

**“Is that Historically Accurate?”
The Inclusion of Nonwhite Actors In
English-Language Period Dramas**

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Introduction

It should come as no surprise that American film and television has a longstanding diversity problem. As recently as 2013, whites constituted 62.2 percent of the American population yet held an outsize share of film and television jobs in Hollywood, with figures ranging from 74 percent to a whopping 96 percent of Hollywood positions on and off-screen (2013 U.S. Census, qtd in Yuen 19). Minorities only reached anything approaching parity with whites in 2021, for the first time making up 39.7 percent of film leads and 42 percent of total actors in film compared against a US Population share of 42.7 percent (Hunt and Ramon 2021a; Hunt and Ramon 2021b). However, in highlighting the achievement of parity in two sections of Hollywood I also want to bring attention to the enormity of the diversity problem that still exists. In every other role in Hollywood, from film director and writer to television lead and show creator, minorities remain underrepresented, often significantly so. Aside from being merely inequitable, American film and television's categorical underrepresentation of minorities prioritizes stories told by and often centering around whites (Yuen 20). In presenting the world through a white lens Hollywood perpetuates racial hierarchies and lends artificial cultural importance to whites over other racial groups.

Shifting demographics within the United States have resulted in a greater demand for onscreen diversity. Projections show that by 2055 non-Hispanic whites are set to make up less than 50% of the United States population ("Modern"). The shift from a consumer market dominated by and traditionally geared towards a white audience to one catering to a primarily nonwhite audience is one reason media producers have been forced to diversify (Molina-Guzmán 442). Furthermore, the noticeable higher ratings and return on investment of film and television series employing greater diversity provides a powerful incentive for showrunners to break away from traditionally white-dominated casts (Hunt and Ramon 2015).

Even as the demand for more diverse casts has grown, showrunners who wish to extend that diversity to Period Dramas have a unique set of challenges to grapple with. Period Dramas, classified for the purposes of this paper as a distinct genre of film and television which presents a narrative set in a past time period, are unique in that they are direct constructions of a collective history. When one considers that the time periods popular in English-Language Period Dramas are often taken from the era of European colonization, creators wishing to increase the diversity of their casts must consider the unsavory past that may be brought to light when situating nonwhite 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 nonwhite 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 nonwhite characters are treated uniformly to the rest of the cast potentially incurs ethical issues by erasing historical trauma. The way directors handle these complex issues creates different visions of past race relations presented onscreen to audiences.

While it may be easy to dismiss film and television as mere mass market commodities, the images that Hollywood chooses to project hold deep cultural significance. Using Stuart Hall's view of media as a medium that both reflects and influences present sociocultural discourse, the stories Hollywood chooses to tell are shown to be a vehicle for examining contemporary discussions surrounding a variety of cultural conflicts, including those surrounding race relations (Hall 14). This becomes particularly relevant when considering that Period Dramas present versions of a very real shared past. Media recreations of the past are situated in a present day

context, and thus often twist historical storylines to create a “useable past,” a depiction of the past that seeks to understand contemporary issues through exploring historical events (Edgerton 9). Ultimately explorations of history through the Period Drama genre in film and television shed light not only on contemporary cultural discourse but also on how we place the past in conversation with the present within these discussions. What do the varied images we present of race relations within a deeply troubled past say about how we wish to consider racial conflict in the present?

This paper’s primary objective was 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 nonwhite actors. There are two distinct portions to the inquiry: a survey for trends in a database of 450 English-Language television Period Dramas shows produced from 1970 to the present day, and case studies on three shows from that database to examine specific instances of identified trends. In discerning broader patterns within the casting of English-Language period dramas and then analyzing specific manifestations of those trends, I aim to uncover the multiple distinctive visions of historical race relations presented onscreen, and better understand what the specific use of those varying presentations say about our modern understanding of and view on present-day race relations.

Database Survey

In the survey portion of my research, I created a database of English-language Period Drama television series produced since the 1970s by amalgamating lists from several online film and television databases. Then using IMDb, VarietyInsight, and websites cataloging historical and fictional figures, I determined whether each title cast nonwhite actors and if that title had cast nonwhite actors in ahistorical roles. Along with creating a graphical representation of trends in the casting of nonwhite actors, I also determined three distinct ways in which nonwhite actors were being cast in Period Dramas during this time period. In carrying out this portion of the research, my primary intention was to map out trends in the production of the English-language TV series Period Dramas from 1970 to 2022. In doing so I aimed to gain a better understanding of the ways in which period dramas were and are including actors of color. In analyzing all of these trends, I wanted to understand the evolving presentation to American viewers of nonwhite peoples place in a past that was often bent on their oppression.

Methodology

In completing this survey, I chose to look only at films that were originally made in English, as I am interested only in shows geared towards and available for an American English speaking viewer base. I chose to include only television in this survey as this paper is focused on multi-episode television Period Dramas, not on films or other forms of Period Drama media. This was primarily done to account for the potential differences between trends in film and television, so I could compare across a uniform dataset. The timespan, from 1970 to 2022 was chosen to review the evolution of Period Dramas into their modern form.

In putting together the database for this project, I aimed to give as comprehensive and accurate an overview of English-language television Period Dramas created in the last fifty years as possible. As such, I originally planned to pull data from IMDb and manually sort through the databases' listings of television series. In searching for a database to pull information from, the ideal source appeared to be IMDb. Widely considered "the world's most popular and authoritative source for movie, TV and celebrity content," available, IMDb also keeps records of television shows produced by year, which presents an easy way to narrow data down by time ranges ("Help"). However, IMDb's process of data collection made it unsuitable for this particular method. Unlike many other databases, IMDb relies primarily on user-generated data to build its database. Data accuracy is not a problem, as IMDb has its team check any contributor addition, deletion, or alteration to the website. Rather, the primary issue I ran into was due to the overwhelming amount of information contained within IMDb's database. Because of IMDb's success in reaching its stated goal to become "the most complete and reliable source of movie, TV, and entertainment information on the web," the sheer amount of information on the website outstrips any attempts to sort through the database with precision. While as I mentioned earlier filtering by year produced and type of media does exist, the number of datapoints this reduces the database down to still precludes any sort of manual searching within a reasonable timeframe. While IMDb does attach genre tags to titles, any potential sorting method relying on genre tags leaves a lot to be desired in terms of specificity, with the closest objective genre tags to Period Drama being "History," "War," and "Western," which can all oftentimes signify a documentary. On top of that, while all the information in IMDb is verified and presumed accurate, there is always the potential for IMDb to be missing shows or summary information on shows that would allow them to be identified as Period Dramas. Given all of this, I turned my attention to

attempting to collect as comprehensive of a set of popular period dramas as possible, narrowing my focus further to shows that 1) people clearly recognized as period dramas and 2) had enough detail on them in the databases to indicate that a significant number of people watched and responded to them. That way, I was able to construct my database to gather titles that were representative of the period drama genre, and thus might provide a better representative example of how the industry has integrated POC actors thinking about this genre specifically.

In pursuit of this goal, I turned to IMDb's keyword tagging system. Thus, using IMDb's list of "Most popular TV Series tagged with keyword "period-drama" I was able to narrow a potential dataset down to 140 titles, which I was able to manually sort through to confirm that each matched with my specific definition of "Period Drama" and add to my master database. However another problem arises with sole dependency on IMDb's keyword system: application of keywords is inconsistent. Because IMDb relies on contributor submission of data for them to verify and add, they cannot ensure that every single title in their database is evaluated for every single potential keyword ("Help"). Therefore, application of keywords is inconsistent, a problem made glaringly obvious when I noted that IMDb had two other generated lists of TV Series tagged with the keyword "historical-drama" and "costume-drama." While these three keywords may all be considered synonyms for the same genre of film, the lists (while all having significant overlap) each contained titles that were not on the other lists. Thus, after constructing an initial database out of all 3 generated lists from IMDb, I began searching for other databases that had "Period Drama"-specific generated lists that I could easily search from. Aside from IMDb, I found two other websites that had generated lists focusing around the keyword "period-drama" or a close cognate: TMDb and PeriodDramaHub.com.

TMDB and IMDb share many similarities, as both of them crowdsource similar content focused on media titles. However TMDB focuses solely on film and television titles, and bills its information as “100% user contributed,” with no apparent dedicated staff regularly adding content or moderator fact checking (“About” [The Movie Database]). TMDB therefore can be seen as a less reliable and complete database than IMDb. However, for the purposes of this project TMDB was suitable to use as a source of information on potential titles to add to the master database, as it has a similar keyword tagging system to IMDb. TMDB had 4 generated lists that I added to my database surrounding the keywords “period drama,” “historical drama,” “costume drama,” and “palace intrigue.”

Contrary to the previous two databases I pulled data from, PeriodDramaHub is run not as a commercial site but rather a personal hobby site centered around cataloging a very specific genre of media. The only information about the creation of the site comes from a single “About” page, which lists the reason for the site’s existence as the creator “[wanting] to create a space for like minded people who can find a period drama based on a century or topic” (“About [Lydia]). The entire site resembles a greatly simplified version of IMDb, with the primary focus being on a main database of titles that can be sorted according to several keyword filters. Instead of primarily pulling information through anonymous crowdsourcing, the site is run by a single creator who adds every period drama title. The site has a much smaller collection of unique titles than either IMDb or TMDB, but the information listed about each show along with the tags added to each show are more accurate and consistent. Taking all of this into account, I used the PeriodDramaHub lists to supplement the titles I had already collected from IMDb and TMDB, rounding out the datasets that I used to create my master database.

In creating the master database, I first filtered each of the datasets I had found to include only TV Series or TV Miniseries. Then I manually filtered through the datasets collected from IMDb, TMDb, and PeriodDramaHub to filter out any series that either did not match my definition of “Period Drama,” were in a language other than English, or were a repeat of a title that I already had in the database. After compiling a list of 455 titles, I began to fill in the casting details. To identify nonwhite actors, I cross referenced the actors listed on the “Top Cast” list from each show’s IMDb page with VarietyInsight’s actor bios.

Billing itself as “Hollywood’s #1 Data Source,” VarietyInsight is an industry oriented website that provides information on everything Hollywood related. It claims that it verifies its data with original sources, and a promotional video states that it is “used by over 750 leading media and entertainment companies” (Variety Insight). Many of the actor bios identify the actor’s race and/or ethnicity. While this information is not supplied for every single actor, and while every single actor does not have a VarietyInsight bio, I found that the website covers the vast majority of actors and actresses. In general, the older the show the more likely the actors did not have available racial or ethnic information listed. Occasionally when searching up an actor, multiple bios appeared for several different actors with the same name. In those cases I checked birthdates and show histories to confirm that the actor listed was the same actor that I was searching for. If the actor’s bio did not appear on VarietyInsight or if they did not have specific racial or ethnic information listed, I simply discounted them and moved on to the next actor, as I was unable to confirm the information.

Limitations

Any show that had one or more actors that I was able to identify as nonwhite I listed as Y for the nonwhite column. After determining which shows had nonwhite actors playing white characters, I took the sample nonwhite actor that I had found in the “Top Cast” page and looked up the character that actor was playing. If that character was a real person who was nonwhite, an adapted book character who was originally white, or a recast in a remake of a prior film where that character had been white, then I considered the nonwhite actor’s casting to be “historically inaccurate.” Any other casting of a non-white actor I allowed to stand as potentially historically accurate.

In describing this portion of my research I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the various limitations inherent in my methodology. The most notable one is the incomplete nature of my master database, as it is unreasonable to assume that my database contains every single English-Language TV Series that could be considered a Period Drama produced since 1970. However every single title contained in the master database is clearly recognized as belonging to either the “Period Drama” genre or a close cognate. Thus the database ultimately shows trendlines in a cohesive set of data, allowing me to track trends only in TV Series that clearly conform to the Period Drama genre. I want to argue, then, that any potential incompleteness in the database is more than made up for by the cohesive nature of the data. In addition, I must recognize the possibility of potential errors within the information attached to those titles in the database due to incomplete information in VarietyInsight’s actor bios. However I believe that any issues with the data due to these factors are not large enough to interfere with the overall trend lines I discovered.

There are further concerns surrounding the information I collected about Historically Inaccurate casting, as when I was determining whether a title cast nonwhite actors I stopped looking through the “Top Cast” list once I had found a single confirmed nonwhite actor in the interest of time. This means that when I was determining whether casting was historically inaccurate or not I only looked again at the way that one actor was cast in the interest of time. Because of this there is a possibility that several titles that employed a mixed use of historical and historically inaccurate casting may not have been flagged as casting actors in a historically inaccurate manner, assuming that there was a nonwhite actor further down the “Top Cast” list that was cast in a different manner. However, due to the actors that appeared in the most episodes being listed at the top of the “Top Cast” list, I think that choosing the nonwhite actor that presumably has the most screentime in the show and seeing how they were cast still gives an accurate representation of how the producers decided to cast nonwhite actors.

Survey Findings: Methods of Inclusion

In compiling these data points, I discovered that there were three primary approaches to casting used when including nonwhite actors in Period Dramas.

Historically Accurate Inclusion

In this method of inclusion, nonwhite actors are cast in roles that are in line with historical fact. Casting using this approach generally results in visibly nonwhite actors being typecast as characters that are affected in some way by the historical oppression that people of color have faced during or after European colonization. As such, the characters are usually shown to conform to primarily anglo conceptions and stereotypes of nonwhite peoples’ place within a Western dominated past. This is the quintessential example of nonwhite casting in period dramas,

particularly showcased in older shows such as *Roots*. While this method can be useful in how it forces viewers (particularly white viewers) to reconcile with the messy reality of the historical subjugation of nonwhite peoples, it also generally constrains nonwhite characters to playing subservient roles. Furthermore, it can result in storylines for nonwhite characters solely revolving around their reactions to oppression and discrimination, creating plots that revolve around not the character themselves but the historical trauma caused to the race that the character represents.

A newer variation to this method has begun to increasingly take hold, in which series portray true stories about nonwhite people and their place in history that do not fall in line with the typical stereotypes. Shows using this type of casting generally have a greater variety of roles for nonwhite actors, allowing more range in nonwhite characters' socioeconomic standing, greater equality in their onscreen relationships to white characters, and an overall more equitable representation of the past. While still incorporating historical discrimination and oppression into their stories, these shows allow their nonwhite characters to exist outside of their marginalization, giving agency to groups that are traditionally solely presented in their role as victims. Period Dramas using this method cause viewers to reevaluate their conception of what the history of traditionally marginalized peoples looks like. In giving more agency and range to groups traditionally depicted as servile, this method also allows directors to showcase the achievements of nonwhite peoples, perhaps attempting to overturn implicit biases viewers have. By spotlighting stories of nonwhite people that place them on equal or greater footing with their better known white contemporaries, Period Dramas that take this approach are able to illustrate that despite historical oppression, the history of nonwhite peoples is not a simple story of their subjugation by white oppressors.

Historically Inaccurate Inclusion

In this method of inclusion, nonwhite actors are cast to play historically white characters. Casting using this approach generally results in visibly nonwhite actors playing characters that are commonly considered as white, such as Sherlock Holmes or Anne Boleyn. Generally, the world the nonwhite characters inhabit does not change, with the characters presenting onscreen as if they were white without in-universe comment. The racial identity of the actor generally does not explicitly transfer over to the racial identity of the character. This method allows nonwhite actors to be cast in any variety of roles, often including typically white leading ones. Shows using this method generally are able to include a greater number of nonwhite actors within anglo centric histories, especially in regards to giving them more screentime. This method appears to have gained traction in the 2000s, making it a fairly recent development. It is especially popular in biopics of white historical figures, as well as adaptations of books. In attempting to present an accurate version of history while including a greater range of diversity in roles for nonwhite actors, this method visually gives the impression of diversity, while managing to maintain the historical status quo of the setting. But historically inaccurate casting creates a weird liminal space, where viewers are acutely aware of the artifice of the series itself, knowing that the casting of nonwhite actors as historically white characters is inaccurate. Ultimately, while this method of casting improves opportunities for nonwhite actors to play leading and historically significant roles in Period Dramas, it doesn't really increase representation. This is because while the actors may be nonwhite, the characters themselves still are. Series employing this method overlay an artifice of diversity atop actual history, visually depicting greater racial tolerance and diversity than may or may not have actually existed.

Ahistorical Inclusion

This method integrates nonwhite characters into historically undiverse and intolerant societies, giving them historically improbable roles and power on par with that of white characters. Racial differences between characters are acknowledged, yet the discrimination and oppression that would historically come with certain racial backgrounds is not presented. The internal logic of the show's historical setting itself is altered, with historical fact warped to accommodate the increased diversity of the characters. This method allows shows to include nonwhite characters in potentially any role within a Period Drama, ignoring historical conventions that generally limit roles for nonwhite actors. The first and only instance of this approach within the database is *Bridgerton*, making it incredibly recent as of the time of this writing. Perhaps the most striking feature of this method of casting is the way it deliberately presents a non discriminatory yet racially and ethnically diverse vision of history. Whereas Historically Inaccurate Inclusion presents a version of the past that has the appearance of diversity only, Ahistorical Inclusion warps the past to be more inclusive, maintaining characters' distinct racial identities. While at first this may seem like a radical new way to create inclusive Period Dramas while avoiding telling a singular dehumanizing story of oppression, there are some troubling implications with the way this approach ignores actual history. By integrating nonwhite characters into structures of power that depended on their continued oppression, this approach sanitizes historical reality. In viewing a minority friendly version of an often colonial past, viewers immerse themselves in the artifice and court drama without having to consider how these power structures operated. By removing the ugly bits from historically a very racist time period and power structure, shows such as *Bridgerton* obfuscate the centuries of oppression that its nonwhite characters would have to deal with.

Additional Trendlines

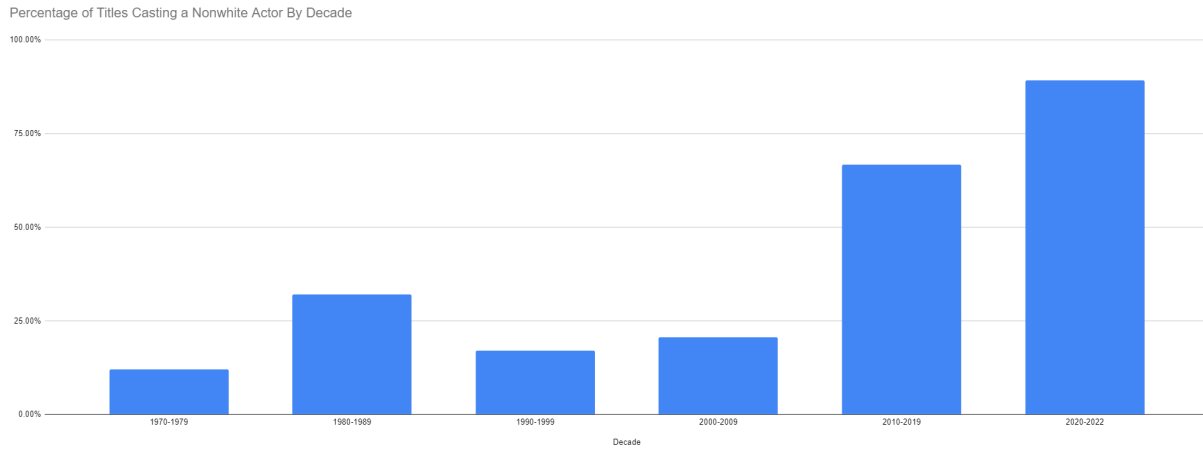


Figure 1

Through graphical representations of the dataset, I was able to identify two key trends in the casting of nonwhite actors. As shown in Figure 1, it appears that from 1970 onward there is an overall consistent decade to decade increase in the percentage of titles per decade identified as casting a nonwhite actor. The 1980s stand as a noticeable outlier to this trend, with the 1990s having a smaller percentage of titles casting nonwhite actors than the 1980s. It is also important to note that there is an exponential increase in the percentage of films casting a nonwhite actor in the 2010s.

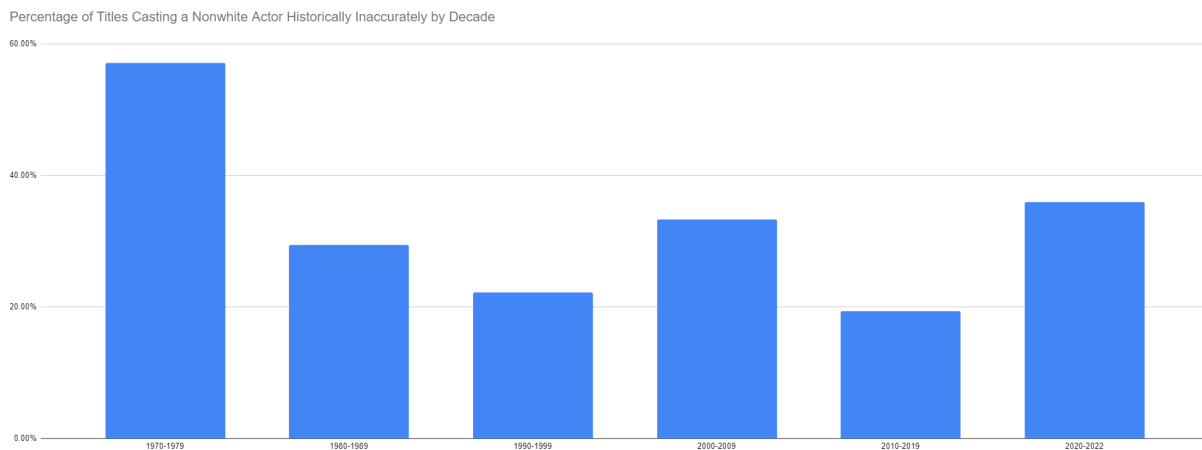


Figure 2

Looking at Figure 2, it appears that the trend line for Historically Inaccurate casting is more complicated. Rather than increasing over time, the percentage of films that cast a nonwhite actor in a historically inaccurate rather than historically accurate manner appears to decrease from the 1970s, with smaller peaks in the 2000s and 2020s. While these trends may seem quite strange, it is important to note that there is a significant difference in the way that historically inaccurate casting of nonwhite actors is used in the 1970s from the present day. While compiling the data I noticed that in the earlier decades, much of the historically inaccurate casting was done by casting “white passing” actors or casting an actor of one ethnicity to play an actor of another ethnicity. In the later decades, particularly in the 2010s and 2020s, much of the historically inaccurate casting is done with nonwhite passing actors, with a clear intentional display of a historically inaccurate racial difference onscreen. Thus, in the later decades both nonwhite casting and historically inaccurate casting of nonwhite actors was done with greater intentionality. This means that while diverse casting and historically inaccurate casting have existed for a long time in Period Dramas, it is only relatively recently that shows have begun to intentionally include nonwhite actors and expand roles for those actors through historically inaccurate casting.

Case Studies

As a continuation of the patterns identified in the Survey portion of this research, this portion looks at the practical implementation of each of the three theoretical approaches to including nonwhite actors in Period Dramas identified earlier. The shows selected for this portion were all selected from the database in the Survey portion, and each one fits a particular method of inclusion. *The Gilded Age* (2022) was chosen for Historically Accurate inclusion, *Anne Boleyn* (2021) for Historically Inaccurate inclusion, and *Bridgerton* (2019) for Ahistorical inclusion. In choosing these shows I specifically picked series that were produced within the last five years that had a significant cultural impact, either through large viewership numbers, prolific online discourse, or some combination of those two factors. Contemporary titles were specifically chosen in order to gain a picture of these casting techniques as they are currently being used. Furthermore, choosing shows from the same time period gave a basis of cultural comparison to ensure that analysis of the differing visions of the past the shows presented was not clouded by the shows coming from different cultural contexts. Cultural impact was a factor in order to ensure that chosen shows were representative of the larger conversation surrounding the casting of nonwhite actors in Period Dramas. Choosing shows that were at the forefront of the cultural conversation allowed conclusions to be more widely applicable, as the shows analyzed are representative of the larger genre and less likely to be anomalies.

Before delving into these case studies, it is important to acknowledge their inherent limitations. The nature of the case study as a detailed analysis of a representative example restricts any conclusions drawn limited to the context of that specific show. Thus findings from each individual case study may or may not be wholly representative of the larger category of casting that show falls into. Additionally, all critical and consumer reviews used are drawn from

online review sources and thus are not from a consistent sample group. Therefore, any conclusions drawn about viewer reactions to these shows pertain to the title's general reception, with receptions varying among specific audiences.

Historically Accurate Inclusion: *The Gilded Age*

English-language Period Dramas tend to primarily focus on distinctly white periods of Western history. When they do decide to cover stories about non-white people that existed within white-dominated societies, these shows often focus on the discrimination and ill-treatment that they faced. Julian Fellowes's 2022 *The Gilded Age* takes a sharp deviation from this traditional pattern in its inclusion of Peggy Scott ("Gilded"). Peggy, played by Denée Benton, represents a different portion of African-American history, one not primarily defined by black subservience but by black triumph: the Black Elite, a thriving community of wealthy African-American individuals nestled amid the glitz and glamor of the Gilded Age. In revealing a story not often told in American history books, *The Gilded Age* is a prime example of the Historically Accurate method of inclusion¹.

To begin with, it is important to note that while the show integrates Peggy's story in the main narrative, the show's primary focus is on Marian Brooks, the niece of Agnes Van Rijn and a member of the wealthy and white "Old Money" crowd. However, Peggy is given significant screentime, appearing in all nine episodes of the show. Onscreen, the show is careful to acknowledge that while Peggy and the larger community of the Black Elite she belongs to are discriminated against, this discrimination does not consume their lives. Peggy's every action is not cast in light of her struggle to find a place for herself in a world that seems against her at

¹ Aside from its fit within the category, this series was also chosen for its commercial success, with 1.6 million people watching the series finale (Del Rosario).

every turn: that place already exists in her family home in Brooklyn. This positions Peggy not as a black woman attempting to forge a path into high society but a black woman attempting to forge a path into *white* society. In showing the comfort that Peggy is used to living in and the success that her family and community enjoy, *The Gilded Age* directly rejects the story of suffering that has encapsulated the narrative told about Black Americans in American history. At the same time however the show is not afraid to illustrate the racism and discrimination Peggy faces on a daily basis due to the color of her skin. It merely emphasizes that that racism does not define her life.

The notion of creating a black character that strays from the conventional ideas surrounding African-American history appears to have been a driving force behind the writer's decision to include Peggy's story. The show's creator Julian Fellowes reflects that he felt that the inclusion of a black main character was necessary after learning for the first time about the existence of the Black Elite, adding that he hopes that after watching the show viewers will shed their preconceived disbelief at the plausibility of Peggy's story and learn about an often overlooked piece of African-American history (Andrews-Dyer). Erica Armstrong Dunbar, credited as one of the primary contributors to Peggy's storyline, espouses the importance of Peggy's narrative as expanding viewers' ideas of the Gilded Age time period and American history in general ("The Gilded Age | The Black Elite"). Dunbar's excitement to work on *The Gilded Age* was particularly because of the potential it had for representing a different perspective on African-American life in the nineteenth century by depicting an educated, well off African-American family (Kuperinsky). All of these statements in connection make it clear that Peggy Scott was specifically included in the series in order to expand the viewers ideas of what African-American history consisted of. While staying true to the discrimination Peggy would

have faced within the time period, the show emphasizes her narrative outside of the narrow story of oppression that is often told.

The reception to the show's portrayal of Peggy and of the Black Elite appears to have had the intended effect on audiences. Comments on the show's portrayal of Peggy Scott and the Black Elite are overwhelmingly positive. Maisyha Kai from *The Grio* commends the show on its "novel depiction of Black elite society during the era." Helena Andrews-Dyer from *The Washington Post* concurs, saying that in *Peggy* the show managed to create "an ambitious young woman who shines instead of shrinks." Patia Braithwaite from *Bloomberg* sees Peggy's portrayal as a vast improvement over the handling of black characters in Fellowes' prior hit *Downton Abbey*. Braithwaite is particularly impressed with Peggy's possession of poet Elizabeth Alexander's named quality of "the black interior," which Braithwaite quotes as being "a metaphorical 'black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination.'" The warm reception *The Gilded Age's* depiction of the Black Elite has received indicates the traction that this particular method of inclusion has with modern audiences. In a canon full of stories that explore the historical trauma heaped on the African-American community, the series creates a character whose story arc is driven by her own ambition. While the discrimination she faces is a part of that arc, it does not define it. Peggy herself does.

Historically Inaccurate: Anne Boleyn

Produced by the British broadcaster Channel 5 and released in the United States on December 9th 2021, there is much to unpack when considering the innovations *Anne Boleyn* adds to what could have been a simple retelling of the infamous British Queen's demise ("About-Channel 5"; Kanter; "Anne"). However, this paper will focus primarily on the show's

unorthodox casting decisions. In a bold move away from convention, the show places black actress Jodie Turner-Smith in the starring role as the historically white British queen, and fills multiple secondary roles portraying historical figures firmly established as white with nonwhite actors. Perhaps more interestingly, the show presents racial differences between the characters solely in a subtextual manner, a decision that has major effects on the vision of Tudor-Era Britain presented to viewers. Along with being a clear instance of the Historically Inaccurate casting method, this show was chosen for this case study due to the large amount of controversy its unconventional casting choices generated, both in Britain and abroad².

To begin with, it is important to review the show's casting of nonwhite actors and its presentation of racial differences on screen. As mentioned earlier, the show never acknowledges any in universe racial differences or discrimination among its characters, leaving its historical setting supposedly unaltered.³ However, it is important to recognize the subtextual ways the show uses race as a central tenet of its storytelling. Out of the nineteen credited actors listed on the series's IMDb page, five are identified as nonwhite, placing nonwhite actors as an overall minority within the cast. It is also important to note here how these actors are cast: every single one of them plays a character with a distinct connection to Anne Boleyn. All other credited actors in the show are white, layering an very interesting racial subtext on top of the real life historical court schism wrought by Anne's usurpation of what many at the time saw as Katherine

² A small sampling of the many articles written about this series include the British Daily Mail "Anne Boleyn Was a Straight White Female: Lawrence Fox Blasts Channel 5 Over Tudor Drama With Black Actress Playing Henry VII's Notorious Second Wife Who Kisses His Third Spouse Jane Seymour" and the American Salon's "Cadence Owens: If a Black Woman Can Play Anne Boleyn, Then a White Man Should Play Obama" (Chueng; Sales).

³ It is important to mention here that not only is the historical setting itself unaltered, but the events that transpire in the series are, for the most part, accurate to documented historical fact. The production team appears to have been fairly dedicated to presenting history accurately, as evidenced by the inclusion of Dan Jones, a well known British historian, as executive producer (Nitrbeditor; "Anne Boleyn: Behind the Scenes"; Mukhopadhyay; Pearson-Jones; Blackett).

of Aragon's rightful throne. This onscreen dynamic is pointed out by Thalissa Texeria, the actress who plays Madge Shelton in the series. Texeria suggests that by casting nonwhite actors solely to play Anne and her closest confidantes amid a primarily white cast, the distance between her and the rest of the court is made more prominent, illustrating her otherness on a larger scale (Carr).

In subtextually alienating Anne through portraying her as part of a racially alienated minority group, the show uses Historically Inaccurate casting to wordlessly demonstrate her precarious position to a modern audience. This notion of casting across color lines to retell the infamous queen's story to a specifically diverse and contemporary audience appears to have been central to the show's unorthodox casting method, with the show's writer, Eve Hedderwick Turner, saying that the production team wanted the show to feel "reflective of our society today," with an aim of gaining viewers "who maybe didn't see a relevance in watching a show like this previously" (Sarner). Thus, the show uses diversity not to present an artificial vision of a diverse British past, but to directly link the past to the present through emphasizing the universal human aspect of Anne's tale. While modern audiences may not care about Tudor court intrigues, they are able to quickly understand the alienation that Anne feels by the onscreen equation of her position to that of a nonwhite woman marrying into a white family. The series' vision of Tudor England is not attempting to break down color barriers or allow nonwhite viewers to watch an escapist fantasy where racism does not exist. Rather the show attempts to present the past as an distorted reflection of the present, reframing Anne Boleyn's story within the larger context of undeserving discrimination and suspicion often heaped on nonwhite women. In presenting this representation of the past to audiences, the series implicates the world that the viewer inhabits in

Anne's downfall, pointing out how despite the centuries that have passed, Anne's tale repeats itself in the discrimination that minorities continually face.

Unfortunately, many viewers appeared to miss this nuance. While critics appeared to recognize what the series was doing⁴, the larger audience appeared to be unable to see Turner-Smith's casting as anything but historically inaccurate. This is particularly evident in the series' Rotten Tomatoes audience score, which at a mere 8% deviates by 42 percentage points from the Tomatometer critic informed score ("Anne Boleyn" Season 1). Out of the 31 written audience reviews submitted to Rotten Tomatoes for this show, a staggering 15 of them directly mention historical inaccuracy as one of the reviewer's main reasons for disliking the show. One reviewer even went so far as to claim that the show "makes a mockery of our [country's] history" (Sarah L). All in all, while the production team for *Anne Boleyn* presented a version of British history intended to emphasize the connections between the past and present, many of their audience members were unable to see past the show's perceived use of diversity as a mere gimmick rather than an integral layer of storytelling. Despite this, the show's use of Historically Inaccurate casting to add a new dimension to well known story highlights the way that this method of inclusion can be used to inject fresh relevance into well worn takes by pointing out uncomfortable similarities between our past and present.

Ahistorical: *Bridgerton*⁵

⁴ This is exemplified in Adam White from the *Independent*'s comment that by casting a black woman to play Anne the series "reinforces the cruelty, distrust, and casual undermining Anne is subjected to," reminding viewers of "how little has changed in the hundreds of years since." Similar sentiments are echoed by many of the other critics proclaimed "Top Critics" by Rotten Tomatoes (Anderson; "Anne Boleyn Season 1 Reviews").

⁵ Please note: for the purposes of this paper, only Season 1 of *Bridgerton* was analyzed.

For this category, the choice was obvious: Shondaland's hit Netflix series *Bridgerton*. The series' release in 2020 marked the entrance of Ahistorical Inclusion as a new and thoroughly innovative way to integrate nonwhite actors into Period Dramas ("Bridgerton"). The series summary reads like that of any other traditional Regency Era Period Drama, complete with gossiping mothers, scheming debutantes, concerns surrounding titles and wealth, and an extravagant romance at the heart of it all. However one glance at the series reveals *Bridgerton*'s striking innovation: its cast diversity. The series embraces diversity, with nonwhite characters shown embedded everywhere in the fabric of the world from the multiethnic royal court headed by the mixed race Queen Charlotte, to the lowliest servants seen only in background shots. One half of the primary romance is played by Rege-Jean Page, a mixed-race black man, and other notable nonwhite characters, such as Lady Danbury, Queen Charlotte, and Marina Thompson, continually appear throughout the series. Perhaps more astonishingly, the Regency Era depicted in *Bridgerton* is tolerant of its diverse cast, with racism or discrimination never shown onscreen. The show's massive commercial success⁶ and cultural impact illustrates the hold that its inclusive vision of the past has over contemporary viewers.

In presenting its diverse vision of Regency Era Britain, *Bridgerton* employs two primary tactics: avoiding mentions of racial difference and altering historical fact. Although the series takes pains to include diversity throughout its entire cast rather than add one or two token nonwhite characters, racial difference is never acknowledged onscreen by any of its white characters. White and nonwhite characters are shown to command equal amounts of power and respect relative to their ranking within the aristocracy, with major portions of the show's plot revolving around the attempts of white characters to get into the good graces of the mixed race

⁶ *Bridgerton* became Netflix's most viewed series ever, with the series viewed by 82 million households globally (Andreeva).

Queen Charlotte. As mentioned earlier, racism toward nonwhite characters is never shown or even presented as a possibility. For all intents and purposes, racial differences between the characters exist only in terms of physical attributes. With the exception of a small mention of the American colonies, British colonial properties are never mentioned. However, mixed into the series are small acknowledgements of past racial strife, where *Bridgerton* bends historical events to account for the increased diversity and racial tolerance it presents onscreen. The most prominent example of this is a scene in “An Affair of Honor,” the fourth episode of Season 1. In a private conversation between the Duke of Hasting and Lady Danbury, both black aristocrats, Lady Danbury reminds the Duke that “[w]e were two separate societies divided by color until a king fell in love with one of us” (*Bridgerton*). In this snippet of dialogue, the show rewrites history, outright acknowledging British racism and immediately cementing it as a thing of the past. Thus, *Bridgerton* manages to present a diverse, racism free image of the Regency Era by portraying discrimination as a thing of the past through altering aspects of British history. The result is a Period Drama that presents a fantastical version of the past for modern viewers, allowing the series to keep all of the familiar British court intrigue, costumes, and drama while sidestepping the historical racism its nonwhite characters would have had to face.

The show’s unique presentation of a diverse and racially tolerant past appears to have been part of *Bridgerton* creator Chris Van Duesen’s vision from the start. In interviews Duesen continually emphasizes his aim to ensure that the show reflected the diversity of the modern world, stating that in creating *Bridgerton* he attempted to “to take everything [he] loved about a period show and turn it into something fresh, topical and relatable,” allowing a contemporary audience to “see themselves on screen ” (Hullender; Van Dusen; “*Bridgerton*’s Creator”; Valentini). In the context of Duesen’s remarks the show’s decision to push the focus away from

historical conflict surrounding race relations can be seen as part of an attempt to create a Period Drama that nonwhite viewers can fully interpose themselves into without historical racism breaking the fantasy.

In this respect, *Bridgerton* appears to have primarily succeeded, as evidenced by its immense popularity⁷ and financial success. However some critics have noted the issues with the way the show hand waves racism and colonialism, electing to erase historical oppression and trauma. Carolyn Hinds from the Observer points out the inherent absurdity of *Bridgerton*'s decision to mostly dismiss race as unimportant to the story while setting the series in Regency Era Britian, a society whose finery was built on money from colonialism and the slave trade, a critique echoed by Aja Romano from Vox. Salamishah Tillet from the New York Times catalogs the series as engaging in "escapism," noting its willingness to engage with the actual history surrounding race relations in Regency Era Britian. Academics have also weighed in, arguing that *Bridgerton*'s decision to ignore its setting's historical oppression of nonwhite people contributes to movements attempting to forget historical racism, and results in preputuaing the false idea of a post-racial society (Kulak; Cantu). Thus while *Bridgerton*'s use of Ahistorical Inclusion to create a escapist fantasy appeals to a societal urge urge to move beyond a past fraught with violence towards minorities, it is important to recognize the problematic nature of the desire to forget.

⁷ Aside from its financial success detailed earlier, the series has a 71 percent audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, placing it into the website's category of "Fresh," denoting it as a title with good reviews ("About Rotten Tomatoes"; "Bridgerton: Season 1").

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the varying presentations of historical race relations onscreen reveal an immense amount about the contemporary discourse surrounding present-day considerations of race and historical racism's role within them. The identification of three distinctive methods of including nonwhite actors in Period Dramas illustrate the primary ways that society currently views this issue. In Historically Accurate Inclusion, a vision of the past is presented that seeks to illuminate the horrors that our collective history holds while still ensuring that the history of nonwhite people records moments of triumph and success. Historically Inaccurate Inclusion aims to connect the past to the present by reframing historical tales through the lens of our contemporary consciously and subconsciously racialized world. Finally, in the newest evolution of all, Ahistorical Casting seeks to move past a painful history of discrimination by presenting a vision of the past that erases all discrimination. Perhaps more interesting than the different presentations of the past these methods present is the contemporary trends in their usage. In considering the move away from Historically Accurate casting in conjunction with the recent popularity of the latter two of these three casting methods, several interesting implications are presented. The recent increase in purposeful Historically Inaccurate and Ahistorical methods of casting can be interpreted as an attempt to retell traditional stories for a modern and diverse audience. Alternatively, it can be seen as a modern impulse to gloss over the uglier parts of Western history, injecting historical settings with artificial levels of tolerance and diversity. Looking at the modern presentation of past race relations as commentary on current race relations, this can be seen as an attempt to move past a shared troubled history - or an attempt to forget it altogether.

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