Piérre Ramon Thomas

Dr. Tonya-Marie Howe

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"It's Possible!": An Argument for Multiraciality in Fantasy Films, Celebrating the Beauty of Black Women, and Disproving Myths Concerning Black-Actor-Led Films in Hollywood in Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1997 *Cinderella*

Fig. 1.1. Disney. Promotional image from 1997 Television Broadcast of *Cinderella*. 1997, Rodgers and Hammerstein's Website. Pictured (from left to right) Jason Alexander as *Lionel*, Paolo Montalbán as *Prince Christopher*, Brandy Norwood as *Cinderella*, Whitney Houston as *Fairy Godmother*, Bernadette Peters as *Stepmother*, Natalie Desselle Reid as *Minerva*, and Veanne Cox as *Calliope*.

Wide-eyed young Piérre was entranced, eyes fixed on the television, during a 5th-grade classroom screening of Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1997 *Cinderella*. I didn't know it at the time, but the feminine little Black boy that I was, connected with the glamour and regality and softness of the TV film's three main Black characters. Brandy Norwood, singer of "I Wanna Be Down", "Baby", "Best Friend", and "Sittin' Up in My Room", whose music and TV show, *Moesha*, I was clearly familiar with and very fond of, played the TV film's titular character. Whitney Houston, the woman who took my breath away circa 1992 with her cover of Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You" in *The Bodyguard*, played Fairy Godmother. And *thee* legend, the incomparable Whoopi Goldberg, who I had the utmost pleasure of watching in *Sister Act*, *Ghost*, *Jumpin' Jack Flash*, *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit*, *Sarafina!*, and *Corrina, Corrina*, played Queen Constantina, the mother of the prince. It should come as no surprise to anyone that, from that classroom screening in 1998 to now, I probably have watched this version of *Cinderella* over a hundred times—no hyperbole. I still watch it, for pleasure, to this day.

There are three versions of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*: the first one was broadcast in 1957, starring *Sound of Music's* Julie Andrews; the second one was broadcast in 1965, starring Lesley Ann Warren; and the third one was broadcast in 1997, starring Norwood. Looking specifically at the 1997 version of *Cinderella* through Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory reveals much about the film's politics, but many researchers have kept their evaluations of the film's politics at the surface level; not many go into detail. It's pretty obvious that, on the filmic level,[1] the characters are racially diverse, and on the production level,[2] the cast is ethnically diverse, but what else is being said beyond that? Are the producers of the TV film promoting an ideology? If so, what is it? Music professor, Graham Wood, rightfully observes that the 1997 version of

[1] Filmic level refers to the elements that constitute a film's narrative, for example, the characters.
[2] Production level refers to the elements that constitute a film's production, for example, the cast.

Cinderella is "visible social commentary" because of its "ethnically diverse cast" (114, 111). Okay. But what is that commentary?

First, we must acknowledge that it was "on the impetus of Whitney Houston" that the 1997 *Cinderella* was made in the first place; for years, Houston wanted to play Cinderella but felt, by the time the movie was greenlit, she was too old to play the part (Wood 111; James). It's important to acknowledge that because, as French writer Jean-Luc Comolli and film critic Jean Narboni put forth, "*[E]very film is political*, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it" (754). Knowing that Houston spearheaded the 1997 *Cinderella* helps us to understand what she and the production team were attempting to convey. Therefore, with that understanding in mind, I argue that the 1997 Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* is not simply just a multiracial adaptation of the 1957 and 1965 versions; the production team is making a case for multiraciality in fantasy films, they are celebrating the beauty of Black women, and they are disproving myths regarding Black-actor-led films that are pervasive in Hollywood.

The Presumption of Cinderella's Race

Nothing points to Cinderella's race in Charles Perrault's fairy tale "Cinderella; or, The Little Glass Slipper", which Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*s are assumed to be adapted from. Nothing points to her hair texture or the pigmentation of her skin. Cinderella, or "Cinderwench" as she's also referred to in the tale, is characterized as: "the most beautiful that mortal eyes have ever seen"; having "excellent ideas, and her advice was always good"; and being of "unparalleled goodness and sweetness of temper" (*Cinderella*). Readers glean from the tale that she's also helpful and forgiving. But nowhere did Perrault mention her race. Someone may argue, "It's assumed she's White because 'Cinderella' is a European tale." Wrong again. Even fairy tale scholar, Jack Zipes,

admits that “Cinderella” may have originated from either China or Egypt. The only addition Perrault made to the tale, reportedly, is adding the glass slipper component (Zipes 172). It could be argued that Cinderella is presumed to be White because of Disney’s widely popular representation of her in 1950: blonde hair, blue eyes, white skin. Yet, because there were no people of color in the background of the first two versions of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Cinderella*s, I argue that there was a more sinister reason.

The Historical Context in Which the 1957 and 1965 *Cinderella*s Were Broadcast

While the 1957 and 1965 iterations of *Cinderella* were being produced and broadcast, the nation was grappling with racial tensions stemming from a series of governmental actions regarding Jim Crow, segregation, voting and civil rights. On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981 mandating the desegregation of the U.S. military. Nearly six years later, the U.S. Supreme Court voted unanimously that separate but equal educational facilities for racial minorities is inherently unequal, violating the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, thereby outlawing segregation in public education. Prior to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s first *Cinderella*, which was broadcast in 1957, Rosa Parks’ refusal to relinquish her seat to a White patron sparked the more than year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott which did away with segregation on buses but not without the boycotters first being met with racial violence. The year the 1957 *Cinderella* was produced and broadcast, Dwight D. Eisenhower had to deploy federal troops to escort nine Black children, also known as the Little Rock Nine, to an all-White school in Little Rock, Arkansas because, a month earlier, the governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, ordered the Arkansas National Guard to block the Little Rock Nine from entry.

The 60s were just as bad. Three years after the Little Rock Nine incident, six-year-old Ruby Bridges had to be escorted to school for a full year by four federal marshals past a crowd of White adults lobbing racial slurs at the child and bringing a black doll in a coffin to their pro-segregation/anti-integration protests. Did I mention that the Little Rock Nine and Bridges were all children? Freedom Rides occurred the next year: Freedom Rides were bus trips occurring through the American South to protest segregated bus terminals. Similar protests occurred in the nation. Sit-ins, marches, and other civil rights demonstrations rallied for civil rights, voting rights, desegregation, and the end of unfair and unequal treatment of racial minorities. Civil unrest in the country led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but the fight was far from over; voting and housing rights were still on the agenda. The year the 1965 *Cinderella* was produced and broadcast, Bloody Sunday, the day in which Alabama state troopers met peaceful demonstrators in Selma with whips, nightsticks, and tear gas, occurred. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a march of more than two thousand across the Edmund Pettis Bridge prompting President Lyndon B. Johnson to address the nation, saying: “There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem . . . Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negros, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome”. Congress, later that year, passed the Voting Rights Act. (The Fair Housing Act wouldn’t be enacted for another three years.)

Now, of course, this isn’t a comprehensive coverage of history of the 50s and 60s, but pointing out such events are important to understand the racist sentiments and attitudes that pervaded American society and Hollywood during the productions and broadcasts of the first two *Cinderella*s. The problem with the 1957 and 1965 versions of Cinderella is not only that they feature only white people in the lead roles, it’s that not even as supporting or background characters

of the two versions are there people of color. This isn't surprising given that media studies professors Robert Stam and Louise Spence report, "Many American films in the fifties gave the impression that there were no black people in America" (239-240). I argue the exclusion of Black people in cinema was extended into the sixties, demonstrated by the 1965 *Cinderella*, which is indicative of the dominant ideology at the time. For "cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself to itself . . . The film is ideology presenting itself to itself, talking to itself, learning about itself" (Comolli and Narboni 755). The racial politics of the first two versions are, on the filmic level, Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color don't and can't exist in fantastical worlds, and on a production level, actors of color couldn't even be considered *to be considered* for casting positions because of the flagrant, explicit racism permeating American society in the 50s and 60s. The 1997 version repudiated the racial politics of the previous two.

The Multiraciality of the 1997 *Cinderella*

Disney's 1997 version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* is multiracial, from its background characters to its main cast. The main cast consisted of: Brandy Norwood (Black/African American), Whitney Houston (Black/African American), Paolo Montalbán (Asian/Filipino American), Bernadette Peters (White/European American), Whoopi Goldberg (Black/African American), Victor Garber (White/European American), Jason Alexander (White/European American), Veanne Cox (White/European American), and Natalie Desselle Reid (Black/African American). The film's multiracial theme is emphasized in the backgrounds of the opening/marketplace scene where Cinderella and Prince Christopher sing "The Sweetest Sounds" leading to the loveliest meet-cute, the ball scene where couples of every conceivable interracial

pairing are dressed in their finest threads and dance, and the wedding scene where people of all colors wave and participate in the celebration of Cinderella and Prince Christopher's marriage (*Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* 00:00:57-00:10:20; 00:41:30-01:02:44; 01:21:17-01:24:01). R. Eric Thomas of *Elle* aptly noted, "[P]eople of different races coexisted without comment." The fantastic biology[3] of heir Prince Christopher (Montalbán) to King Maximillian (Garber) and Queen Constantina (Goldberg), or daughter Minerva (Desselle Reid) to Stepmother (Peters) "wasn't treated as unusual or even remarkable" (Thomas). Houston's *Cinderella* makes it clear how, prior to its production, the world saw the "Cinderella" tale, specifically that all the characters were automatically White and characters of color couldn't and therefore didn't exist; Houston and her production team rejected this idea. The producers' rejection of the racial homogeneity of "Cinderella"—namely, that it's a White fairy tale—aligns with Hutcheon's idea that "adapters are first interpreters and then creators" (18). Producers intentionally making the third *Cinderella* multiracial, a stark deviation from its two predecessors, is commentary on how the first two *Cinderella*s by Rodgers and Hammerstein were received: as excluding people of color.

The 1997 *Cinderella* serves primarily as an argument for multiraciality in fantasy films. Multiraciality in fantasy films means casting actors of color, as well as White actors, in non-racialized roles in fantasy films. In fantasy stories that racialize their characters or feature the theme of race/racism in their narratives to address or provide commentary on race/racism—I am not referring to tales in this category. The type of fantasy films that allow for multiraciality are the narratives that, by their own design, don't racialize their characters nor have their characters experience racism. Fantasy film adaptations of this class, like Rodgers and Hammerstein's

[3] The term "fantastic biology" is borrowed from Marleen S. Barr's "Biology Is Not Destiny; Biology Is Fantasy: *Cinderella*, or to Dream Disney's 'Impossible'/Possible Race Relations Dream" from *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, which refers to the realistically impossible racial heredity of Prince Christopher and Minerva.

Cinderella, should aim for multiraciality to reflect the "colorblind society" White people often advocate for and claim to want.

The argument for multiraciality in fantasy films is an offshoot of the colorblind casting/blindcasting versus color-conscious casting debate. The practice of casting actors of color, usually in minor roles, in majority-White productions is commonly referred to in the movie-making industry as *colorblind casting* or *blindcasting*. The term is misleading because it insinuates that either racial casting is unintentional or that casters and producers are unaware of race in their casting decisions. Colorblind casting, being the misnomer that it is, would have people believe that casting directors or film productions simultaneously ignore actors' races and also take actors' races into account when casting to increase a production's diversity. Neil Meron, executive producer of the third *Cinderella*, in the same breath admitted that they employed color-blind casting for *Cinderella*, and that they "cast with diversity" (James). However, performing and media arts professor and author, Kristen J. Warner, challenges the contradiction, saying, "[T]o be diverse means intentionally seeing racial difference while blindcasting literally means to not see race. How can these two notions be in place at the same time?" (36). The linguistic failure of the terms *colorblind casting* and *blindcasting* goes back to our society's discomfort with acknowledging race; the term *color-conscious casting* is reminiscent of racist White people's hostility towards affirmative action—which studies have shown that White women benefit from the most. In denouncing affirmative action, and consequently, color-conscious casting, racist White people manufacture this societal nightmare where *unqualified* Black people or people of color take opportunities from qualified White people. That premise assumes that there are absolutely no *qualified* people of color to occupy the roles or opportunities they are supposedly "taking". (The pool of qualified Black talent runs deep, however.) Therefore, intentionally casting actors of color

in TV or film—whether in lead or supporting roles—is color-conscious casting. The 1997 *Cinderella* is a color-conscious casting and it's okay to say that it is.

During Kendra James' 20th anniversary interview with the 1997 *Cinderella* cast and production team however, they inaccurately mischaracterized the third *Cinderella* as "multicultural" and kept referring to the film's characters by their ethnicity as opposed to their race (James). But the Rodgers and Hammerstein's website and the casting director, Valorie Massalas, have accurately characterized it as 'multiracial' (*1997 Television Broadcast*; Valorie Massalas Tweet). On the filmic level, the characters shed their ethnicities, meaning, the actors only bring their races to their roles; we only know of their ethnicities on the production level. This distinction is important to parse because it can be misleading for someone who hasn't seen the film. If they hear it's "multicultural", then they might expect to see multiple cultures displayed in the film. *Race* tends to be considered a bad word in our society because of our discomfort with the topic and what it often leads to, namely, the topic of racism, but *race* is not a bad word. Therefore, the 1997 *Cinderella* was multiracial.

The film appears to express this utopian attitude of both societal multiracial normality and racial insignificance among the characters; there is no moment in the 1997 *Cinderella*, not even a line or two of dialogue that comments on or hints at the characters' racial differences. Race is both unimportant to the film's narrative yet equally important to display to reflect the diversity of the American population. Wood concurs, saying, "[The 1997 *Cinderella*] certainly represents the American 'kingdom' a little more democratically and imagines a place where anyone might be a king, a queen or indeed a president, regardless of the colour of their skin" (114). In the glass-fitting sequence, Prince Christopher and Lionel are fitting women of every single race with the glass slipper even though they know, from the ball event, that the "mysterious girl" is very obviously

Black (*Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* 01:14:51-01:20:47). Alexander, *Seinfeld*'s George Costanza who played Lionel in the film, commented on and highlighted the humorous nature of this scene in the James interview, explaining how he "got the giggles" fitting women "from every nationality, of every shape, size, and color" with the glass slipper even though they knew Cinderella "was clearly African American" (James).

Fiction writer Marleen S. Barr also comments on the display of race and ethnicity in the film, being one of the few people to engage in the "visible social commentary" Wood refers to. Although parts of Barr's argument are spot on, there are parts where she misses the target. Concerning the multiraciality of the film, she argues that the film "depicts a dream that race does not matter" (191). There's some truth to Barr's argument. In the West, racial politics determine virtually everything: who one marries; who one associates with or lives near; who's voted/elected to power; who's approved for housing, education, or employment; and many other such decisions. In the fantasy world of the 1997 *Cinderella*, however, the inhabitants are not burdened with that pesky race problem the West just can't seem to shake. The parts of her argument I find disagreeable are when she claims, "Within *Cinderella*, no one has race–that is, everyone is culturally white (assimilated into white middle-class norms) and fantastically devoid of biological identity" and, the film's "portrayal of race, like glass, is colorless" (Barr 188). Race, ethnicity, and nationality are often conflated and used interchangeably in Western discourse, but in a society that has differentiated, hierarchized, and emphasized racial differences, race is distinct and cannot be extricated from a film's characters nor the actors who play them. Or, to put it another way, the race of a character is lent to them by the actor who portrays them. At bottom, every actor brings at least their race with them to every role and every character they enact. Therefore, the 1997 *Cinderella* is not colorless or raceless but colorful or multiracial.

Barr's claim of *Cinderella*'s colorlessness is further debunked based on the audience's reactions to the film. In her essay, she articulates, upon the introduction of the TV film, viewers wonder how a Black Cinderella is possible, asking essentially how there can be a Black Cinderella when Cinderella is supposed to be White (189). Robert Freedman, one of the writers for *Cinderella*, confirmed this sentiment when he shared how, when *Cinderella* was being advertised, as he was standing in line at a market, a person behind him responded to a TV Guide magazine cover (**fig. 1.2**) with Norwood and Houston as Cinderella and Fairy Godmother asking, "How can there be a black Cinderella?" (James). However, with rose-colored glasses on, Barr continues, "The shock of seeing the new Cinderella becomes acceptance: black Cinderella becomes a normal Cinderella" (Barr 189). I'm skeptical of the total truth of that statement, but I do know that among forward-thinking people and little Black girls, this sentiment rings true. Seeing a Black Cinderella, for many of us, became normal.

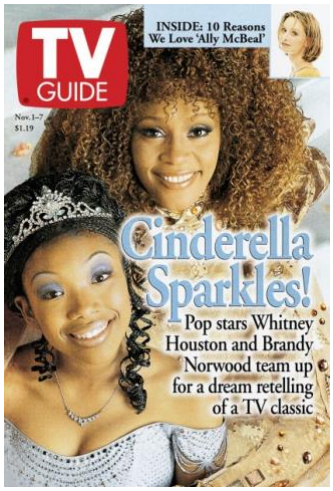

Fig. 1.2. *TV Guide* (November 1, 1997 issue), "Cinderella Sparkles!" Pictured (from bottom to top) is Brandy Norwood as Cinderella, Whitney Houston as Fairy Godmother Houston, and Calista Flockhart.

Reasons for 1997 *Cinderella*'s Success

Experiencing a Black Cinderella and the multiraciality of this fantasy world communicated universality to its audience which garnered much success for the film. On the night of its broadcast, Sunday, November 2nd to be exact, "roughly 23 million households nationwide . . . were tuned in. ABC [estimated that] 60 million viewers watched all or part of the telecast" (Gans and Lefkowitz). The Wonderful World of Disney's *Cinderella* led to the network's "best ratings in the [7 – 9 p.m.] timeslot in 13 years" (Bauder). Craig Zadan, one of the executive producers for the TV film, shared that months later, the week the TV film was made available in stores, it sold one million units (James). In the context of capitalism, these sorts of measurements were important to Disney and ABC to determine the success of the film; however, in my opinion, there was a much more significant barometer by which to measure the TV film's success: the sociocultural impact.

Never before the 1997 *Cinderella*, on such a large scale, has young Black women been depicted as princesses in fantasy. Even James, in the introduction of her article, wrote:

> The casting of this "Cinderella" was historic and not without its detractors—not since "The Wiz" had a production dared to imagine that a story so firmly fixed in the cultural zeitgeist could be seen as anything other than lily white. And for a generation of young children of color, "Cinderella" became an iconic memory of their childhoods, of seeing themselves in a black princess who could lock eyes and fall in love with a Filipino prince. (James)

James is right: while Black women have not been imagined as princesses in fantasy before the 1997 *Cinderella*, the only time Black people have been imagined in fantasy was Quincy Jones' production of *The Wiz.* And Dorothy (Diana Ross), as wonderful a character as she may be, is no princess. Barr echoes James' sentiment: Houston's *Cinderella* refused to accept the idea or notion

that only White characters or White actors could be protagonists in fairy tales (187). Up to that point, in 1997, Disney had introduced Snow White in 1937, Cinderella in 1950, Aurora in 1959, Ariel in 1989, Belle in 1991, Jasmine in 1992, Pocahontas in 1995. Mulan was released nearly a year after Houston's *Cinderella* in 1998.[4] In terms of animations, it wouldn't be until 2009, that is, eleven years after *Mulan* and twelve years after the 1997 Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*, for Disney to give little Black girls their first animated princess, namely, Tiana from *Princess and the Frog*.

Representation, representation, representation. Representation is critical, especially in media, where we are, from youth to old age, inundated with images and symbols and those images and symbols inform us about ourselves, others, and the world. Seeing yourself reflected back to you in media, like TV and film, is important because having your *self*, your identity, affirmed and celebrated is empowering. Positive validation leads to a healthier self-image, psychology teaches us. Researchers Dwight E. Brooks and Lisa P. Hébert assert that representation is important because it is critical to the formation of our social realities and the development of our racial and gender identities. They maintain:

> Much of what audiences know and care about is based on the images, symbols, and narratives in radio, television, film, music, and other media. How individuals construct their social identities, how they come to understand what it means to be male, female, black, white, Asian, Latino, Native American—even rural or urban—is shaped by commodified texts produced by media for audiences that are increasingly segmented by

[4] Although Pocahontas and Mulan are not princesses, and their tales have been argued to be problematic, in the Disney pantheon, they are considered to be princesses.

> the social constructions of race and gender. Media, in short, are central to what ultimately come to represent our social realities. (Brooks and Hébert 297)

Psychologist, author, and professor, Kevin Leo Yabut Nadal adds that representation can help one find their community. Social media has helped underrepresented and marginalized peoples find and connect with people like them, via identity-focused media, thus making the world feel less lonely for these groups. Bringing underrepresented and marginalized groups to the forefront of media doesn't just help these groups, he continued, it can help broaden our understandings of people different from us, thus reducing prejudiced and racist attitudes (Nadal).

Returning to the point of celebration, the 1997 *Cinderella* affirms, celebrates, and showcases the beauty of Black women. Stam and Spence propose that, "[In film,] image scale and duration, for example, are intricately related to the respect afforded a character and the potential for audience sympathy, understanding and identification" (247). Close-ups and prolonged shots in the 1997 *Cinderella* win Fairy Godmother, Queen Constantina, and Cinderella adoration and identification with the audience.

The TV film opens on Fairy Godmother, floating ethereally in a timeless, spaceless dimension, resplendent in a sparkly, gold-sequined, high-collared, winged-dress number with brown, shoulder-length corkscrew curls, singing a refrain from the story's most central song, "Impossible" (*Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* 00:00:00-00:00:42). Not since Miss One the Good Witch of the South and Glinda the Good Witch of the North from *The Wiz* in 1978—nineteen years earlier—has a Black woman been imagined in such a magical role, costumed in such splendor, on such a large scale equivalent to the Wonderful World of Disney. Queen Constantina, given her rank and status, has multiple scenes which display her royal finery and

queenly beauty: Be it her collared, plum-colored, gold-lined velvet robedress, with its inverted sleeves, and her dreadlocks set in a crown-like plum-and-gold headdress in the ball-planning scene; or her indigo gown, with a bejeweled sash draped across and around her body, and a diamond tiara preceding her beautiful dreadlocks in the ball scene: or her cream-colored brocade dress with its high collar and cape, and another diamond crown nestled into her backward-cascading dreadlocks in the wedding scene (*Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* 00:11:18-00:13:44; 00:41:30-01:02:44; 01:21:17-01:24:01). In all Goldberg's scenes, it was revealed in the James interview, the jewelry she wore was supplied by Harry Winston Jewelers (James). Cinderella wears what Fairy Godmother characterizes as "pretty braids" throughout the film (*Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* 01:11:32-01:11:37). One of the two most stunning moments of beauty for Cinderella is the scene where Fairy Godmother flourishes her arms and turns her drab house clothes to a gorgeous, powder-blue, off-the-shoulder ball gown complete with rhinestones on the bodice and shiny, dangling accoutrements on the dress' arms, and a tiara positioned atop the crown of her head from which a few curly braids fall from their updo (*Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* 00:39:10-00:46:32). Her second radiant moment is manifest in the wedding scene from the moment Prince Christopher slides the glass slipper onto her foot and Fairy Godmother, again, turns her house clothes into a traditional all-white wedding dress similar in form to the earlier powder-blue number (*Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* 01:20:59-01:24:00). Framing Black women in the context of fairy tale and fantasy, costuming them in fancy, elaborate pieces, and showcasing the versatility of Black hair (**fig. 1.3)** communicates the idea that "ethnic hair is good hair" and "Black is beautiful" (Barr 193-194).

Fig. 1.3. Disney. Images borrowed from Rodgers and Hammerstein's Website. Pictured (from left to right) Fairy Godmother (Houston), Cinderella (Norwood), and Queen Constantina (Goldberg). Collage made in Canva.

Little Black girls—and I know of at least one little Black queer boy, namely, myself—who saw themselves in Cinderella, Fairy Godmother, and even Queen Constantina. In the February 2021 *Entertainment Weekly* interview with some of the main cast (Houston and Desselle Reid absent due to their unfortunate passings), Cox (Calliope) stated, "There are very few weeks that go by, even now, after how many years?—25?—that somebody does not come up to me and say how much [*Cinderella*] meant and how much it changed their lives—and how much it started their lives! The point where *Cinderella* changed people's lives and started a new life. A new way of seeing things." Alexander joined Cox and shared how people "often" say to him, "Brandy is *my*

Cinderella." Speaking directly to Norwood, Montalbán praised her, saying, "You've changed the life of so many people that I run into, to this day. To this day, they say that Brandy as Cinderella changed the way that they looked at themselves growing up. That anything's possible for them" (Jones 00:03:33-00:07:21). Norwood herself has often shared in multiple interviews post-*Cinderella* how Black girls and Black women have expressed to her how impactful *Cinderella* was for them.

But it wasn't just seeing Norwood in *Cinderella* that had an impact on us; seeing Norwood, Houston, and Goldberg in a magical, fairy-tale context, playing a rags-to-riches princess, a fairy godmother, and a queen shifted many of our paradigmatic thinking. Through imagery they showed us that we can, in fact, see ourselves beyond our traumatic history of slavery, Jim Crow and segregation, lynchings, police brutality, race riots, housing discrimination, voter suppression, and all the other ugly experiences African Americans endured in America: a sentiment in the Black community Hollywood largely ignores.

Growing Exhaustion from Black-Trauma Narratives

Trending upward is this growing sentiment in the Black community, manifest mostly in online social media spaces, where Black people are becoming exhausted with Hollywood's neverending productions of Black-trauma narratives. Black-trauma narratives could be defined as films depicting and reflecting the real realities African Americans have faced and, in some cases, are still facing in America, to include but is not limited to, slavery, the fight for civil rights, police brutality, extreme stories of poverty and abuse, and so on. However, and this next part is crucial, there's nuance to parse here. Black people are not saying that Black history shouldn't be taught. Millennials and Gen Z-ers, mostly, are noticing how, the only time multiple Black actors are

employed in a single, big-budget film in Hollywood, is only when the film narrative deals with the still-felt and still-evident trauma of slavery or systemic, structural, and institutional racism. We want to see Black characters in fantasy films where Black people get to play heroes or heroines, fairies or merpeople, witches, warlocks, wizards or evil sorcerers, dukes or duchesses, dwarves or elves. We want to see Black characters in science fiction films where Black people get to play captains of spaceships, navigating through the stars, finding alien life on other planets. We want to see Black characters in action films where Black people get to play computer hackers or spies or double agents or art thieves. Point is: Black spectators, too, want the privilege of seeing people who look like them playing roles that allow them to imagine themselves beyond the dark, cruel legacy of American history. This is probably why, as both a spectator and a producer, Houston chose to produce *Cinderella*.

Houston, by the time the third *Cinderella* was produced and broadcast, had won 15 Billboard Music Awards, 13 NAACP Image Awards, five Grammys, and one Emmy (*Awards*). Her most notable acting credits included *The Bodyguard* in 1992, *Waiting to Exhale* in 1995, and *The Preacher's Wife* in 1996. She was considered one of the top female artists of the late 80s and 90s. With her influence and status, she could've produced a biopic about Ida B. Wells-Barnett and her remarkable journalism, or a film about the Wilmington Insurrection of 1898 where white supremacists drove Black citizens from their town following an election, or a film about the East St. Louis race riot of 1917 where racist White people shot, killed, injured, set on fire, and destroyed Black people, their homes, and their businesses. Houston could've produced these sorts of films but instead she produced a multiracial *Cinderella* remake.

Unfortunately, a multiracial *Cinderella* remake was not without nitpickers who nitpicked about the casting. Zadan shared, in the James interview, that an unnamed Disney executive, acting

independently of the network, tried to deter the casting of Norwood as Cinderella. (It was clarified by another executive producer for *Cinderella*, namely, Meron, that this unnamed Disney executive wasn't Michael Eisner, the head of Disney at the time, who backed the cast pairing completely.) Since Houston was slated to play Fairy Godmother, her choice for Cinderella (Norwood) rubbed the Disney executive the wrong way prompting him to suggest the folk/pop/country singer, Jewel, to play Cinderella. (Jewel was thought to be the White counterpart to Brandy at the time [James].) What was his reasoning you ask? Why did the casting of Norwood rub the unnamed Disney executive the wrong way? Zadan said the Jewel casting proposal demonstrated how "there was still a resistance to having a black Cinderella" and Hollywood's hesitance or outright refusal to casting two Black leads (James).

Hollywood's Problems with Black-Actor-Led Films

There are, at least, two major myths Hollywood perpetuates concerning Black-actor-led films: (1) Black-actor-led films won't sell well because White people can't identify with Black characters; and (2) too many Black people in a film will be received as a "too-Black film", thus turning away White audiences. Couched in these myths are some of Hollywood's most obvious covert racism. For one, because White people are the highest racial demographic in this country, constituting over half the percentage of the U.S. population, Hollywood over-caters to this audience by producing films with all- or majority-White casts and expecting that people of other racial groups will just relate to the White character; however, White people shouldn't be the only audience Hollywood caters to because there are other racial groups who consume cinema. What? Do minority groups, African Americans, Indigenous Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, Asians, Native Hawaiians, etc., not deserve to have their stories told or see themselves as central characters in TV and films as well?

Two, to say that White people can't or won't relate to characters of color is to imply that White characters (and their stories) are inherently universal while characters of color (and their stories) are niche. As a Black gay male—as a human being who doesn't have the lived experiences of women, disabled people, Indigenous Americans and so on, I am able to sympathize with their experiences and find commonalities between other groups and my own; I don't always need to see stories featuring people who look like me to relate to them—I'm not that self-absorbed or self-centered. Three, historically, Hollywood has had no problem inundating the movie-watching public with films with all- or majority-White casts even though America has never been a racially homogenous country. Many different racial groups, ethnicities, cultures, sexual and gender identities, and religious affiliations are and have been present in America. So let's get this straight: nonwhite individuals are able to relate to films featuring White characters, but White people aren't able to reciprocate the same to groups different from them? The answer to that question is telling.

Research supports my claims. Warner quotes Russell K. Robinson's 2007 *California Law Review* article about the universality of White leading characters, in which he states, "[O]pportunities to play a lead tend to go to white actors, because the industry executives believe actors of color lack the universal appeal" (qtd. in 21). And why do Hollywood executives care about universal appeal? As sociologist and author, Maryann Erigha, suggests, Hollywood misrepresents their justification for the perpetuity of racially casting White actors and not actors of color by incriminating the audience. The movie-making industry claims that the audience's refusal to accept nonwhite actors in lead roles will ultimately affect the success of the film, thus preventing them from taking a risk on casting a nonwhite lead (Erigha 52-63). Potential market performance is often used as a guise for continued racist casting decisions. Underneath the excuse

of potentially poor market performance is nothing but racism: the unwillingness of White Hollywood to de-center themselves and center people of color or their stories.

The racism from Hollywood decision-makers gets worse if or when the cast of a movie is all or majority Black: it affects how executives advertise the movie before hitting theaters. Erigha claims that predominantly Black movies (and other minority-led movies) are labeled 'unbankable' in Hollywood, and explains further that:

> The "unbankable" label affects a movie's marketing strategy. Hollywood executives conceive of small, specific audiences for "Black films" and large, general audiences for "white films" that often go racially unmarked. In turn, Hollywood executives envision raced, segmented audiences and thus heavily market Black movies to Black audiences. What transpires is a self- fulfilling prophecy: raced marketing plans reinforce the perception that Black movies are unbankable to non-Black audiences. (55)

Given this marketing strategy—racially targeted advertising for minority-led movies—it's no wonder Hollywood believes that minorities don't also have universal appeal. Is it safe to say that the general audience has been conditioned to believe that they can't identify with minority-led movies because minority-led movies aren't marketed to them? While Hollywood continues to hold on to this myth about the narrowness of reach of Black movies, Black movies will continue to have a stigma associated with them that "too-Black" equals unmarketable and nonprofitable.

I'm not saying Houston went into the 1997 project with the clear intention of trying to disprove these myths; I'm arguing that just by the nature of having two Black leads in *Cinderella*—two!—with a $12 million budget, in the late 90s, disproving these myths, for any movie of this

sort, will have become the intent of the producers naturally, whether they knew it or not. I argue that the reason the unnamed executive from earlier didn't give the producers the extra money they requested for the background extras is because the unnamed executive envisioned a very small audience for the film and assumed that the 1997 *Cinderella* would be ephemeral and short-lived (James). Joke's on him. Not only did 23 million households watch *Cinderella* during its 1997 broadcast, not only did the TV film sell one million units (VHS and/or DVD) in its first week, but the TV film is still raved about 25 years later and the media went ablaze when Disney Plus announced it was adding it to its streaming services. The 1997 *Cinderella* was not only successful, but it was also received as a multiracial film and not a Black film even with its multiple Black characters.

Timeliness of Argument

The argument for multiraciality in fantasy films is a timely one given the recent uproar—as recent as this year—surrounding racial castings or re-castings of traditionally White or White-assumed film adaptations. Since, at least 2012, racist trolls online have harassed Black actors cast in traditionally White or White-assumed roles. Amandla Stenberg, and to a lesser degree, Dayo Okeniyi and Lenny Kravitz, were on the receiving end of the worst social media bigotry for their portrayals of Rue, Thresh, and Cinna in Gary Ross' *The Hunger Games* (Holmes). Two years later, in 2014, some took to Twitter to express their hate-filled displeasure at eleven-year-old Quvenzhané Wallis being cast in the *Annie* remake (Davidson). *Fantastic Four* fans directed racial hatred towards Michael B. Jordan from 2014 to 2015 for being cast as the traditionally White Johnny Storm (Diaz). *Spider-Man: Homecoming*'s director, James Gunn, had to speak up for Zendaya in 2016 who also suffered the same racist trolling when she was first cast as the red-

haired Mary Jane Watson (Bitette). From 2015 to 2019, when Idris Elba was rumored—*rumored*—to replace Daniel Craig in the *007* film series, not only did Elba share that older people personally expressed their displeasure to him about playing the role they know as being occupied by a White man, the author of the series also expressed his displeasure of Elba playing James Bond saying that Elba was "too street" and "a bit too rough" to play the part (Collins; Lockett). In 2020, Storm Reid shared, in a *People* interview, that people "were uncomfortable" with her portrayal of Meg in Ava DuVernay's *A Wrinkle in Time* (VanHoose). Same year, John Boyega, in a *GQ* interview, talked about the hate he received from *Star Wars* fans for being cast as the stormtrooper, Finn (Famurewa). This year was no better. Thirteen-year-old Leah Jeffries was cast in a Disney Plus adaptation of Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series. The racist backlash against the 13-year-old was so bad that the author condemned the racism in a blog post on his website and championed #LeahIsOurAnnabeth on social media (Asmelash). And I can't forget Halle Bailey. Since 2020, but worsening this year, Bailey has been on the receiving end of some of the most sickening racist vitriol I think I have ever witnessed from racist White people. They made racist memes of her, #NotMyAriel trended on social media, conservative talking heads cited science and fidelity to Hans Cristian Andersen's original fairy tale as the reasons why a mermaid—a fictional, pretend, make-believe class of species that don't exist—can't be Black, and the comments on *The Little Mermaid* trailer on YouTube are littered with the most hideous representation of humanity.

Racial casting decisions on Amazon's *The Rings of Power* and HBO's *House of the Dragon* have also been met with resistance, reported John Blake of CNN, by J. R. R. Tolkien's and George R. R. Martin's fanbases. Authors and conservative journalists claim, of these adaptations and their casting actors of color in the series, that Hollywood executives are perverting, corrupting, and "trying to woke-ify" fantasy and sci-fi worlds that have long been assumed as all-White (or,

thought to have been constructed absent of people of color.) As if these people all read from the same racist talking points handbook, they all assert that the casting of actors of color in these traditionally White or assumed-as-White fantasy narratives is some major conspiracy by TV and film executives to "embed 'social justice politics'" into Tolkien's and Martin's narratives. Plots and storylines become secondary, they purport, since the shows become more about its racial diversity. "Forced diversity," they cry, "threatens story believability." On what grounds do they make these claims? Ardent fans aren't "willing to suspend their disbelief" because they insist the castings aren't "faithful" to the authors' visions, but we all really know it's because the series have people of color in them (Blake). When racist White people talk about seeking escapism in fantasy and sci-fi stories, one of the main things they seek escapism from is people of color. They do not conceive people of color existing in fantasy or sci-fi worlds, and they believe that they don't belong.

I say all that to say this: Making multiraciality in fantasy films the standard, I predict, will lessen and lessen the racist backlash that happens when people of color are cast in traditionally White or assumed-as-White narratives. Over time, of course. The well-meaning and sometimes sinister claims that racism is over or that America is not a racist country by White people is hard to believe when there are outcries every time a person of color is cast in a fantasy. It'll get harder and harder for people of color to say that America is racist—because it currently is—when multiraciality in fantasy films becomes common. The 1997 *Cinderella* started this trend and the argument.

Conclusion

Wood did say that the 1997 *Cinderella* is "visible social commentary" due to its "ethnically diverse cast", but I don't think even he imagined how much commentary could be made on Rodgers and Hammerstein's third *Cinderella*. Barr was the only person brave enough to engage in said commentary. Modifying Barr's argument though, I claim that *Cinderella* doesn't necessarily argue that race doesn't matter; *Cinderella* argues that race is not—and should not be—a point of contention, and equally that films, specifically films of the fantasy variety, should reflect the multiracial nature of the society in which they are produced. *Cinderella* also celebrates and exhibits the beauty of Black women by showing the variety of Black hairstyles, showing Black women dressed in a fantastical context, and making them central characters to the film. And lastly, *Cinderella* discredits the racist myths associated with Black-actor-led films by exceeding expectations for a TV film and being so firmly imprinted in the minds of little Black girls, Black women, and progressive-minded individuals years after its broadcast. What did Houston and Norwood—excuse me, I mean Fairy Godmother and Cinderella—tell us? "It's *poooooossiiiiiibleeeeee*!" (*Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* 00:41:12-00:41:28).

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