

"Is that Historically Accurate?": The Inclusion of Non-White Actors in English-Language Period Dramas

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Summary

This study's primary objective is to gain a better understanding of the evolving messaging surrounding past race relations through examining the changing methods English-Language Period Dramas have used to incorporate non-white actors.

Background

American film and television has a well-documented diversity problem (1). As the demand for onscreen diversity has grown due to changing demographics (2), showrunners who wish to extend that diversity to Period Dramas have a unique set of challenges to grapple with. Unlike most other film and television genres, Period Dramas are direct constructions of a collective history, one that was often traumatic for non-white people.

While creators may wish to increase the diversity of their casts, they also have to consider the unsavory past that may be brought to light when situating non-white characters within a world whose power structures often directly depended on their subjugation. Showrunners are thus forced to navigate a set of dilemmas arising from the tension between historical accuracy and inclusivity. If they decide to include non-white characters in a historically accurate setting they run the risk of characters' storylines entirely focusing on their oppression, dehumanizing characters by defining them through their trauma and presenting them in a solely subservient position. On the other hand the decision to alter the historicity of the setting so non-white characters are treated uniformly to the rest of the cast potentially incurs ethical issues through erasing historical trauma. The way in which directors handle these complex issues create differing visions of past race relations presented to audiences.

The various messages presented to audiences about past race relations have major implications. To begin with, fictional media presentations of the past are shown to have a large influence on the way in which viewers think about actual history (3). Period Dramas, as forms of media, also reflect and influence present societal concerns (4), portraying messages about the past through a present lens. Thus in their various presentations of the past, Period Dramas reflect changing contemporary conversations surrounding present day race relations.

Methodology

This study is broken up into two portions: a survey of a database of English-Language Period Dramas produced from the 1970s onward, and case studies of three of the Period Dramas in the database.

SURVEY: A database of 450 television series English-Language Period Dramas produced since 1970 was created by amalgamating lists from IMDb (5), TMDb (6), and PeriodDramaHub (7), all online film and television databases. Each title was then analyzed using IMDb and VarietyInsight (8) to determine whether that title cast non-white actors, and whether those non-white actors were cast in historically inaccurate roles. Graphs were created to map the data, revealing overarching trends in the integration of non-white actors into Period Dramas as well as in the development of Historically Inaccurate casting (defined as casting a non-white actor to play a historically white person or fictional character).

CASE STUDY: In the process of analyzing the titles in the database, three distinct methods of integrating non-white actors into Period Dramas were identified. Recently produced titles from the database that were representative of each of the three methods of integration were chosen to be analyzed further in a case study. In conducting the case studies, the selected television series were analyzed for what vision they present of the past and their reception by audience members.

Survey Findings

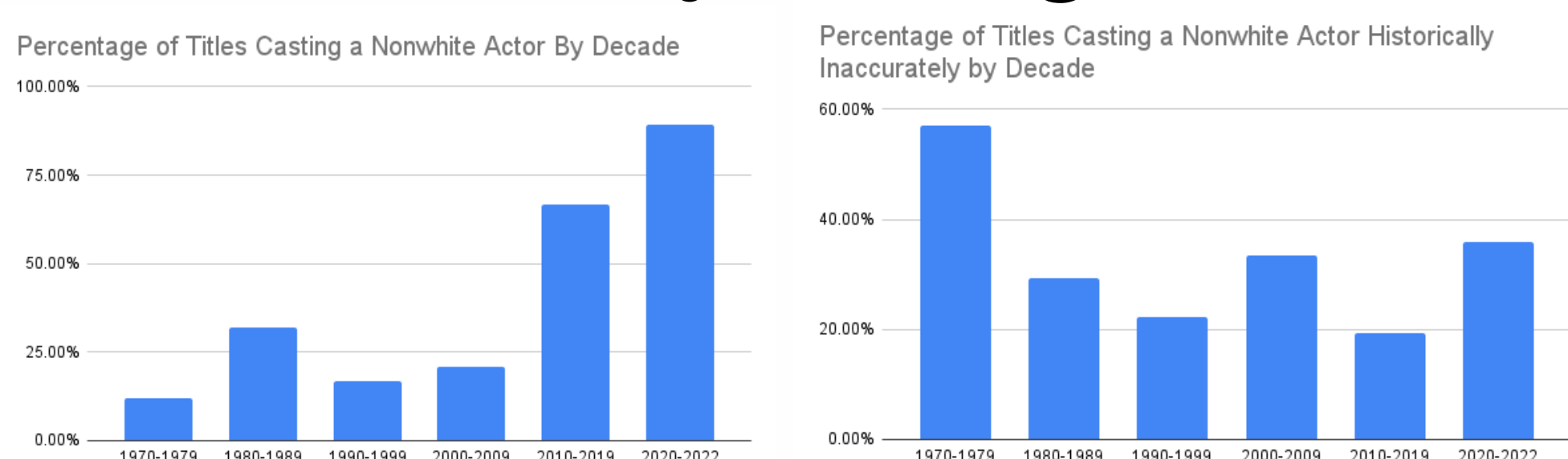


Figure 1

Figure 2

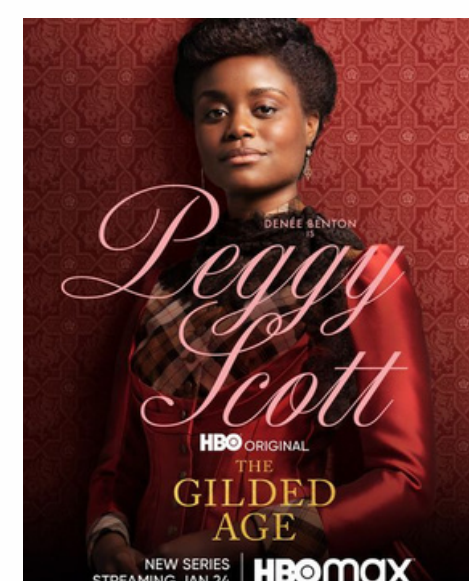
In Figure 1, there is an overall consistent increase in the percentage of titles per decade identified as casting a non-white actor. The trend line for Figure 2 is a bit more complicated, with the percentage of films that cast a non-white actor Historically Inaccurately showing an overall decade to decade decrease. While this particular trend may seem strange, it is important to note that there is a significant difference in the way that Historically Inaccurate casting has been used over the decades. In the earlier decades, many of the incidences of Historically Inaccurate casting were due to casting "white passing" non-white actors, or casting a non-white actor to play a non-white character of a different race. In later decades, particularly in the 2010s and 2020s, much of the Historically Inaccurate casting was done to intentionally display a non-white actor cast to play a traditionally white character. Thus while Historically Inaccurate casting has existed for a long time in Period Dramas it is only relatively recently that shows have begun to use this method to deliberately display racial difference onscreen.

Through analyzing the titles within the database, three distinct methods of integrating non-white actors into Period Dramas were identified:

- 1) Historically Accurate Inclusion
- 2) Historically Inaccurate Inclusion
- 3) Ahistorical Inclusion

Historically Accurate Inclusion: The Gilded Age

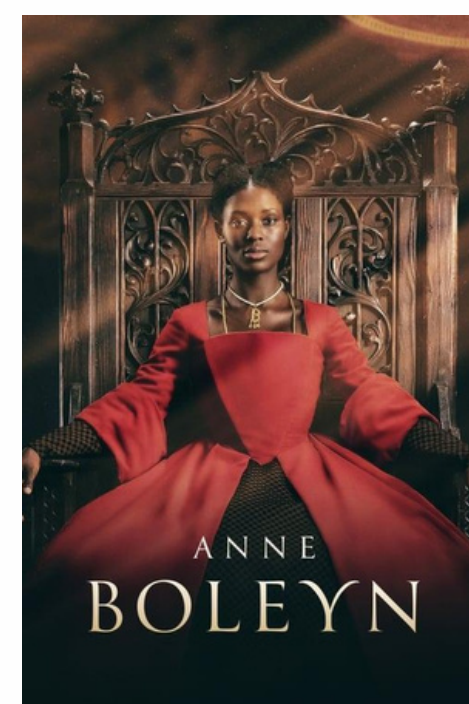
- Non-white actors are cast in roles in line with historical fact.
- Casting using this approach generally results in visibly non-white actors being cast as characters affected by historical oppression. Usually the characters conform to Anglo-American conceptions of non-white people's place within a European colonial or post colonial past.
- While this method forces viewers to reconcile with the messy reality of the historical subjugation of non-white people, it also can constrain non-white characters to storylines that revolve solely around their reactions to oppression and discrimination, resulting in unnuanced portrayals.
- *The Gilded Age* (9) presents a fresh take on this method of integration by using the character of Peggy Scott to highlight the existence of the Black Elite, a portion of African-American history that pushes against common Anglo-American conceptions (10). By showcasing a history that places African-Americans in a position of power and wealth, *The Gilded Age* fills in gaps in Americans' typical understanding of African-American history as one of solely oppression and victimization.



(11)

Historically Inaccurate Inclusion: Anne Boleyn

- Non-white actors are cast to play white historical figures or historically white fictional characters. The racial difference between the actor and the role they are playing is usually unacknowledged in-show.
- Casting using this approach generally puts non-white characters into a number of leading and supporting roles previously unavailable to them. Characters cast using this method are often in positions of power and influence over white characters.
- Shows employing this method overlay an artifice of diversity atop history, visually depicting greater racial tolerance and inclusivity than generally existed. Thus, while this method improves casting opportunities for non-white actors, it only increases representation on a visual level.
- In only casting non-white actors to play the titular queen and characters with close connections to her, *Anne Boleyn* (12) maps the suspicion and distrust Anne and her supporters faced onto present day racial discrimination (13). By using Historically Inaccurate Inclusion to add an additional layer of meaning onto a well-worn tale *Anne Boleyn* blurs the lines between the past and the present, presenting a version of the past that is eerily similar to the world minorities live in today.



(14)

Ahistorical Inclusion: Bridgerton*

*Please note: for the purposes of this study, only Season 1 of Bridgerton was analyzed.

- Non-white actors are cast to play non-white characters integrated into historically racially intolerant societies. Racial differences between characters are acknowledged, yet the discrimination and oppression that would historically come with certain racial backgrounds is not presented, warping the historical setting to accommodate the increased cast diversity.
- As with Historically Inaccurate Casting, shows following this method are able to cast non-white actors in any role within a Period Drama, ignoring historical conventions that generally limit roles for non-white actors. Casting using this approach generally gives non-white characters historically improbable roles and socioeconomic power on par with that of white characters.
- Rather than simply presenting the appearance of diversity as in Historically Inaccurate Inclusion, Ahistorical Inclusion actively warps historical settings to be diverse and inclusive. While at first this may seem like a radical new method of diversifying Period Dramas, there are some troubling implications in the way this approach ignores actual history. By actively integrating non-white characters into the top of hierarchies of power that have historically operated through their oppression this approach presents a sanitized version of history, allowing viewers to enjoy an "inclusive" version of colonial power structures.
- *Bridgerton* (15) uses Ahistorical Inclusion to present a version of Regency Era Britain that is diverse and non discriminatory. While the show does allude to the historical discrimination that minorities faced before the royalty elevated them to political power and wealth, it also continually emphasizes that discrimination is firmly in the past (16). In glossing over the ugly bits of British history, *Bridgerton* erases the racism and discrimination that minorities would have typically experienced. Thus while *Bridgerton's* use of Ahistorical Inclusion creates an unprecedented amount of diversity, it also risks glorifying a historically oppressive time period.



(17)

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