BUT WE DREAM IN THE DARK FOR THE MOST PART: FANTASIES OF RACE, "COLORBLIND" VISIBILITY, AND THE NARRATIVE MARGINALIZATION OF BLACK FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN MAINSTREAM FANTASY MEDIA

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Masters of Arts
in English

By

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Washington, D.C.
March 23, 2020
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ABSTRACT

Fantastic stories offer new ways of dreaming, yet even in magical worlds race remains the “unspeakable thing unspoken.” My project analyzes the racialization of Black female characters positioned as protagonists in early 2000s mainstream fantasy media, looking primarily at Gwen from BBC’s Merlin, Tiana from Disney’s Princess and the Frog, and Cinderella from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Cinderella. By only incorporating Black female actors through “colorblind” casting, writers and producers make Black female characters visible but fail to incorporate the necessary cultural specificity of representation. Consequently, the adaptation of fantasies defined by white cultural values resist the new centrality of the “Dark Other” and instead re-inscribe oppressions of the racial past. These supposedly colorblind narratives of “worlds-that-never-were” cannot divorce historical settings and archetypes from their temporal connotations when applied to a Black female protagonist. In the “rags to riches” stories I analyze, the presence of a Black princess unsettles but cannot overcome race-d, gendered, and class-ed tropes linked to white femininity and the depiction of the princess. I argue that Gwen, Tiana, and Cinderella are still intersectionally marginalized within “colorblind” mythologies, even if not explicitly and not only due to skin color. These narratives then set up real Black girl audiences to dream of a world that has to ignore their embodied difference in order to include them.
With this thesis, I close one chapter in my continuing journey towards fearlessly embracing the fullness of my identity. Thank you to the family and friends who gave me the support and love that I needed to get here.

And thank you to Toni Morrison, who taught me to play in the dark, because being a Black woman does not limit my imagination; it expands it.
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INTRODUCTION

I. Fantasy, “Colorblindness,” and Unspeakable Things Unspoken

My passion for literature and narrative is inseparable from my love for the fantasy genre. The first chapter book I remember reading was *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis; I was drawn in by the promise of the limitless worlds that an author could bring to life. I constantly sought to stretch the farthest limits of my imagination; to imagine dragons, fairies, talking animals — all things I knew did not exist and many for which I had no reference. I knew that the “real world” had no fantastic creatures or otherworldly guardians, and there were no magical solutions for everyday problems. Still, I kept reaching for new realities, or at least new reimaginings of reality. As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas expresses in the introduction to her book *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, “I was warned against walking through metaphoric looking glasses, trained to be suspicious of magic rings, and assured that no gallant princes were ever coming to my rescue … and yet I was most drawn to those magical stories, for I longed to dream” (Thomas 1).

I have come to understand that my love for fantasy was inexorably tied to my coming of age, although I did not have the language to express it then. My immigrant parents had sacrificed to make sure I lived in a nice neighborhood, went to a good private school, and had every chance to assimilate. My not feeling “different” was meant to be empowering, so that I could thrive in primarily white spaces. Nevertheless, from a young age I still felt inexplicably ill at ease among both my white peers and my extended family who had chosen not to assimilate to the same extent. Not having the vocabulary for my own difference did not lessen the impact of that

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difference. This social discomfort led to my finding solace in the media that I could consume instead of dealing with lunch table dynamics and family reunions. Rosemary Jackson’s *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* explains that “fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting in cultural constraints; it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence or loss” (Jackson qtd. in Schanoes 236-237).² These stories were not just escapist; they were the means by which I tried to visualize my own self-actualization. Fantasy was the literature of desire, of dreaming. The shy kids in fantasy were always the “chosen ones,” which was the closest I could get to validation for my alienation. Still, I continued to feel invisible: unable to see myself or to be seen.

The mainstream fantasy stories I grew up with, both as movies and as books — like *The Chronicles of Narnia, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter,* and *A Wrinkle in Time*³ — only further reinforced my invisibility. I internalized the fact that even these wildly magical alternate worlds were fundamentally conservative and consistently excluded characters, let alone protagonists, who looked like me. In these stories, the princess and/or protagonist was depicted as “fair”: blonde or brunette, slender, and white. I willed myself into the narratives without consciously acknowledging the ways in which my identity was not welcome in these worlds, telling myself that I was relating to characteristics “beyond” skin color: cleverness, shyness, bravery, ambition. But subconsciously, my imagination had learned its boundaries: “Although a sense of infinite possibilities inherent in fantasy, science fiction, comics, and other imaginative genres draws children, teens, and adults from all backgrounds to speculative fiction, not all

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³ This is not to say that there were not Black authors writing fantasy at the same time as these stories, but unless a concentrated effort was made to find those stories, they were not easily accessible in the mainstream. At the time I had been taught not to focus on difference and consequently, not to look for those stories.
people are equally represented in these genres” (Thomas 3). When I wrote and published my own novel as a teenager, none of my protagonists featured my own racial identity. I had come of age with no language for understanding myself. And even in fantasy — a genre that seemed to pride itself on imagining the extraordinary, where I could be anything I wanted to be — I could not represent myself as the hero of my own story.

Growing up in the early aughts, I was later able to find a few exceptions in film and television to the lack of Black girls in fantasy. It was visual media that had to do what books did not: commit to a character’s visibly race-d portrayal, instead of leaving a few open-ended physical descriptions in the text. But at the same time, there was a rise in the idea of “colorblind casting” or “blind casting”: Black people and people of color could be cast for more roles so long as their race was never acknowledged. In her article “A Black Cast Doesn’t Make a Black Show,”

Kirsten J. Warner explains “the plausible deniability of colorblindness”:

Blindcasting became a useful tool because it allowed industrial practitioners like showrunners and television writers to avoid explicitly writing race into the script while remaining confident that there could be “equal opportunity” for actors of diverse backgrounds. Yet this much-touted practice of equality is patently paradoxical. That is, rather than pursuing diversity by hiring minority writers and/or showrunners to create culturally specific roles for people of color, the television industry preferred to make roles racially normative. While on the surface this may have seemed a laudable practice, again, the problem with blindcasting is that racial normativity is a euphemism for “whiteness.” Thus, blindcasting forces minority actors to input their cultural difference and output a standardized form of whiteness.

This “colorblindness” was meant to work towards the vaguely defined goals of diversity and

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inclusion, but as Warner identifies, because few marginalized voices were in the writers’ room, 
let alone executive producers or directors, these Black characters were written to ignore the 
significance of their embodied identity — just like I had grown up ignoring mine. Their lines of 
dialogue and cultural values were barely distinguishable from their white peers. Furthermore, the 
roles they were given were often limited to secondary characters, like Kat Graham’s Bonnie 
Bennett in CW’s *Vampire Diaries* or Amandla Stenberg’s Rue in *The Hunger Games;*5 never 
truly central but enough to check the “diversity box.” Most, if not all, of them exemplify what 
Ebony Elizabeth Thomas calls “the imagination gap”: the gap between the diverse lived 
experiences of Black girls and the limited number of stereotypical Black characters that were 
recycled over and over again (Thomas 4-5). Out of these supposedly colorblind castings, only a 
few Black fantasy protagonists emerged: the ones my thesis will explore are Brandy as 
Cinderella in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Cinderella* (1997), Gwen from the BBC’s *Merlin* 
(2008-2012), and Tiana from Disney’s *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). They were my first 
glimpses at even the possibility of representation that did not sideline people who looked like me 
in magical worlds. Nevertheless, race remained the “unspeakable thing unspoken,” as named by 
Toni Morrison in her 1988 lecture.6 Watching these portrayals left Black girl audiences like me 
to take away that this was the fantasy we should embrace: a world that does not speak of race 
even as its standards are built on race.

Only in the past three years has a wonderful and gratifying surge in Black fantasy and

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5 It is interesting to note that, at the time, all of these Black characters cast through colorblind casting 
appeared in subgenres of fantasy that edged closer to contemporary settings, like paranormal romance and 
dystopian fiction. I will analyze more extensively in my chapter on *Merlin* the prevailing argument that 
diverse characters can only appear if the world is meant to look “real.” Very few young Black women 
were cast as secondary characters, let alone protagonists, in the kind of epic fantasy that eschewed 
modernity entirely.

science fiction come into the mainstream, largely enabled by the billion-dollar Marvel blockbuster *Black Panther*. White audiences are suddenly eager to learn more about Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction, and Black creators who have been doing the work are now getting the promotion they deserve for culturally specific Black worlds with complex Black protagonists. In contrast, only a few Black women were actually cast as fantasy protagonists through colorblind casting. Why then this topic for my thesis, if the field of Black speculative fiction has “moved on”? It is clear that colorblind casting, and its sister concept of “multiculturalism” (detailed in my chapter on *Merlin*), are meant to shore up white discomfort with racial difference. But it is not enough to simply dismiss these characters because of the white power structures that created them. In “Black Cultural Politics and Commercial Culture,” Herman Gray asserts that in fact, “it is the constant articulation of representations to material circumstances, social formations, and alliances of power that make a critical analysis and politics of culture so very consequential … cultural practices and the potential they hold are significant only in relation to the political power, economic positions, social conditions, and lived experiences of people” (Gray 6). It matters that there are Black girl protagonists in mainstream, white dominated media, because their characters prominently articulate and reinforce the historical socioeconomic marginalization of real young Black girl audiences. It matters that there are Black girl protagonists in *fantasy* because of fantasy’s claim to be “atemporal,” outside of time, even as it draws on racial and historical temporalities. The genre reveals that colorblindness is in fact both a fantasy of dominant white discourse that dreams of a world that ignores difference, and a *pedagogy* of dreaming taught to young audiences. The shoring up of white anxieties about race in “colorblind” fantasies becomes not a simple erasure of race, but itself a fantasy that reinscribes race in a way that can be taught through the accessible medium of
“family-friendly” movies. My project leans on one distinction — although the field has wonderfully begun to celebrate the complexities of Afrofuturism and Black futurities written by and for Black people, I have found very little scholarship on the Black characters in the mainstream genres of fantasy that sought to create “worlds-that-never-were” (Thomas 2). I will examine these fantasy narratives’ peculiar relationship with a historical and racialized past.

Placing these stories alongside the subgenre definitions detailed in The Cambridge Companion for Fantasy Literature, I posit that fantasies of “worlds-that-never-were” are neither “alternate histories” that reimagine a specific “what if” in the historical record, nor “historical fantasies” that interrogate the dominant discourse of historical record (Schanoes 237). Both of those subgenres imply a narrative awareness of a historical past as more than the sum of its parts. Alternate histories and historical fantasies both acknowledge that even changing one element of history (adding magic, intervening in the death of a dictator) would lead to world-changing repercussions that require meticulous world re-building in the narrative (Schanoes 237-238). Fantasies of “worlds-that-never-were” do the opposite: in adapting myths, legends, or fairy tales, they choose a few well-known elements of a time period (or several time periods), just enough to evoke “the past” with very little historical context or cultural specificity. There is an intentional disconnect from a holistic view of a historical past, making the setting paradoxically both vaguely historical and ahistorical. I argue that when these fantasies include colorblind casting, this refusal to incorporate cultural specificity and context also refuses to acknowledge historical signifiers’ “racialized past”: the understanding that history is a “racialized and sexualized social formation, that is, a formation that remains structured by unequal access to and distribution of power and rewards organized along class, race, and gender lines” (Gray 163).7 History is itself a

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narrative fantasy meant to retrospectively give cohesion to and validate contemporary systems of power. As each text will bear out, the tropes genre fantasy stories take from history were created to uphold specific race-d, gendered, and class-ed values. Despite the lack of explicit textual acknowledgment of those values, race, as constructed by the racial past, will be the inescapable “unspeakable thing unspoken” in fantasies that use those tropes.

I believe the closest articulation of a way to reconcile the limitations of the racialized past on the imagination comes from Toni Morrison, who argues that as a Black author, she sought to “carve out a world both culture specific and race free”:

I had three choices: to ignore race or try to altogether and write about the second world war or domestic strife without referencing race. But that would erase one, although not the only, most impinging fact of my existence and my intelligence. Two, I could become a cool “objective” observer writing about race conflict and/or harmony. There, however, I would be forced to surrender the centre of the stage to received ideas of centrality and the subject would always and forever be race. Or, three, I could strike out for new territory: to find a way to free my imagination of the impositions and limitations of race and explore the consequences of its centrality in the world and in the lives of the people I was hungry to write about (Morrison, *The Guardian*).  

Morrison’s careful, methodical explanation of how to ensure the narrative imagination is “as unencumbered as possible and as responsible as possible” (Morrison, *The Guardian*) acknowledges both that race is an unavoidably “impinging fact” for Black women and that it is not the only fact. The oppression of race does not have to be central, because that can create a story so obsessed with depicting Black realities that it exploits Black pain. However, entirely ignoring it does not alter its effects. Colorblind fantasies of “worlds-that-never-were” construct the first of Morrison’s choices and fall far short of the limitless storytelling she proposes. If

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anything, they are “race specific and culture free”: racial oppressions are re-enacted with more specificity than cultural contexts, removing the support of Black communities and emphasizing Black suffering.

In this thesis, I argue that to various extents Cinderella, Merlin, and The Princess and the Frog all attempt to “colorblindly” represent a Black female protagonist, while connotatively reenacting settings and characterizations that carry racial connotations from a historical racialized past. These connotations result from the fact that “Western or European writers believe or can choose to believe their work is naturally ‘race-free’ or ‘race transcendent’” (Morrison, The Guardian, emphasis mine). That is, writers and creators believe that if race and skin color are not addressed, they do not have to exist. This mentality does not erase the racial identity of their protagonists — not only because of the necessary function the race-d Other serves in fantasy, which I will discuss in the next section in the context of Thomas’ The Dark Fantastic, but also because the racial past continues to fundamentally shape modern perceptions about Black people. I argue that these fantasy narratives actually construct “fantasies” of race, in which I use “fantasy” not just as a genre categorization, but to mean “daydreams arising from the unconscious” (Oxford English Dictionary).9 If directors and screenwriters are not consciously working to be “culturally specific and race free,” then the unconscious, the subtextual racial past, continues to shape the marginalization of the Black protagonist through the narrative exploitation of the “visual difference” of the Dark Other. The racialization of Cinderella, Gwen, and Tiana vividly illustrates the complexity of truly representing race and cultural difference. It requires the foundational understanding that skin color can indicate but does not by itself define racial difference, because race is “not [a] fixed singular essence, but [the] locus in which economic,

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gender, sex, and race contradictions converge” (Lowe 26). It requires a contextual, historical grounding in cultural specificity. Like Warner, I acknowledge that “an innate sense of cultural difference is difficult to grasp and maintain. However, I do not accept that just because race is difficult, it is impossible to represent in meaningful and complex ways” (Warner 49). By simply selecting Black female actresses through “colorblind” casting, showrunners only make black female characters visible, and that is not enough to bridge the imagination gap.

II. The Paradox of Colorblind Visibility and the Narrative Need for Blackness

The terms “diversity,” “visibility” and “representation” have often been used interchangeably by actors and creators of color, let alone by white directors and showrunners patting themselves on the back for their efforts. Many critical race scholars have understood this conflation to be unhelpful, at best. I posit that analyzing colorblind casting can help distinguish between them, precisely because by conflating “visibility” and “representation,” colorblind casting uniquely reveals the imagination gap between them. In the acclaimed Broadway musical Hamilton, the character of Aaron Burr expresses his rising ambition and political discontent in the song “The Room Where It Happens,” bemoaning, “We dream of a brand new start / But we dream in the dark for the most part … I’ve got to be in the room where it happens.” Burr, a white man from early American history, is played in the original Broadway cast by a Black man (Leslie Odom Jr.) because of creator Lin-Manuel Miranda’s commitment to a casting both “color-blind” and “color-conscious”: resisting the fact that the Founding Fathers were all, of course, white, and insisting that the entire cast be comprised of an intentional variety of non-

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white, marginalized ethnicities. In light of this casting, the lyric “but we dream in the dark for the most part” seems to me to adroitly (if unintentionally, as I take it slightly out of context) gesture towards my overarching argument. Supposedly “colorblind” visibility in media and art can allow those who have never seen themselves to fantasize, to dream, in what seems like new and exciting ways — “but we dream in the dark for the most part,” still limited by the stereotypes and tropes those stories simply re-enact with our bodies. Colorblind casting merely places Black female characters onscreen in roles created for or originated by white people, and that is not representation. As August Wilson declares in *The Ground On Which I Stand* regarding about colorblind casting in theater, perhaps deepening my *Hamilton* connection: “In an effort to spare us the burden of being ‘affected by an undesirable condition’ and as a gesture of benevolence, many whites (like the proponents of colorblind casting) say, ‘Oh, I don’t see color.’ We want you to see us. We are Black and beautiful” (Wilson 32). When producers and writers pride themselves on their “blindness,” it inhibits their understanding of the Blackness they claim to want to represent. They cannot hope to represent something that they refuse to see. Only characters that acknowledge and specifically celebrate Black experiences and perspectives represent Black people. Even then, Black people are not a monolith, and we cannot be represented in singularity; hence, the need for a diverse array of Black experiences to be depicted in books and media.

However, I maintain that colorblind casting, as inadequate as it was and is, does do the work of visibility. That is, colorblind casting makes embodied Black people literally able to be

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12 This decision has received legitimate critique for many of the same concerns behind my own project, but it is worth adding that Miranda also wrote the Tony Award-winning musical “In the Heights” based on his experiences growing up in the Latinx community of Washington Heights. He is evidently not unaware of the importance of representing cultural specificity.

seen in genres, like fantasy, where they were not present before. (There is no denying that it is satisfying to see Black women play protagonists in spaces that completely excluded us in the past.) But visibility and sight are only the first step. I have already used the word “see” several times in this introduction, either to refer to associating oneself with characters based on commonalities of identity, or to denote the literal visual act of viewing television and film. Additionally, there is another important and more complex distinction in terminology that I propose. In *Sula*, Toni Morrison makes a complex distinction between “seeing” and “watching”:

“What did Eva mean by you watched? How could she help seeing it? She was right there. But Eva didn’t say see, she said watched. ‘I did not watch it. I just saw it’” (Morrison 170). Here “seeing” is implied to be the act of viewing, whereas “watching” takes what is viewed and interprets it, participates in it. “Watching” brings preexisting worldviews, critical thought, and cultural values to the text that is viewed. As a child, I *saw* colorblind depictions of Black girls in fantasy, not realizing the values and desires I was internalizing. Now I can *watch* them and understand what they did for me, but also what they did to me. Non-Black creators of colorblind fantasies reveal that they only see Black people and cannot bring an understanding of Black cultures to inform their stories. They rely on being able to simply “transfer” characteristics of the “universally” relatable white hero to Black protagonists. I maintain that “it is because the fantastic is often positioned as universal in our culture that its deconstruction and transformation are essential” (Thomas 24). I did not then have the language and the tools to analyze the fantasies I was taught to dream, but I still felt the marginalization I could not explain.

Colorblind casting also reveals that fantasy has always needed race and Blackness — Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’ titular “Dark Fantastic” — to create the very genre tropes and

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archetypes that will then necessarily marginalize Black protagonists. In the essay “Black Matters” from Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Toni Morrison explores the concept of “American Africanism”: “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify” (Morrison 6).15 Not to be confused with understandings of real Black people, this is a construction of “literary blackness” that makes space for “contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” (Morrison 7). The presence of “literary blackness” becomes the tool by which the mainstream white narrative creates its values. As Morrison observes, it is not that “Black people signified little to nothing in the imagination of American writers” (Morrison 15) but that “the subject of the dream is the dreamer16 … the fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive” — that is, literary blackness defines whiteness. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas uses Morrison’s literary blackness, as well as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s Monster Theory and Stuart Hall’s “spectacle of the Other,”17 and Western traditions of fantasy and the speculative, to build her own premise for a theory of the “Dark Fantastic.” Thomas asserts that Black female casting establishes a monstrous Dark Other through the spectacle of “visual difference” that both fetishizes and fears the presence of the Black body on screen. Black characters necessarily open up the possibilities for violence and suspense: “She is not supposed to be there (although she must be), wreaking havoc on the order, harmony, and happiness that of all that is right and light (and White)” (Thomas 26). Although the Dark Other is necessary for the fantastic, her centrality is unsettling, because “darkness must be destroyed, or there is no story … thus, the Dark Other is

16 Morrison’s particular phrasing also can be connected to the constructed nature of the American Dream. The subject of that “dream” is not the immigrant, but the white American and their dream of what it imagines immigrant subjectivity should/could be. The American Dream is an imagined reality of how “Americanness” is “earned” that is re-inscribed and perpetuated onto American history.
subject to textual violence, which often results in character death” (Thomas 27). The Black
woman as the Dark Other — gendered, race-ed, and (as I will argue) class-ed — was never meant
to be the protagonist in white Western narratives:

In the Anglo-American fantastic tradition, the Dark Other is the spectacle, the monstrous
Thing that is the root cause of hesitation, ambivalence, and the uncanny. The Dark Other
is the present-absence that lingers at the edges of every fairytale … Readers and hearers
of fantastic tales who have been endarkened and Othered by the dominant culture can
never be plausible conquering heroes nor prizes to be won in the fantastic (Thomas 23).

In other words, Black girl audiences marginalized in the “real world” find their marginalization
reinforced in fantasy. In the white imagination, Black women cannot be the princesses. We are
the demons, the evil witches, the monsters. Changing the position of the Dark Other from villain
or secondary character to protagonist does not change the function of the narrative to marginalize
her as such. It may not happen as evidently as the Black character’s inevitable death if she is
made the protagonist;\(^{18}\) nevertheless, through various storylines the narrative can and does enact
the intersectional marginalization of the Black protagonist despite her apparent centrality.

In the narratives I will analyze, the presence of a Black protagonist unsettles racial,
gendered, and class-ed tropes specifically linked to white femininity and the archetype of the
princess. My paper will explore two central examples: firstly, the “rags to riches” trope of classic
princess narratives that depicts a lower-class character, classically a maid or a servant as made
popular through the Cinderella fairytale, entering the upper class through marriage. The viewer is
meant to understand this upward mobility as “deserved” because of her “moral character” shown
through hard work — e.g. Cinderella is kind to her cruel stepmother and stepsisters and submits
to servanthood with meek domesticity. When a Black woman is cast as Cinderella (and even

\(^{18}\) Although that did not stop FOX’s *Sleepy Hollow* from killing off Abbie Mills (Nicole Beharie), who
was originally cast as one of two co-lead characters of the show.
more so when a white woman is also cast the evil stepmother, as is the case in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Cinderella), this trope now invokes racial histories of Black oppression and exploited labor that these “colorblind” stories are not prepared to reconcile. Secondly, the archetype of the princess — who can go off and have adventures with the implication that, in the end, she will receive her happy ending and be taken care of — assumes both financial and narrative security that Black girls in these stories are not afforded. The archetype also assumes desirability, as that happy ending is often tied to romance, but the narrative undercuts the desirability of the Black protagonist by maintaining standards of white femininity, often by positioning her against a white woman foil (Charlotte, Morgana, and Cinderella’s stepsisters).

My analysis allows for an understanding not only of Black girls’ onscreen marginalization, but also of the impact of those depictions on young Black female audiences. White feminist film theorists like Laura Mulvey have talked at length about the voyeurism in cinema through the male gaze that determines a split between active/male and passive/female. However, Mulvey centers the vulnerability of white women in front of the white male gaze in a colorblind analysis of gender. An analysis of Black female characters through Mulvey’s white feminist lens would not account for the other factors that inform the racialization of Black female gaze, because that lens assumes feminist analysis itself is colorblind. I argue that Black feminist theories of intersectionality and embodied difference provide the most useful frameworks for a theory of Black spectatorship. Jacqueline Stewart builds her approach to Black audiences’ engagement with media from the Unborn Child in Julie Dash’s Daughters of the Dust: “As [the Unborn Child] shifts her gaze between the picture printed on the stereograph and the visual ‘trick’ performed by the viewer, it is clear that she is fascinated by these images, their

‘promises,’ and their means of representation, even if the urban landscape she sees is alien, crowded, and provides no clear space for her inclusion” (Stewart 651). Similarly, I argue that Black girl audiences like me are drawn to the promise of Black women’s visibility onscreen, despite the “visual trick” that includes Black bodies but not Black experiences and Black histories. A Black woman’s onscreen embodiment is placed within a narrative fantasy of colorblindness that does not speak of the racial histories that shape it. Black girls then absorb the narrative unconscious as their own unconscious, internalizing the desire for a “race-free” world without understanding the erasure of difference embedded in the white “post-racial” imagination.

Still, I believe Black audiences can and do find reparative ways of watching the visibility of a Black woman playing a princess, even though the trope was constructed by white cultural values. bell hooks theorizes that Black women can find pleasure in constructing the “oppositional gaze,” in which “the acts of analysis, of deconstruction and of reading ‘against the grain’ offer an additional pleasure — the pleasure of resistance … not to ‘unsophisticated’ enjoyment … but to the structures of power which ask us to consume them uncritically and in highly circumscribed ways” (hooks 99). Importantly, however, she argues that “critical Black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual Black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking” (hooks 103). That is, Black women and Black girls are not a monolith in our resistance, and we are not born with the oppositional gaze. In fact, “our perceptions of reality have been so profoundly colonized” (hooks 102) through historical, graphically racist archetypes of Black women that it is all too easy to accept the comparatively less dehumanizing visibility of Black female actors as enough. bell hooks calls this acceptance

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“cinematic gaslighting”: “I could always get pleasure from movies as long as I did not look too deep.” For Black female spectators who have ‘looked too deep,’ the encounter with the screen hurt” (hooks 97). This thesis is an exercise in looking “too deep,” but still I believe that it is necessary and even cathartic to unpack my own love of these fantasies. I am more enriched by watching, in Toni Morrison’s sense, these Black female protagonists through a deconstructive Black feminist gaze. Only once we can name colorblind fantasies for what they were and what they taught us to dream, can we truly move beyond them toward Black girl futures.
WATCHING RACE IN A LAND OF MYTH AND A TIME OF MAGIC: INSCRIBING THE MARGINALIZATION OF GWEN IN BBC’S MERLIN

I. Racial Temporalities, Multiculturalism and Intersectionality

The BBC show *Merlin* (2008-2012) introduced a uniquely family-friendly Arthurian adaptation to broadcast television. The show’s premise depicts a magically gifted young Merlin befriending and protecting the self-centered prince Arthur, while Uther Pendragon is still king of Camelot in what the narrator tells us is “a land of myth and a time of magic.” Over the course of five seasons, *Merlin* toyed with the legends that characters such as Merlin, Arthur, and Morgana would become by creating “backstories” intended to subvert audience expectations about their eventual roles. However, this chapter focuses on the casting of Black British actress Angel Coulby as Gwen, who is set up to become Queen Guinevere but spends most of the show as a servant to the royal court. I argue that despite the eventual brief political status of her role as queen, Gwen’s narrative positionality is reframed by Coulby’s embodiment as a Black woman. Through “colorblind” storytelling, *Merlin* uses the “rags to riches” trope to create Gwen’s character arc from servant to queen. However, this narrative also explicitly makes a Black woman the repeated target of storylines of class-based marginalization and religious persecution, and in doing so appropriates medieval constructions of race and intersectional oppression. Gwen’s new backstory and relationship dynamics serve to further disempower her, traumatize her, and illustrate an unnecessarily stark contrast between Gwen the maid and the royal she is meant to become.

Before I begin that argument, however, it is important to note that my theoretical framework of historical intersectionality must necessarily contend with the fantasy of history that *Merlin*’s supposedly ahistorical fantasy drama constructs. The phrase “in a land of myth and a
time of magic,” repeated in the opening credits of every episode, sets up the ambiguously medieval setting within the fantasy drama. In “Multiculturalism, Diversity, and Religious Tolerance in Merlin,” David Tollerton notes that:

No references are made to Roman history or Christianity, and even its [Merlin’s] setting in pre-modern Britain is decidedly vague, [since] the name Britain is never used … The director James Hawes reflects, “We’re very conscious that if you take Arthurian legend you could choose anywhere from about the sixth into the fourteenth or fifteenth century. So what we’ve done is not try to choose a specific era. We’re building a world that feels real within the legend and it borrows from that Dark Ages, Medieval period.” (Tollerton 116, emphasis mine).22

Unlike the show’s genre contemporaries, BBC’s The Musketeers and BBC’s Robin Hood — which both take liberties with historical accuracy but still incorporate actual figures and events from the time period — Merlin only invokes the English Middle Ages in its government, costuming, and set design. It embraces “a time of magic” without grounding in any one Arthurian source, or a historical Britain from a specific century. As Tollerton concludes, this setting attempts to make the world of Merlin as “a fantastical and mythological realm that exists largely outside of history” (Tollerton 116). At the same time, BBC’s official Diversity Strategy is “to produce ‘programming which reflects modern Britain accurately and authentically’ … promot[ing] television which, in the absence of good reason not to, should ideally reflect the ethnically diverse character of contemporary British society” (Tollerton 117, emphasis mine).

The world of Merlin may be legend, but this “Diversity Strategy” informing its colorblind casting means that temporality, and specifically racial temporality, is inescapable. Modern perceptions of race in “contemporary British society” necessarily inform the casting of racial

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minorities in BBC television and film. The BBC’s statement and Hawes’ declaration that it should “feel real” both operate in two contexts: that of supposedly “multicultural” modern Britain, and that of a white medieval Britain as it is thought of by modern British audiences, even though Black people existed in medieval Britain. This emphasis on “multiculturalism” as a “modern” reimagining that Tollerton feels is praiseworthy is in fact inadequate. Multiculturalism is a white liberal product of colorblindness, “a national cultural form that seeks to unify diversity through the integration of differences as cultural equivalences abstracted from the histories of racial inequalities unresolved” (Lowe 30, emphasis in original). The genre of an “ahistorical” fantasy, a “land of myth and a time of magic,” promises a space “beyond” race as a space to be desired. In fact, it necessitates “forgetting the material histories of racialization, segregation, and economic violence” (Lowe 30) that could have grounded the representation of medieval Black women. In other words, multiculturalism is the way in which fantasies of racial histories can be constructed in order to appease a white liberal audience that sees “overlooking” histories of race as benevolence, instead of as an extension of privilege that results in the narrative oppression of Black characters.

Although Gwen is never explicitly addressed as “Black” or given a “foreign” cultural background, Coulby’s embodiment as a Black woman reframes the implications of the “rags to riches” trope whether or not it is likely meant, as I suggested earlier, simply to give the character a backstory that subverts audience expectations. Her history so diverges from Malory’s Guinevere that as director Hawes suggests, the adaptation of Guinevere to Gwen could be read as if the showrunners took the concept of the legend and created a wholly original character. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas states that:

Traditionally in Arthuriana stories for children and young adults, Guinevere is invariably positioned as a highborn lady or princess. Often she is the object of desire not only for the
once and future King Arthur but also for the Knights of the Round Table, most notably Sir Lancelot. She is beloved of her parents, particularly her father, and revered by her people. … Most recent retellings for children and young adults, including Nancy McKenzie’s *Chrysalis Queen Quartet* book series and Robert Mandell’s anime television series *Princess Gwenevere and the Jewel Riders*, have focused far less on Guinevere’s treachery and faithlessness and more on her agency and power as a young princess (Thomas 78).

Guinevere is always a princess, but the meanings attached to that princesshood, Thomas explains, have evolved somewhat over time, as modern white feminism has sought to redefine the archetype’s gendered expectations. Still, most of the expectations of her character remain the same because they are embedded in popular culture. Jennifer Edwards opens her article, “Casting, Plotting, and Enchanting: Arthurian Women in Starz’s *Camelot* and the BBC’s *Merlin,*” with the statement: “Viewers of Arthurian television programs have certain expectations for Arthur’s women. We want to see Guinevere as sweet and innocent in all things but love” (Edwards 57). Even looking at one of the most well-known books in the Arthurian canon, *Morte D’Arthur*, Thomas Malory’s introduction to Guinevere is brief: Arthur chooses to marry Guinevere, despite Merlin’s prophecy against the match, largely due to the political advantage of an alliance with her father, King Lodgreaunce. She is a princess in her own right, who without any explanation or backstory becomes the center of Arthur’s attention. Her appearance is swiftly followed by her wedding, coronation, and subsequent installation in the Camelot power structure. In several medieval legends, Guinevere also brings the Round Table as her wedding gift, which will eventually become iconic in securing Arthur’s reign over England.

In contrast to Guinevere’s established political advantages and hold on Arthur in so many

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other Arthuriana texts, the television show *Merlin* introduces Gwen as a vulnerable politicized character on the margins of the royal court and only just inside Arthur’s awareness. Gwen is a seamstress, the maidservant to Morgana Pendragon, and the daughter of a blacksmith. She has grown up a peasant but been given access to the court; she has been Morgana’s companion since they were children but still unmistakably lower-class. Gwen has no political advantages, and her precarious straddling of both upper and lower class positions her as uniquely vulnerable to exploitation and royal turmoil. This becomes evident through one of the show’s major storylines, in which *Merlin* establishes from the first episode that Uther Pendragon has outlawed magic use as punishable by death. Although this is meant to be a central source of tension for Merlin as the titular character, the first demonstration of the impact of Uther’s decree explicitly targets not Merlin, but Gwen. In season one episode three, most of the kingdom, including Gwen’s father Tom, falls ill with a magical plague sent by the sorceress Nimueh (who it is later revealed was the source of Uther’s hatred for magic) (“The Mark of Nimueh”).\(^{24}\) Merlin, who is already drawn to Gwen’s kindness and honesty in the intrigues of court, secretly heals Tom to see her happy, but because Tom is the only one to recover, Uther has Gwen arrested on suspicion of witchcraft. Her hysterical confusion at the scene of her “trial” painfully illustrates her innocence and Uther’s blind stubbornness and rage against the very idea of magic. He will barely allow her to speak on her own behalf.

It is important to note that Gwen remains kneeling on the floor through her whole trial, literally looking up at the white royal court who will decide her fate. Her confusion and panic is painful to witness, and even worse: she is not the subject of this storyline. It is Merlin’s reactions that the camera cuts to, because the audience is meant to understand her pain as his stakes. If he

is caught using magic, this could be him on trial. Later episodes will demonstrate that even when he is caught, he has just enough “plot armor” as the white male protagonist such that no consequences reappear past the end of each episode. Here, only Morgana speaks on Gwen’s behalf, seemingly benevolent until later we see that it is Morgana’s long-standing resentment of Uther’s high-handedness that drives her defense of Gwen: “I’ve seen the way the girl works. Her fingers are worn, her nails are broken … Why would she kneel on a cold stone floor morning after morning when she could make these things happen with a snap of her fingers, like an idle king?” (“The Mark of Nimueh”) This reasoning only serves to underscore Gwen’s marginalization. Her moral character is evaluated not by any reference to her personal interactions with the royal family, but by her physical labor. *Merlin* links Gwen’s worthiness and moral character to her “hard work” as a lower-class Black woman (and *The Princess and the Frog* will do the same to an even greater extent). Ignoring Morgana’s feeble defense, Uther will entertain no dissent, even from his ward: “I’ve seen what witchcraft can do. I have suffered at its hand. If there’s the slightest doubt about this girl, she must die or the whole kingdom will perish. … There are dark forces that threaten this kingdom” (“The Mark of Nimueh”). As a pseudo-medieval epic fantasy, *Merlin* employs the easy familiarity of the “light versus dark, good versus evil” trope. But with Coulby’s Gwen, the only Black character on the show, accused of being a “dark force,” Coulby’s embodiment changes the implications of Uther’s prejudice in this instance and points to the racialized undertones of the trope at large. This mention of “dark forces” with reference to Gwen marks the beginning of Gwen’s racialization inscribed through skin color, in relation to class and religion.

Since as previously stated, the show “borrows” from the medieval period, frameworks for approaching discussions of race in the medieval period can be useful in understanding *Merlin’s*
subtextual reconstruction of race. It is important to note that unfortunately, mainstream medieval studies long refused to acknowledge that race existed in medieval Europe, and it is only recently that the field has begun to acknowledge the work of critical race scholars in uncovering these histories (and even now these scholars face no little persecution for their efforts). In her article “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages,” Geraldine Heng observes that in medieval religious rhetoric, “black, of course, is the color of devils and demons” (Heng 259),25 presenting the connotative contrast between purity and evil that carries into discourse about ideas of whiteness and Blackness. Moreover, Heng argues that “the ability of racial logic to stalk and merge with other hierarchical systems … means that race can function as class (so that whiteness is the color of medieval nobility), [and] as ‘ethnicity’ and religion” (Heng 262). Using this theoretical framework for the medieval invention of race, the show’s approach to depicting Uther’s oppression can be understood as racialized through both class and religion. Although it is not a direct analogy, Tollerton discusses Uther’s systematic persecution of magic as “a conflict that links with notions of religious persecution since those shown to suffer at Uther’s hands are often Druids or those associated with ‘the old religion’” (Tollerton 117). Because Merlin’s fantasy world has chosen to allude to religious persecution through an abstraction of Druidism, Gwen’s arrest and racialization functions within that aspect of intersectional oppression as well. In terms of class, whiteness is certainly the color of medieval nobility in Merlin’s Arthurian court; there are white lower-class characters, but there is not a single non-white upper-class character.

I acknowledge that it underscores the drama of Gwen’s character arc to give her so little political agency that she cannot speak for herself at her own trial, knowing that she will

eventually become queen. But Gwen’s embodiment as Black is not incidental to her portrayal as a maid, no longer a princess in her own right. Gwen’s recasting as a Black woman — even if that Blackness is not named outright — seemingly necessitates a change in her social positioning:

This darker Gwen experiences considerably more hardship than the fair princess and queen familiar from the cycles, but her travails are all too familiar to Black characters in fictional narratives: Gwen in *Merlin* is incarcerated, falsely accused, and loses a parent to state violence. … Gwen exists not for herself, but as Morgana’s maid, a friend for Merlin, and an unwelcome conscience for Arthur. She is, in effect, one of the many instantiations of a Black servant character on television (Thomas 79).

In other words, this television adaptation’s archetypal change from the princess Guinevere of legend to the maid Gwen of *Merlin* is not neutral or race-free; it is an embodied change from white princess to Black servant, protagonist to sidekick (so to speak), that allows for the marginalizing tropes that shape her character within the narrative. This change makes it clear that Guinevere simply cannot be embodied as a Black woman in a white narrative without being subjected to the tropes that subjugate Blackness in white media. And so despite its fantastical setting and different terminology, the narrative of *Merlin* inscribes race. I argue that the model of intersectionality best illuminates Gwen’s racialization, with an understanding of both Heng’s definition of race as the management of human differences that encompass class, religion, and skin color, *and* Kimberle Crenshaw’s modern legal definition of Black feminist intersectionality. In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Crenshaw illustrates how Black women are pushed to the periphery of the “woman” social category in terms of gender oppression (Crenshaw 152).26 This single axis categorization ignores the ways in which Black women face

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both racism and sexism separately, simultaneously, and intersectionally — an experience “greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw 140). Intersectionality disrupts the idea that “but for” only one marginalizing characteristic, there would be no disadvantage. It is not just that Gwen is a woman, or a working-class maid, or a suspected follower of the “Old Religion.” It is the intersection of all of these things that reconstructs Gwen’s racialization. The compounding factors of gender, class, religion, and skin color in this supposedly “ahistorical” fantasy world serve to put Gwen “in her place”: marginalized within this new Arthurian legend.

Furthermore, unlike the show’s contemporaries, BBC’s Robin Hood (which introduced Jaq, a brown Saracen young woman who joins Robin’s gang in the first season) and BBC’s The Musketeers (which waited until the last season to introduce Sylvie, a black revolutionary with whom Athos falls in love), Gwen is not a brown character that the showrunners invented for the adaptation. She is arguably one of the most central characters of the Arthurian legend who has been recast as Black, and the showrunners chose to adapt storylines that now also recast her new positionality. The Guinevere of traditional Arthuriana was defined by her queenship; the Gwen of this television show is now defined by a “rags to riches” narrative that subjects her to royal oppression for most of the series’ run. It is true that Merlin himself is reimagined as Arthur’s servant and a lower-class character, also allowing for a more “dramatic” character arc. But unlike Merlin, Gwen has no magical power to fight back against her oppressors. In “The Mark of Nimueh” she is only saved by Merlin’s quick thinking to prove her innocence. I argue that the decision to position Gwen specifically as a vulnerable member of the lower class, and then to immediately (and repeatedly) make her a target of unjust systemic oppression, gains compounding impact because of her embodied Blackness. Starting in the earliest episodes of the show, Gwen’s racialization through institutional (in this world, royal) oppression begins at the
moment she is allowed to exercise the least agency over her own body and life.

II. All’s Not Fair in Love and Servanthood: Desirability and the Princess Archetype

Both Gwen’s relationship with Morgana and Gwen’s relationship with Arthur further highlight her political vulnerability and racial marginalization. From the beginning of the series, the writers of the show evidently assume that the audience knows Arthur is “supposed to” marry Gwen so that she will become Queen Guinevere. The narrative consequently takes its time putting the two together in a romantic context. In the meantime, Gwen’s characterization in early seasons is also shaped by her relationship with Merlinc and her relationship with Morgana. But the delay in Arthur and Gwen’s relationship — as opposed to the Guinevere of, for example, Malory’s Morte D’Arthur, who appears from the beginning as the object of Arthur’s single-minded affections — serves to draw out the dramatic tension, but it also makes space for the intersectional power dynamics that will govern Gwen’s most significant relationships and, in turn, the narrative’s portrayal of her femininity and desirability.

The marginalization of Merlin’s Gwen is ostensibly unexpected if one is judging by the standard of the feminine character qualities that the princess archetype privileges. Gwen is depicted as kind, generous, patient, and demure. She is eager to help Merlin in his various misadventures serving Arthur, understanding when Morgana vents her various complaints about her position, and often the first to call Arthur a “bully” when he exerts his privilege carelessly

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27 This ends up being an unnecessary and forced puppy love dynamic the show itself never quite commits to and never mentions again after the first season, instead settling into a platonic respect and easy friendship united by both characters’ prioritization of Arthur.
28 I will discuss the “princess” archetype even though Gwen eventually becomes queen, because my argument interrogates the narrative of an adaptation which has taken a legend in which she was a princess before she was queen and instead made her a maid. Her eventual, brief queenship does not by itself cancel out her marginalization.
(Thomas 80-81). As the series goes on, she routinely “provoke[s] better manners, better
decisions, stronger actions, and more noble attitudes in Arthur, often through explicit
exhortations to improve [himself] and live up to [his] potential” (Edwards 66). She is clearly
supportive and “soft” in a way that nominally subverts “hard” stereotypes of Black womanhood
(which I will discuss further in my chapter on The Princess and the Frog) and fits traditional
gender codes of the princess. If meekness and domesticity were the sole signifiers of the princess
archetype, she should by all accounts be set up for the narrative centrality of the princess
protagonist. Yet even with all the “right” archetypal gender coding, she is still narratively and
visually positioned as a maid, not a princess, in contrast to other white princesses that come in
and out of Arthur’s life (Sophia, Mithian, Catrina, etc.) and of course, “the Lady Morgana.” Most
if not all of these princesses are Arthur’s love interests, presented as more viable options for his
marriage. These princesses are beautiful, wealthy, generally demure, and come with political
advantages — and again, most importantly, white. In other words, they have all the qualities of
the Guinevere of Arthurian legend. Although some later 2000s mainstream feminist media has
since worked to subvert representations of princesses as this kind of “feminine ideal,” there is no
denying that the “fair” white princess is associated with desirability, and desirability is associated
with the feminine ideal, particularly in the fantasy genre. The show signals its understanding of
that through these various white princess characters. Consequently, by setting up a contrast
between the white princesses, whom Arthur can court, and the Black maid whom he cannot, the
narrative also reveals the specific racial embodiment of the princess that necessarily must place
Gwen outside of that archetype.

29 There are several insinuations in early seasons that Arthur has a crush on and/or is unnecessarily
possessive towards Morgana, perhaps the show’s way at nodding to their incestuous affair that begets
Mordred in Arthurian legends, but it is disconcerting here, in a supposedly “family friendly” show, when
Morgana and Arthur have been raised together and otherwise have a sibling dynamic.
It would be not quite correct to say that Gwen the maid is portrayed as wholly undesirable, but expressions of desire towards her are few and far between. They usually serve a specific narrative purpose meant to draw attention to the show’s “innovative” twists on other Arthurian characters, or, later, to further Arthur’s own characterization. Gwaine flirts with Gwen in his titular season one introductory episode to establish the show’s playboy spin on a character often portrayed as pious in Arthuriana.\textsuperscript{30} Lancelot — here portrayed as a mild-mannered, lower-class young man with knightly aspirations — is of course infatuated with Gwen, and Gwen briefly convinces herself that she is in love with him too (“Lancelot and Guinevere”).\textsuperscript{31} However, the show’s adaptation of their romance has Lancelot sacrifice himself for Merlin and Arthur, get resurrected as Morgana’s puppet a season later, and used to bait Arthur by kissing a love spell-drugged Gwen right before her wedding to Arthur. The bandit leader Helios lusts after and kidnaps a dejected Gwen for his harem, but it is revealed to be Morgana’s trick to get Gwen away from the castle. Finally, Arthur’s desire for and eventual openness towards loving a servant is presented “as a modern rejection of the ‘old ways,’ the making of a new Camelot, one that is more just” (Edwards 61). Arthur is the only one who narratively benefits from Gwen’s status as a maid and “lesser” desirability. He is given additional moral high ground, portrayed in this new narrative not only as the Once and Future King, but also as a king willing to “break down” class and racial barriers.

In this way, the show is consistent in its inability to see Gwen as desirable and central in her own right. Edwards quotes early promotional materials for \textit{Merlin} on the Syfy Channel (where it aired in the United States, as opposed to BBC in the United Kingdom) that explicitly


declare Gwen’s features unattractive:

“If there’s one thing Gwen might wish for, it’s that she could be just a little bit prettier. With her wonky teeth, uncooperative hair and glasses, not even the most charitable person could call her beautiful. She secretly wishes that someone would see beyond the obvious and like her for the person she is... but in Camelot, she doubts that will ever happen” (Edwards 60).

Since Gwen does not wear glasses, it is clear this description is from an earlier version of the character, yet it was still included in promotion after the show had begun airing. On one hand, this reads like a character for a modern sitcom, not a medieval drama, which is more evidence that the show was more informed by modern sensibilities than medieval ones. This is the standard description of what, in movies such as The Princess Diaries, would be called the “pre-makeover” princess: braces, curly hair, glasses, and all. However, including this description for a black Gwen leverages the specificities of Black embodiment as undesirable: “uncooperative hair” in particular can be read as a reference to the fact that Angel Coulby wore her natural curly hair as Gwen. Black women’s hair has historically been one of the most pivotal ways Black women assert their femininity, and consequently one of the most contentious sites of tension in modern beauty culture. If princesses are “supposed” to be beautiful, it cannot be overlooked that the show goes to these lengths to say that Gwen is not beautiful because of these racial markers.

The narrative even has Gwen place herself outside of the princess archetype, seen most explicitly in season two, during the early stages of Arthur’s on-and-off courtship while she is still a maid:

Gwen: One day you will. One day you will find your real princess. One day you will be king of Camelot and I cannot be your queen.
Arthur: You don’t know that.
Gwen: I am as sure of that as you are.
Arthur: Things may change.
Gwen: Well until they do, my lord. ("Sweet Dreams," emphasis mine)\textsuperscript{32}

Once again the audience is meant to understand that she refers to their class difference, but it
only serves to underscore that for most of the series, Gwen is markedly not a “real princess.”
Although Britain did not have the same anti-miscegenation laws as the United States, the
emphasis on the institutional barriers to their relationship evokes the social, if not legal, stigma
of historical interracial romance. This is only affirmed by the fact that Lancelot has also been
changed to be of the lower class and is played by the only other brown actor in the main cast,
Chilean actor Santiago Cabera. In the season one episode “Lancelot,” the character’s
introduction, Gwen helps Lancelot disguise himself to compete in a tournament, and when he
expresses doubts that he will ever overcome the class barriers to knighthood, Gwen immediately
counters his discouragement:

Gwen: We need men like you!
Lancelot: You do?
Gwen: Well, not me personally, but Camelot — Camelot needs knights, not just
Arthur and his kind, but ordinary people like you and me (“Lancelot”).\textsuperscript{33}

Similarly to “ordinary people,” Edwards calls Lancelot and Gwen “the more practical choice”
(Edwards 62), a statement that although not untrue in terms of their class status, implies that only
Black and brown love interests are accessible to Black and brown characters. Putting the only
people of color together would “just make sense.” The show, of course, does have her end up
with Arthur, but the emphasis on the impossibility of their relationship should be viewed as the
dominant narrative Black girl viewers of the show are left to absorb.

\textsuperscript{32} Jones, Julian. “The Mark of Nimueh.” \textit{Merlin.} Performances by Colin Morgan, Bradley James, Angel
\textsuperscript{33} Jones, Julian. “Lancelot.” \textit{Merlin.} Performances by Colin Morgan, Bradley James, Angel Coulby, and
As mentioned previously, although he expresses his attraction and eventual affection for her in season two, Arthur does not begin his courtship of Gwen in earnest until season three’s “Queen of Hearts.” At this point, Arthur insists he does not see her as a servant. But once Uther finds out, he immediately reduces the relationship to Gwen’s marginalized identity: “I was young once. I’m more than familiar with the temptations of serving girls. No serious harm has been done. But I can’t allow it to continue, obviously. You can never see this girl again … You’ve had your fun. Now it must come to an end” (“Queen of Hearts”). Once again, due to her embodiment as a Black female maid in a white upper-class household, the particular phrasing of Uther’s oppression invokes a racialized mistress dynamic. It would certainly be permissible for an upper class white man to sexually take advantage of a Black maidservant, but not to openly engage with, let alone marry her. Once again Gwen is accused of witchcraft, this time of a love spell, and once again Uther’s blind hatred for magic leads him to underscore her racialization: “Of course it was this [the love poultice]. Why else would Arthur fall in love with someone like you?” (“Queen of Hearts”). Of course, in terms of storytelling, the repeated enforcement of Gwen’s class status serves to underscore the dramatic arc of her eventual queenship. But more than that, because the royal court is the center of the *Merlin* stories — metaphorically, in that all the main characters are royals or knights, and spatially, in that battles are fought and intrigues are carried out primarily within the castle space — placing Gwen as an outsider to the royal court implies her presence is as a voyeur coming in and out of the other characters’ stories. She is given few opportunities for storylines independent of the Pendragons, storylines that do not repeatedly marginalize her. It is not just that her relationship with Arthur brings her under Uther’s systemic oppression. It is that the emphasis on the barriers to their relationship

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underscores her exclusion from centrality, desirability, and in effect, possible princess status.

III. “I Have Dreamed the Future and In It That Servant Sits Upon My Throne”: White Supremacy, Fear, and Trauma in Gwen and Morgana’s Racial Power Dynamic

As central to Gwen’s characterization as her relationship with Arthur (in early seasons even more so), Gwen’s relationship with Morgana reinforces the narrative’s inability to see Gwen as the “true” princess and eventual queen of Camelot. Despite the fact that Gwen “wins” in the end and becomes queen — despite the fact that Morgana becomes the story’s central antagonist — the narrative refuses to prioritize Gwen’s interiority over the course of their relationship. In this way, Gwen’s relationship to Morgana is key to affirming the racialization and marginalization of Gwen that is enabled by Gwen’s “rags to riches” narrative arc. Gwen’s relationship to Morgana reveals what Ebony Elizabeth Thomas calls the “necessary presence” of the Dark Fantastic, in that Gwen’s gender coding opens up the narrative space for Morgana’s resistance to gender norms. Morgana’s frequent challenging of Uther and her headstrong declarations of independence overwhelm and take advantage of Gwen’s quieter demonstrations of kindness and support. I argue that Gwen’s status as Morgana’s servant and the deterioration of their relationship reinscribes the power dynamics of upper class white women and lower class Black women. A racialized understanding of their relationship’s true arc begins with Morgana’s eagerness to speak for Gwen from the position of a privileged “ally,” as seen in “The Mark of Nimueh,” and culminates in the trauma of “The Dark Tower,” the result of Morgana’s fervent hatred for the racial threat she perceives Gwen to be.

At first Morgana’s allyship is not unkind, but even at its most benevolent it detracts from Gwen’s agency, partially due to the forcefulness of Morgana’s personality, but also due to the
inherent power dynamic of their relationship and the narrative’s seeming conviction that Gwen must always be in distress. When her maid is kidnapped in her place, Morgana insists that Uther rescue her (“Lancelot and Guinevere”); when Gwen is frightened by a sorcerer, Morgana takes charge so that Gwen will not see him again (“The Witch’s Quickening”). I take issue with Edwards’s blithe summary that “Gwen is Morgana’s maid, and there are moments when Morgana is sharp with her, but the affection she bears Gwen consistently is present in the first two seasons” (Edwards 74) as if the very real power dynamic of Morgana’s relationship with Gwen is merely a facet of their friendship. In episode after episode, Morgana is Gwen’s only advocate, holding Gwen’s livelihood, and often her life, in her hands, and that inevitably shapes Gwen’s interactions with Morgana. The times that Morgana is able to put Gwen “in her place” verbally are actually the cracks showing in a friendship supposedly strong enough to give dramatic tension to Morgana’s eventual antagonism. In light of Gwen’s overall marginalization, the fact that this is her closest friendship is a tragedy the show is unable and unwilling to address.

When this unequal friendship dissolves by the end of the second season, Morgana’s subtle classism in her friendship with Gwen now becomes overt resentment at even the possibility of Gwen’s upward mobility. After Morgana has been radicalized by her sister Morgause to hate Uther, Arthur, and Camelot itself, season three’s “Queen of Hearts” establishes Morgana’s particular overwhelming fear that Gwen will become queen. Morgana laments her prophetic dream: “It's my serving girl, Gwen. She sits beside Arthur on a throne. She is crowned Queen. I see the same thing night after night … How can that be? She’s a servant. Uther would never allow Arthur to marry her” (“Queen of Hearts”). Her sister Morgause replies, “You can't allow this serving girl to take your rightful place upon the throne. Whatever relationship exists between Arthur and Gwen, you must destroy it” (“Queen of Hearts”). And so Morgana does her very best
to do so, by manipulating them and outing them to Uther in that same episode, and through various plots to kill either or both of them. Edwards summarizes Morgana’s motivations with two explanations: “... one, that she, Morgana, [believes she] is the rightful Queen of Camelot; and two, that Gwen’s servile status is unworthy of the throne” (Edwards 64). However, Gwen’s “servile status” gains specific racial connotations when Gwen is a Black servant threatening a white woman’s class and racial supremacy. It cannot be overstated that Morgana’s hatred for a black Gwen highlights the fact that Gwen is the only Black person in the main cast, and the only Black woman who achieves anything close to upper class status. (Her brother Elyan becomes a knight but not until season four.) She is the only Black person in the show able to infiltrate this white space, revealing the inherent white supremacist underpinnings in the personal offense Morgana takes to that possibility. Morgana becomes so hostile toward Gwen in season four that she exclaims, “I have dreamt the future and in it that servant sits upon my throne. I would rather drown in my own blood than see that day ... We must make sure she never sees another dawn” (“The Darkest Hour Part 2”). 35 This, in the world of *Merlin*, is the fearful hatred of white supremacy.

It is the season five episode “The Dark Tower” that brings the narrative racial subtext of Morgana’s hatred for Gwen to the forefront. By this point, the last season of the series, all of Morgana’s machinations have seemingly come to naught; Arthur and Gwen are finally married, and Gwen has been crowned queen. Perhaps Gwen will actually be allowed to gained narrative centrality through her reign as Black royalty over Camelot. That hope is dashed only a few episodes in. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas succinctly states, “Rather than using the infidelity of Gwen to threaten Camelot’s stability, *Merlin* departs from other Arthurian legends by invoking the

psychological terror of a White woman assuming mastery over a Black one” (Thomas 85-86).

Knowing that Morgana has held mastery over Gwen physically before, when Gwen was her maid, “The Dark Tower” is profoundly disturbing because it depicts Morgana seizing psychological control of Gwen as well. Morgana kidnaps Gwen and places her in isolation, inside a tower that Morgana has enchanted to prey on Gwen’s deepest fears through hallucinations of her loved ones mocking and berating her. As a young Black girl first watching this episode, I remember feeling a guttural fear stronger than genre horror movies had ever been able to provoke in me. As a Black woman rewatching the episode, and having now seen Black horror movies like *Get Out*, I recognized the unspoken racial dynamic that was provoking that fear. The fact that this episode is called “The Dark Tower” only further emphasizes that racial dynamic; again, “black is the color of devils and demons” (Heng 259). The easy connotation of darkness as evil is leveraged against “this dark queen trapped inside [Morgana’s] dark tower” (Thomas 88). Moreover, Thomas notes that “Morgana takes Gwen up a long staircase and locks her inside a room, whispering, ‘Sleep well,’ much as Gwen used to do when she was servant to the Lady Morgana” (Thomas 86) — a reference to Morgana’s power over Gwen, now both mental and physical.

As Arthur, Merlin, and the knights race to rescue Gwen, the episode slowly reveals that Morgana’s endgame is not just to make Gwen suffer, but to make Gwen her puppet in the royal court when Arthur eventually comes to take her back. In the meantime Morgana toys with Gwen, temporarily alleviating the torture to pretend she alone can understand Gwen’s pain:

Morgana: I know how lonely you must be. All by yourself in that room. At least you’re not shackled. There’s daylight. You can move, you see.

Gwen: You expect me to be grateful?

Morgana: I too have suffered, Gwen. I spent two years living in darkness. I spent two
years chained to a wall in the bottom of a pit. … I would have sold my soul for someone to show me kindness such as this ("The Dark Tower").

Here Morgana refers to an imprisonment that the audience is actually never shown on screen, but presumably happens at some point during the time jump between season four and five. Morgana refers to it twice, both times to justify her disregard for innocent lives; in light of the destruction she has wrought, it is unconvincing both times. McGrath’s dynamic acting cannot overcome the fact that the audience has little narrative evidence that Morgana has suffered to any great degree that was not her own doing through her active treason. Most importantly, however, because of Gwen and Morgana’s racial embodiment and class difference, Gwen’s retort to her lack of physical chains, “You expect me to be grateful?” has a clear racial subtext. Although she was not technically enslaved, Gwen had spent years subject to Morgana, who was at best a benign if spoiled mistress. Gwen had been falsely imprisoned no less than three times before and even sentenced to death; she had to watch her innocent father be burned at the stake because of the whims of white royals. She knows what it is like to be trapped and at the mercy of these powerful white people. The Dark Tower’s magically heightened version of that subjection only builds on the previous physical and psychological trauma of state oppression she has endured, but it is clear in this episode that the narrative is determined to underscore Gwen’s alienation. Gwen will not return to her throne unscathed.

Since Gwen is only queen for the space of the fifth and last season, her marginalization shapes her character much more significantly than her queenship, and the power and potential of her queenship effectively only lasts until “The Dark Tower” episode. After Morgana’s torture, Gwen goes through a four episode arc in which as Morgana’s puppet, she tries to assassinating

Arthur. In the process she kills a stable boy and almost kills her friends. It is only through Merlin’s magic and Arthur’s love that she is restored. But as Elizabeth Ebony Thomas asserts:

This comes at a narrative price to Gwen. Although she is forgiven by the king and restored to her position as faithful consort, she becomes incidental for the remainder of the series … Unlike Rue’s violent death as the necessary sacrifice in the ritual of the sadistic Hunger Games, Gwen’s death is symbolic — hers is a social death after being compromised by darkness. After suffering the violence of Morgana’s psychological torture in the Dark Tower, Merlin’s perfect dark queen becomes the hollow queen, a puppet who exists solely to do the bidding of the series’ primary antagonist. Once innocent, Gwen now has the blood of Tyr the stable boy on her hands … Gwen loses her place as the heart and moral center of the series (Thomas 89).

From that point until the end of the series, Gwen as queen may still be present in Arthur’s councils and on the throne at his side, but “she remains silent unless she and Arthur are alone—she is not an active member of the council … she rarely speaks in public; she primarily smiles or looks anxious” (Edwards 79). Her narrative potential for centrality has been lost, perhaps as punishment for the harm she inflicted, but the harm she inflicted was not within her control. Consequently, this becomes the narrative once again demonstrating that it cannot see and therefore cannot depict a black Gwen as an empowered Queen Guinevere. She must be a maid, then a puppet, then a voiceless queen.

Technically, in the last episode of Merlin, because the show chooses not to make Gwen’s affair with Lancelot the source of Camelot’s fracturing, Gwen remains to rule in Camelot long after Uther, Morgana, and even Arthur are murdered. Nevertheless, we are not allowed to see her do so. It matters that her embodiment as a Black lower-class maidservant at court means that for the large majority of the series, every aspect of her racialized identity is scrutinized by Uther’s persecution and prejudice, then amplified by Morgana’s torture. The time that she does not spend being falsely accused and in fear for her life, she spends serving the other white characters, both
literally as a maid and metaphorically as Merlin or Arthur’s moral grounding. The choice to change significant signposts of Gwen’s character in Arthurian legend — subjecting her to intersectional state oppression and repeated instances of physical and psychological trauma — serve to marginalize a character now represented as a Black woman. Even in “a land of myth and a time of magic,” a safe and cared for Black princess remains just out of reach.
DIG A LITTLE DEEPER: FANTASIES OF RACIAL HISTORY AND THE MYTHOS OF THE DISNEY PRINCESS IN DISNEY’S *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG*

I. “Almost There”: An Intersectional Analysis of Hard Work and Happy Endings

In Disney’s animated movie *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), the fairytale of the princess who kisses a frog in order to turn him into a prince is adapted into the story of Tiana (voiced by Anika Noni Rose), a working class Black woman in 1920s New Orleans. She works as a waitress and hopes to save up enough to open a restaurant, and meets the disinheritcd, enchanted Prince Naveen after she is outbid on a building and the white, male realtors condescendingly attribute their hesitance to her “background.” Instead of her kiss turning the frog Naveen back into a human prince, Tiana turns into a frog herself, and spends the large majority of the movie as such. With a primarily Black cast and a soundtrack that evokes the jazz of the era and setting, the movie seemingly does more to place its Black girl protagonist in a specifically Black cultural context than either BBC’s *Merlin* or *Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Cinderella*. However, as I will discuss, *The Princess and the Frog* still literally dances around acknowledging Tiana’s Blackness and its impact in the narrative. Hence, Black culture is separated from the specificities of an American racial past. Like the implications of Gwen’s class status in her racialization in *Merlin*, I argue that Tiana’s characterization illustrates the movie’s construction of fantasies of racial history shaped by the “unconscious” racialized past. In efforts to be “colorblind,” the narrative appropriates the Disney Princess archetype and genre tropes without positing racial specificity and acknowledging negative connotations for a lower-class,

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37 A brief digression is necessary to note that one of the few white cast members not specifically depicted as white (so not including Charlotte and “Big Daddy” La Bouff) is Jim Cummings, who plays Ray, a Cajun firefly. Scholars have not settled on a racial classification, if any should exist, for the mixed-race French and African American peoples in Louisiana who have at turns self-identified “Creole” or “Cajun” with different historical connotations.
Black female protagonist. In this case, *The Princess and the Frog* links Tiana’s worthiness and moral character to her labor and refuses to deal with the implications of Tiana’s racial and class positionality in that characterization. This reinforces both the social construction and the maintenance of racist tropes in the minds of both Black and non-Black young girls.

The film largely accomplishes this by revising the generic conventions of Disney’s particular brand of characterizations through music. *The Princess and the Frog* is not just an animated kids’ movie — it is a Disney animated movie, so the soundtrack of the movie is meant to clearly and concisely elucidate any narrative subtext. In particular, the song “Almost There” is an example of what has come to be known as the Disney “I want” song; other examples include *Little Mermaid*’s “Part of Your World,” *Tangled*’s “When Will My Life Begin,” *Beauty and the Beast*’s “Belle (Reprise),” *Mulan*’s “Reflection,” and *Pochantas*’ “Just Around the Riverbend.” The song is meant to set up and define the princess’ character through a musical explanation of her goals. Here Tiana’s song conveys that she is driven and purposeful, a hard worker who does not indulge in “messing around”:

> I don’t have time for dancin’ // That's just gonna have to wait a while // Ain’t got time for messin' around // And it’s not my style // This whole town can slow you down // People takin’ the easy way // But I know exactly where I am going // Gettin closer and closer every day …

By simply saying “it’s not [her] style,” the song lyrics attempt to dodge acknowledgment of the privilege she does not have to, as the song says, “take the easy way.” This is meant to implicitly place Tiana in contrast to Charlotte La Bouff, whom we meet in the previous scene at the diner — a good-hearted but spoiled socialite who shamelessly takes advantage of her sugar baron father’s money and connections. In an early scene during Tiana’s diner shift, a group of young adults, seemingly Tiana’s peers, appear very briefly only to bemoan that they cannot understand
why “all [she] ever do[es] is work.” Tiana cannot afford Charlotte’s lifestyle, or even the lifestyle of those who can come to her place of work, invite her to parties, and admonish her for being “too busy.” Even if she was not saving money towards establishing a restaurant, she works for a living, which it seems like none of the other young people in the movie do. Additionally, we can surmise from the scene of her collapsing on the bed in an otherwise empty apartment that she is likely living on her own and perhaps even supporting herself financially. These opening lyrics frame Tiana’s lifestyle as a choice, and perhaps the extent of her work ethic — taking on extra work to build her savings — demonstrates her agency. It would be too simplistic to interpret her work ethic as entirely subject to her financial circumstances, erasing the evidence that she does seem to work harder than strictly necessary in order to achieve her restaurant. But by making “hard worker” her primary character trait, these lyrics reinforce the narrative of the “American Dream” that hard work will yield a fairy tale, while ignoring the intersections of her socioeconomic class and racial background. Tiana has no “Big Daddy” benefactor to pay her bills, so she has no other options but work. Instead of acknowledging that class barrier, the song establishes labor as the beginning and end not only of Tiana’s characterization, but also of her goals. In “Black Love Is Not a Fairytale,” Rebecca Wanzo asserts:

If one of the pleasures of the princess narrative is the lightening and elimination of labor, the film illustrates the singularity of an African American in the princess role as Tiana is the only princess whose “happily ever after” clearly involves labor outside of that required by heterosexual marriage (Naveen is also the only prince who is “broke,” having been disowned by his parents for his spendthrift behavior). Is this simply another progressive move to modernize the princess tale, or might we also read this as yet another sign of how impossible it is to imagine the Black fairy tale romance where the Black princess wins her man and simply gets to rest? (Wanzo 7)³⁸

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³⁸ Wanzo, Rebecca. “Black Love Is Not a Fairy Tale: African American Women, Romance, and
I argue that apparently it is that impossible to imagine, at least within the tropes of the genre. Her goals cannot simply be to settle down and end her labor, because real institutional class and race barriers will always stand in her way. The first verse of “Almost There” already makes it clear that there is no future in which Tiana can see herself as taken care of and at leisure — in other words, there is no future in which she can see herself as the traditional archetype of the Disney princess, even in her own “I want” song.

The lyric “this whole town can slow you down,” also in the first verse, also raises another important point: “this whole town” seems to refer to the rich, privileged, barely mixed race community (Charlotte, Big Daddy, and the Black friends from the diner scene). However, the movie depicts that Tiana and her family, at least at one point, lived in a predominantly lower-class Black area. In the movie’s prologue, the happy scene of her father’s gumbo bringing the community together includes mostly dark-skinned neighbors. And yet somehow by the time Tiana becomes a young adult, that Black community does not reappear. Her only Black peers ever seen in the movie brusquely dismiss her financial disadvantage. Her closest friend is shown to be Charlotte, whom she was raised with because her mother nannied for the family. I posit that the introduction of a close-knit, lower-class Black community — which would have been a historical reality of early twentieth century New Orleans — and its almost immediate erasure from Tiana’s life illustrates the inaccessibility of a “rags to riches” arc for a Black girl protagonist. *The Princess and the Frog* has to place Tiana in an upwardly mobile social group,

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39 Disney is entirely ill-equipped to address de jure vs. de facto segregation, but residential segregation was a reality of 1920s New Orleans, and, despite rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina, a reality of New Orleans today.

40 According to Disney trivia, Tiana is 19, which makes her one of the oldest Disney princesses, tied with Cinderella. She is not allowed to have the innocent naivety of a coming-of-age story.
because it is only through Charlotte’s invitation that Tiana gains access to the Mardi Gras ball that will lead to her encounter with Naveen. However, in doing so, the film invokes the “I’m not like other girls”/ “odd one out” trope often evident in modern depictions of the “princess” archetype, like *Ella Enchanted* and *Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Cinderella*. Like Ella’s social activism within a hierarchical society and Cinderella’s kindness within her petty family, Tiana must be implicitly exceptional in order to “prove” her worthiness as a princess. Here the narrative sets up that Tiana’s exceptionalism is succeeding in her goals while being the one Black girl in a primarily white, upper class social group. To be exceptional in that privileged space, Tiana has to be willing to work twice as hard to achieve what is simply handed to her peers, placing the burden on her to bridge the fundamental racial divide within the American dream. Still, the subtext of this barrier to her success cannot be acknowledged outright within the text of the movie, because earning her happy ending is meant to be “empowering.”

In fact, the message of “earning” a happy ending is only a surface-level subversion of Disney’s past princess passivity. The second verse of “Almost There” is almost cliché in its empowerment message — pull yourself up by your bootstraps, work hard, and it will all “go [your] way”:

I remember Daddy told me // Fairy tales can come true // You gotta make ’em happen // It all depends on you // So I work real hard each and every day // Now things for sure are going my way // Just doing what I do // Look out boys I'm coming through …

There’s been trials and tribulations // You know I've had my share // But I've climbed a mountain I've crossed a river // And I’m almost there!

Again in these lyrics we see the narrative’s contradiction: Tiana asserts that her hard work is “just doing what I do” — an innate part of who she is — but only a few lines earlier she declares

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⁴¹ Charlotte is effectively her “fairy godmother,” further emphasizing the power dynamic between them.
that this is the *only* way “fairy tales can come true,” at least for her. Her dream, her fantasy, of owning a restaurant requires her active labor; she cannot sit passively and wait for that to come.

Still, for Disney’s own branding, this message of fighting for one’s own happy ending is somewhat revolutionary, as previous Disney princesses have never really had to do much for their happy ending (a man) to find them.\(^42\) Here lies my issue with the storytelling decision: in this fantastic narrative that positions its reality as colorblind, unaffected by the historical racial structures of the world on which it is based, why does Tiana *still* have to work for her happy ending when no other white princesses had to? I want to note that I am not attacking this aspect of her character in order to undermine its feminist potential. Of course women can have career goals that define their life’s work. But to first disempower a *Black* princess through the narrative choice to have her be lower class, and then to “empower” her by making her “work real hard each and every day” to make her fairytale ending, carries oppressive implications in light of a long history of Black women’s hard labor in America than it would for empowering a white princess, whether or not the movie is willing to acknowledge that difference. All of the other younger and white princesses are allowed to have ephemeral goals in their “I want” songs that in many cases vaguely amount to, “I want something more than this kingdom/town/island,” whereas Tiana sings, “I know *exactly* where I’m going [emphasis mine].” The other princesses want to run away from the few responsibilities they *do* have; for example, Elsa’s “Let It Go” from *Frozen* (2013) is an “empowerment” anthem celebrating the freedom to choose to reject societal pressures of power and self-isolate. Tiana has no such freedom to simply “not care

\(^{42}\) Of course, there are several newer princesses whose happy endings are not tied to men, but all of them (to some extent) come from backgrounds of class privilege. For example, Merida in Disney Pixar’s *Brave* may seem very modern in her active lifestyle and lack of desire for marriage. However, Merida has the luxury of her royal upbringing, and in the end, Merida will be financially taken care of, whether she is her father’s daughter or someone’s husband. Tiana has no such safety net.
“The narrative requires that Tiana, unlike “this whole town” of her privileged counterparts, will have to earn her access to a princess “happy ending,” but there is yet another evasion of systemic economic oppression happening in the lyrics of “Almost There”: “There’s been trials and tribulations; you know I've had my share.” Critical viewers, particularly Black viewers, might understand this to mean racial prejudice and class barriers, but the movie undermines that implication — and sidesteps the specificity of Black experiences — by making the issue individual, not systemic. When Tiana tries to buy a building for her restaurant and is rejected by white male realtors with the comment, “A little woman of your...background would have had her hands full trying to run a big business like that,” their refusal of her offer should be read as the intersection of their classism and sexism and racism. The movie does Black girls a disservice by implying otherwise — figuring them as paranoid about the reality of the structures against them and reinforcing the myth of meritocracy. Instead of acknowledging institutional barriers to Black
financial success, the face-value reading of the lyric “it all depends on you” clearly places the onus in overcoming those structures on Tiana: *she* is the one who has to work hard and make sacrifices in order to get ahead. But by all accounts, Tiana has done everything right to achieve her goals: the movie’s earlier montage shows that she gets up early and goes to bed late, working until she is apparently frazzled and collapses for lack of sleep; she is shown adding to her jars of money every morning, diligently saving up; and as previously shown, she turns down distractions in the form of social outings. After all of this, it seems wrong to even imply that the “trials and tribulations” in the way of her buying her restaurant are her fault.

Tiana’s comment that “I've had my share” also begs further interrogation. How much suffering, exactly, is the movie suggesting Tiana deserves? It could be argued that the phrase is tongue-in-cheek, and she is actually saying she has had more than her share. Nevertheless, within the rest of the song, the message is clear: Tiana believes her happy ending will be a result of her labor and her overcoming suffering, and not of her own inherent deserving. The narrative will go on to undermine this message — not to validate her worth, but to assert that in fact, even her hard work is not enough because her priorities and values are apparently incorrectly aligned. This is evident in the blitheness of the lyrics in “Dig a Little Deeper,” which once again place the burden on Tiana to “deserve” her happy ending. At this point in the movie, Tiana and Naveen have come to see the “voodoo queen of the bayou” Mama Odie (very loosely based on the nineteenth century figure of Marie Laveau, who held that title), who is supposed to turn them back into humans. But Mama Odie has a different, more spiritual prescription for them:

Miss Froggy, might I have a word? // You's a hard one, that's what I heard // Your daddy was a loving man // Family through and through // You your daddy's daughter // What he had in him you got in you // You gotta dig a little deeper // For you it's gonna be tough // You gotta dig a little deeper // You ain't dug this far enough // Dig down deep
inside yourself // You'll found out what you need // Blue skies and sunshine //
Guaranteed!44

Tiana is told to work to “dig a little deeper,” and that she “ain’t dug this far enough”; the bar for
her as a Black woman continues to move just out of reach. This idea is worse than simple failure
in its condescension, because of Disney’s pedagogical intent to communicate that “love”
(vaguely defined as both the emotion and romantic or familial relationships) is more important
than any concrete achievement,45 no matter Tiana’s labor or sacrifices to get there. In fact, Mama
Odie says Tiana is a “hard one” — a phrase that could be taken several ways in the context of the
movie. It could mean that Tiana is stubborn and less likely than the carefree Naveen to take
Mama Odie’s advice, or that Tiana is “hardened” and more cynical than Naveen. Either way, the
song implies that Tiana’s “hardness” is a character hindrance, if not an outright character flaw.
The film has established its racialized double jeopardy: Tiana has a wealth of life experience
gained through hard work, but at the same time the value of that experience continues to be
undermined. Somehow, it has made her “hard,” and that is a bad thing, a resistance to the
inheritance of her father’s love and to any possible love interest.

It is in many ways a frustrating turn: setting up a Black princess who can only achieve her
happy ending (her business) through labor, only to suggest that she places too much value on that
labor. Not only is she allowed no margin for error to “discover herself” and make mistakes as a
girl coming of age,46 but she is criticized for who she has become and what she has had to do.

44 “Discovering yourself” guaranteeing “blue skies and sunshine” is a typical Disney fantasy, but in light
of the obstacles Tiana continues to have to overcome, it sounds a bit more jarring here.
45 This message appears almost universally across the Disney Princess films; the only notable divergence
would be in Mulan, where her happy ending is saving China, but Mulan 2 quickly rewrites that in several
separate storylines to enforce that love is more important than the political wellbeing of an entire nation.
46 The field of Black girlhood studies begins with this as its premise: Black girls are not allowed to be
“children” in the conventional, protected sense because of intersectional systems of oppression that
penalize them for their bodies and their “attitudes.”
The fact that Tiana’s work ethic makes her worthy and unworthy at the same time is not an accidental narrative contradiction, but an intersection of race and gender oppression within the Disney Princess mythos. This mythos necessarily works from the assumption that the white princess protagonist inherently deserves, without question, her opportunities for personal development and centrality and will have the financial security to do so. That is, Tiana’s racialized double jeopardy is the intersection of racialization which demands Black women’s labor as “proof” of moral character, even as that labor necessarily excludes Black women from the “soft femininity” of white femininity within the cult of true womanhood.\textsuperscript{47} The narrative inscribes race even as it claims to erase it, so that essentially Tiana is too Black to be feminine, let alone to be a princess.

\textbf{II. The Princess Frog? Animality and the Racial Masquerade of Princesshood}

The movie, despite its title “The Princess and the Frog,” apparently sets up Tiana as more frog than princess. She spends the large majority of the movie as an animal, one of the most discussed and seemingly self-evident failures of the movie to represent Black women. Many bloggers and fan reviews at the time of the movie’s release, such as Jack and Jill Politics’ “The Princess and the Frog: Positive or Negative?”\textsuperscript{48} and Turner’s own blog \textit{Two Cents: Acting White, Acting Black}’s “Acting White: Disney’s Black Princess Kisses White Frog,”\textsuperscript{49} criticized the movie for erasing Tiana as a visibly “Black” princess for the majority of the movie. Sarah Turner points out that “in fact, human Tiana is only on the screen for the first twenty-nine minutes; frog

\textsuperscript{47} I use “the cult of true womanhood” with reference to the social value system of purity, meekness and submission upheld by nineteenth and twentieth century white women.
Tiana takes up the next fifty-nine minutes, leaving only the final three and a half minutes for Tiana and Naveen to reappear in human form: ‘They say it ain’t easy bein’ green, but it’s certainly a hell of a lot easier than being Black’” (Turner 90). Turner’s statement references Scott Foundas’ 2009 review for Village Voice, “Disney’s Princess and the Frog Can’t Escape the Ghetto,” which even in its title alone clearly expresses the discontent with the seemingly self-evident racialization of this narrative choice. In fact, the film’s original title was “The Frog Princess,” but that was shot down “because of the traditional association of African Americans with animals” (Wanzo 4). And yet the plot of her actually being an animal remained intact. So can The Princess and the Frog even be considered visibility, let alone representation, if Tiana does not even appear as a human for most of the movie?

I maintain that the movie does still meet the minimum standard of making a Black female character visible. This is most clearly evidenced by the hundreds of young Black girls who dress up as Tiana for Halloween and to go to Disney World. Tiana’s existence as a “Disney Princess” clearly impacts young girls such that, limited though her human screen time undoubtedly is, she is technically made visible to them in a space where Black women were and once again are unwelcome. Tiana is the first and only Black woman in the Disney Princess canon. Tiana’s significance as even minimally visible is also underscored by how many Black characters in animated movies spend even less screen time as Black humans. A few most recent examples include Lupita Nyong’o as the alien Maz Kanata in Star Wars: The Force Awakens (2017) and

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50 I digress to note perhaps the movie’s title could be seen as a statement about her inherent “nobility of spirit” from the beginning — but the movie only can prove that “nobility” through her labor, and her princess status is still not formal.
51 Due to Disney’s ownership of properties which have separate (few) Black women characters, social media has embraced, for example, Shuri’s status as a Disney Princess. Disney has also cast Haile Bailey as Ariel in their upcoming live action adaptation, technically now making Ariel a Black Disney Princess. For the sake of this project, I am focusing on the animated Disney Princess canon proper.
Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2018), Will Smith as a super spy turned pigeon in 20th Century Fox’s Spies in Disguise (2019), and Jamie Foxx as a music teacher turned an amorphous soul blob in Pixar’s Soul (2020). Animated Black characters who remain visibly Black throughout the story, like the family in Sony Pictures Animation’s recent short film Hair Love (2019), are few and far between. The bar is low for Black people’s visibility in family-friendly animation, hence my qualified affirmation of Tiana’s depiction. We do technically see Tiana as a Disney Princess in Toni Morrison’s sense of the word.

To evaluate the narrative beyond mere visibility, though, I return to the title of the movie itself to ask: does the narrative actually ever depict Tiana as a “princess”? I have discussed in the previous section how “there is no future in which she can see herself as the traditional archetype of the Disney princess,” but the film itself also demonstrates its reluctance to depict her as such. There are only two scenes in which Tiana is visibly a princess, at least according to Disney’s traditional visual signifiers, such as a gown, a crown, and more vivid makeup. The first instance is when she dresses up for the Mardi Gras party, wearing a tiara and a pale blue contemporary gown, all gifted by Charlotte. This is when Prince Naveen, whose spoiled naivety has already gotten him turned into a frog through Dr. Facilier’s voodoo magic, mistakes her for a princess and begs her to kiss him. But because she is not a “real” princess, merely a waitress in a costume, Naveen’s magical curse acts upon her, changing her into a frog like him. The second is at the end of the movie, when she kisses Naveen at their wedding and transforms back into a human wearing a green, more traditionally billowy “princess gown.” The kiss works this time because technically, as she exclaims, “You just kissed yourself a princess!”

52 The movie interestingly acknowledges the original story it will then adapt; Tiana’s mother reads a preschool Tiana and Charlotte the princess and the frog fairytale in the movie’s opening, and Naveen finds Tiana’s copy of the book which inspires him to ask for Tiana’s kiss.
It is important to note that Tiana’s pale blue gown in the earlier scene is evocative of Cinderella’s ballgown in the Disney adaptation; both women are masquerading at a class status they do not actually have. Tiana’s ending echoes Cinderella’s in this facet of the “rags to riches” trope, because despite their hopes and dreams, neither woman cannot achieve a true class bump to nobility/princess without marrying a prince. Until that marriage, they are simply “playing dress-up.” Yet Tiana is punished for that pretense in a way that Cinderella is not. When the fairy godmother makes Cinderella’s dress to send her to the ball, the narrative has built up Cinderella’s circumstances such that it is clear that she will never escape servitude without that intervention. Cinderella’s identity is hidden, but the audience understands that the masquerade necessarily empowers her towards a deserved opportunity to mingle with the upper class and overcome the abuse of her family that has “demoted” her to the lower class. Tiana’s costume of the blue Mardi Gras dress is a deception that not only does not successfully give her access to the upper class at the Mardi Gras party, but actually gets her turned into a frog that they (irrationally) fear and reject. When they spot her and Naveen hopping around post-transformation, they chase her from the party and into the swamp. As they flee, Naveen explicitly labels Tiana’s dress as deception and laments her for it:

Tiana: Oh, I'm not a princess. I’m a waitress.
Naveen: A waitress? Well no wonder the kiss did not work! You lied to me! Tiana: I never said I was a princess!
Naveen: You never said you were a waitress! You were wearing a crown!
Tiana: It was a costume party, you spoiled little rich boy!

It could be argued that we are meant to understand that Naveen is wrong to call her costume a “lie”; however, the narrative has already proven him right. Her princess dress was a deception, and worse, a failed deception. The kiss not only did not work, but punished her for the attempt by turning her into a frog. Even though the setting is a masquerade party, Tiana’s own
masquerade gains a specific negative connotation. In “Disney’s Second Line: New Orleans, Racial Masquerade and the Reproduction of Whiteness in The Princess and the Frog,” Sarita McCoy Gregory uses the movie’s Mardi Gras masquerade “second line” parade as an analogy to assert that the movie itself plays the role of a second line parade alongside the Disney Princess canon: “running concurrent with main line parades, although [it] … incorporate[s] those who would usually remain on the sidelines” (Gregory 432). For the purposes of my interpretation here, I move to apply Gregory’s conceptual connection between setting and narrative to the masquerade trope in the movie, in order to argue that the narrative requires Tiana to perform a number of metaphorical masquerades. She must masquerade as equals with Charlotte and her upper class peers despite having her own financial disadvantage (as discussed in the previous section); to masquerade as a princess through her costume despite not even being allowed to own property (her restaurant); and to masquerade as a non-raced frog despite being narratively raced as a Black woman.

To that last point, many critics correctly dismiss the idea of attributing Tiana’s frog form to storytelling “innovation” in adapting a fairytale, but they all assert that her animality is a colorblind attempt to erase race. I argue that Tiana’s transformation and extended screen time as a frog — and the references throughout the movie that link animality to prejudice — actually become a continuation of the movie’s attempt to find metaphors to re-inscribe the physicality of race in a colorblind context. If color cannot be acknowledged as a racial marker, the storytelling

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54 I find Gregory’s specific thesis that the movie follows the same story arcs (the same path, so to speak) as the other Disney Princess movies, only deviating in incorporating marginalized characters who would “remain on the sidelines,” to be useful as an analogy for the movie’s colorblind aims, but not quite enough to identify that the result cannot successfully “run parallel.” As my central argument asserts, the tropes are not the same when applied to a Black woman.
must find other ways to signify the marginalization of a Black female protagonist. Even though Cinderella could go to the ball as a princess, Tiana must be punished for trying to enter a category from which she is excluded on the basis of both race and class. Her transformation into a frog is the consequence: a fantastical reinforcement of the marked body to “put her in her place.”

The song “Dig a Little Deeper” makes explicit how animality reconstructs race in the movie. The song opens with the lyrics that encapsulate the racial concerns of a “colorblind” movie:

Don’t matter what you look like // Don’t matter what you wear // How many rings you got on your finger // We don’t care! // Don’t matter where you come from // Don’t even matter what you are // A dog, a pig, a cow, a goat // Got ‘em all in here!

There is an anxiety being answered here; it “don’t matter what you look like” in Mama Odie’s shack, because the narrative maintains its own colorblindness. But at the same time it acknowledges that the “outside society” does care about certain appearances. The sequence of the following lyrics imply that the audience could assume “what you look like” is a marker of class, further clarified by “what you wear” and “how many rings you got on your finger.”

However, I argue that to begin the verse with “don’t matter what you look like” and then end with “don’t even matter what you are” defines these lyrics not just a reference to class, but to race, in which the “Othering” of animality is meant to be analogous to a racialized “Othering.” That racial marginalization intersects with class (as discussed in the previous section) but is here specifically tied to physical characteristics, i.e. the embodiment Tiana is denied.

The narrative creates the secondary character of Louis, whose storyline emphasizes racialized animality. Naveen and Tiana meet Louis, an anthropomorphic alligator (voiced by Michael-Leon Wooley), in the swamp after fleeing the Mardi Gras party of humans now
(irrationally) terrified of the frogs in their midst. Louis is a talented jazz trumpet player, but bemoans society’s inability to accept him: “All the greats play the riverboats. Old Louis’d give anything to be up there jamming with the big boys.” When Naveen asks why he cannot do so, the movie cuts to a flashback played for laughs, in which Louis jumps on a riverboat and attempts to perform, only for the humans to freeze in horror and then start shooting at him as he dives off the boat. Cut to Louis’ flattened expression and the understatement: “It didn’t end well.” Louis is the one who tells them of Mama Odie, and through Naveen’s manipulation, Louis agrees to guide them through the swamp. During their first traveling musical number, “When We’re Human,” Louis sings, “When I’m human, I’ll head straight to New Orleans … I’m gonna blow this horn ‘til the cows come home, and everyone’s gonna bow down to me.” All he wants as a nonhuman character is the acceptance of a human audience who appreciates his talents, instead of fearing and shunning him for apparent physical characteristics he cannot control. I assert that this lays the foundation for how Princess and the Frog believes it can gesture towards racial prejudice based on phenotype without actually acknowledging Blackness. Through Louis, the narrative concedes the idea of general prejudice based on physical appearances, but (literally) dances around specifying historical racial prejudice, or even class prejudice. However, once the narrative applies this idea to Tiana, the concept of race as animality gains a specific signification within the Disney Princess canon.

By placing The Princess and the Frog in the context of the other Disney Princess films, it is clear that the Disney Princess mythos is fundamentally a mythos of gendered and race-d white feminine subjectivity, and animals/animality helps build that mythos. The princess is necessarily defined against an “Other,” an opposite object against which a subject can be created. In the earliest Disney films, animals provided the perfect foil for the princess. They were a class of
peasantry whose simplicity and devotion proved the princess’s worthiness as a ruler and a role model. The princesses proved they were exemplary (human) women by demonstrating their benevolent superiority over their animal subjects. The animals in *Snow White* and *Cinderella* are mute or move in separate worlds; Ariel is desperate to escape from the world of “beasts” under the sea in *The Little Mermaid*; and Belle is tasked with civilizing a beastly prince and returning him to his (white) humanity in *Beauty and the Beast*. However, when the role of the Disney Princess expanded to include women of color — Pocahontas, Jasmine, and Mulan55 — the line between the animal and the human became less distinct. Rather than contrasting sharply against their fellow animals, princesses of color were often depicted as being of equal stature with their animal friends or even as having beast-like traits themselves. In *Aladdin*, *Mulan*, and *Pocahontas*, the protagonists are quite intimate with the animals in their lives, who are all but equally central in the narrative. Mushu, Abu, and even the raccoon from *Pocahontas* move in and out of the protagonists’ world with independent agendas that are allowed to conflict with the protagonists. Moreover, for example, Aladdin, Jasmine, and Jafar are referred to as various types of animals in the dialogue of the film (“street rat”; “street mouse”; “snake”).56 Cary Wolfe argues that “you can’t talk about race without talking about species, simply because both categories – as history well shows – are so notoriously pliable and unstable, constantly bleeding into and out of each other” (Wolfe 43) such that “the distinction ‘human/animal’ – as the history of slavery,

55 Two of whom are not even princesses: Pocahontas is the daughter of a Native American chief, but of course the Eurocentric assumption that labels that as “princess” is its own frustration. And Mulan is even further from being a princess, since she is not the daughter of the emperor and does not marry a prince. Only Jasmine exists in a fantasy world in which she is referred to as “princess” canonically, even though Agrabah is a very loose fantasy of a Persian historical past in which the daughter of a sultan would be called “shehzadi” or “sultana.”

56 Each of these various movies, and the examples I list, deserve an entire paper to themselves, so this is simply a briefly noted expansion to set up my argument.
colonialism, and imperialism well shows – is a discursive resource” (Wolfe 10). The institutions of white supremacy define that distinction to affirm race-d, gendered, and class-ed power structures.

An examination of these relationships between the various Disney Princesses and their animal companions reveals a “continuum” of humanity, with white human at one end of the spectrum, animals at the other, and with non-white humans occupying an intermediate position, sharing some of the characteristics of animals and some of the characteristics of human beings. As Alexander Weheliye points out, creating this human/animal discursive space utilizes “Black subjects, along with indigenous populations, the colonized, the insane, the poor, the disabled, and so on [...] as limit cases by which [the straight white] Man can demarcate himself as the universal human” (Weheliye 24). Similarly, the Disney Princess canon sorts its characters into full humans, “not-quite-humans,” and nonhumans. Blurring the white rhetoric of the divide between civilization and savagery, culture and nature, Tiana’s existence as “not-quite-human” allows whiteness (and white femininity in particular) to separate itself from animality. A Black princess might be lovely and good at heart, but she is shown to be closer to expressing her animal nature than white women are. It is worth noting too that the other significant Black female character, Mama Odie, also has an affinity with the animal world that goes far beyond that of the white people who live in the city. Her only companions are animals, and her song, as previously discussed, begins with her declaration, “Don’t matter what you look like … Don’t even matter what you are. A dog, a pig, a cow, a goat, got ‘em all in here!” It is in the bayou, not in a church, where she presides over Tiana and Prince Naveen’s marriage. Esther Terry argues that the movie

“understand[s] the rural as a liminal teaching space … the Louisiana bayou functions as a place for character development, spiritual reflection, and human restoration” (Terry 470) (in contrast to the dehumanizing rural plantation setting of Disney’s previous, blatantly racist *Song of the South*). As Morrison elucidates in *Playing in the Dark*, literary blackness in the pastoral fashions the perfect frontier space in the American imagination for that kind of character exploration. That is, the bayou reveals the movie’s larger mediation on Black “humanness” (and supposed lack thereof), because American understandings of literary (discursive) blackness create the delineation between “human” and “animal.”

However, I want to unpack Terry’s subsequent assertion that Tiana’s presence in the bayou is possible because of “her temporary greenface status through which she recovers her true human-ness” (470). Specifically, the term “temporary greenface status” is quite a loaded analogy, evoking both the immigrant visa and the idea of Blackface, used here to describe a Black character turned nonhuman. I would actually take Terry’s term to argue that “greenface” is functioning as a kind of “colorblind” Blackface, inasmuch as we can understand Blackface as a masquerade — an attempt to “put on” and “take off” racial identity. By turning Tiana into a frog, the narrative depicts Tiana in a way that tries to dismiss color as racial signifier, but in fact only emphasizes her racialization. Black people are already dehumanized and caricatured as animals, and the depiction of Black people as frogs has a long history in American animation, including animation produced by the Walt Disney corporation. Many animation studios took to creating froggy caricatures for the voices of African-American jazz musicians in musical shorts because, according to one former studio animator, their large mouths made them “suitable animals to

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59 This idea of the “untouched” natural frontier, of course, is not without its own violence in necessitating native presences against which to work out space for that imagination.
depict as African Americans” (Lehman 39). Ub Iwerks, an animator who intermittently worked for Disney during his career, created one of these jazzy frogs with his *Flip the Frog* series from the 1930s while MGM produced froggy versions of Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Thomas “Fats” Waller, Louis Armstrong, and Ethel Waters throughout the 1930s and 1940s (Lehman 40). This racial history cannot be divorced from the film’s portrayal of Tiana’s animality; it reconstructs the historical implication that Tiana cannot, as Terry says, ever fully access “true human-ness” within the narrative because the narrative already determined her to be not “human enough” as a Black woman. In Disney movies, princesses are humans, and Tiana is not quite a princess. Demoting her to animality further underscores the oppression of “not-quite-humanness” of her Black identity.

Further emphasis of that status comes in the epilogue scenes after Tiana’s marriage, during which the film underscores that Tiana’s court is quite unlike those of the white princesses who came before her. Tiana’s restaurant functions as a space where white people, Black people, and animals alike can enjoy gumbo and jazz music. This kind of wild “kingdom” provides a stark contrast to the fairy tale castles occupied by Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty. Although her restaurant is visibly inclusive, its very accessibility to “all kinds” reestablishes that this is not a princess’ domain as Disney has defined it before and will define it again after with movies like *Tangled* and *Frozen*. Tiana’s domain is the space of the “Other,” as the movie has ambiguously defined it by refusing to acknowledge race. She does not truly gain the social status bump of princesshood, nor the narrative or visual distinction from her “subjects.” Because of her proximity to and association with animality which is a function of her racialization, Tiana is fundamentally unable to fully occupy the performative space of “universal humanity” and unable

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to participate in the privilege that ensues to those who occupy that space: the “real” (white) Disney Princesses.

### III. Love Is (Color) Blind: The Pedagogy of Racial Liminality in Naveen and Tiana’s “Happily Ever After”

As a Black woman Tiana is not quite “human” and not quite “princess” — but can her marriage to Naveen be seen as a concession towards a Disney happy ending? Does Tiana’s prince make her a princess in more than technicality, in a way that can “overcome” her racialization? In this next section, I will explore the difficulties of Naveen’s racial positionality and that positionality’s relationship with Tiana. Arriving on a ship from his home country of “Maldonia,” the playboy Prince Naveen is brown-skinned and clearly coded as “foreign,” yet his characterization includes a confusing mix of racial and ethnic signifiers. Gehlawat observes that Naveen’s accent and diction seem more European — with dialogue such as “Is beautiful, no?” — and he clearly understands French, translating the French lyrics of the Cajun firefly Ray’s song for Tiana. Naveen’s term for the frog prince, “fraggiputo” similarly seems to invoke a European-esque language (Gehlawat 423). At the same time, the character is voiced by a Brazilian actor, Bruno Campos, and Naveen’s name in Hindi means “new,” which would notably make him Disney's “new prince.” Additionally, the movie takes place in the segregated 1920s, yet he is to stay at Charlotte’s house during his visit to New Orleans as the “personal guest” of

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62 I find Gehlawat’s footnote helpful to note here: “‘Maldonia’ seems to imply a rather hybrid etymology, including partial references to (and invocations of) the Maldives, Moldovia (or Moldova), Mongolia, as well as Macedonia. The name, indeed, seems to reflect the meaning behind the French term for the native of the latter country, ‘Macédoine,’ that is, a mixture or medley. What is clear, then, is that Disney has gone out of its way to keep Naveen’s ‘roots’ unclear” (Gehlawat 423).
her father. Finally, in the song “When We’re Human,” while Louis and Tiana both start their parts of the song with the title, “When I’m a human being…” Naveen starts with, “When I’m myself again…,” the presumption being that he’s always enjoyed the privilege of humanity.

Bearing all of this in mind, Gehlawat posits that “the implication would seem to be, to paraphrase Fanon (1952 [1991]), that Naveen is ‘extremely brown’ rather than Black” (Gehlawat 423). I agree with the facetiousness of Gehlawat/Fanon’s term; however, in my analysis of colorblind racial reconstruction, I interpret “extremely brown” here not, as Gehlawat and Fanon use it, to signify a Black man’s dissociation with Blackness, but instead to signify Disney’s attempt at racial ambiguity through the literally multi-cultural idea of a “person of color.”

Once again, the physicality of race must be re-inscribed and signified in this fantasy space. Turner claims that Naveen is “not Black, but he’s not White either,” a quote taken from Adrienne Samuel Gibbs’ *Ebony* review, “Disney’s Princess Tiana: A Brown-Skinned Beauty Finally Gets Her Prince.”

Building on the article’s reference to Tiana as a “brown-skinned beauty,” Demetria Lucas points out in her review of the film for *Essence* that Naveen’s levels of melanin seemed to change and increase between early trailers and the actual release of the film (Lucas).

Disney’s chief creative officer at the time, John Lasseter, refers to the “wavy-haired, tan-skinned prince as a ‘person of color’” (Gibbs). Rebecca Wanzo notes that “Naveen, fulfilling a particular stereotype of rich playboys, but also of some men of color, is, as Tiana describes him, a ‘no account philanderin’ lazy bump on a log’” (Wanzo 6). Wanzo’s analysis of Naveen alongside this stereotype of brown men does give necessary context to his racialization.

But stating he is “brown”/a “person of color” does not itself explain the function that his
ambiguous racialization serves within the narrative. Critics and critical race scholars have come
to assert that the term “person of color” has “evolved from a gesture of solidarity and respect, to
a cover for avoiding the complexities of race” (Hampton). Unfortunately, “person of color” has
been used to uncritically re-center whiteness in racial definitions, lumping non-white and non-
European cultures together. Worse, the idea of “people of color” has generalized racial dynamics
specific to Black people in America, universalizing points of solidarity into an unhelpful
flattening of lived experiences. In The Ground On Which I Stand, August Wilson says of the
Cambodian? A Nigerian? An African American? Are we to suppose that if you put a white
person on one side of the scale and the rest of humanity lumped together as nondescript ‘people
of color’ on the other side, that it would balance out? That whites carry that much spiritual
weight? We [Black people] reject that. We are unique, and we are specific” (Wilson 32-33). The
paradoxical “colorblindness” of “people of color” is a multicultural white liberal ideal that
Naveen epitomizes: as a brown man with a “foreign” accent, he is race-d just enough to appeal to
whiteness’ fascination with the “exotic,” but since his character blurs several racial signifiers, he
has no specificity of ethnicity. He is brown and associated with Europe, but dissociated from the
colonial historical past that brought brown people within European borders or under European
rule. He faces little to no narrative marginalization based in race, gender, or class; as a prince, he
is complicit in and not a threat to white power structures of monarchy and class privilege.
   I assert that the same colorblind narrative that must racialize Tiana without ever naming
race itself is what must construct Naveen, this “new” Disney prince, as a “new” multicultural

65 Hampton, Rachelle. ““People of Color’ Was Once a Sign of Respect. But It's Becoming a Cop- Out for
66 This can allow certain ethnic groups to not only move in and out of being “people of color,”
but also to participate in anti-Blackness against Black people and within their own communities.
ideal: an ambiguous brown “person of color.” Since Tiana can only “become” a princess through her marriage to Naveen, then the only way the narrative could make that marriage acceptable within this racialized “colorblind” fantasy world is if she marries a prince “of her own kind,” so to speak — a race-d prince, but one similarly constructed within a fantasy of racial history that separates his various ethnic signifiers from appropriation or systemic oppression. Like Lancelot and Gwen in Merlin, putting the brown people together “just makes sense.” More specifically, if Naveen’s positionality is that of a vaguely defined “person of color” who has been constructed “free of” systemic oppression and who cannot be connected to any one historical racial past, then his marriage to Tiana becomes the narrative’s problematic attempt to have Tiana access a racial liminality as her happy ending. Tiana is only able to achieve said restaurant with Naveen’s money, and through the montage of them building the restaurant together, it is clear that they are co-partners in the endeavor. Therefore, we are meant to understand that not only does Tiana’s marriage give her access to the status of “princess,” but it gives her the restaurant as a racial “in-between” space — a narratively legitimized liminal space to exist a “not-quite-human” princess. In other contexts, liminality is an imaginative space, a realm of pure possibility in which new configurations of social norms and relationships may arise. Here, liminality is used to appease white anxieties about the “accessibility” of a Black princess. A Black protagonist written and watched as Black would not be universal in her Blackness; she would be culturally specific, and so harder to assimilate. This concession “both appeal[s] to a minority audience while at the same time retain[s] a white viewership that is able to identify with the middle ground these characters occupy” (Turner 93). Tiana’s happily ever after has been made to fit the expectations of a white audience who both expects the “rags to riches” ending and has absorbed Tiana’s subtextual racialization throughout the movie. She must get a kingdom, but that kingdom cannot be truly
“human.” She must get a prince, but that prince must reinforce the film’s fantasy of colorblindness. She must become a princess, but she cannot be given luxury and rest. Her happy ending is conditional to her marriage and her labor, and it is contained within the four walls of her restaurant where “it don’t matter what you look like.” If what she looked like was acknowledged to matter, the film would have to deal with the impact of a Black girl not being allowed to be Black or a human girl onscreen in her own movie. In that embodiment, Tiana was rejected by the white male realtors, and she was an insider-outsider in the upper class. But because of her marriage to Naveen, she has her restaurant where wealthy white patrons, wealthy ambiguously brown patrons (from Naveen’s Maldonia, presumably), and animal patrons who embrace her wholeheartedly. The ending sees her seamlessly move from serving them food, to singing on stage, to overseeing her domain proudly, to running up to the roof to dance with Naveen. The narrative tells us to watch and see: even a Black girl can have it all — as long as she can occupy a fantastical “racial in-between” where the unspeakable must remain unspoken.

I. Creating the Contradiction: Behind the Scenes of a “Colorblind” Multiracial Production

The Cinderella fairytale — the story of an impoverished, fatherless girl saved from her wicked stepmother and stepsisters by a fairy godmother and a handsome prince — has become a mainstay for modern pop culture depictions of femininity and the princess archetype. First published by Italian author Giambattista Basile, the Cinderella story became one of The Brothers Grimm’s best known works, published in their 1812 fairytale collection. Both Merlin and The Princess and the Frog draw upon the basics of the fairytale, which I have previously identified as the “rags to riches” trope: like Cinderella, Gwen and Tiana are both fatherless, impoverished, (supposedly) morally validated by their narrative for their labor, and made princesses through their marriage to a prince. The 1997 television movie musical Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Cinderella that I will analyze is based on the 1957 CBS live staged version of the “Cinderella” musical, starring a young Julie Andrews. It was remade again in 1967, starring Lesley Ann Warren, and it was so successful that it was rebroadcast eight times, essentially once a year through February of 1974.67 Disney’s Cinderella had only just been released a few years before that, in 1950, and at the time of the 1957 musical it had not yet reached the height of its cultural influence. However, by the 1990s the Disney Renaissance was in full swing, and so the creators of the 1997 Cinderella would have been aware of both the live musicals and Disney’s version of the story.

Providing a remarkable wealth of insight behind the scenes, Kendra James’ 2017 ten year anniversary article interviewing many of the film’s cast and crew reveals that the making of Cinderella was paradoxically both progressive and ignorant, color-conscious and colorblind. Executive producer Debra Martin Chase, a Black woman, and executive producer Neil Meron and writer Robert Freedman, both white men, express retrospectively contradicting goals for the adaptation:

Debra Martin Chase: I grew up watching the Lesley Ann version of “Cinderella.” That was an annual major event in my house. So I was enthralled with the idea of doing a new "Cinderella," and having her be of color. I knew how much it would have meant to me as a little girl. …

Neil Meron: I think it [the studio’s excitement for the project] was because Whitney was so huge at that time; to a lot of executives she was popular entertainment as opposed to being defined by her race. We were also worried about making sure that Cinderella [was] defined by more than falling in love with a handsome prince. She needed to have a story of her own that superseded just being attracted to his good looks. That’s not the way that the culture was going at that time. Robert was able to give her a little bit more of a backbone and have her be an independent woman.

Robert Freeman: I wasn’t thinking about how to write it multiculturally, I was thinking about how to write for 1997, for young girls watching it. My wife told me about how women were depicted affected her growing up — you know, like in those Doris Day movies, and even in the past Cinderella’s. … I’m not saying that it’s the most feminist movie you’ll ever see, but it is compared the other versions (James, emphasis mine).

These three quotes can be analyzed separately, but they are even more starkly incongruous when placed alongside each other. On one hand, Chase is specifically color-conscious; not only does she explicitly say a Cinderella “of color,” but she indicates the importance of seeing her own identity: “I knew how much it would have meant to me as a little girl.” She celebrates the fact that this adaptation now encompasses her simultaneous racial and gender identity. Meron and
Freeman, on the other hand, applaud themselves for the “colorblindness” of their feminist aims, as if gender identity is colorless. To be clear, where the word “blind” in “colorblind” might imply an inability to see, they are intentionally refusing to look at the specificities of the racial identities they were casting. That refusal defines the qualifiers that the white imagination places on Black women’s visibility. Whitney Houston cannot be a Black female icon of mainstream popular culture; she has to be popular in the mainstream “as opposed to being defined by her race.” Freeman cannot be writing “multiculturally” (which I have already discussed is a flawed term, but here would at least indicate some acknowledgment of multiple cultures); he has to be writing “for 1997” progressiveness. That progressiveness is apparently defined by “the culture,” i.e. the white mainstream that calls itself neutral. Meron’s admission that Cinderella’s past depictions were “not the way that the culture was going at that time” indicates that he saw mainstream white feminism as innately “race transcendent,” to use Toni Morrison’s phrasing.

Watching, in Toni Morrison’s sense of the word, the movie with this interview in mind goes beyond seeing the seeming “colorblind” empowerment of a multiracial cast to highlight the contradictions of the film’s understanding of skin color as a race marker. Marleen Barr writes in “Biology Is Not Destiny; Biology is Fantasy: Cinderella, or to Dream Disney’s ‘Impossible’/Possible Race Relations Dream”68 that “the program presents a tale of two families whose genes do not compute. A Filipino prince emanates from “Queen Whoopi Goldberg” and “King White Male” … The white evil stepmother engenders one white and one dark-skinned black daughter” (Barr 187-188). Aside from her amusing renaming of the royal family (I agree that it is hard to see Goldberg as a character other than Goldberg herself in this role), Barr’s title

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and this phrasing problematically essentializes race to “genes that do not compute.” I argue that focusing on biology/skin color alone oversimplifies the racial dynamics at play and moves dangerously close to racial essentialism. Color is not wholly synonymous with race, but it is part of an intersectional understanding of racialization. The film’s multiracial families are not an issue of biology. I argue that both the film itself and the metanarrative of its adaptation is a fantasy of race in which throwing together various “people of color” becomes a way to metaphorically blur and visually obscure the shades of those colors and the diversity of specific racial pasts. In fact, that is quite literally what yet another white, male executive producer Craig Zadan claims was the aim of the production: “What we did very purposefully was to demand that this production be thoroughly color saturated. … We wanted the image on screen to have so much color in it — primary colors especially — that the skin colors almost dissipated in that you weren’t staring at ‘that person’s this or that’ because the design dictated that everyone became part of the same story” (Zadan qtd. in James). He attributes this intentional obscuring of color to his desire to “make sure that our diverse vision wasn’t so obvious that it became self-conscious and try-hard” (Zadan qtd. in James). But it does come across as incredibly self-conscious. In trying to avoid acknowledging racial difference, he reveals himself to be overly aware of color, while paradoxically also “not looking.” Instead of using the production’s colorful set and costuming to celebrate the variety of skin tones, he attempted to overwhelm their visibility.

Other evidently absurd implications of the “colorblind” multiracial narrative only highlight the film’s attempts to obscure the very visibility that, at the very least, could have been seen as one small, if insufficient, step towards representation. Interestingly enough, it is Jason Alexander (the royal footman Lionel) who at least acknowledges the bizarre paradox of “colorblind and multiracial” in James’ interview:
There was one point where I was really confused; I just didn’t know what we were doing. It was the scene where Lionel’s trying the slippers on all the girls in the kingdom. Cinderella was clearly African-American — that was the whole point — but all the sudden they had all these ladies lined up from every nationality, of every shape size and color. And I started going down the line with the slipper, and I got the giggles. Rob Iscove asked me what was going on. I said, “Look I understand that we live in a world in this film where it doesn’t matter what color people are! But Cinderella was African-American! Do Lionel and the Prince really not know she was black? Couldn’t they eliminate half these women and save time?” (qtd. in James)

Here lies the difficulty behind the humor: “it doesn’t matter what color people are” — like the lyric “it don’t matter what you look like” in The Princess and the Frog — actually diminishes the very Black princess they are supposed to be celebrating. It should matter that she is Black, particularly, as Alexander points out, for this essential aspect of the narrative in which Cinderella needs to be identified. Being Black is part of her identity. She is Black and she is a princess; to quote Alexander, “that was the whole point.” How can creators applaud themselves for “diversity” without acknowledging what that diversity is? As August Wilson declares in The Ground On Which I Stand: “We want you to see us. We are Black and beautiful” (Wilson 32). Brandy playing Cinderella does the work of visibility that places a Black woman in a fairy tale for young girls. Despite the later deconstruction of that fairy tale that I will explore, Brandy deserved to be acknowledged in her Blackness for stepping into the glass slipper. In fact, the metaphor of the clear glass slipper demonstrates the basic appeal of visibility: that these fairytale and mythical roles could be played by anyone. Barr’s analysis relies on this metaphor:

*Cinderella* proclaims regardless of race, if the shoe fits, wear it. … The most poignant moment in *Cinderella* occurs when Cinderella places her bare black foot within the magically custom made glass slipper. The camera’s focus upon her foot inside the transparent shoe enables viewers literally to look through racial stereotypes. The audience sees that a black foot belongs inside the glass slipper, that a black woman is a
rightful fairy tale princess (Barr 188).

I agree that the concept of a “Black foot belong[ing] inside the glass slipper” is a beautiful image from which to understand why young Black girls are drawn to Brandy’s Cinderella. However, the problem is that the film does not actually acknowledge that it is a Black foot. Although these lyrics are not unique to the 1997 adaptation, it is worth noting that the fairy godmother’s song “Impossible” gives a color adjective for each “impossible” transformation: “a plain yellow pumpkin,” “four white mice,” and “four white horses.” It is only Cinderella, the “plain country bumpkin” who does not have a color. The film’s portrayal of race is not colorless; it is oversaturated with color so as to obscure the specificity of Blackness.

The inability to acknowledge the Blackness of Black women is not just at the level of narrative; it predictably manifests elsewhere in the production meta-narrative. Zadan discusses the dynamic on set when Natalie Desselle (who played the stepsister Minerva) needed a Black hairdresser:

Craig Zadan: The one thing we didn’t know would be such a major issue was black hair. We hadn’t hired any black hair dressers. So we had pushback, especially from Natalie Desselle — she was the one who threw up her hands in exasperation because she didn’t want the hairdressers that we had.

Neil Meron: We were like, “Why is she crying? Over her hairdresser?”

Craig Zadan: And we said, “Debra help!”

Debra Martin Chase: We had black hair stylists for Brandy and Whitney. But we didn’t have, well, black hairdresser money. But God knows I understood Natalie’s complaint, so we went and found one (James).

The dynamics in their retelling of the incident are truly infuriating and unfortunately unsurprising as the result of “colorblindness.” They “cannot see” Blackness enough to fail to meet the needs of Black women, then they can suddenly see Blackness in order to call the token
Black woman to fix the problem. The adamant refusal to acknowledge difference, both in the narrative of the film and in the meta-narrative of its creation, coincides with Herman Gray’s category of assimilationist television discourse. According to Gray, assimilationist shows propose an elimination or “marginalization of social and cultural difference in the interest of shared and universal similarity” (Gray 85). In this way, the film’s oversaturation of color works to produce colorblindness because “color” is viewed as the only barrier to “universal similarity.” This approach ignores and so perpetuates the unspoken systems in place that enforce *intersectional* race-d, gendered, and class-ed oppressions. Zadan and Meron assume all women’s hair is the same and imply that Desselle is overreacting. Chase notes that they did not have “black hairdresser money,” but Brandy and Houston had enough money to bring their own stylists. The intersectional dynamics are apparent in this anecdote alone. Ignoring them marginalizes the Black characters, the real Black people like Natalie Desselle playing those characters, and the Black girl audiences seeing those characters. Whitney Houston opens the film singing the “Impossible” melody to tell the audience that “dreamers never make the dream come true”; the *Cinderella* story that follows is meant to prove those lyrics wrong, to make the impossible dream possible. But the film teaches Black girls to dream of fairytales that have to ignore their embodied difference in order to include them.

II. “Underneath You’ll Still Be Common”: The Racial Unconscious and Interracial Dynamics in Cinderella’s Family

In Barr’s analysis of the glass slipper, she claims that “instead of usual race and class issues, the program [Cinderella] is about race and glass: its portrayal of race, like glass, is colorless” (Barr 188). I contend that this is an incorrect “either/or” statement that does not
account for the fantasies of race being constructed. The film engages with race on the level of visibility and recreates the dynamics of race and class through its characters. As I have discussed in both my chapters on Tiana and Gwen, the “rags to riches” trope is inherently a class issue, and when depicted as the character arc of a Black woman, becomes intersectionally race-coded. The Cinderella story is the trope’s most well-known iteration, if not its original iteration. In the 1997 adaptation, the overall premise — an impoverished Cinderella is forced to serve her evil stepmother and stepsisters, who degrade and mock her at every opportunity — remains the same. The film’s beginning indicates this premise by transitioning from the opening score set over a rapid tour of the busy village setting, to an abbreviated instrumental of “The Stepsisters’ Lament” that is the stepmother and stepsisters’ musical cue as they come into view. The camera then reveals Cinderella walking behind them, struggling to keep up and carry their packages. This moment not only acts as the reveal that this Cinderella will be played by a Black woman (Brandy) but also that Cinderella’s stepmother will be played by a white woman (Bernadette Peters) and her stepsisters by a white woman (Veanne Cox) and a Black woman (Natalie Desselle). It also establishes that the film will still maintain the “old” dynamics of the 1967 live musical while playing with “new” multiracial casting.

The “old” dynamics, however, play differently with multiracial casting. Firstly, and most obviously, Cinderella is the Black stepchild of a white stepmother who is forcing her to serve her family. This parallel to the historical Black servant-white mistress dynamic is notably also implicit in the other “rags to riches” narratives this project analyzes. The Cinderella figure’s servanthood is all but a requirement of the trope, one of its most recognizable elements. But the fact that every adaptation of the Cinderella figure that has cast her as Black, has also cast the stepmother/mistress figure as white continues to be evidence of the same fantasy of racial history
as unconscious subtext. In light of the interview I have cited, my use of “unconscious” is not meant to attempt to lift culpability from the executive producers and writers. I use “unconscious” to indicate that racial dynamics are happening on the level of subtext within the narrative; the characters themselves are not aware of racial temporalities. Instead, when Cinderella asks to go to the ball, her stepmother says, “Take my advice: know your place.” Cinderella sings that she is “as mild and as meek as a mouse / when [she] hear[s] a command, [she] obey[s].” When Cinderella asks why it is so hard for the stepmother to imagine her dancing with the prince, her stepmother answers, “Because you’re common, Cinderella. You can wash your face and put on a clean dress, but underneath you’ll still be common.” All of these dismissals have intersectionally racialized implications through race and class. “You can wash your face … but underneath you’ll still be common” comes the closest to referencing skin as a marker of that dehumanization. Despite her name (the “cinder” in Cinderella usually references the soot on her face from sleeping by the fire) Cinderella has not appeared dirty throughout the movie. On the contrary, her skin is smooth and dirt-free, and she is usually wearing some light makeup. Evidently this becomes an unconscious reference to skin color. All of these moments together create Cinderella’s characterization as the meek, subservient Black servant to a white mistress who constantly reminds her (and the audience) of Cinderella’s dehumanization.

Just because “derogatory racial utterances do not exist in this fantasy world, especially because the white speaker herself has a daughter of color” (Barr 195) does not mean that the narrative unconscious does not understand the context in which they would be spoken. James’ interview includes both Peters’ and Meron’s retrospective reflection on the dynamic:

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69 Barr goes so far as to say, “Peters emphasizes the ‘c’ in ‘common’ in a manner that implies that the stepmother might have been about to say ‘colored’ — to say “because you’re colored, Cinderella” (Barr 195). I certainly agree to the extent that the racial implication is there, but I’m less sure about Peters’ specific acting choices.
Bernadette Peters: … I don’t remember if I thought about the optics of playing a white evil stepmother to a black Cinderella. We weren’t really playing ‘real’ people — it’s a fairy-tale, and I just wanted to play the role as best as I could, as cruelly as I could. I think that’s how we all approached it.

Neil Meron: Then we decided that it would be terrific for one stepdaughter to be white and one daughter be black just to further hit home that color is irrelevant in this fantasy world. Here Meron continues to be incorrect; color is clearly relevant, as has already been established. Interestingly, Peters also gestures towards a distinction between “real people” and “fairy tale,” a recurring argument that I assert actually both defends and undercuts “colorblind” visibility in fantasy. The characters of Cinderella are not “real people,” so they could be anyone. Fantasy is not the “real world,” so it does not have to recreate social and historical norms. However, subverting those norms requires the intentional effort to be race-free, as Toni Morrison explains in her “Home” essay published by The Guardian. Believing that ignoring race is enough to make the fantasy race-free fails to understand the racial unconscious. To simply refuse to see the “optics” of their embodied racial difference in the dynamics of the narrative is irresponsible.

Finally, both Barr’s earlier defense that “the white speaker herself has a daughter of color” (Barr 195) and Meron’s comment that casting a Black stepsister makes color “irrelevant” do not acknowledge the fact that of the two stepsisters, it is Minerva, the Black stepsister, that has also been singled out. Here, as in other adaptations, the narrative slightly differentiates between the stepsisters’ characterizations, although they are both portrayed as cruel and vain. Calliope is the comedic relief stepsister depicted as not comprehending social cues, but Minerva is the stereotype of the “brash” Black girl. She is the one who yells, in the middle of the ball, “I want a chance at him!” so that her white stepmother literally silences her with her hand over her mouth. Black female sexuality’s depiction as too overt has long been a trope in the white mainstream media across genres, whether it is as the “sassy Black friend” or as what Patricia Hill
Collins calls the controlling image of the “Jezebel.” Moreover, although the narrative mocks both stepsisters, most if not all the jokes made at Minerva’s expense have to do with her size. In the movie’s opening, she cannot walk through a doorway because of the width of her skirts. The stepmother, lecturing her on how to prepare for meeting the prince, struggles to get her into a corset in what is played as a comedic moment, in addition to the fact that she even has to wear a corset gown while her skinny white sister and mother are allowed to wear long loose dresses. When Minerva tries to fit into the slipper, she says that “anyone can see that the shoe was made for a daintier foot” than Calliope’s, and Lionel the footman emphatically coughs to undercut that statement. She pulls the shoe and Lionel into her body as she tries to make it fit, and he is shown to be physically “smothered” by her. White cultural norms have set the standard of body image; a Black woman’s body is a site of and a sight for mockery when the standard is the white woman’s body. These scenes will culminate in the racialization of desirability in the song “The Stepsisters’ Lament.”

III. “In My Own Little Corner” and “The Stepsisters’ Lament”: Deconstructing the Desirability of a Black Princess

My close reading of the stepsisters’ view of Cinderella’s desirability, and the narrative’s view through their eyes, in “The Stepsisters’ Lament” first necessitates an understanding of Cinderella’s own view of her desirability. “In My Own Little Corner” could perhaps be called “Cinderella’s Lament,” or the film’s version of an “I want” song for Cinderella, though it is not actually an “I want” song at all. Instead of dreaming of changing her circumstances, Cinderella simply escapes into her own mind — into fantasies of other countries and cultures, and of who

she would be in another context. Like Merlin’s selective relationship with the Middle Ages, Cinderella has chosen to only incorporate the existence of real countries, and their real historical elements, as if they were themselves atemporal fantasies. Most tellingly, the song has the same lyrics as the 1967 live musical with a white Cinderella, except for one difference: “a young Norwegian princess” has been changed to “a young Egyptian princess.” This small change perhaps indicates an acknowledgment that having a Black princess want to be a white princess is the step too far, whereas the other roles she pictures in the lyrics (“a milkmaid,” “the greatest prima donna in Milan,” “an heiress who has always had her silk made by her own flock of silkworms in Japan,” “a thief in Calcutta,” “a queen in Peru,” “a mermaid,” and “a huntress on an African safari”) could be more easily rationalized as “neutral” personas. I would contend, however, that none of these articulations are “neutral” at all; they are specifically race-d in that in all of them (except for the Egyptian princess, the changed lyric) she is not Black. But it is only in those roles that she envisions “the world will open its arms to [her].” By lumping so many different ethnicities and cultural contexts together, the song metaphorically accomplishes the same aim as Meron’s production: to oversaturate color in order to obscure color. In this way, Cinderella is in fact desiring the fantasy Black girls learn from this movie and from colorblind depictions in general: they can become “empowered” and escape marginalization as long as they view themselves outside of not just their own specific embodied racial identity, but the idea of race in general.

At the ball, however, Cinderella becomes the focal point of desire, and the narrative steps outside of her perspective to show others’ view of her desirability. The prince moves quickly to dance with her as soon as she comes in, although their dance is not without any awkwardness. Not knowing he has accidentally met Cinderella before while he was disguised as
a commoner in the marketplace, the prince tries to find out where he has met Cinderella before with talk of the seasonal pursuits of the idle rich: the lake, the lodge and mountains (presumably for skiing). Cinderella deftly deflects these questions by saying she just likes looking at the mountains. The moment is one of acute class consciousness, and (as often happens in stories where a rich man falls in love with a poor girl) he is seemingly even more drawn to her because of her indifference towards his status, in addition to her beauty. But I agree with Barr’s assertion that, to some extent at the ball itself, Cinderella’s desirability at the ball is granted by white male power: “The prince touches Cinderella’s chin with a white gloved hand. He is the possessor of white male power. Cinderella, who now wears a crown, is a black American princess. She is a prize that men want to win. This holds true for the king, a man more powerful than the prince, who is also attracted to Cinderella” (Barr 194). The prince’s romantic interest alone is not enough, since he met and liked her when she was a servant. The king also has to exclaim, “A vision! Ah, if I were a young man——” as if to, uncomfortably, validate the prince’s romantic interest in her. The king of course is already married to Whoopi Goldberg’s character, so were the film acknowledging race this would possibly be the narrative’s way of reinforcing a through line from white father to Filipino son of established attraction to Black women. That is not what is happening, though; the king’s expression of desire for Cinderella signals to the audience that, although before she was a servant and could not gain validation in these upper class spaces, now she is attractive and can do so. Like in Merlin, the prince is the inheritor of white male power to “grant” desirability, but not quite the sole possessor of that power since the kings define how the princes and the audience see the Black soon-to-be-princesses. Like in Princess and the Frog, the prince’s romantic interest in the Black lower-class protagonist affirms her racial masquerade in the dress of the princess she has not yet become.
As the prince and Cinderella dance, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Cinderella allows for a uniquely multi-layered understanding of spectatorship, fantasy, and desire through “The Stepsisters’ Lament,” in which the sisters watch Cinderella dancing with the prince and, without recognizing her as their stepsister, express their confusion and jealousy. Minerva sings the first few lines: “Why would a fellow want a girl like her / A frail and fluffy beauty? / Why can’t a fellow ever once prefer / A solid girl like me?!” Especially in light the fact that she is comparing himself to another Black woman, once again the narrative defines Minerva’s racialized body as a marker of her desirability. I argue that, although the song lyrics remain unchanged from the 1967 live musical with a white Cinderella, the lyrics’ framing of desirability when watching a black Cinderella now becomes a declaration of the proximity to white bodies valued in Black women, overlaying the beauty standards of white femininity onto a Black princess. Cinderella is being valued here for her “frailness” and “fluffiness” (softness), both esteemed within an ideal of white femininity that needs to be “protected.” The lyrics then escalate as Calliope, the white stepsister, sings: “She’s a frothy little bubble / With a flimsy kind of charm / And with very little trouble I could break her little arm!” It is the white stepsister who is so provoked by her jealousy for Cinderella that she is willing to exert violence; in fact, upon hearing the threat, Minerva looks up at Calliope in a brief moment of startled shock. Still, they continue attempting to hide their reluctant attraction to and jealousy of Cinderella’s beauty, while measuring that beauty by other standard descriptors of white femininity: she is compared to “a rose,” “a doe,” “a swan,” “a (dainty) daisy,” and “a (graceful) bird.” Here, like in “In My Own Little Corner,” the lyrics have been altered, and Freedman takes credit for changing what he says are the worst of the lyrics:

I also knew that in “The Stepsister’s Lament,” they talk about Cinderella’s skin being pale and her neck white as a swan’s. I just thought it would be horrible to have them sing that stuff, so I judiciously changed some lyrics. I never told anybody. I never got
permission from the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization. We’re talking maybe three to four words at the most, but it was my secret (James).

It is frustrating to realize that in the same interview Freedman and Meron contradict themselves so evidently; this is clearly color-consciousness, in that they recognize a black Cinderella cannot be complimented for her white skin, but Freedman also claims “he was not writing multiculturally.” While those more blatant lines have been removed, the unconscious overtone of white femininity remains. The lyrics do not have to say “white swan” because the trope was created by white cultural values.

A few lines later Minerva too is emboldened to threaten violence, although hers is more specific: “She's a frothy little bubble / With a frilly sort of air / And with very little trouble / I could pull out all her hair!” This threat is significant as sung by a Black stepsister to a black Cinderella because, throughout the movie, Brandy as Cinderella has worn her hair in long braided extensions, but at the ball her hair has been straightened and curled in loose ringlets. In contrast, Minerva continues to wear her natural kinky-coily textured hair, the hair that was so much “trouble” on set for the white male executive producers. This lyric becomes an expression of jealousy towards Brandy’s flat-ironed “good hair.” It is sadly ironic to note both the meta-narrative of the executive producers’ dismissal of Desselle’s natural hair, and this lyric about pulling out Cinderella’s hair, when articles about the movie such as the article published on ReelRundown.com celebrated that seemingly “none of the actresses were shamed for their hair or forced to change it for the film … when hair isn’t important at all, there’s really no reason to enforce European beauty standards.”\(^71\) In fact, even with a Black protagonist, white feminine

beauty standards set the expression of desirable qualities in this black Cinderella fantasy.

In the end, the producers’ belief that a colorblind “feminist” Cinderella story can be constructed with a multiracial cast attempts to universalize (already inadequately executed) ideas of modern femininity and makes every effort to obscure race and cultural difference. This obscuring does not itself erase the impact of racial oppression that informs the story. In “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” from *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde posits:

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, class, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences … Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections. Either way, we do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives. We speak not of human difference, but of human deviance (Lorde 115).72

At its heart, colorblindness refuses to acknowledge difference because of the belief that, if those in power ignore the power differential at the heart of racial difference, then it does not have to exist. That is false — race will *always* carry the histories of power and oppression. But race, as I noted in Geraldine Heng’s framework, is not just the “management of human difference”; it is the “articulation” of that difference. Black feminist authors like Toni Morrison, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, and Audre Lorde all look towards new ways to articulate difference that could be “culturally specific but race free.” I believe that of the texts I analyze, this Cinderella adaptation in particular sets up what could have been done had the producers understood the potential of a truly multiracial fantasy world — a world where the Black princess is not surrounded by an all-

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white royal court, like *Merlin*; or left to somehow bridge the racial liminal space between her white peers and her “not-quite-human” kingdom, like *Princess and the Frog*. Instead of trying to obscure the fact that there were so many people of color in the cast, each ethnicity could have been highlighted by thoughtfully incorporating an understanding of the racial past into this adaptation’s worldbuilding. What would it mean to intentionally write the culture of a country that had both a Filipino prince and a Black queen? What would it mean to intentionally write the love story and power dynamic of a Black queen and a white king? In the film, Brandy as Cinderella says, “A girl should be treated like a person, with kindness and respect,” asking for the bare minimum of human decency for a universalized “girl.” If she referred to herself as a *Black* girl, and if “The Stepsisters’ Lament” used imagery acknowledging the specific physicality of Black women, like that of Beyoncé’s 2019 song “Brown Skin Girl,” what other kinds of visual and narrative re-vision does the narrative have to do to represent Black as beautiful? These questions of cultural specificity are not questions that limit the imagination; they necessarily require more originality, more research, and more nuance than colorblindness can ever fantasize. In the end, colorblind narratives fail to understand that the truly “impossible dream” reaches beyond visibility towards the possibilities of a Black princess who is able to be watched and celebrated in her Blackness.
CONCLUSION

It has been eight years since the 2012 finale of Merlin, the most recent of the works I analyze in this project. With the sheer amount of fantasy media that has been generated since then, I wish I could say my project is no longer relevant. Yet popular fantasy adaptations — like HBO’s Game of Thrones (2011-2019), CW’s The Flash (2014-present), Netflix’s The Witcher (2019-present), and Birds of Prey (2020), to name a few — continue to employ colorblind casting that places Black women as secondary characters only meant to protect and propel white characters, or nominal protagonists who are not allowed to acknowledge their embodied identities. These narratives are given big budgets and even bigger platforms that reach Black and non-Black audiences. I do want to acknowledge HBO’s Watchmen (2019) as an adaptation that truly did work to reimagine genre tropes (in this case, of the superhero) with an explicit understanding of the specific racial past in order to create a new narrative for its Black casting. However, the fact remains that this is the only mainstream fantasy adaptation that has done so.

I maintain that Black girl audiences deserve to be part of the mainstream fantasies we consume, just as much as we can and do create new spaces for ourselves. As August Wilson proclaims in The Ground On Which I Stand, “We are too far along the road of reassembling ourselves, too far along the road to regaining spiritual health to allow such transgression of our history to go unchallenged” (Wilson 26). I have come too far on my own journey to embrace the ways my own embodied identity informs my scholarship, just to see more media that reiterates the same pedagogies. But when Black girls are allowed to be Black, it is clear that the old tropes cannot do us justice. The gendered, race-d, and class-ed underpinnings of a “rags to riches” character arc and the easy connotations of light/dark as good/evil cannot ever truly make way

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73 For the purposes of my argument, as I discussed in the introduction, I am not including adaptations of source material already written about and for Black people, like CW’s Black Lighting (2018-present).
from a Black girl protagonist. Writers and producers must *intentionally* reimagine the unconscious, fundamental premise of the genre that Blackness/darkness is monstrous — the looming threat that must be subdued, no matter how Black girls’ positionalities in the story are rearranged. We the marginalized, the endarkened “Others,” can and should instead be the heroes with whom to identify, cared for by our own communities. Black girls deserve mythologies that celebrate our Blackness, and fantasies that dream of our triumphs without erasing our histories. If fantasy media ever hopes to truly stretch towards a limitless imagination, writers and producers need to understand how to play in the dark.
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