Beyond the Cage and the Crown: Interrogating Blackwashing in *Queen Cleopatra* (2023) and *Queen Charlotte* (2023)

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Abstract:
The longstanding lack of minority representation has drawn justifiable criticism to the discriminatory practices inherent in cultural production. In recent years, however, a reverse phenomenon has surfaced. As numerous narratives undergo revision and re-adaptation, the drive for public approval has drastically altered the racial composition of historical and literary canons. Drawing on the psycho-political theories of Franz Fanon and the cinematic critique of Stam and Spence, the paper examines this shift through a case study of Netflix's royal biopics, *Queen Cleopatra* (2023) and *Queen Charlotte* (2023). It argues that the imposition of Black identity onto historically white figures results in a distorted overrepresentation.

Keywords: Blackwashing; Naïve integrationism; Racebending; White Gaze

1. INTRODUCTION

Though many have anticipated the significant impacts of technological advancements on various social and cultural domains, only a few were able to foresee its far-reaching influence. The rise of New Media, by the turn of the twenty-first century, transformed the way human beings live, communicate and even think about themselves and others. With an unprohibited access to multiple platforms that provide a massive space for interactive user-generated content, the relationship of individuals (readers, spectators, players, etc) with entertainment media, in particular, has been reshaped. Narrative, as one of the most popular arts/mediums, seemed thus "to be disappearing into the larger stream of audiovisual media, be they photographic, electronic or cybernetic" (Stam, 2000, p. 314). The production, promotion and consumption of literary and cinematic narratives, hence, evolved into more convoluted practices. Old questions about race, gender and class, however, remain persistent since representations proliferate in number as in perspective bringing to the fore renewed interest in revisited/revised storytelling.

Among the intriguing currents that have been noticed in recent decades, is the openness of the entertainment industry towards the inclusion of people of color on screen. For instance, several commentators have applauded the integration of black characters in science fiction and fantasy works seeing it as a necessary step towards diversity and social equality (Owens, 2017). The Marvel Comics universe is mostly referred to in order to indicate the positive contribution of casting black actors to play the roles of originally-white characters. Most of the examples cite the successful performances of Samuel L. Jackson (as Nick Fury in *The Avengers*), Idris Elba (as Heimdall the guardian of Asgard in *Thor*) and Zendaya Coleman (as MJ in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*) among others. Such portrayals are part of a larger phenomenon that is often regarded with varying degrees of excitement (and rating) for it involves a wide array of adaptations and revisions. While Denzel Washington's casting as a Scottish king in *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2021) was seen as a distinctly valuable contribution, *The Little Mermaid* (2023) triggered a viral controversy around the casting

of a dark-skinned actress (Halle Bailey) to play the role of Ariel (a redhaired Danish). This reitrated a polemical cultural question concerning racial/ethnic bounderies/blurrings that seem to govern major productions.

The rise of fandom activism in response to disapproving views about representation, particularly in the case of *Avatar: the Last Airbender* (2010), to advocate against what is diagnosed as "racebending" has launched an assertive endeavor to "correct" the hegemonic white-centred narratives of dominant media outlets. However, with the increasing emergence of various narratives bending race in reverse directions, more voices are raised to call for deeper appraisals of such representations as they exemplify competing/convergent interests of production companies aiming—presumably—for greater reach and more profits. In a similar vein, the present research attempts to examine recent changes in the representation of blackness on screen through a study of dramatic series that are produced by Netflix, as a prominent streaming platform. The analysis focus on the historical dramas of *Queen Cleopatra* (2023) and *Queen Charlotte* (2023) as culturally-significant instances of blackwashing.

The significance of such research is derived from its alignment with the often-voiced necessity to maintain a continuous concern with emergent representations of "minorities" in Western narratives. As many critics have repeatedly insisted, the mere presence of marginalized groups, on page, stage or screen, does not automatically lift them to the status of dignified equality nor does it evade the possibility of re-channelling pejorative stereotypes through covert means. As eminent critic bell hooks has clearly asserted in *Reel to Real*, it is a "cultural failure" not to understand that certain black characters can still function as "mouthpieces for racist assumptions and beliefs"; thus, "artistic vigilance" is needed to resist "racist mythography" which is still so deeply embedded within the entertainment environment that "it will take nothing short of a revolution … to change this world" (hooks, 2009, p.93). Accordingly, it remains necessary to (re)evaluate contemporary representations centring on blackness, especially as they come from independent new media rather than mainstream media, in order to fully comprehend the complex negotiations

between progressive intent and regressive subtext, and to determine whether these new narratives truly herald the revolutionary change called for by hooks or merely repackage the old mythographies in a more palatable form.

Audiences' zealous engagement with racial and ethnic representations has often been the rule rather than the exception. However, social media have allowed the voices and opinions of such observants to gather more momentum. Consequently, in recent years terms such as "racebending" or "blackwashing", that are introduced by layreaders, fanfiction groups, and followers have infiltrated their way through to academic discussions. A number of scholarly works seek to examine various cases of multicultural narratives that involve minority portrayals by focusing on the production and consumption of color aesthetics.

For example, editor Beretta E. Smith-Shomade devotes attention, in a collection of essays presented by a number of researchers, to the perspectives of black audiences on television programs. *Watching While Black* (2012) discusses different sources with thematic and generic varieties that do not seem to have qualitatively improved blacks' audio-visual content. William Hart (2015) discusses the pros and cons of assimilating people of color within adaptations of established white narratives. His study focuses on fantasy as he analyses *I, Robot* and *I am Legend*. In *Whitewashing v. Blackwashing: Structural Racism and Anti-Racist Praxis in Hollywood Cinema*, Alyssa M. Smith demonstrates that colorblind casting contributes to further negative associations with black characters despite the "attempt at direct anti-racism, or the act of promoting equal treatment that results in equal opportunities"(Smith, 2021, p.ii). Moreover, Aimee Hinds Scott and Maciej Paprocki examine the selection of dark-colored depictions of Greco-Roman goddesses in film and on television to comprehend reactions to such adaptations. "Casting Black Athenas" concludes by highlighting the differences between "commodification, colorism, and color-conscious casting" as factors which intervened in triggering neutral or favorable responses towards female mythical deities as opposed to their male counterparts (Paprocki and Scott, 2023, p.36). From a

different point of view, the present paper focuses on the blackwashed representation of historical figures, namely Queen Cleopatra and Queen Charlotte. The analyses emphasize the cultural resonances of portraying originally-white royalties as blacks in order to fathom their impact on racial images

2. Beyond Surface: from the "White Gaze" to "Naïve Integrationism"

While the aforementioned scholarly works effectively map the contemporary landscape of audience reception and industrial practice, the psychological and existential aspects of racial recasting demand a deeper theoretical anchor. To this end, the critical framework of Franz Fanon provides an indispensable lens for interrogating the subtext of blackwashing, moving the discussion beyond production and consumption to the realm of the colonial psyche. Fanon's seminal work, *Black Skin, White Masks*, diagnoses the internal crisis induced by the "white gaze". The latter is seen as the internalized colonial lens that fixes and continues to over-determine the Black subject even after the end of colonization. He poignantly describes the moment of racialization as a crushing imposition, where one is no longer an individual but a symbol, "given fixed coordinates" and "laid bare" by a racist world (Fanon, 2008, p. 92). This process of being reduced to a "fact of blackness" creates a fundamental alienation, a "third-person consciousness" where the Black individual sees themselves through the eyes of the white other (Fanon, 2008, p. 90). Within this framework, the practice of blackwashing can be seen as operating directly within this field of vision. The recast character is immediately and overwhelmingly subjected to this overdetermining gaze; their Blackness is not incidental but becomes the primary—often sole—topic of discourse in a way that overshadows narrative and character depth. Thus, such figures are not permitted to simply be, but must represent, carrying the symbolic weight of an entire race, thereby re-enacting the very alienation Fanon so critically diagnosed. This positions blackwashing not as a simple corrective, but as a potential re-inscription of the Black subject into a pre-fabricated symbolic order defined by whiteness.

A Fanonian perspective further complicates the progressive claims of

blackwashing through the concepts of "lactification" and the pitfalls of seeking validation within the oppressor's framework. Fanon argues that the colonized subject, burdened by an internalized inferiority complex, may be driven by a desire for "whiteness," a process of "lactification" where they aspire to appropriate and be validated by white culture (Fanon, 2008, p. 80). From this point of view, the intense focus on claiming established white icons—be they fictional heroes or historical European figures—can be interpreted as an implicit affirmation that these characters and narratives represent the ultimate cultural value, the "standard" that must be accessed even through recoding. This risks replicating what Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, critiqued as the role of the "national bourgeoisie," who, after independence, often mimic the colonizer and offer a "vanishing mystification" of change without altering fundamental power structures (Fanon, 1963, p. 149). Similarly, blackwashing can function as a corporate mystification, creating the appearance of diversity while the underlying creative and executive power remains unchanged. It is precisely this risk—that such representations constitute a superficial insertion into old, oppressive roles—which Robert Stam and Louise Spence critically term "naïve integrationism."

Therefore, the analyses are informed by the methodological template suggested by Robert Stam and Louise Spence in "Colonialism, Racism and Representation". Discussing films as essentially "fabrications" which mediate between reality and representation, their work advances a critical thesis that breaks down complex structures and patterns into assessable images about the colonized, the marginalized and the oppressed. Despite its being published decades ago, the work presents an exquisite examination of ongoing issues arising from the "naïve integrationism which simply inserts new heroes and heroines, this time drawn from the ranks of the oppressed, into the old functional roles that were themselves oppressive" (Stam and Spence, 1983, p.9). Put differently, many black-centered narratives may, in fact, simply replace one color with another without adjusting or accommodating the story to do justice to the independent character of the portrayed subject.

The analyses, hence, ought to focus on, first, "political positioning" as a method that is employed to encircle the portrayed subject and trigger identification mechanisms in the viewer. Second, codes and strategies that determine character status, through plot, framing, scale and sound, are important in deciphering the image/ value of the portrayed subject (Stam and Spence, 1983, p.17). Third, the audience's "cultural awareness" plays an equally-decisive function in informing the viewer's perception of representations through a background of ideologically and socially instilled assumptions (Stam and Spence,1983, p. 19). The purpose of such approach is the going-beyond superficial "positive images" because even those are fraught with "reductionism" and "methodological dangers" that proved repetitive or fruitless at best (Stam and Spence, 1983, p.9). The following sections will investigate whether the blackwashed royal figures are granted a liberated subjectivity within the narrative or remain, in a Fanonian sense, overdetermined symbols whose perceived "positivity" is merely a new guise.

3. Netflix's Queen Cleopatra: A Case of Mythical Erasure

Queen Cleopatra was released, after a lot of contesting rumors about its production, on Netflix in 2023. Since it presents the life and reign of a very well-known female monarch, it was initially regarded as a welcome addition to the historical narrative genre. However, its captivating promise began to fade as more details about the casting were revealed. Many spectators, particularly Egyptians such as comedian Bassem Youssef who expressed his utmost dissatisfaction on Piers Morgan Uncensored (April 2023), were against the representation. Thus, the series received a very low rating (1.2 out of 10 on Internet Movie Database) and only a few reviewers hailed it. Writing for *The Guardian*, Leila Latif suggests that such a story is not meant to be seen in black or white because, according to her, the skin color of the lead is not important for Cleopatra is viewed as a "proxy". While trying to highlight the distinctness of such an iconic figure, such a view dissimilates her character into a foggy uncertainty as if she were a myth rather than a reality to her people. Bethonie Butler's review on *The Washington Post* offers a more objective view of the different aspects

surrounding the controversial depiction and its reception. She draws attention to the fact that the core of the debate revolves around marketing the dramatic series as a documentary. Indeed, the episodes are dubbed as a "docudrama" narrating the lives of African queens.

The first sequence opens with Prof. Shelly Haley's voice-over an aerial-shot scene displaying a vast Arab desert. She, a black feminist, says that her grandmother was the inspiration for her when she was introduced, at a young age, to Greek and Roman legacies because she told her "I don't care what they tell you in school. Cleopatra was black". The gigantic doors of The Great Library of Alexanderia (51 BC) then open wide for the viewer to join a young Cleopatra in her study space. The juxtaposition of the three elements, thus, positions the spectator in a very particular standpoint. First, s/he is invited into the exotic world of the Arabian dunes that strikes a familiar sense of both awe and fascination by a culture that is as deep as it is enchanting. The scenery, however, does not necessarily picture the narrative's (Egyptian) setting since such an image could have been anywhere between Namibian and Persian deserts. The professor's opening statement about her childhood memory, repositions the viewer again in a contemporary school setting in which s/he is being lectured on an ancient history. Such an impression is emphasized by the transition to the library (close-up) scene in which Cleopatra is described as "a scholar", "a scientist" and "a linguist". The montage of subsequent actions among intervals of commentaries made by historians (Debora Heard and Islam Issa) attempts to indicate that the storytelling is based on some revisionist research on the life and legacy of Egypt's last pharaoh. As such the apocryphal narrative, which purposefully begins by highlighting the blackness of the famed queen, is presented as an authentic account that promises its viewer a deep bird's-eye view of a character and a culture that deserves more attention.

Nevertheless, the historical perspectives that are expressed by the experts remain most of the time speculative and inconclusive. They often attempt to imagine Cleopatra's thoughts, intentions and choices while the entire mise-en-scène indicates that other aspects of her life are more liable

to specification. In other words, while scholarly evidence should have been provided regarding the framework for such a ground-breaking adaptation, the documentary focuses instead on discussing elements that are commonly thought to be hard to decide on in any biographical or epic narrative. For instance, despite the indication that the royal family of Ptolemy is of a Macedonian descent, and despite the ethnographic nature of Egypt, from ancient to contemporary times, as a diverse nation, the majority of the queen's entourage is black. Notwithstanding the fact that Jada Pinkett Smith (the producer and narrator in the series) ponders whether she was "vexing or strategic? Collaborative or maverick?", the representation aims to re-adjust the gaze towards her as an iconic African woman instead of deepening understanding of her character and heritage.

Therefore, in centering blackness, such narrative erases other significant sociocultural aspects all while encircling the viewer in a less-questioning position. The latter allows for a one-sided viewpoint since both the commentaries and the performance dominate over the account. Others (such as Cleopatra's siblings, Egyptian leaders, scholarly opponents etc) are only spoken about but not given a voice of their own. As such, the narrative is not removed from the reductionist realm of Eurocentric encoding strategies.

Throughout the four episodes, most focus is laid on the character of Cleopatra as a the leading figure. Though she is at first announced to be distinctly knowledgeable and skilled (perhaps even ahead of her time), her depiction takes on a singular arch as the narrative proceeds. The narrative voice describes her as being "worshiped and feared by Egypt. Courted and reviled by Rome" to imply her glorious position in a cross-national context. This is conveyed by her visual framing, through frequent and repetitive close-up shots (of her stern dark features) showing her crowned, strolling in her Pharaonic castle, dancing energetically or giving birth. The space-temporal emphasis on such moments of victory and strength frames her as an extraordinary monarch.

Indeed, her status is magnified to reach the level of a myth or a legend. In a resonant voice, the queen is pictured proclaiming herself as "a

queen of kings". She says " I am Isis. I am a god". Hence, while focus on her figure is supposed to stimulate empathy in the viewer, elevating her status to a mythical realm distances her from spectators but, from a Fanonian perspective, completes her alienation, transforming her from a historical subject into an overdetermined symbol. The events, almost exclusively, follow her relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. This re-produces the common image of the black female protagonist as a femme fatale who resorts to carnal charm whenever spiritual/intellectual prowess fails her. In so doing, the representation falls short of its initial promise in telling her true tale as a real woman. This occurs because the materials employed in constructing the historical narrative seems to have remained within the shallow confines of speculation and positive imagining.

Additionally, the mythical aura that the representation casts on such a queen whose status is sacred in the Egyptian cultural heritage, strips the figure of her original belonging to a distinct nation in order to facilitate her appropriation into various racial/ethnic settings. While such a practice would have been less frowned-upon in fictional or proliferant portrayals, it is understandable that Egyptians feel marginalized and cancelled in their own cultural territory. The concluding sequences, dedicated to the experts' final statements on Cleopatra's legacy, reassert the already-apparent attempt to racialized the story. Prof. Haley expresses a disapproving stance towards what she describes as an unfortunate act of burying, erasing and whitewashing Cleopatra's black lineage. It seems Africa, as a vast, rich and diverse continent, is reduced to one skin shade. As such, only black can identify as African and vice versa. The overgeneralization, besides revealing a colorblind gaze towards the colonized, suggests further misrepresentations. By trying to bend the iconic story of the last pharaoh to fit into a black-centered vision, the narrative falls into the trap that Stam and Spence identified as "naïve integrationism", changing the color of the protagonist but not the oppressive, Eurocentric functional role of the 'exotic, sensual femme fatale'. Despite attempting to shed more light on African culture and history through the stories of its queens, the series end up employing westernized strategies to include blackness on screen.

4. *Queen Charlotte* : A Case of Revisionist Erasure

Queen Charlotte is not the first English Queen who is seen through Netflix's lens as black. Before her, Anne Boleyn (2021) depicted the famous wife of Henry VIII as a woman of color. Many questions were then raised about the accuracy and even utility of a representation that runs counter to established historical records. In fact, Netflix appears to have a decisive policy of widening the presence of marginalized racial/social groups on screen. Such inclusion is justified as a strategic will to diversify its content to meet the expectations of its global audience. The portrayals it presents to viewers however are not beyond reproach for they often engender controversial reactions due to their cultural insensitivity.

Queen Charlotte (2023) was presented to an audience that is already familiar with the adaptations of Julia Quinn's Bridgerton series. The romantic stories are set in Regency England, and they focus on biracial relationships. While the fictional narratives were not disapproved of, the prequel has been subject to question. Basically, the narrative substitutes the character of Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz (a royal of a German descent) by an African-looking actress (India Amarteifio) in an attempt to construct the antecedent for the Bridgerton's setting. Many characters, such as Lady Danbury, are part of a rising black aristocracy. Thus, the narrative reimagines 18th century England based on an alternative social order in which people of color enjoy an adequate, if not truly equal, treatment in terms of economic and political power.

The series opens with a disclaimer that states "it is not a history lesson. It is fiction inspired by fact". The liberties taken in retelling the story of king George III and his queen consort are not simply entertaining or appeasing to an audience that wishes to see cherish fantasies about a nonwhite Austenian upper-class. The narrative seeks to project modern day concern with racial and ethnic differences on a distant past through an aesthetics of nostalgia and nobility. Including a black voice within the story seems to accentuate its inviting appeal. Besides the costumes, the background music, the baroque mise-en-scène of carriages and lavish salons, encircle the viewer in strictly functioning British (fairy) tale. The

young Charlotte embodies all the admirable, and exceptional, traits of a stereotypical black girl: strong-headed, outspoken, and courageous. Closeup shots emphasizing the softness of her features subdue her robust African lineage to maintain her ladylike fitness for the British crown. In a Fanonian sense, this is a process of "lactification," molding the Black subject to aspire to and fit within the white world's most exclusive institution, all while remaining under its determining gaze. As such, the portrayal of the queen is supposed to be positive and easily identified with.

Nevertheless, the extent of its historical and cultural import remains a subject of scrutiny. First, the recourse to western formulas and tropes to advance people of color into a more privileged position is ill-suited and even diminishing because it covertly hints that blacks are intellectually and culturally incapable of creating stories of their own. This practice aligns with Franz Fanon's critique of seeking validation within the oppressor's framework, thereby failing to achieve a liberated "new humanism" and instead creating a new form of alienation. Second, by allowing a dominant stance to minority voices, whose position history clearly indicates was undermined, the narrative seems in a sense apologetic. In other words, to counter a centuries-long legacy of oppression and marginalization, such a romanticized tale is redemptive of the nation's past guilt. Third, the very choice of the period drama to revise the past (and supposedly improve the future) through an imagined society in which racial differences are no cause for discrimination or oppressions, might not have been avoidant of backlash.

To an uncritical spectator, the narrative is just an intriguing tale, yet to a more discerning eye the representation is fraught with cultural discomfort. Citing the dissatisfied responses of historians Steven Martin and Gretchen Gerzina, The Guardian colonist Steve Rose discusses the indeniability of representation's poor framing of an issue that was paramount at the time and still continues to effect the lives of many people in various ways. He remarkably draws attention to the fact that "the brutal mechanics of the slave trade were in full swing… 1.5 million Africans were captured and shipped to plantations in North America and the Caribbean…These are the

ill-gotten riches on which Bridgerton's (and Britain's) world of palaces, parties and gigantic wigs was built". The absurd Western lack of accountability, even in fictional projections, re-emphasizes the continuing marginalization of black history and the intentional dismissal of the transgenerational suffering cause by colonialism and imperialism.

An aberrant reading of such works, uncovers the subtle forms of representation that continue to reproduce stereotypes and conceal realities. Despite, the probable good-intendedness of such re-visioning projects, it would have been more enriching to she light on historical narratives that record the inspiring contributions of minorities in their nations. Racebending is not the only method to ensure diversity. As Rose further argues, the alternative is to shed light on the stories of people of color, from different origins and backgrounds, to allow them a distinct independent space that is fully attuned to the particularities of their historical experiences. In other words, instead of blackwashing canonical or historical narratives in order to bring the black subject to the fore, it is more valuable to discover, create and reinforce ethnic narratives on their own right so that a new cannon could be found. Such authentic narratives would be a step toward what Franz Fanon called a "new humanism," freeing Black characters from the alienating and overdetermining symbolic roles that even well-intentioned fantasies like *Queen Charlotte* ultimately force them to occupy

5. CONCLUSION

A close examination of recent historical-dramatic narratives reveals the complex and often contradictory currents driving the production and reception of racebent artifacts. Through an analysis of the covert misrepresentations in *Queen Cleopatra* and *Queen Charlotte*, this paper has demonstrated that such "blackwashing" frequently fails to remedy antecedent flaws in racial portrayals and, in line with Stam and Spence's critique, often devolves into a "naïve integrationism" that leaves oppressive narrative structures intact. The findings yield several critical conclusions.

First, the decades of work by post-colonial theorists and critics have

cultivated a significant public consciousness regarding the power dynamics of representation. Audiences are now more equipped to discern pejorative stereotypes and narrow portrayals, even when they are packaged as progressive entertainment. Second, this rising critical awareness is amplified by new media platforms, which offer fewer restrictions on audience response and have facilitated powerful bonding efforts, as seen with movements like #BlackLightsMatter. Third, and most crucially, despite being advertised as objective or diverse, many of these narratives unveil subtle forms of re-appropriation and falsification. The corporate insistence on providing more roles for Black actors in established white narratives can be seen, through a Fanonian lens, as a new form of pigeonholing—a "lactification" that seeks validation within the oppressor's cultural framework rather than forging a true "new humanism" When production companies strategically center blackness based on algorithmic feedback and subscriber preferences, the result is not random but a calculated commodification of identity. Consequently, such works remain Inherently biased and vulnerable to backlash, as they lack a genuine, profound understanding of race and ethnicity.

In the final analysis, reimagining historical and canonical narratives through a black lens, while often well-intentioned, must be recognized as a potential pathway to new forms of distortion and cultural erasure. The phenomenal increase in such depictions demands not uncritical embrace, but rigorous scrutiny. These strategies of representation must be evaluated for whether they truly grant authentic subjectivity or merely create new avatars for old stereotypes, perpetuating alienation under the guise of inclusion. Ultimately, the solution lies not in colorblind casting or blackwashing, but in the dedicated creation and amplification of original, authentic stories that emerge from within the lived experiences and historical particularities of Black and minority cultures, thereby building a new and truly liberated canon.

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