

Mariam Muwanga

Modeling the African Diaspora

Narrative Representations of Diasporic Blackness
in Black British Fiction

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Literature and the Construction of Race

In 2014 the internet was awash with rumors about the possibility of casting Black British actor,¹ Idris Elba, as Ian Fleming's fictional character James Bond. Traditionally played by White British male actors, casting a Black actor as Bond led to an online debate among fans "about whether a black Bond could ever be [considered] *legitimate*" (Eddo-Lodge 135, emphasis added). A similar debate was sparked in 2016 when it was revealed that South African actress, Noma Dumezweni, would be playing J.K. Rowling's fictional character Hermione Granger in a theater adaptation of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. News of a Black Hermione led to negative reactions by several Harry Potter fans. To them Hermione had always been White.²

1 The category 'Black British,' as used in this book, refers to individuals in Britain that self-identify with or who have ancestral ties to the cultural contexts of Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the African/Black diaspora.

2 The upper-case shall be used henceforth to denote racial and ethnic categories, for instance 'Black' as opposed to 'black.' This is because racial categories are not considered adjectives that describe (biological) traits of individuals—these categories refer to individuals and groups of people. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the categories 'Black,' 'White,' and the ethnic category 'South Asian' are considered social constructs as opposed to biological facts (see Hall, "New Ethnicities" 443).

The decision to capitalize the racial categories 'Black' and 'White' in this study, despite being contested in academic scholarship, highlights the constructedness of race while also being attentive to the political significance and debates behind the capitalizing or italicizing of these terms. While the general consensus among academic scholars is that 'Black' (as a marker of a cultural group, of resistance, and counter-hegemony) can be capitalized, there is a lack of consensus about how the category White should be written. Kimberlé Crenshaw suggests a lowercase spelling of White as the term does not refer to "a specific cultural group" (Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" 1244). However, a lowercase spelling of the term has come under scrutiny because it may reinforce the 'unmarkedness' or default status of Whiteness as a seemingly neutral category, giving it the power to maintain its invisibility (see Ewing no pag.). Eggers, Kilomba, and Piesche ("Mythen, Masken und Subjekte" 13) have suggested an italicized, lower-case spelling of "*white*" to highlight its constructedness while at the same time demarcating it from 'Black,' a category that signifies resistance and counter-hegemony. However, according to philosophy scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah, Whiteness does not deserve a lowercase spelling because doing so obfuscates the social constructed-

Commenting on the reaction of Harry Potter fans, Eddo-Lodge posits that “[w]hen you are used to white being the default, black isn’t black unless it is pointed out so” (137). For some Harry Potter fans it appears that casting a Black character to play Hermione was too far a stretch of the imagination because “[they] couldn’t imagine little black girls as precocious, intelligent, logical know-it-alls with hearts of gold” (ibid. 139).

Casting racially diverse actors and actresses for roles originally played by White actors and actresses continues to spark debates among audiences, as recent reactions to popular television adaptations show. For example, fans of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* were divided about the inclusion of Black hobbits, orcs, dwarves, and elves in the book series’ prequel, *The Rings of Power*, that was streamed in August 2022 on Amazon Prime (see Sanders no pag.). To point out another recent example, Walt Disney’s live action re-make of the film *The Little Mermaid*, which made its debut in September 2022 on YouTube, was received with excitement among some fans. However, the film also “sparked anger and dismay among fans who felt that Ariel was written to be a White character” (Kunze no pag.). The film features African American actress, Halle Bailey, as the mermaid, Ariel. Parents and caregivers of Black children, mostly in the United States, shared videos on various social media platforms showing how ecstatic their children were about seeing a ‘Black Ariel’ in the Disney classic (see ibid.).

These mixed reactions to casting Black characters for leading roles originally played by White characters prompts the rhetorical question: “Isn’t that the point of acting: to suspend audience disbelief ...?” (Gelt no pag.). One would expect that what literary theory refers to as the aesthetic convention would apply to all fictional representations. In literary theory the aesthetic convention holds that literary texts and representations “should not be judged in terms of ‘true’ versus ‘false’ or ‘useful’ versus ‘useless’ but rather [...] individuals are prepared to abandon, or rather to ‘suspend,’ the expectations of factual accuracy with which they generally approach non-fictional texts” (Nünning and Nünning, *An Introduction* 17). The discourses surrounding color-blind casting in film adaptations make plausible the assumption that the process of choosing or selecting fictional characters reflects society’s norms about race.

The practice of casting actors of different races (and ethnicities) for roles that have been traditionally played by White characters is commonly referred to as

ness of race (see Appiah no pag.). Hence, it is my impression that a lower-case *and* italicized spelling of “white” unnecessarily centers Whiteness. Therefore, I prefer to capitalize both “Black” and “White”—not to suggest that the categories are on a par with one another, but rather to highlight their social constructedness and acknowledge their evolving political significance and historical genealogies.