

Seen but Not Heard: A Critical Analysis of Colorblind Casting and Racial Representation in
Performance Media

Lizzie Henry

AFST 299: Research Methods in Africana Studies

May 6, 2025

In an era that is rife with remakes, interpretations, and sequels, there are often casting decisions that are made which fans of the source material do not agree with. However, there is almost never more controversy than when the casting decision involves a change in race. Of course, the first instinct for Black people when faced with criticism of a colorblind casting decision is to defend it against racist commentary. However, is colorblind casting really all that it is chalked up to be? Of course, it is a form of representation that is badly needed for underrepresented minorities. However, is there a difference between simply seeing Blackness in media and actually representing Blackness in media?

Colorblind casting is the process through which actors are given roles without regard to race. Non-traditional casting is also often used interchangeably with colorblind or cross-racial casting, serving as an overarching definition containing casting decisions that differ from the original casting in any way (Pao, 1). This includes casting actors in roles of non-traditional race but also includes other facets of identity such as sexuality, disability, and gender. The practice of colorblind casting started as an initiative to create more roles for actors of color in the theatre and film industry, as demographics other than white were severely underrepresented. Colorblind casting has existed since the 50s and 60s, with groups like The New York Shakespeare Festival, Washington, DC's Arena Stage, and the Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center being some of the first to incorporate racially integrated casting practices into their works (Pao, 3). In the 80s, the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP) was created, inspired by polling that showed a severe over-representation of all-white casts in theatre productions (Pao, 3). This group was formed to educate the theatre community and the public on unfair casting practices and create discourse around and encourage alternative casting practices which would make the wide gap in representation between minorities and the white majority smaller. Another thing that the NTCP

did was clarify between different types of non-traditional casting. These types included labels like conceptual, social, cross-racial, and more, but they “frequently overlap and new variations are constantly being developed” (Pao, 4). All of these practices, however, fall into the umbrella of Non-Traditional casting, and the label of non-traditional casting as a whole is not as popular or prevalent as colorblind casting which, by the 70s, had become the most popular method of integrated casting, encouraging those casting to ignore race and rather cast productions based upon merit or who fit the role best (Pao, 3).

Though well-intentioned in some ways, colorblind casting still fails to address many of the deeply rooted issues within the film and theatre industries that lead to a lack of representation. Furthermore, this form of casting leads only to visibility of people of color rather than actually hearing the voices of people of color themselves. The famous playwright August Wilson was particularly vocal about the pitfalls of colorblind casting, touting it as “an assault on our presence, our difficult but honorable history in America, and an insult to our intelligence, our playwrights, and our many and varied contributions to the society and the world at large. The idea of colorblind casting is the same idea of assimilation that Black Americans have been rejecting for the past 380 years” (Wilson, 499). The practice of colorblind casting has deep ties to colorblind racism, a form of racism “where people deny race and racism as a signifier of individual and group outcomes, thereby upholding race-based inequalities” (Ifeonu, 71). Those who uphold the tenets of colorblind racism insist that the world has pushed past racial inequalities and that race itself no longer matters. However, this is not true, as the systemic practices that uphold racial inequalities are still existing and working even in the modern day. Therefore, to say that race no longer matters simply allows for these systems to shunt blame for racial inequalities onto other factors like talent, merit, or work ethic without acknowledging the

systems that create these inequalities in the first place. Wilson fears, like many, that an acceptance of racial integration without deep introspection into how race is categorized (simply as non-white and not including whiteness within its scope) will lead to an assimilation into white culture that ignores racial difference and erases Black culture as a whole (Catanese, 34). Wilson continues, “We reject any attempt to blot us out, to reinvent history and ignore our presence or to maim our spiritual product. We must not continue to meet on this path. We will not deny our history, and we will not allow it to be made to be of little consequence, to be ignored or misinterpreted” (Wilson, 499). His call is not just for people to ignore race, but to acknowledge it and empower racial difference as well as the systems of inequality that cause racial disparities. Colorblind racism and the refusal to acknowledge racial differences “allowed many white Americans to focus on “sameness” and to concentrate on the places of human relatedness rather than on the ways in which people are dissimilar, allowing for the denial of white racial superiority” (Gonzalez, 151). While in theory color blindness is meant to help level the playing field for non-white actors, in practice, this method of casting gives an appearance of racial progress while ignoring the systems which create true racial inequalities in the performance industry.

Another major issue with colorblind and non-traditional casting is how it can often be used to further advantage White actors rather than help non-white actors. Though it was framed as a form of racial integration into the film and theatre industries in the late 1900s, nontraditional casting has always existed, just not for the benefit of non-white actors (Phillips). Until the 1600s, women weren't allowed to act on stage, and so men would often dress in costume to portray women (Lamb). Furthermore, many roles that were intended to be people of color were also portrayed by white men, with them using cork to color their skin and perform in

blackface. Shakespeare's titular Othello, who is a Moor and therefore of either Black or Arab descent, was not played by a Black man until 1826, over 200 years after the play was originally written and performed (Gonzalez, 153). There is a long tradition of White actors playing the roles of non-white characters. These include roles as Native Americans such as Johnny Depp's role in the *Lone Ranger* or Rooney Mara's portrayal of Tiger Lily in *Pan*, a more recent adaptation of the Disney film *Peter Pan* (Sharf). This also includes Mexican or Hispanic people in films like *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*, or *The Princess Bride*. Though non-traditional casting processes were touted as new and progressive, it's true that "nontraditional casting has been benefiting white actors for centuries, as no role has ever been off-limits to them" (Gonzalez, 153). In fact, the practice was relatively common until the last decade or so, when people began to push back against the process and demand that white actors not play the roles of non-white characters.

One particular facet of Non-Traditional casting that is particularly relevant is race-conscious casting. This is the seeming middle-ground between fully racialized casting practices and colorblind casting. Essentially, a race-conscious casting decision is one which involves non-traditional racial casting but is conscious of race within the text of the performance. In some aspects, race-conscious casting can serve as a way to initiate race-change in a meaningful way, not changing the story as a whole but still exploring the impacts of race within a story. Black director Timothy Douglas often utilizes race-conscious casting within his shows, whether by choice or by virtue of the show being cast without his own input and having to figure out the dynamics of the actors from what is given to him. Though the stories portrayed on stage are fictional, the audience's perceptions are still deeply affected by the culture and politics of the current society. As Douglas says, "We [directors and actors] have to reflect the honesty of what

is being portrayed here [on stage], and it is influenced by the culture we live in. That is our job” (Thompson and Douglas, 140). The recognition of racial realities within a wider context of the performance allows for stories to become more palatable and sidestep the pitfalls of not acknowledging race at all. Douglas finds that the stage can be a good place to explore racial tensions in a controlled environment, stating that “the beauty of being an actor on the stage is that even though [the actors] were having very real experiences, the words of Beaumarchais kept them safe and kept the audience from imploding,” with Ayanna Thompson reiterating that “the art can facilitate the harder discussions that are often left unsaid” (Thompson and Douglas, 140).

Unfortunately, color-conscious casting can still fall into pitfalls of offensive casting, or the racial commentary can become distracting to the plot of the story and lead to tokenism or a muddled or overwhelming message (Thompson and Douglas, 138). Race or color-conscious casting also continues to ignore the same issues of a lack of diverse opportunities, roles, and stories that are created by a lack of support for Blackness in areas that are off-stage or off-screen. While it makes characters of color visible and can lead to meaningful commentary or new angles on the traditional story, it also doesn’t actually allow for POC writers and producers to create and tell original stories that center around the characters. It merely takes a white story and modifies it slightly for the sake of accommodating a character of color. In the end, color-blind, non-traditional, and color-conscious casting all tend to fill the same role, touting signifiers of racial progress when in fact they don’t do so much to bridge the racial divide and can reinforce aspects of white supremacy and racial division within the performance industry.

That is not to say that there is no merit at all in non-traditional casting. Race-change can be important for the sake of representation and job-opportunity where it is lacking. Being cast in already well-known roles can allow for actors to gain recognition and following and enhance

their careers. Some race-changed roles have even become iconic in the media zeitgeist. Take, for example, Nick Fury as portrayed by Samuel L. Jackson in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or the race-changed versions of princess movies like *Princess and the Frog*, or Halle Bailey's Ariel in the most recent adaptation of *The Little Mermaid*. Representation in the media helps to broaden the perspectives and understanding of those who watch it and can be a good way to normalize racial differences (Jenkins). These representations serve as important reminders to Black people both young and old that they are accepted and recognized as part of a wider American culture, empowering them by making them feel seen. The larger issue is that Black people don't just need to be seen, they need to be heard as well.

There are many instances of colorblind casting that one can pull out as a case study to help reinforce these points. However, the Netflix adaptation of Julia Quinn's *Bridgerton* series produced by Shondaland (the television production company of famous Black producer Shonda Rhimes) seems to be rife with issues brought about by color-blind casting. Taking place during the regency era of London, Shondaland's *Bridgerton* takes place in a "multicultural mecca" where King George III established racial equality in London and the issue of race has become largely forgotten (Daut). Though it is mentioned briefly, the show tends to ignore race in favor of the more plot-relevant social and romantic drama that drives the novels. However, paying minimal attention to race within the world of *Bridgerton* brings up quite a few issues.

One of the most prevalent race-changes within the world of *Bridgerton* is that of Queen Charlotte, portrayed as a Black woman. This portrayal is rooted in rumors of the real Queen Charlotte having African Ancestry, as well as portrayals of her in some of her portraits. However, these rumors are likely not true, stemming from ancestors that are 600 years removed from Charlotte herself. Furthermore, she is also closely related to other members of the aristocracy,

meaning that if one were to consider Charlotte Black, one would also have to consider Prince Harry and Mary, Queen of Scots Black as well (Muhammad). However, ignoring the fragile evidence of Charlotte's Black heritage, the premise of *Bridgerton's* "multiracial mecca" also rests on the shoulders of the relationship between Charlotte and King George. In the words of Lady Danburry, England was "two separate societies, divided by color until a king fell in love with one of us... Love... conquers all" (Daut). Though it seems like loose ground to stand on, in the world of *Bridgerton*, this interracial relationship has, in fact, changed everything. "It has defeated color prejudice and it has eliminated chattel slavery" (Daut). However, this implication takes away from the history of resistance and revolt that truly changed everything. In reality, it was not the "moral concerns and altruism" of Britain and King George III which caused him to end slavery, it was "the resistance of slaves and colonized people that led to abolition and the withdrawal of British troops from the colonies" (Muhammad).

In particular, the writers and producers of *Bridgerton* also inadvertently ignore Haiti, both the stage of the Haitian Revolution which played an enormous part in the elimination of slavery (being the first independent and slavery-free nation in the Northern Hemisphere) and the home of a real Black aristocracy (Daut). At the same time that the regency era was taking place in Britain, Henry Christophe had just established his own monarchy, establishing himself as the King of the State of Haiti in the North of Haiti in 1811 (Weiss, 39). Having recently freed themselves from French control through the largest and most successful slave rebellion in history, Haiti was now attempting to establish itself as equal to the other states, especially when so many were rooting for it to fail or unwilling to support them due to their former status as a slave colony and the idea of encouraging slave revolts. Making Haiti into a monarchy was "an attempt to boost its fortunes", with Christophe trying to put Haiti on the same playing field as other sovereign

nations, most of which were still monarchies or dictatorships at the time (Weiss, 39). The kingdom itself was short lived, with Christophe suffering a stroke in 1820 and, fearing a coup from republican revolutionaries, committing suicide shortly thereafter. The Republic of Haiti then took over the State of Haiti in the north and reunited the two halves of the nation (Weiss, 41). Despite the short-lived nature of the Kingdom of Haiti, it still remains that it existed, with Christophe creating building projects, making trade deals, and establishing dukes, duchesses, and barons alike (Weiss, 36). To ignore such a rich and powerful history only to hinge the premise of the show on a much less accurate and much more tenuous basis of interracial love shows where *Bridgerton's* main interests lie. *Bridgerton* is not necessarily meant to be rooted in a fully accurate history. However, the history that the show tells reinforces the erasure of Blackness from history and passes on opportunities to make intriguing racial commentary for the sake of anesthetizing the show for viewers who don't want to think more deeply about the implications of Blackness in the time period's wider context.

This is not to say that instances of colorblind casting such as this cannot or should not exist, or that clearly racialized criticisms of colorblind casting are valid. Rather, the point is that colorblind casting is only a surface-level solution to a much deeper problem, and that the solution lies in allowing Black voices not just on the screen or the stage but in all aspects of the creative process. Encouraging the uplifting and hiring of Black writers, editors, and directors is necessary for the creation of roles for Black people.

Despite the failures of *Bridgerton*, there are existing works that adapt white stories in such a way that they faithfully reflect Black culture and identity instead of offering only a surface level visibility. One of these works is *The Wiz*, originally a Broadway musical and later adapted into a movie by Motown. *The Wiz* is an adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* which

reimagines the story not only with a Black cast but with music, settings, costumes, and themes that reflect Black culture, struggles, and ideas. Although the plot remains the same as the original *Wizard of Oz*, this adaptation takes the foundations and builds a story which not only represents Black people visually, but speaks in a Black voice to a Black audience.

One of the most striking differences between *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Wiz* are the visuals of the two films. *The Wizard of Oz* takes place in a bright and fantastical wonderland, the protagonists moving through forests, green hills, and fields of flowers towards the opulent utopia of the Emerald City. *The Wiz*, on the other hand, has Dorothy and her companions move “across the urban landscape rather than towards it,” taking place in a strange alternative version of New York (Hassler-Forest, 89). This urban environment is one that is almost always hostile towards Dorothy and her crew, with them being attacked in the subway, lured into a drug-infused nightclub, and in a common gag throughout the film, denied access to the cabs that are seemingly everywhere and forced to walk all the way to the home of *The Wiz*. The costuming of the characters is also distinct from the original *Wizard of Oz*. Though the main protagonists remain in similar outfits, the most interesting changes come in the forms of some of the side characters. For example, one of the most interesting and dramatic changes in appearance comes from the citizens of Oz who have been enslaved by Evillene, *The Wiz*'s equivalent to the Wicked Witch of the West. While enslaved in her underground sweatshop, the actors wear deformed masks with strange features as well as brightly colored puffy clothing. However, once Evillene has been defeated, the people celebrate by shedding their costumes, revealing their true bodies beneath it. Not only do the workers shed the weight of their oppressor in the story, but they shed the monstrous costumes which she made them wear, a symbol of rebirth and a change of both the external form and internal mindset that takes place during the song “Brand New Day.”

The soundtrack of *The Wiz* is based in R&B, Jazz, and Soul music, all genres that are based in Black tradition. From Dorothy's slower ballads to the upbeat "Ease on down the Road," the musical style of *The Wiz* makes itself distinct from the more popular theatrical style of *The Wizard of Oz*. Furthermore, the songs include lyrics that are more attuned to the themes and content of its own story. In his introductory song, "You Can't Win", Michael Jackson's Scarecrow laments about his misfortune in life as he is harassed by a group of crows. They could be representative of Jim Crow laws and the way that they tear down the confidence and power of Black People by repetitive debasement based on a logic of racial oppression. This is especially prevalent as they force the Scarecrow to recite the "crow commandments," a set of nonsensical rules that the crows have created to keep the scarecrow from leaving the pole, and force him to sing the "Crow Anthem", depicted as the aforementioned "You Can't Win," and featuring the lines "People keep saying things are going to change / But they look just like they're staying the same / You can't win, way over your head / And you only got yourself to blame / You can't win, child / You can't break even / And you can't get out of the game." However, the crows could also simply be representative of a larger pervasive ideology of the inevitability of Black oppression that was instilled among Black people by the lasting effects of slavery, Jim Crow, and institutionalized racism. One of the main ways that the crows encourage the Scarecrow's resignation towards his own oppression is by convincing him of his own stupidity, with one of the "crow commandments" being "Thou shalt stop readin' all bits of paper and literature." Despite this, over the course of the film, the Scarecrow, who is filled with scraps of philosophers' texts rather than simple newspapers, continues to use these texts to give advice and make commentary throughout Dorothy and her friends' journey to confront The Wiz and return her home. Eventually, at the end of the film, before Dorothy is sent home, the Scarecrow tells her

“Success, fame and fortune– they’re all illusions. All there is that is real, is the friends that two can share.” When Dorothy asks who said that, the Scarecrow responds, “I did.” The Scarecrow has recognized the truth in Dorothy’s words, that “everybody has a brain”, and that the words of others had kept him from recognizing his own intellectual abilities and self worth. However, by the end of the film, he has realized that his own thoughts can be just as important and intellectual as the philosophers that he’s been reading from.

The character of Dorothy is also central to *The Wiz*, representing the main protagonist and the character through which the audience perceives the story. In *The Wiz*, Dorothy is portrayed as older and more mature than her white counterpart. Rather than complaining about the limitations of her home life and longing to be somewhere else like the original Dorothy, Diana Ross’ Dorothy instead lives in Harlem and has never traveled south of 125th street. The major conflict of her character comes from her inability to create connections and “participate in the Black community life that seems to come naturally to the rest of her family” (Hassler-Forest, 90). Her journey and character arc is largely about stepping outside the bounds of the comfortable bubble of Harlem, not to show her that it is where she truly belongs, or that “a larger world of privilege and wealth will always remain accessible to her,” as in the Original 1939 film (Hassler-Forest, 90). Instead, it is to show her the importance of self-determination and that despite– or even perhaps because of– the internal and external hardships of Black life, community and friendship can offer strength and empowerment in dark times. Dorothy becomes open to deep connections and feels herself empowered by her journey, returning home with a new and hopeful outlook on life despite the harrowing journey she went through to get there. Although the plot that *The Wiz* follows remains the same, and so do the names and likenesses of the main characters, the story

that it decides to tell is one that encompasses themes relevant to Black social and cultural identity, and it does so using aesthetics that relate deeply back to Black culture and society.

Non-traditional and colorblind casting are methods that have been around for a long time and likely will stick around for quite some time longer. Despite putting Black faces on stage or on screen, these casting methods still only offer visibility rather than actual solutions to institutional issues of racism within the performance industry. These issues are exacerbated by colorblind ideologies which seek to ignore racial differences and make true progress difficult. Offering mere visibility, however, is no longer enough. As we venture further into the 21st century, more Black actors and directors are making waves in the film industry. Names like Jordan Peele, Ryan Coogler, and Ava DuVernay are becoming more well known and creating original Black stories and roles for actors to fulfill. Hopefully, one day, there will no longer be a need for colorblind casting, as Black people will not only be seen, but their voices will be heard and uplifted through their own stories instead of through those of the White past.

Works Cited

- Burke, Meghan A. "Colorblind Racism: Identities, Ideologies, and Shifting Subjectivities." *Sociological Perspectives* 60, no. 5 (2017): 857–65. doi:10.1177/0731121417723827.
- Catanese, Brandi Wilkins. "The End of Race or the End of Blackness?: August Wilson, Robert Brustein, and Color-Blind Casting." In *The Problem of the Color[Blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance*, 32–71. University of Michigan Press, 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.368267.5>.
- Daut, Marlene L. 2021. "Why Did Bridgerton Erase Haiti?" Avidly. January 19, 2021. <https://avidly.org/2021/01/19/why-did-bridgerton-erase-haiti/>.
- Gonzalez, LyaNisha R. "True Lies: The Myth of Color-Blind Casting and the Silencing of the Black Playwright in American Theatre." *Theatre Symposium* 29, no. 1 (2022): 150–62. doi:10.1353/tsy.2022.0012.
- Hassler-Forest, Dan. "Utopian Afrofuturism in *The Wiz*." *Science Fiction Film and Television* 9, no. 1 (2016): 88–90.
- Ifeonu, Prof-Collins. "Burke, Meghan, Colorblind Racism." *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 45, no. 1 (2020): 71–74. doi:10.29173/cjs29653.
- Jenkins, Paul. 2024. "Why Is Representation Important: A Guide to Its Significance." Brilliantio. April 6, 2024. <https://brilliantio.com/why-is-representation-important/>.
- Lamb, Jessica. 2017. "Get Thee to a Stage! A Brief History of Women in the Theater." Women's Museum of California. September 6, 2017. <https://womensmuseumca.org/get-thee-to-a-stage-a-brief-history-of-women-in-the-theater/>.

- Muhammad, Nylah. 2023. "The Real History of Queen Charlotte, and the Problem with Netflix's Bridgerton Spinoff." *Vox*. May 5, 2023.
<https://www.vox.com/culture/23712625/queen-charlotte-bridgerton-netflix-real-history>.
- Pao, Angela C. "Introduction." In *No Safe Spaces: Re-Casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater*, 1–22. University of Michigan Press, 2010.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.1729062.4>.
- Phillips, Maya. "Colorblind Casting And Its Complications: The Arts/Cultural Desk." *The New York Times*. 2020, Late Edition (East Coast) edition.
- Sharf, Zack. 2017. "25 Worst Cases of Hollywood Whitewashing since 2000." *IndieWire*. August 29, 2017.
<https://www.indiewire.com/gallery/hollywood-whitewashing-25-roles-emma-stone-jake-gyllenhaal-scarlett-johansson/edge-of-tomorrow-2014-3/>.
- Thompson, Ayanna, and Timothy Douglas. 2006. "In the Blood: William Shakespeare, August Wilson, and a Black Director." In *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, 137–53. New York: Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203944332-10>.
- Weiss, Daniel. *Haiti's Royal Past. Archaeology*. Vol. 71. Boston: Archaeological Institute of America, 2018.
- Wilson, August. "The Ground on Which I Stand." *Callaloo* 20, no. 3 (1997): 493–503.
[doi:10.1353/cal.1998.0096](https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.1998.0096).