

Case Study

A black *Little Mermaid*? Disney and race-bending

The word 'race' historically contains negative meanings, associated with savagery, primitiveness, backwardness, physical and mental inferiority and so on. Consequently, the subject of much race and media studies is the negative ways in which different racial groups are represented. However, in contemporary times, we are more likely to encounter 'positive' depictions of race, even cases where the main hero/heroine becomes Black. I am specifically referring to Disney's 2023 live-action remake of its classic animation *The Little Mermaid*, where the lead character Ariel, historically represented as white, is played by Black American actress Halle Lynn Bailey.

This is referred to as 'racebending' and describes those instances when certain roles are played by actors of a different race to the original characterisation. The term 'racebending' originally started as a hashtag on social media, as a fan backlash against the live-action movie adaptation of the popular American animation *Avatar: The Last Airbender* that cast white actors to play the programme's ostensibly Asian characters (Lopez, 2012). In recent times, racebending has changed meaning; 'whitewashing' is now used to describe when white actors play characters who are originally Black/Brown/Asian, while racebending refers to those instances where Black/Brown/Asian people are cast to play characters who are originally coded as white, or indeed are white. Racebending has become more common, causing huge controversy in mainstream media and social media alike, with people arguing over whether racebending is an example of woke agendas going too far or a sign of progress.

Racebending needs to be situated within the *diversity turn* in media, a context where media in the West are being called out for a lack of racial/ethnic diversity, in its workforce and casting (Saha, 2024). As one of the biggest media companies in the world Disney are particularly under the spotlight. Interestingly, the casting decisions behind *The Little Mermaid* is just once incident of Disney working to improve its record on diversity; they have also put trigger warnings on classic animated films, such as *Dumbo* and *Peter Pan* that feature racist stereotypes, again to much controversy (Rose, 2021). Racebending on the surface can appear anti-racist. In the case of including trigger-warnings, it suggests trying to fix historic wrongs. In the case of casting a Black Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, it demonstrates Disney's attempts to address racial inequalities in the film industry by hiring actors from backgrounds that have been historically prevented from playing major roles.

The fact is, however, that Disney would not be making these choices if they were not profitable. Disney's use of trigger warnings is an attempt to protect the value of their intellectual property. Casting a Black Ariel helps to extract even more value from their back catalogue, by modernising a movie franchise that was in danger of becoming staid and old-fashioned. Critical theorist Theodore Adorno (1941: 25) would call this *pseudo-individualisation*, making standardised and formulaic cultural products appear unique through the use of superficial details, duping audiences into thinking they are consuming something original. This might appear as a cynical reading, but as Isabelle Lewis (2024) found in her small-scale audience study, this was something that both white and non-white groups of university students were aware of. Lewis found that both groups

were able to hold both negative and positive opinions on racebending, questioning Disney's motivations as opportunistic and commercially driven, while welcoming the casting of a Black woman as a lead character in a major film. There is a lot more to unpack here, but the bottom line is that Disney sensed that there was money to be made in casting a Black Ariel (*The Little Mermaid* grossed \$569 million worldwide). Whether this is evidence of society becoming less racist is difficult to tell. But it does demonstrate how Disney is learning to capitalise on the demand for diversity. My point here is that, in this moment of 'diversity', race has taken on a new *commercial* meaning. Disney are discovering that race sells.
