

It's a White-Washed Life

Andrea Lin

She lives in an orphanage, has hair as big as her personality, and wears a smile full of hope that has won the heart of a billionaire time and time again – and she'll be played by Quvenzhané Wallis this December in the 2014 film version of *Annie*. When a census from modern day America's adoption system reports that only 16.1% of adopted children are African-American, it makes sense that Annie would more likely be black than white with ginger hair.

The trailer, released in March, was met with extreme reactions, from the enthusiastic to the not-as-enthusiastic. Twitter-user Nana News responded to the new adaption, “how is a black girl playing Annie in the Anne remake? A fucking travesty [sic].” This and many similar reactions arose over a traditionally white character being played by an African-American actress (with numerous acting awards and nominations despite only being 11 years old). Their arguments echoed a very similar issue brought up just a year ago when African-American actor Michael B. Jordan was signed on to play The Human Torch in the reboot of the movie *The Fantastic Four*.

Among these claims, angry fans remark that were the situation reversed, there would not be this kind of backlash and discussion occurring – that in fact, because of this, they were being held to a double standard, a type of “reverse racism” and discrimination.

They're right. Almost.

What is colloquially known as “white-washing” or the act of casting white actors in roles meant for minorities has a history that reaches back since minstrel shows in the 19th century to the beginning of Hollywood and still exists today. *Huffington Post* writer Amanda Scherker reports on this long winding history, beginning from the 1930s when a white actor named Warner Oland portrayed the overly caricatured comic book detective Charlie Chan in a series of movies “often wearing...yellowface or assuming exaggerated accents and movements.” Although offensive stereotypical representations increasingly drew critique, Hollywood's practice of casting white actors as minority characters continued, whitewashing roles such as Genghis Khan, Othello, Cleopatra, the Prince of Persia, Tonto, etc.

So this reverse situation that some fans talk about? It's already been happening, and it happens a lot, and although people react, it never reaches this level of outrage in mainstream media. What this situation isn't, is “reverse racism”. The refusal to accept an African-American in a traditional leading role is a by-product of just plain racism.

In most media, audience members are expected to relate to white- characters who represent a universal figure. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, a Sociology professor at Duke University and author of *Racism without Racists*, writes that, “[o]ur visual culture expects...that people of color suspend belief and become white-like, otherwise, ‘no soup for you’.” Since white-leading movies are so prevalent, minorities will watch such movies without question, which creates a white-normative culture. In this way, the effects and traces of racism still thrive today without being detected. As

author and University of California at Santa Barbara professor Robert Samuels writes in his analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, "all modes of representation... in our current culture tend to idealize the desire for whiteness and devalue the presence of blackness." With most roles being made for white actors to begin with, the best chance for a minority actor to land a part is for them to audition for roles that are specifically meant for a person of color. Whitewashing roles effectively exacerbate the lack of minority representation in media and harm the image of minority communities.

Andrew Weaver, an associate professor in the Telecommunications Department at Indiana University, found, "the failure to cast minority actors in even a few such roles represents a missed opportunity to potentially break down audience-held stereotypes." Movies and other media are not only reflections of ourselves, but also incredibly influential determinants of our values. The message we send when we whitewash roles meant for minorities convey to our youth that if they are a minority, they are not important enough to be leading players.

This problematic message also reveals the deeper inequalities of minority representation in media. Why aren't there more roles? Why do minority characters have to be roles specifically about race? Weaver's studies on audience reaction to movies with casts of different racial make-up concluded that Hollywood was caught in "a vicious cycle: Producers are hesitant to cast minorities in race-neutral romantic roles because of a fear that the White audience will perceive the films as 'not for them', but White audiences perceive romantic films with minorities as 'not for them' because they seldom see minorities in race-neutral romantic roles." The vicious cycle leads to an even more intricate contradiction that underlays the problem of racism: do we pretend to be colorblind and risk erasing the history of discrimination and injustices, or do we highlight race and risk limiting minorities to be defined only by their ethnicity?

Both of these choices lie at opposing sides of a spectrum, but the reality is we still struggle to view minorities as fully-fleshed individuals instead of one-dimensional side-kicks or a singular representation of a vast community. In an interview with radio talk show host Brooke Gladstone, Vincent Williams points out that "one of the continuing challenges for African-Americans, and particularly the African-American middle class, is to be seen as run of the mill." This result comes from perpetuating both extremes: being color-blind and being overly color-conscious. Currently, there is only one way to obtain the desired middle-ground, the idea of normality and of universal personhood – and that is by being white.

The real travesty within this modern re-make of *Annie* lies within the inability of mainstream media to accept an adaption with mainly people of color and yet marketed towards everyone. Although attempting to subvert the normalization of whiteness in media, some fans interpret the re-make as minorities "stealing" the role of traditionally white characters. The story of *Annie* was never meant to be "traditionally white" though; it was meant as a universal standard to relate to. The subversion of races in the new adaption also does not inflict nearly the same amount of harm as the practice of white-washing does.

Having an African-American character be played by a white actor (as opposed to having a white character be played by an African-American actor) takes away the already limited roles that minorities can play and erases the identities of minorities in reality. It essentially denies minorities

a reflection of their existence and devalues their worth accordingly. Dr. Michael D. Baran, a Harvard professor and founder of Cambridge Diversity Consulting, stated, "It is critical that children see all sorts of people playing both the good and the bad roles in media. Otherwise, they may take those absences as meaningful and it may affect how they understand social categories." The outrage over *Annie* reveals a much deeper wound within our conceptualizations of what it means to be a human being; it is this wound that allows us to disassociate an entire group of people from ourselves, to ignore the injustices done to them because it doesn't pertain to us, and to perpetuate a class system that raises human worth solely based on the lowering of others.

And yet, it is a wound that we are hesitant to address. We still see movies coming out today that white-wash characters, an issue that we promise to fix tomorrow. But in order to see a better tomorrow that we can love, we need to begin acting like it's already tomorrow, today.

Works Cited

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "The Invisible Weight Of Whiteness: The Racial Grammar Of Everyday Life In Contemporary America." *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 35.2 (2012): 173-194. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 17 Sept. 2014.

Kreider, Rose M., and Daphne A. Lofquist. *Adopted Children and Stepchildren: 2010*. US Census Bureau. Washington: US Census Bureau. Apr. 2014. Web. 17 Sep. 2014.

"Michael D. Baran, Cultural Anthropologist." Interview.Racebending.com. N.p., 22 Sept. 2009. Web. 17 Sept. 2014.

Nana News (Toxicityy1). "how is a black girl playing Annie in the Anne remake? a fucking travesty. jay z stays ruining every classic" 6 Mar. 2014, 12:53 AM. Tweet.

Samuels, Robert. *Writing Prejudices: The Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy of Discrimination from Shakespeare to Toni Morrison*. New York: SUNY Press, 2001. Print

Scherker, Amanda. "Whitewashing Was One Of Hollywood's Worst Habits. So Why Is It Still Happening?" *Huffington Post: Entertainment*. 10 Jul. 2014. Web. 19 Sep. 2014.

Vincent Williams. "In Other News." *On the Media*. NPR. WNYC, New York City. 10 Oct. 2008. Radio.

Weaver, Andrew J. "The Role of Actors' Race in White Audiences' Selective Exposure to Movies." *Journal of Communication*. (2011): n. pag. Web. 24 Sep. 2014.