

# Whitewashing in Hollywood: A Legacy of Racism

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## Introduction

If it is true that one picture is worth a thousand words, then how big is the impact of a prolonged sequence of countless images accompanied by music tracks and a myriad of other cinematic effects?

Films are audiovisual means, which can provide entertainment, transfer knowledge, and communicate ideas. They can also serve as carriers of ideologies and cultural heritage. Since its inception, the American film industry has been continuously and predominantly casting white actors in non-white roles. The accurate term coined to describe this phenomenon is *whitewashing*.

In this article, I will briefly examine this existing racist practice in Hollywood by highlighting some selected whitewashed race representations in American cinema. I will also attempt to explore and demonstrate multiple dimensions and impacts of this phenomenon on the US culture and beyond.

## Whitewashing

Audre Lorde defines racism as the “belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance, manifest and implied” (Lorde: 2007). According to Merriam-Webster dictionary (2017), the term *whitewashing* “refers to casting white actors as characters who are non-white or of indeterminate race... It can also refer to preferring white actors, directors, cinematographers, and so on, over equally qualified people of color, as in the Oscar nominations.” When viewing the latter definition through the lens of Lorde's understanding of racism, whitewashing appears to be another distinct manifestation of the hegemony and superiority of the white race.

In this contribution, I will focus on the specific aspect of whitewashing that favors “casting white actors as non-white characters” (Merriam-Webster: 2017) while arguing that whitewashing is one of the covert forms of racial discrimination in Hollywood. In my attempt to closely examine the connection between race and casting decisions, I came across countless examples of American flicks with white actors playing the roles of non-white characters, some of which are as old as Hollywood



**Illustration 1: Rudolph Valentino as Sheik Ahmed, *The Sheik*, George Melford, 1921, Famous Players-Lasky**

itself. The long list of films featuring white actors portraying non-white roles reveals that whitewashing is neither new nor coincidental.

## Whitewashing in the Film Industry

Jill Lane refers to “racial impersonation”, which means “acting in the name of place of the other”, and she points out that it includes practices such as the use of “blackface, redface, yellowface” (qtd. in Chan: 2017).

Examples of racial impersonation can be spotted in films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), in which white actors played the roles of African Americans, *The Sheik* (1921), whose leading character, Sheik Ahmed, is played by a white actor, Rodolph Valentino (illustration 1), *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), in which the role of Ahmed is played by Douglas Fairbanks, *Cleopatra* (1963) featuring Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra (illustration 2), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) with Jim Caviezel portraying Jesus Christ (illustration 3), *Noah* (2014) with Russel Crowe as Noah, *Gods of Egypt* (2016), whose predominantly white, non-Egyptian(-looking) cast play the roles of Egyptian gods, and last but not least *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), where Scarlett Johansson portrays a Japanese character.

Despite the harsh criticism and backlash some of these films received due to the disproportionately inaccurate ethnic casting decisions, this practice has never ceased to exist in Hollywood. To illustrate whitewashing as an actual practice and to demonstrate its potential impacts, I would like to refer to two major film productions that became huge blockbuster successes upon their release and formed big milestones in the world film industry.

The first example is *Cleopatra* (1963), where the character of the renowned ancient queen of Egypt was played by the white British-American actress Elisabeth Taylor, even though Cleopatra's ethnicity has remained until today the center of controversial racial debates triggering collective racial anxieties. As a matter of fact, Cleopatra's race has been frequently altered and whitewashed over the decades in Hollywood. Duane W. Roller (2010) notes that “in at least one of the several *Cleopatra* movies currently planned, a white (instead of black) actress would play the role of the queen.”

In the second example, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), the white, blue-eyed American actor, Jim Caviezel, features in the role of Jesus Christ. The figure of Jesus has been repeatedly depicted as a Caucasian white male, with blue or green eyes and fair hair. This repetitive representation gives the impression that he was, most probably, of European descent, a suggestion that contradicts existing historical records stating that Jesus was a Semitic Palestinian Jew (Britannica: 2024).



**Illustration 2: Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra, *Cleopatra*, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963, 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox**



**Illustration 3: Jim Caviezel as Jesus Christ, *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson, 2004, Icon Productions**

These casting decisions imply that these depictions are most probably not coincidental. For Cleveland (2016) “white Jesus is featured on most Christmas cards; and the recent History Channel mini-series *The Bible* dramatically introduced a white Jesus to more than 100 million viewers. In most of the Western world, Jesus is white.” This systematic whitewashing even of Jesus himself is probably the most concerning form of this practice due to the already existing and potential consequences it has or may have on how our whole world is administered. In this regard, Cleveland says:

“While Christ the Lord transcends skin color and racial divisions, white Jesus has real consequences. In all likelihood, if you close your eyes and picture Jesus, you’ll imagine a white man. Without conscious intention or awareness, many of us have become disciples of a white Jesus. Not only is white Jesus inaccurate, he also can inhibit our ability to honor the image of God in people who aren’t white.” (Cleveland: 2016)

Hollywood’s portrayal of Jesus as a white god begs the rhetorical question of how big the divine authority his white children would have over his non-white ones.

### **Sociocultural Implications**

Concerning the subject matter of this article, I want to share an anecdote that was told by a former professor of mine who once worked as a visiting lecturer at a prestigious American university. The reason for referring to this anecdote is to exemplify how movies can impact a nation's collective consciousness and national memory. Upon asking his students studying political sciences and international relations about the location of Pearl Harbor, which was bombed by the Japanese air forces during WWII, most of them resorted to the 2001 movie, *Pearl Harbor*, as a reliable source of historical reference. To my professor's dismay, most of his students, who were Americans, failed by large to provide an accurate answer. Some even had the impression that it was located somewhere in Japan, while it is in fact situated in Oahu, Hawaii, west of Honolulu.

In the following, I will list some major implications of whitewashing on US culture. Whitewashing can, in some cases, misrepresent or even falsify historical facts through inaccurate casting decisions. In other cases, it can distort literary fictional non-white characters when making white actors play their roles in film adaptations. This practice can be regarded as an implicit contribution towards favoring whiteness and promoting white supremacy. In this very context, Wiley A. Hall (1997) wrote:

“Finally, the movie makers must not be afraid to lie - especially if it makes us look good. Hollywood has been whitewashing (pun intended) history since movies were invented.” (Qtd. in Merriam-Webster: 2019)

The repetitive casting of white actors as representatives of other racial groups, including historical biblical figures or Egyptian royalty figures, might be viewed as a deliberate Orientalist attempt to rewrite the history of the Middle East region, which has been for millennia the target of white European colonialism. Such deliberate misrepresentations covertly suggest that white Europeans

are indigenous to the Middle East and thereby promote colonial narratives related to claims over already disputed territories in the Holy Land and beyond.

From another angle, whitewashing gives the impression that Hollywood considers people of color either racially inferior or at least unworthy of being represented by actors belonging to their ethnic groups. The question of race and the representation of people of color have been the center of fierce sociocultural and political debates. Casting more white actors to replace non-white ones can be considered a further violation of the rights of the non-white groups perpetrated above all by white supremacists in Hollywood (producers and film directors). Such practices often trigger collective racial anxieties and deepen the racial divide in American society. Consequently, people of color find themselves not only underrepresented but also misrepresented when they are denied the right to speak for themselves and to tell their own stories. Regarding the representation of (non-)whites in Hollywood, Robert DiAngelo (2012) states that:

"The abundance of films written, directed by, produced, edited, and starring whites provides me with role models in all aspects of life. These films affirm me and engender a sense of normalcy and belonging... On the other hand, there are few significant roles for people of color in Hollywood, and most are extremely stereotypical."

Even when non-white characters are portrayed, white actors can still be hired for the job, leaving behind the most talented aspiring non-white actors, who mostly remain either jobless or struggling to find a job opportunity. Accordingly, whitewashing reflects, among others, the lack of diversity and equality of opportunities in the film industry.



**Illustration 4: Joseph Fiennes as Michael Jackson, *Urban Myths*, Ben Palmer, 2017, Sky UK**

The best example of this practice is the controversial case of casting the white English actor, Joseph Fiennes, to portray the world-acclaimed black singer and performer Michael Jackson in an unaired episode of the famous TV series *Urban Myths* (illustration 4). This incident was well-documented and triggered waves of collective racial anxieties during that era. According to Merriam-Webster (2019):

"Diversity in the entertainment industry has been a hot topic for a while—Variety published essays in 1956 about the paucity of black actors on television and the big screen—but lately the discussion has moved to the forefront. The confluence of an all-white Oscar slate with the casting of the white actor Joseph Fiennes to play black musician Michael Jackson has led to renewed charges of Hollywood whitewashing."

Still speaking in the same context, back in 1977, the following question was posed in a New York Times op-ed regarding the importance of promoting diversity policies and affirmative action. The question was whether the opportunity should be reduced "for some whites—somewhat—so as to accelerate opportunity for some blacks and other victims of pervasive discrimination" (New York Times: 1977). After almost half a century, the answer to this question seems to be the persistent continuity of whitewashing. Such a contradiction between words said and actions done reveals

“the strangeness of whiteness”, or the white paranoia arising from the danger of losing power through empowering non-whites. This aspect has been elaborated by Chang (2016) in his book about race and resegregation, in which he says:

“Demographic and cultural change has unsettled whites in their privilege. And so diversity presents itself as a lot of confused, contradictory things at once, each indexed to the confused, contradictory states of whites themselves.” (Chang: 2016)

This quote demonstrates by extension how diversity policies in the mass media in general, and in the film industry, in particular, have been strongly influenced by the collective white anxieties about having, at some point, to surrender some white privileges that have been taken for granted.

The highlighted aspects in this article reveal the significance of understanding whitewashing in Hollywood due to the deep sociocultural impacts its practices leave. As explained before, casting white actors to represent non-white characters distorts in many cases historical facts due to its (un-)intentional presentation of fallacies that contradict historical events or literary depictions. Consequently, whitewashing becomes a biased racist method of rewriting history.

This tradition has further implications, not only on the American collective memory and self-awareness but also on the global perception of American culture and history due to the global hegemony of the US film industry. Globally speaking, whitewashing could create, imprint, and spread among world audiences inaccurate stereotypes about non-white Americans leading to an increased hegemony of America's white race. In light of this understanding, whitewashing could be regarded as a form of a covert global mass brainwashing operation.

Politically speaking, whitewashing promotes white colonialism, white supremacy, and the enforcement of white ideologies, views, and policies. Eventually, the outcome of this practice would be the expansion of the white influence over non-white nations, cultures, and territories. Consequently, whitewashing in Hollywood should be examined more thoroughly because it is not merely a temporary fad or a transitory phenomenon. It seems that it is rather an ongoing organized process and a systematic media-based policy that pushes white supremacy inside and outside America.

## **Blackwashing or Whitewashing?**

It is important to note that a new trend of whitewashing has begun to appear lately in Hollywood. This trend has been similarly criticized for its cultural appropriation tendencies achieved through an alleged reversed whitewashing process. It can be spotted in recent flicks where non-white actors played roles of characters widely known to belong to other races. Such cases include Disney’s remake of *The Little Mermaid* (Marshall: 2023), and the controversial documentary Netflix miniseries, *Queen Cleopatra* (2023), produced by Jada Pinkett Smith (illustration 5).



**Illustration 5: Adele James as Cleopatra, *Queen Cleopatra*, Tina Gharavi, 2023, Netflix**

In both productions, the leading characters had been repeatedly played by white actresses before they were finally played much later by black ones. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the docudrama of the Egyptian queen has ignited waves of collective racial anxieties due to Cleopatra's portrayal as a black person. Reportedly, the backlash came above all from Egyptian officials who called for banning the series in Egypt and accused Netflix of misrepresenting “Egyptian identity” to “promote Afrocentric thinking” (Dani Di Placido: 2023). Instead of creating new unique characters designed for non-white actors, it rather appears that Hollywood would recycle and even regurgitate old (white) characters, distorting the collective memory thereof and blurring the differences among America’s unique ethnic groups and subcultures. Accordingly, despite the alleged endeavor to reverse whitewashing in Hollywood, this recent trend seems to be rather an attempt to whitewash the already existing whitewashing.

## **Conclusion**

A genuinely honest approach to overcoming colorblindness and biased racial representations in Hollywood should offer proportionately more diverse, more accurate, and more inclusive race representations. This approach would not only mitigate the collective racial anxieties resulting from whitewashing but also provide a more accurate representation of America domestically and globally.

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