

***A Thousand and One***

In film and television, Black female characters are often stereotyped as the “angry Black women,” or the “Black best friend.” Their characters typically have no development and their purpose is to enliven the white characters’ storyline. In response, Black girls begin to think their *own* stories, and lives, are insignificant. Directed by A.V. Rockwell, *A Thousand and One* is one of the best directorial debut films I have seen all year. Set in the ‘90s and 2000s Harlem, the film follows a woman named Inez as she kidnaps her young son, Terry, from the foster care system, finding a new home with him in an ever-changing City. Inez fights for her and Terry’s livelihood against systemic racism and gentrification, pointing out how Black women, especially Black mothers, are often targeted by society; survival itself becomes a triumph.

*A Thousand and One* is a Black film that breaks stereotypes. Teyana Taylor’s performance as Inez showcases a confident, strong-willed, empathetic woman who is *unapologetically Black*. Inez powers through every obstacle she meets with a fiery determination, whether it be jumpstarting a haircare side hustle, finding an apartment with affordable pricing, or instilling honorable morals in her son. Although she is constantly told she is unsuitable to care for Terry, she ignores the comments and fights to provide him with a good life. Inez gives Terry a chance to succeed in a world determined to watch him suffer. This film helped me solidify my own identity as a Black woman by emphasizing the

importance of self-assurance. I see myself in Inez, as a Black woman who strives to defy society's expectations of Black women.

*A Thousand and One* also gave me a new perspective on family. My cousin, who my parents adopted before I was born, has struggled with substance abuse issues for years, always going between living with my family and living on the streets. His decisions have not been the best; he often disrespects, manipulates, and uses my parents for his own benefit. However, my mother in particular has always found it in herself to forgive him, which I resented because time after time, he never changed. In the third act of the film, it's revealed that Terry is not Inez's biological son. After he was left on the sidewalk when he was a baby, Inez decided to take him in as opposed to allowing him to be taken into foster care. She saved him from the abusive, racist system that almost destroyed her in order to give him a better chance at life than he would have in the system. In doing so, she saved not only him but herself.

After the reveal, my first thought was of my mother. She grew up in an impoverished, emotionally abusive household. As a result, many of her seven siblings succumbed to substance abuse issues. This film helped me realize that my mother does not constantly forgive my cousin because she cannot say no to him, but perhaps because she does not want him to feel hopeless; she wants him to have a chance at a better future. Although my cousin is not her biological son, she wants him to have a better chance at life than he would have otherwise. She is constantly pushing him to change his habits and rise to the person she knows he can be, and this film helped me see that. Like Inez and her son, my mom is batting a "thousand and one" on my cousin. This film provided me with a new insight into not only their relationship but my own definition of family.

*A Thousand and One* is a beautiful example of the kinds of films I wish to create in the future; heartfelt, intimate, and layered. I want to tell stories of Black female characters that break stereotypes - the Black girl who's top of her class, the Black girl who rules and fights for her kingdom, and the Black girl who gets to experience the full realm of human emotion and interaction. When I watch films, I'm not only thinking about the story, but *feeling* it- how certain lighting represents a character's solitude, how camera angles reflect power dynamics, or even how camera movement can emphasize the importance of a moment in a character's life. Connecting with these visual elements makes me feel like my emotional experiences are not isolated; I am not alone. There are so many aspects of the human experience and film has the power to capture them all.