

Iannucci and Branagh's Adaptations of *David Copperfield* and *Much Ado about Nothing*: The Problematic of Race-Bending

Hala T. Maani

Language Center, The University of Jordan, Jordan

Samira Al-Khawaldeh *

Department of English Languages and Literature, The University of Jordan, Jordan

Received on: 5-6-2022

Accepted on: 6-9-2022

Abstract

This paper embraces a counter-argument approach to the contemporary theatrical trend of race-bending mostly through color-blinding. Two cases are examined: Armando Iannucci's film adaptation of Charles Dickens' novel *David Copperfield* under the new title *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, and Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* under the same title. Color-blind casting is a non-traditional theatrical practice that encapsulates undermining the actors' ethnicities when playing a certain character, cancelling the typical alliance of ethnicity between character and actor. The paper utilizes Stuart Hall's theorizations on cultural identity in addition to August Wilson's objections to the method, questioning the compatibility of the race-bending strategy with its stated purposes: embracing equality and multiculturalism. It seeks to demonstrate that, on the contrary, this strategy neither enhances cultural diversity nor advances equality, as it both demolishes historical authenticity and causes distraction in the construction of the cultural identity of people of color.

Keywords: Race-bending; color-blinding; Stuart Hall; *The Personal History of David Copperfield*; Branagh's film *Much Ado about Nothing*.

1. Introduction

The seeds to diverge from traditional casting, as Angela Pao points out in her introduction to *No Safe Spaces* (2021), started to formulate in the mid twentieth century when the American producer, Joseph Papp (1921-1991), established the New York Shakespeare Festival in the 1950s (3). In an audio episode entitled "Freedom, Heyday! Heyday, Freedom!" (2005) Pao indicates that Papp introduced the groundbreaking idea of bending race through casting Raul Julia, a Puerto Rican actor, to put on the role of Othello (23:00- 23:30). In taking this step, she asserts, the intention was to infuse more "racial integration" in all social and cultural areas in the West. The idea of race-bending was later adopted in a few performances until it was officially used by the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP) in 1986. The NTCP advocated casting people of color and societal "minorities," including the disabled in

© 2023 JJMLL Publishers/Yarmouk University. All Rights Reserved,

* Doi: <https://doi.org/10.47012/jjml.15.4.19>

* Corresponding Author: s.khawaldeh@ju.edu.jo

theatrical performances and film adaptations. In color-blind casting, the most common tactic in this trend and as developed by the NTCP, “actors are cast without regard to their race or ethnicity; the best actor is cast in the role” (Pao 2021, 3-4). In her book *Passing Strange* (2005), Ayanna Thompson also advocates color-blind casting in the adaptations of Shakespearean plays indicating that this approach

also assumes that theatre is a location that can enable a society to change long-held views of race. As a model that prides itself on its meritocratic roots (the best actor for the best part), colorblind casting also assumes that an actor’s color has no semantic value onstage unless it is invested with one by the director. (77)

Theatre as a location of social change is a great idea, but it gets more complex when it attempts to change the past, even as it tries to “fix” it. Since its crystallization in the 1970s, the reception of color-blind casting has been one of controversy. Among its critics is African-American playwright, August Wilson, who, in his speech at the eleventh Biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference (1996), marked a significant attack on color-blind casting for multiple reasons reiterated in his article “The Ground on Which I stand” (1996). Wilson condemns the practice as “an aberrant idea that has never any validity other than a tool for Cultural Imperialists” (498). In her article “Recasting Race: Casting Practices and Radical Formations” (2000), Pao comments on this, explaining that Wilson seems to believe that through neutralizing color, color-blinding indirectly paves the way to an ideology that simultaneously erases the right of Black people to celebrate a distinctive Black perspective of the world and demolishes an insight into their own history (3). In an interview with Sandra Shannon and Dana Williams (2003), Wilson points out that race cannot be set off from culture, and that movies about universal issues can tolerate casting from different ethnicities, but movies that portray cultures require authenticity in casting directors and actors from the same race (193-194). Wilson considers race as “the most important part of personality,” and that the American theater must be seriously concerned with this trait as defined by the American society (37).

Speaking on diversity at the Black Star season of The British Film Institute (BFI) (2016), Black British actor David Oyelowo appeals for an authentic representation of Black history in the film industry. He was commenting on the rejection of his project on Bill Richmond, a British boxer born into slavery, for the excuse that people were interested in movies about historical events “familiar” to them, which they could revisit and relate to. This angered Oyelowo who assumed that this meant that the history of Black people would never be visited. “If my history has never been visited, where does that put me?” ponders Oyelowo, also stressing the need for authentic contexts in the portrayal of Black people’s suffering:

People of colour have been expunged from Britain’s history. One of the best ways to illustrate how integrated we are historically is to have a piece of entertainment that people can also learn from while they are watching it. That is why I am hellbent on period drama: we need the context so we can build, and then go on to grow. (Qtd. in Pulver)

Wilson worries about the erasure of Black identity through color-blind casting, which brings to mind Staurt Hall’s (1932-2014) conceptualization of cultural identity. Under the provocative title “Who Needs ‘Identity’?” (1996), Hall perceives identification as an ongoing ‘process’ that is constantly changing,

Iannucci and Branagh's Adaptations of *David Copperfield* and *Much Ado about Nothing*: The Problematic of Race-Bending

which makes identity 'positional.' According to Hall, the focus in understanding identity should not be on the 'sameness' that is shared among people of the same cultural background, but rather on their differences from other groups; for this is what makes their cultural identity unique. The route is, asserts Hall, to delve into what makes an individual "different" from "the other" (1996, 3-4).

To illustrate, Hall thinks that a course aiming at teaching the cultural identity and history of Black people in America must describe Black people's position in relation to white people; i.e., their suffering in history is due to the fact that they are not white, which makes their identity positional. The sameness shared among Black people is not as important as their relation to white people. The latter defines their position in society; thus, their cultural identity is constructed through that positioning. To push the argument further, if color becomes meaningless or neutral, their cultural identity becomes meaningless too.

In consonance with Hall's approach to the identity concept, one needs to comprehend the position of a person in relation to the various historical and cultural contexts that occur over time. A person's identity is changeable due to different discourses and practices that take place. Paul du Gay, in "Organizing Identity: Entrepreneurial Governance and Public Management" (1996), describes the nature of identity as "relational"; to understand a person's identity requires a grasp of "the conditions" in which this person exists. Once their surroundings change, their identity will consequently be altered (153). Accordingly, the fundamental question of identity, as Hall sees it, is "what we might become" in different discourses and situations. On this account, identity is a dynamic process of becoming and "represent[ing] oneself through utilizing 'resources of history, language and culture'" (Hall, 1996, 3-4). The construction of the self is non-stopping being the offspring of the discourses and practices the self is surrounded by (Craib 1998, 6). From this we understand the two controlling factors here: change of time and of situation.

Wilson and Hall's views converge in the process of understanding the importance of differences in the construction of identity. However, what we are dealing with here is the attempt, first, to bend color in casting well-known texts and established drama and its effect on this formation process. It can be viewed as unconsciously bending the historical background of Black people. One might say that the conscious disregard of color in casting is an unconscious disregard of the whole history of racism in the West. The question remains, when and where and how has the suffering of the black people exactly taken place? Besides, and most importantly, color-blind casting threatens the construction of the cultural identity of future generations since identity, in Hall's theorization, is not stable. Colour-blind casting does not support Black people's cultural identity as it demolishes the main thing that stands as the roots of their suffering. Identity is about differences that make individuals, through time, grow and become who they are. If these racial differences are blinded by non-traditional color casting, Black people's efforts to actualize a wholesome, prejudice-free reality for themselves are frustrated. The message they should get is not that we do not see your Blackness, but, we see it, yet, simply as an ethnicity marker. No value added; no value lost.

Hall dwells on the nature of the communicative discourse of media through the process of encoding and decoding signs (1). Developing this idea in 2005, he published “Encoding/decoding” in which he indicates that the traditional “linear” mode of communication which consists of the sender-message-receiver mode is usually in defiance of encoding/decoding process because the former mode focuses on the message and neglects the context where the receiver reproduces the encoded message (117). The recipient becomes the producer and dominates the process of communication (Hall, 2005, 1). For Hall, media production inaugurates “a message” in a communicative process the moment it is broadcast. The recipient does not necessarily understand the message as intended by the encoder. Instead, he/she encodes a meaning based on the political cultural context of the message reception. Hence, the production and reception of the message are usually interconnected but probably never “identical” (3). Hall explains the clash between the two meanings as it relies “both on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry between the position of encoder-producer and that of the decoder-receiver (4).

Hall extends his argument to describe “connotative” visual sign. A visual sign, with the multiple positions within different fields and contexts it bears, is a spot “where the denoted sign intersects with the deep semantic structures of a culture and takes on an ideological dimension” (13). The visual sign is rarely confined to a direct denotative meaning as it overlaps with the cultural structure through which the sign is produced resulting in a connotative meaning. Thus, most often, visual signs in televisual discourse are embedded with an ideology that portrays “in disguise” the cultural atmosphere of the encoded message (11). This is important as the current study is focusing on the *connotative visual signs* in the adaptations of two canonical literary texts: Iannucci’s movie, *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019) based on Dickens’ (1812-1870) famous novel (1860); and Branagh’s film adaptation (1993) of Shakespeare’s (1564–1616) play *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598). *David Copperfield* the novel is a first-person narrator bildungsroman that traces the journey of David, a Scottish orphan, from the phase of innocence in his early childhood before his mother's second marriage to that of experience where he becomes a successful writer telling his own story in retrospect. Dickens centers the story on issues of social injustice, and poverty in nineteenth-century England.

The movie, directed by Armando Iannucci, has a color-blind/race bending casting. The Anglo-Indian movie star, Dev Patel, playing the role of David is not the only ethnically different character in the cast as there are also Benedict Wong, a British Chinese actor, playing the role of Mr. Wickfield and his daughter Agnes, cast by the Ghanaian star, Rosalind Eleazar; as well as the character of Steerforth’s mother, played by Nigerian-born Nikki Amuka-Bird. The stated purpose of such strategy, according to Armando Iannucci, writer and director, is to mirror the *modern* British society with its multiple ethnicities and races. The decision to follow untraditional casting did not stumble in his mind for a second, states Iannucci (Singer). In a review (2020) of this adaptation, Glenn Kenny sees the multi-ethnic casting strategy as completely normal and essential giving Black people the opportunity to be part of the “fictionalized” Victorian society. As a deduction, the intention non-traditional casting of *David Copperfield* serves seems to be at best nothing more than a fantasy of transporting a global image of *modern* Britain to the Victorian world through deploying the bodies of these actors. The problem we have here lies in projecting the present over the past; simply, rewriting history.

Iannucci and Branagh's Adaptations of *David Copperfield* and *Much Ado about Nothing*: The Problematic of Race-Bending

Much Ado about Nothing, on the other hand, is a comedy that celebrates love and power through witty language encompassing self-expressive love between Count Claudio and Hero, Leonato's daughter, juxtaposed by the emotionally suppressed love in the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice, Hero's cousin. The play opens with the news of "Don Pedro of Aragon [is coming with Benedick and Claudio] to Messina," a city in the island of Sicily (Shakespeare, 5). On the wedding day, Claudio refuses to marry Hero, accusing her of infidelity publicly; he is fooled by the plotting Don John, Pedro's wicked brother, who wants to spoil the marriage. The play ends with a dance celebrating both the marriage of Claudio and Hero when the latter's fidelity is proven, and the engagement of Benedick and Beatrice.

In addition to *Much Ado about Nothing*, Branagh has also produced adaptations of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *As You Like It*. Art critic Steve Rose criticizes Branagh for frequently opting for non-traditional casting even in the adaptation of *Hamlet*. This style, he thinks, extends the "weary tropes" of not just "the Black best friend, the token non-white underling – but all manner of archaically white-centric stories [that] are still being diversified at the edges" (par. 4) In the adaptation of *Much Ado about Nothing*, unlike the adaptation of *David Copperfield*, there is only one person of color cast, Denzel Washington, an African-American Hollywood star, playing the role of Pedro of Aragon, - which foregrounds the color-blinding gesture.

Under the title "Faux Show: Falling into History in Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost*" (2006), Courtney Lehman points out that the fragility of the color-blind casting of *Much Ado about Nothing* stems from Branagh's paradoxical and boastful description of the movie as a Shakespearean movie that speaks "for the world." Also, in the screenplay, he mentions that the casting would be "as international as possible" with "different looks and different accents." Ironically enough, the only non-white actor in the movie is Denzel Washington and "the different accents" are either British or North American; thus, Denzel Washington "becomes a synecdoche for all the other nonwhite 'others' whom Branagh's ostensibly colorblind vision fails to accommodate" (69).

Inclusion or erasure

The approach of color-blinding in *The Personal History of David Copperfield* and the adaptation of *Much Ado about Nothing* perpetrates a danger both in undermining the cultural identity of people of color and in fabricating the historical accuracy of the original texts. The intended messages of inclusion and equal opportunity *encoded* in the films are decoded differently by some critics. "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show", states David in the opening lines of *David Copperfield* (Dickens, 3). In his doubts, David ironically raises the question of role filling and ponders on his capacity of being the "hero" of his own story. The movie, opening with the same words, surfaces a disturbing example of a situational irony represented in casting the English protagonist by an Indian actor (1:10-1:20). How much suspension of disbelief is required to allow Dev Patel to be "the hero" of Victorian David's life? In so doing, casting an

Indian actor for a nineteenth-century British character unconsciously erodes the former's own history, leaving it unspoken, with images of colonial oppression lingering in the knowing mind.

In this respect, Hall's theorization of cultural identity becomes more significant in the context of *The Personal History of David Copperfield*. According to Hall's logic, Patel's casting as David jeopardizes the process of cultural identity construction for people of the same ethnicity, and puzzles the audience about the historical authenticity of the film; for identity construction cannot be comprehended apart from the discourse of "agency and politics" (Craib 1998, 7). Since identity is continuously fluctuating within the cultural frame of its construction, for people of color it will be indeed affected by the colour neutralizing move. Color is a major factor in defining the identity of Black people because of its historical ramifications, as mentioned above (Wilson 1996, 499). It cannot be simply undermined, ignored, and made invisible. It is an identity definer. If identity, in Hall's terms quoted above, is about "becoming" and growing (Hall 1996, 4), this nonconventional casting does not enhance the people of color, which can only be done by aligning them with their distinctive experience.

To elaborate further, the challenge stems from some incidents in the film that confusingly fabricate the historical facts of Victorian society. One example is the title of the movie. Moving the phrase "The Personal History" from the heading of Chapter One to the title of the film suggests, at first glance, the authenticity of the narrative; then, surprisingly, the contradiction arises between the ethnic diversity of the movie characters (who are all British in Dickens' novel) and the accuracy of the title. In the same vein, David at the end of the movie states that his story is "more than mere fiction" (1:52-2:00); a statement not to be found in the novel. The emphasis here is on the contradiction between what is in the novel and what is shown on the screen, which in conclusion leads the recipient to reinvent a new version of world history through this adaptation. The movie does not depict the Victorian era per se; it falsely shows Victorian London as a melting pot. In *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (2018), Fryer finds that a high percentage of the Black people living in London belonged to the lower class; their life was a chain of suffering as they "had to fight" daily at every level (231). The movie portrayal contradicts this description. Casting non-white actresses for the characters of Mrs. Steerforth and Agnes, who are superior in their class and social power, sets a deceptive portrayal of Black people's life in that period as both characters retain power and occupy socially significant positions.

Nevertheless, one might argue that not all Black people suffered in that society. To push the argument further, one can notice that there is a genuinely tight corner for twisting the representation of Black people in the movie. This is because there is some truth in this untrue representation. The movie uses a tiny thread from Black history in an attempt to weave a fake canvas, that not all black people experienced hardships in the nineteenth century. Those who were equipped with money, though scarce, lived peacefully and were "tolerated" by other members of their society (Fryer, 237-238). Taking this into consideration, the movie is unconsciously unweaving the misery most Black people have suffered from in that society, and, instead, is weaving the bright experiences of the very few represented by Agnes and Steerforth's mother who do not struggle because of the social power they enjoy.

If to mirror the modern British society with its diverse ethnicities and multiculturalism is Iannucci's intention, one cannot help wondering: Cannot this be accomplished by focusing on the present

Iannucci and Branagh's Adaptations of *David Copperfield* and *Much Ado about Nothing*: The
Problematic of Race-Bending

'achievements' without attempting to eradicate and modify the shameful past? For this is a heavy price to pay for something that can be easily obtained through writing and celebrating the 'glorious' multicultural present; though there is still shame here too. In casting an Indian actor as David will certainly cause a lot of confusion to younger generations starting their acquaintance with the history of Empire in India. It is important for them to know that when Dickens was writing this particular novel around 1850, Britain was suppressing the natives of India who resorted in 1857 to armed resistance for the liberation of their land. While, on the other hand, to make it seem completely natural to have a Black prince in post-inquisition Spain is an inexcusable sacrifice of the hard truth; even offensive. Besides, in line with the recent slogans of "Never again" and memorials erected for victims of violence, race-bending should be rejected for it is mainly an attempt to erase the dark memories and the crimes of colonialism and slavery. Even the attempt is a crime in itself, for there are other, *better* ways to redeem guilt.

Hall's theorization of the deconstruction of the cultural identity of the Black people is also applicable to Branagh's adaptation of *Much Ado about Nothing*. It is even more apparent due to the sharp contrast between the casting of the white Don Pedro's character and the Black actor playing the role. The construction of Black identity in the adaptation can be discerned through three moments of joyous celebrations. Noticeably, when the movie opens with the song "Sigh no more" (0:50-2:53), Don Pedro fails to appear in this idyllic white-dominated scene as it precedes his arrival. For those who have not read the play, the scene seems perfect; however, the fact that this song originally appears in Act Two in Don Pedro's presence (Shakespeare, 2. 3. 33) not at the opening raises questions about the significance of this rearrangement that only led to the exclusion of the single Black character on the set because it precedes his arrival as mentioned earlier

Similarly, at the end of the movie Don Pedro leaves during the marriage celebration (1:44- 1:47) although in the play there is no hint of that as *they* "dance and then exeunt" (Shakespeare, 5. 4 92). On the other hand, the only time Don Pedro is seen celebrating with other characters is during the masked ball (20:00- 31:00), where he appears wearing a mask like the rest. This visual image can be highly connotative. The omission of Don Pedro's appearance from two celebrations can be read as an indirect denial of his cultural identity in that society. The exceptional manner in which Don Pedro is included is when he dons a mask that conceals his complexion and ethnicity. In Hall's logic, cultural identities evolve through utilizing "history, language and culture" (1996, 4), Branagh's decisions will affect people's perception: as Black identity is presented based on the code that implies Black people can join society merely in disguise and assimilation, not as Black but rather masked Black. This movie employs a Black actor to represent someone else's cultural identity; exactly as in the unacceptable practice of white faces painted black. Thus, most probably, when we watch the movie we will be unconsciously and disturbingly focusing on the split in this character: form versus content; while Shakespeare's words, put in the mouth of another character, echo in our ears:

DON JOHN. I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any...

In the meantime, *let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me.* (1.3 16; italics added)

In the style of *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, the adaptation of *Much Ado about Nothing* also misrepresents the experience of the black people in the sixteenth-century. There is also Othello's tragic history, and, speaking of the Elizabethan Age, there is the life Africans lived in England and Europe at that time; where they "were said to be inherently inferior, mentally, morally, culturally, and spiritually, to Europeans. They were sub-human savages, not civilized human beings like us. So there could be no disgrace in buying or kidnapping them, branding them, shipping them to the New World, selling them, forcing them to work under the whip" (Fryer 2018, 8). So, casting the prince of Aragon as an African seems absurd and truth twisting.

Interestingly, Branagh has some remarks to make on his choice: He sees Washington as "a brilliant actor, very masculine but also very tender," adding, "I didn't think beyond that. His being black *doesn't work for or against the story*. His feud with his half-brother Don John is a filial, brotherly thing, not racial" (quoted in Lehmann, 70). If this whole incidence of atypical casting works neither for nor against the story, which is not true in times filled with race and racism, Branagh's explanation expresses no more than a subjective admiration for an individual person. It is commendable that Branagh knows Washington's personality and that it may resemble the character he plays, but for the public this dimension is virtually non-existent. The majority of them will see what is in front of them: a Black assuming the guise of a princely white character.

Moreover, "not to see color" is not a simple and innocent individual attitude as it may appear. Many current researchers consider it as part of what they have labelled Colorblind Racial Ideology (CBRI). The ideological significance of claiming "not to see race is that people can explain racial inequality without any reference to racism" (D'Silva 2021, 16). Colorblindness and othering are further explained as attitudes meant to silence objections to ethnic inequality and discrimination (16). In another 2020 study dealing with Colorblind Racial Ideology, the sense of belonging and racism, the author chooses the following definition of CBRI: It consists of the beliefs that deny, minimize, and distort the existence of racism in its different forms (whether personal, cultural, or institutional), and the impact of race in people's lives (Aggarwal & Çiftçi 2020, 2255).

Through the process of encoding, the two adaptations send apparently *innocent* messages of cultural diversity and inclusion claiming that their audience will enjoy this modernization of the Victorian and Elizabethan texts with the innovative atypical casting. However, with skin colour a sensitive issue in western culture, the visual sign of color-blinding cannot be free from the suspicion of attempting to gradually wipe out the history of racism in the West. Future generations of recipients will get the false impression that color has never been a grave issue in history. In a way, this better serves cultural imperialists while at the same time imposing western cultural visions on the cultural identity construction of other ethnicities.

To ignore or diversify

If these two adaptations aim to neutralize colour, the result is, on the contrary, more emphasis on the issue. A direct correlation exists in the atypical casting: The more producers *ignore* color-differences the more visible it becomes. The original text mandates comparison; especially with the biologically illogical mixing of various ethnicities in the same household. Had all the cast been of the same ethnicity - whether it be European or African, Chinese or Arab - the effect of difference would have been less noticeable. Thus, the unconvincing biological relationships among members of the same family in *The Personal History of David Copperfield* like Steerforth and his mother will be a distraction. The movie is like a canvas that is rich in enforced binary oppositions. Moreover, at some point, the recipient is liable to attribute stereotypical connotations to the ethnic representation of certain characters following the color cue, e.g., casting a Chinese actor to play Mr. Wickfield, the lawyer who runs Aunt Betsey's business, enhances the image of the Chinese as masters of the art of business.

In a similar manner it is hard to detach the cultural content sutured in casting the character of Dora, the first woman David loves, by a British actress. Dora does not fit the traditional image of Victorian woman described by Miss Mill as "a favorite child of nature... a thing of light, and airiness, and joy" (Dickens 453). Her role in the movie drifts from the novel at certain moments that are worth questioning. In the novel, David marries Dora in Chapter 43; but not in the movie. Is this, consciously or unconsciously, somehow connected to Indian David? Probably, because the movie conveys the impression that his marriage works only when the spouses are of ethnic minorities as it might signify a problem with the cultural intersection between the different ethnicities of the actors. It is worth emphasizing that this ellipsis would have been inconsiderable, had the couple been of the same ethnicity. This deletion proves that the movie is subconsciously color-conscious and that there are limits to such relationships in real life.

Another alternation in the adaptation is the ending of this relationship. In the novel, Dora dies a year and a half after marrying David (chapter 53); whereas in the movie she asks David to exclude her from the story: "There is no reason for me to be here... I feel I don't probably fit... I don't belong. Write me out" (1:46-1:48). By taking out the story of Dora's death, the movie confuses the audience about women's suffering in the Victorian society as it shifts the focus to the compatibility between Indian David and British Dora who feels out of place in her relationship with David. Women who did not fit gender roles suffered and eventually vanished. Thus, a woman without babies and housework duties, like Dora, has no place in the Victorian society. Her death can symbolize "an escape from marriage" and an act of withdrawal from "the unbearable" (Hager qtd. in Ioannou 148). Yet, this suffering is not represented in the movie as the death scene is erased from the screenplay.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that characters cast by non-white actors in both films: Don Pedro, David, Agnes, Mr. Wickfield and Steerforth's mother are socially superior. In Lehman's interpretation, class becomes a "racial solvent" (69), an aspect that counterbalances the *different* ethnicity. Washington is assigned a role of high-ranking Don Pedro in what appears to be an unconscious attempt to compensate

his race; thus, class becomes his “racial solvent” (Lehman 69). Similarly, Patel, casting the character of David makes up for his Indian ethnicity. This is because David, although born an orphan, exerts social power since he is endowed with the gift of writing which makes him a notable author by the end of the movie. Without exception, the fact that Mr. Wickfield is a lawyer belonging to the aristocracy paves the way for casting Benedict Wong (of Chinese ethnicity) to play the role, and Rosalind Eleazar (of African ethnicity) for his virtuous daughter Agnes. The emphasis in dramatizing Steerforth’s mother cast by Nikki Amuka-Bird (of Nigerian origin) is on the arrogance and luxurious life she leads in a way that subordinates her racial identity. In conclusion, one cannot help but think of a condescending attitude behind this approach and accordingly agree with Lehman that the approach of color-blinding ostensibly attributes roles of social power in a, supposedly, unconscious attempt to compensate cultural lack in non-white actors.

Likewise, gaps between the movie and the original play prove the invalidity of color-blinding in the adaptation of *Much Ado about Nothing* and shifts the focus towards the issue of difference. An example of an ellipsis and an added scene illustrates the emphasis on ethnic difference in the movie. In the play, Claudio tells Don Pedro that he would marry Hero “were she an Ethiope” (Shakespeare 5.4. 89). However, this statement is omitted in the movie; so, instead of color-blinding, this ellipsis does reveal an unconscious color-biased approach (Lehmann 70). The added scene at the end of the movie where they celebrate in joy the marriage of the two couples also puts much emphasis on the same subject (1:50-1:53). It is an Eden-like image that shows characters, all white, rejoicing the marriage of the two couples, who are also white. As the camera goes higher, Don Pedro is excluded. According to Lehmann, the *reader* of the play gets the impression that Don Pedro, being the prince of Aragon, excludes himself from these moments. However, in the movie, the image of Pedro excluded and not himself getting married implies his/Washington’s inadequacy for this Eden-like scene due to matters of race (2006, 70). In Hall’s words, this visual image of exclusion is connotative. With the gradual fading of Don Pedro, floats a perfectly imperialistic image portraying white characters hand-in-hand dominating the scene and symbolically conquering the world.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper adopts a deconstructive approach to the concept of race-bending for the purpose of showing its problematic nature that betrays its own purposes; especially in color-blind casting, as demonstrated in the film adaptations of these specific works by Shakespeare and Dickens. It spotlights two negative ramifications of the strategy: The first is the tampering with the historical authenticity of the original texts and their contexts. In ignoring the color of casting rises to the surface a disguised overlooking of the history of discrimination in the West. This, in effect, creates a problem for the coming generations whose cultural identity will probably be affected by the connotations of this representation that ignores the suffering of Black and colonized people in particular. To present as normal having a Spanish Black prince in Spain during or after the inquisition is bitterly ironic. *David Copperfield*, for example, has an autobiographical element of the life of Charles Dickens in the nineteenth century. Historically speaking, London was mainly inhabited by British people with some ethnic minorities living

Iannucci and Branagh's Adaptations of *David Copperfield* and *Much Ado about Nothing*: The
Problematic of Race-Bending

on the margins. What is worse is to falsify the historical reality of imperial London, wishfully populating it, like a melting pot, with high-ranking figures from ethnicities that were actually colonized and oppressed by the same Empire in that particular period: India, Nigeria, even China.

The second disadvantage is that color-blinding as a contemporary means to obliterate ethnic differences enhances those differences instead and undermines the contextual integrity of the literary work, turning it into a patchwork of idiosyncrasy, anachronism and eventually grabbing attention formalistically to themes and issues alien to the original text. Dickens had different pressing problems such as poverty and social injustice while Shakespeare in this particular play was celebrating love and its fortunes and mishaps.

To achieve its purposes, the paper has utilized Stuart Hall's conceptualization of cultural identity, which views the construction of cultural identity as positional, depending on cultural practices and positions surrounding individuals. Understanding a person's sense of identity requires understanding the *differences* that exist among people of various ethnicities and cultures.

The paper also refers to the communicative system of decoding and encoding messages through media, which explains the audience's reception of the production signs within a culture. Each decoding sign has an embedded ideology formulated in a cultural context. The paper demonstrates the fallacy of color-blinding by multiple examples from the two case studies of moments either of ellipsis or of addition in the adaptations of the two literary works, which proves that color-blinding is ironically highly biased and color conscious. The final utopian scene in the adaptation of *Much Ado about Nothing* is scoped through an imperialist eye that celebrates the dominance of the white, through the marriage celebration of two white couples surrounded by all hand-in-hand white community over the world, which might be perfectly normal except for the exclusion of the *obtrusive* single black figure of Don Pedro from the scene.

In order to solidify its thesis, the paper chooses the adaptations of *David Copperfield* and *Much Ado about Nothing* on two bases. First, although the two films are by different producers and directors, they both share the same racial subconscious vision in casting various ethnic actors for roles with social power to compensate for their race. Along with other ethnic castings in the two adaptations, Don Pedro and David are matched in being the *crème de la crème* of their class, which indirectly counterbalances their race. The second reason is because both adaptations portray the failure of marriage for both Don Pedro and David from characters cast by white actresses. Don Pedro stands out alone in the crowd and remains single at the end of the movie, an incident which sticks to the play. David's plans to marry Dora fail, departing from the novel, as Dora dies after a miscarriage. That one character remains single in a white crowd and the other does not marry a character cast by a white actress, subconsciously hints at the failure of the attempted convergence of the white and the Black. In the movie, David, cast by an Indian character, marrying Agnes, cast by a Ghanian actress, conveys the impression that this marriage is more befitting because the spouses are of ethnic minorities.

أفلام أيانوتشي و براناغ المقتبسة: الإشكاليات

هالة معاني

مركز اللغات، الجامعة الأردنية، الأردن

سميرة الخوالدة

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وأدابها، الجامعة الأردنية، الأردن

الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى نقد الاستراتيجية التي تسمى بدمج الأعراق في المسرح المعاصر، وتنظر الدراسة في نموذجين على وجه التحديد لهذه الاستراتيجية وهما: فيلم أيانوتشي المأخوذ عن رواية (ريفيد كوبرفيلد) للكاتب البريطاني تشارلز ديكنز، الذي جاء تحت عنوان "التاريخ الشخصي لديفيد كوبرفيلد" وفيلم براناغ المأخوذ عن مسرحية وليام شكسبير (ضجة بلا طحن) وجاء بالعنوان ذاته. ودمج الأعراق هو استراتيجية مسرحية غير تقليدية تتمثل في التقليل من شأن أعراق الممثلين، لاغية التوافق المتعارف عليه بين عرق الشخصية والممثل. تستعين الدراسة بنظرية ستيوارت هول ومفهومه للهوية الثقافية، علاوة على آراء أوجست ولسون المعارضة لهذا المنهج. وتتساءل الدراسة عما إذا كان ثمة توافق بين عملية دمج الأعراق والأهداف المعلنة لها مثل الاعتقاد بالمساواة وتعدد الثقافات. وتسعى كذلك إلى إثبات أن هذه الاستراتيجية، على العكس، لا تساعد في التنوع الثقافي ولا المساواة، إذ إنها تهدم المصادقية التاريخية وتؤدي إلى تشتيت الانتباه في بناء الهوية الثقافية للملوتين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دمج الأعراق، عمى الألوان، فيلم التاريخ الشخصي لديفيد كوبرفيلد، فيلم براناغ ضجة بلا طحن،

ستيوارت هول.

Iannucci and Branagh's Adaptations of *David Copperfield* and *Much Ado about Nothing*: The
Problematic of Race-Bending

References

- Aggarwal, Aashna, and Ayşe Çiftçi 2020. Colorblind Racial Ideology, Sense of Belonging, and Racism-Related Stress in Asian Indian International Students. *Social and Personality Psychology* 124 (5) (Sep): 2251–2271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294120961063>
- Branagh, Kenneth, dir. 1993. *Much Ado about Nothing by William Shakespeare*. (perf.) Denzel Washington and Emma Thompson. USA: The Samuel Goldwyn Company.
- Craib, Ian. 1998. *Experiencing Identity*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Dickens, Charles 2002. *David Copperfield*. Beirut: York Press.
- D'Silva, Margaret Usha 2021. Colorblind Ideology and Othering in Our Time: A Mindfulness Pathway. *Intercultural Communications Studies* 30 (1) 15-20.
- Fryer, Peter 2018. *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gay du, Paul. 1996. Organizing Identity: Entrepreneurial Governance and Public Management. In Stuart Hall & Paul Du Gay, (Ed.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (151-169). London: SAGE Publications.
- Hall, Stuart 2005. Encoding/decoding. In Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, et al, (Ed.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79* (117-127). London: Routledge.
- Hall, Stuart. 1973. Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse. Discussion Paper. *ePapers Repository*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham. Retrieved November 16, 2021 from <http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/2962/>
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. Who Needs 'Identity'? In Stuart Hall & Paul Du Gay, (Ed.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1-17). London: SAGE Publications.
- Iannucci, Armando (dir.) 2019. *The Personal History of David Copperfield*. (perf.) Dev Patel, and Peter Capaldi. Film Nation Entertainment, United Kingdom.
- Ioannou, Maria. 2013. Dora Spenlow, Female Communities, and Female Narrative in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 44 (1): 143–64.
- Kenny, Glenn 2020. The Personal History of David Copperfield. Review of (dir.), Armando Iannucci. *The Personal History of David Copperfield*. Retrieved November 20, 2021 from <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-personal-history-of-david-copperfield-movie-review-2020>.
- Lehman, Courtney. 2006. Faux Show: Falling into History in Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost*. In Ayanna Thompson, (Ed.), *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspective on Race and Performance* (69-88). London and New York: Routledge.
- Pao, Angela. 2013. *No Safe Spaces: Recasting Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in American Theatre*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Pao, Angela. 2000. Recasting Race: Casting Practices and Radical Formations. *Theatre Survey* 41 (2) (November): 1-22.

- Pulver, Andrew. 2016. David Oyelowo: 'People of Colour Have Been Expunged from British History.' *The Guardian* 18 (2). Retrieved December 12, 2021 from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/06/david-oyelowo-a-united-kingdom-people-of-colour-film>.
- Rose, Steve. 2020. Fowl Play: Why Colour-blind Casting Can Also Reinforce Weary Tropes. *The Guardian*. Retrieved December 18, 2021 from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jun/22/why-colour-blind-casting-can-also-reinforce-weary-tropes-artemis-fowl>.
- Shakespeare, Williams. 1968. *Much Ado about Nothing*. London: Penguin.
- Shannon, Sandra G. & Dana A. Williams (2004). A Conversation with August William. In Dana A. Williams and Sandra G. Shannon, (ed.), *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics*. Palgrave: Macmillan: 187-195
- Sheir, Rebecca (nar.). 2015. Freedom, Heyday! Heyday, Freedom! *Folger Shakespeare Library*.(pro.) Richard Paul, Washington. (ep. 20). Retrieved January 3, 2021 from <https://collections.folger.edu/detail/shakespeare-unlimited-african-americans-and-shakespeare/3db49824-2f3e-4077-a6ae-11088d6809f2>.
- Singer, Leigh 2020. 'The Story Is the Least Interesting Part': Armando Iannucci on Adapting David Copperfield. *Sight and Sound*. Retrieved November 1, 2021 from <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/armando-iannucci-personal-history-david-copperfield-casting-modern-dickens-adaptation>.
- Thompson, Ayanna. 2011. *Passing Strange. Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America*. Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, August. 1996. The Ground on Which I stand. *Callaloo* 20 (3) (fall): 493-503. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.