Recuperating Racebending as a Worthwhile Practice in an Imperfect Entertainment Industry

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Abstract
This article examines and uses the music video for JAY-Z's song "Moonlight" (2017) and its remaking and recasting of Friends *(NBC 1994–2004) to think about how recast remakes and their repetition with a race-difference might be more than just a superficial play for diversity. It seems that the music video itself, as well as its creators and commentators, deem the act of replacing White actors with Black ones in remakes as producing only, what Kristen J. Warner (2017, p. 34) calls, "plastic representation". This article uses the shot-by-shot recast scene of "Moonlight" to consider how such recastings with a race difference might in fact nevertheless be productive for decentring whiteness. It argues that there is something worthwhile in Alan Yang's re-reading and re-making of* Friends *with Black actors within the music video, and in this recasting practice—which one can call "racebending"—more generally. Firstly, racebending can be seen as a type of "viewing as if" (Laugalyte, 2020) and "reparative reading" (Eve Sedgwick, 2003, p. 150), both concepts framing the practice as an impulse to "repair" cultural texts that are perceived to somehow be lacking, in this case, in terms of the types of bodies that are and are not represented. Secondly, by considering the music video within the context of* Friends *and other adults-living-with-friends sit-coms, such as* Living Single *(Fox, 1993–1998), this article argues that racebending is a part of the adaptation and adoption process, always mirroring the racial politics of the time. Though the entertainment industry needs to go through some truly radical changes to become decolonised, this article contends that racebending is not the answer to the White-centric U.S. entertainment landscape, but an important practice in an imperfect system.*

Introduction

Demands for increased diversity on screens, especially in terms of seeing more images of non-White people, are not difficult to find on the internet, especially for those living in the Anglosphere, such as in the U.S., or if one consumes a lot of U.S. media. However, many scholars have shown the idea of diversity as not being altogether straightforward. One reason for the critique of diversity is because profit is a big motivator in industry, which means that culturally diverse representations depend on the whim of what is popular and profitable at any given moment. To articulate diversity as a money-making strategy, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007) has written about the championing of diversity as a "branding strategy" for the children's channel Nickelodeon in which characters of different ethnicities and races are shown but whose diversity is in fact tightly managed and ensured to be palatable by omitting any overt social critique. Melanie E.S. Kohnen (2015, p. 91) has outlined how the channel ABC Family has been rebranded to attract a type of millennial audience, that she explains is both invested in cultural diversity as well as, importantly, affluent, which highlights diversity onscreen as dependent on the attitudes, but more significantly, the wealth, of its audiences. Finally, Axelle

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Asmar, Tim Raats and Leo Van Audenhove (2023, p. 25) have explored how Netflix, through its press releases, stresses its commitment to diversity, "ethnic, sexual or linguistic", and that it does so for the purpose of generating a transnational appeal to gain a competitive advantage. The pitfalls of this kind of market-motivated diversity are articulated in, for instance, Arlene Dávila's book, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (2001), which is dedicated to showing how reliance on what is profitable creates images of the most marketable aspects of ethnic cultures and people, leading to reinforced stereotypes. Furthermore, Kristen J. Warner has written about how superficially diverse images, which are in reality hollow and meaningless, are in danger of populating our screens when there is an unthinking demand for diversity:

> while I do not share the popular expectation for mediated imagery to matter, its overdetermining of black images as the marker of societal progress or regression makes any image acceptable on its face, obliterating context and sidelining any consideration of depth. Thus have images in the era of representation matters become hollowed, malleable signs with artificial origins (Warner, 2017, p. 34).

In these ways, calls for diversity should be looked at with caution, and any demands one makes for it should be thought out, with an awareness of how easily diversity can be co-opted by market logics and compromised.

Academics are not the only ones looking at thoughtless demands for and claims of diversity with caution, it comes from popular culture too. A good example of this, and a focus of this article, is the music video "Moonlight" for JAY-Z's song of the same name from his album *4:44* (2017). Before outlining the argument of this article, the following is a description of this music video and the critique it makes. Directed by Alan Yang (*Master of None*, Netflix, 2015–present), "Moonlight" recreates a *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) scene shot-by-shot, including the same setting, dialogue and costuming, but replacing the White actors with up-and-coming contemporary Black actors: Lakeith Stanfield plays Chandler, Lil Rel Howery plays Joey, Jerrod Carmichael plays Ross, Issa Rae plays Rachel, Tessa Thompson plays Monica and Tiffany Haddish plays Phoebe. The *Friends* episode that is "remade" and recast is the beginning of "The One Where No One's Ready" (season 3, episode 2), and the only other alteration besides the casting is the replacement of the iconic *Friends* theme tune, The Rembrandts's "I'll Be There for You" (1995) with the song "Friends" (1984) by Whodini. The scene itself shows Ross (Carmichael) hurrying everyone to get ready for a black-tie gala at the museum, though no one takes his pleading seriously. While the lines and their delivery are replicated almost exactly by this new cast, their performance is slightly off-kilter, subtly lifeless

and mawkish. Warner (2017, p. 32) says of this scene that “the performances feel like hollow experiments produced in a laboratory; they feel plastic”.

The shot-by-shot recreation is interrupted when the actor Lil Rel Howery, who plays the Joey character, receives a call on his mobile phone, disrupting the performance of the *Friends* episode, and breaks character to silence his phone. Reaching into his pocket, he apologises to the rest of the actors: “my bad everybody, that’s my fault”. At this point Jerrod Carmichael (playing Ross) asks if the actors can “take five”. As the rest of the actors start leaving their positions, the camera cuts to behind the set where the Black actor and comedian, Hannibal Buress, appearing as himself, is standing and eating at the refreshments table. Here, one hears Buress express his criticism of the *Friends* re-cast remake to Carmichael: “Garbage […] It’s just episodes of *Seinfeld*, but with Black people. Who asked for that?” Carmichael defends his choice to act in the remake by saying, “This is something, like, subversive. Something that would turn a culture on its head”. To which Buress responds,

> Well you did a good job of subverting good comedy. You gonna do a Black *Full House* next? *Family Ties*? Why stop there?

Then, when Carmichael asks Buress what he is doing employment-wise, Buress replies,

> Chilling man, I just booked this role in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Cruise Line*. Yeah, I play a parrot with a bad attitude, but he has a heart of gold. It’s terrible, but it’s way better than this shit.

The music video’s critique of half-hearted attempts at diversity here points to the problem of the exclusionary nature of the entertainment industry in the U.S. which marginalises African American artists and creators, not to mention other artists and creators who are non-White. Buress’s articulated criticism explicitly frames the *Friends* remake in the video as an insult to Black actors, the question being: why not write original comedy for Black actors in the first place? The criticism is especially poignant considering that Carmichael’s *The Carmichael Show* (2015–2017) had been recently cancelled just over a month before the release of the music video for “Moonlight” on NBC, the same Network which aired *Friends*, with NBC Entertainment President Jennifer Salke saying that “[i]t was hard to find a stable audience” (cited in D’Alessandro, 2017) in response to a Television Critics Association (TCA) reporter. Note, “stable audience” here is no neutral term but refers to the industry standard of affluent, advertiser friendly and White audiences that networks value and without which television shows are regarded as expendable.

Warner (2017, p. 32) celebrated the video's critical stance, seeing it as asking, "critical questions about the intersections of representation and employment for black actors", and more specifically asking,

> [h]ow do they [Black actors] balance taking jobs that seem facile all the while attempting to imbue the parts with depth through subversive performances that may not be as easily perceived as intended? (Warner, 2017, p. 32)

and as creating a

> response of discomfort, amid the realization that neither playing nor watching white characters metaphorically dipped in chocolate on screen can deliver the progress that was implicitly promised by watchdog groups like the NAACP who for years have sought to strategically diversify the labor force in meaningful ways. (Warner, 2017, p. 32)

In other words, Warner sees the music video as being a critique of shallow attempts at diversity.

The act of this recasting as problematic is further observed in Yang's commentary, which aimed critique not at *Friends* itself but "a culture" more generally:

> I know people might look at the video as some sort of implicit criticism of shows, but, to me, that wasn't really the intention. I say that with complete honesty. I think "Friends" is a really good show, it's a well-made show. So it was less pointing a finger at that show or any network and more of a balance of, look how far we've come as a culture in terms of representation onscreen. Look how far we still have to go. And look at how important it is that we get the opportunity to tell our own stories and create our own art. I don't wanna be didactic and preach to people and tell them what the video means. But this video does not come from an angry place. It's more to point things out and start a conversation rather than try to shame people (cited in in Rao, 2017).

JAY-Z on iHeartRadio also pointed his criticism at "the culture",

> It's like a subtle nod to *La La Land* winning the Oscar, and then having to give it to *Moonlight* […] It's really a commentary on the culture and where we're going" (cited in Ross, 2017).

Indeed, the song "Moonlight" that begins to play two thirds into the music video, with JAY-Z rapping lyrics such as "We stuck in La La Land/Even when we win, we gon' lose", refers to the 2017 Oscars incident where *La La Land* (2016) was mistakenly named winner of Best Picture instead of the actual winner, *Moonlight* (2016)—the first all-Black cast film to win the award. This "#OscarFail", as it trended on Twitter, was highly criticised for overshadowing the pioneering achievement by the Black director Barry Jenkins and his all-Black cast. The end of JAY-Z's "Moonlight" music video is a reflection on this mishap. As the song begins to play at this point of the video (indeed, there is no music or vocals until now, almost two thirds into the video), the viewer sees Carmichael, led by Rae, leaving the set. Eventually, Carmichael finds himself sitting on a park bench in the middle of the night, staring at a giant full moon. This

moment serves as a reference to the Oscar-winning *Moonlight* and perhaps also to the one-sheet for *La La Land* from the scene that depicted Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling dancing by the park bench against the background of a beautiful evening sky. As Carmichael sits in solitude and looks into the distance and the music video draws to a close, one hears the sound recording of the Oscars announcement by Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway overlaying the final shot, announcing *La La Land* as the winner of Best Picture, followed by the sound of applause. This scene and JAY-Z's comments about "the culture" refer to this Oscars incident and how it represents industry dynamics happening in the industry[/industries] where Black artists, actors and creators are repeatedly overshadowed and do not obtain the proper attention their work and talent deserve.

Recuperating Racebending

The above example clearly outlines that the situation is far from ideal. The path to improvement is complicated and that superficial attempts at injecting African American presence on the screen is not the radical transformation that the U.S. entertainment industry needs. However, this article aims to reconsider and recuperate the kind of practice of recasting the audience gets in the "Moonlight" music video as one that is worthwhile. It argues that this practice, which is categorised here as "racebending", is not just what Warner calls "plastic representation" (Warner, 2017, p. 34), or superficial attempts at diversity, but is also productive for decolonising the entertainment industry.

This argument is made by discussing the practice of racebending and the many forms it has taken in recent pop culture, followed by the framing of this practice using two concepts, "viewing as if" and "reparative reading", to redeem the kinds of recastings in the "Moonlight" music video. Racebending is also positioned in the context of the adaptation and adoption process, specifically considering the music video and *Friends* in the context of sitcoms about adult friends co-habiting together. In this way, this article highlights that gender and race transformations are part of the process of adaptation, always reflecting the current socio-historical period. Through this contextual reading, this article also shows that *Friends* itself is a racebent text, rather than an "original" text. To do so, this article uses JAY-Z's music video which, one could say, epitomises Warner's plastic representation. To elaborate more on what Warner means by "plastic representation", it is worth looking at the "operational definition" Warner provides:

> [plastic representation] can be understood as a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate

> depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny (2017, p. 35).

She coins the term “plastic representation” following the term “plastic soul” which was used by the White British artist David Bowie’s to deprecate and criticise his own culturally appropriated album *Young Americans* (1975) where he sings in the style of soul—a music genre that originated in the African American community (2017, p. 35).

The reason for considering the term “plastic representation” in relation to JAY-Z’s music video in this article, however, is not for the purpose of deciding whether this term is appropriate to describe the music video or not. Rather the argument questions whether such racial recastings more generally should be categorised as “plastic representation” or if there are more productive ways of thinking about such recastings. Thus, rather than laying emphasis on the analysis of the music video, this article (1) explores and demonstrates framing the phenomenon of racebending itself, as it appears across cultural texts, with recuperative concepts (“as if” viewing and “reparative reading”) and (2) uses concepts and methods from adaptation studies (the concepts of “the copy” and “the original” and the methodology of looking at texts in the context of other texts from which they have been adapted and adopted) to surface racebending in the entertainment industry as a meaningful practice and a part of the way that texts evolve. Thus, while this article examines the “Moonlight” music video to a certain extent the focus of the argument concentrates on racebending in the entertainment industry more generally.

What Is Racebending?

Racebending is a practice in the production of adaptations and remakes where the skin colour of characters is reconfigured, making White characters have another skin colour or non-White characters be White. The term “racebending” itself was coined after the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Nickelodeon, 2005–2008) cartoon to film adaptation (*The Last Airbender* [2010]) (‘racebending’ being a play on words of the title) which, to fans’ outrage, was cast with White actors playing Middle Eastern and Indian roles. Fans responded to this casting by setting up Racebending.com and a corresponding community on LiveJournal, using the word “bending” to pay tribute to their loyalty to the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* cartoon while calling out the industry (Gilliland, 2016, pars. 2.2–2.3). The term’s usage has continued and broadened after this much criticised casting, describing casting of films and other adaptations that alter the ethnicity of characters. It has been used in the mainstreaming of whiteness by mainstream film production companies who cast White actors to play non-White characters as well as to

promote diversity onscreen by casting Black characters to replace originally White ones. Racebending is also practiced by fans who use it to undermine the dominance of whiteness in mainstream popular culture by populating their fan art with non-White versions of their favourite White characters.

Examples of racebending in cultural productions abound in the 2010s, where there had been a surge in Hollywood films and television series which used racebending to remake White characters into non-White characters, as well as "gender-bending" to recast women in roles that were played by male actors in the original texts. The "as-if" racebending of identity (specifically gender and racial identity) is especially noteworthy in the case of the 2016 *Ghostbusters* (originally made in 1984) which received a strong backlash (Adams 2016; Shoard 2016; Dvorak 2016).[1] But many other examples abound, including 2014 *Annie* (originally made in 1982) where the White Annie is recast with a Black actress, the remake of Norman Lear's television series *One Day at A Time* (Netflix, 2017–2019) with a Hispanic family (originally ran 1975–1984 on CBS), *High Fidelity* (Hulu, 2020) television series remake of the 2000 film that cast Zoe Kravitz in the main role of the originally white male protagonist, *Ocean's 8* (2018) which featured a female cast instead of the typically male cast of the *Ocean's* films, and one could also think about the casting of Jodie Whittaker as the first female Doctor and Ncuti Gatwa as the first Black Doctor in the popular science fiction television series *Doctor Who* (BBC One, 2005–present). Although technically the character of *Doctor Who* can be regenerated in any form, he nevertheless has only been cast as a White male previously, making the more recent castings noteworthy.

Racebending is also pervasive in fan art and audience practices. Examples of audiences and fans using this racebending approach to texts, especially by non-White audiences and fans, include comedian Corin Wells (2019) who in a Twitter thread recast *Game of Thrones* (HBO,2011–2019) with Black actors. Another example is Black *Harry Potter* fans who, after speculating about the race of Hermione in the books, have created images of Black Hermione in acts of fan recasting. Yet another example is fan slash videos that nowadays exist for almost every show made, but were originally brought to light in academia by Constance Penley (1997)

[1] Racebending and gender swapping may or may not involve blind casting (that which Warner argues the entertainment industry ought to avoid), since it depends on the choices of the writers and the actors in terms of how much is changed about the character. For example, the new text might be barely rewritten, and a White actor merely replaced with a Black actor, repeating the same lines of dialogue. However, the character may be rewritten greatly to create a culturally or gender-specific character. See the example given of the 2016 re-make of *Ghostbusters* later in this article as an example of a recasting that makes a good effort to take into account the implications of recasting men with women actors.

who looked at slash videos of Spock and Kirk reimagined as a homosexual couple. In these videos, fans edit together scenes from the original *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966–1969) series to bring out an eroticism between the two, seemingly straight male characters. Here, sexuality, rather than gender or race (which are more visible signifiers of identity), is bent. Nevertheless, there is an exhibited desire to read the text imaginatively, creatively, politically and daringly with the aim of re-creating it.

Of course, racebending by fans and by the entertainment industry are two different things and the motivations for each are distinct. Racebending by fans cannot be understood as being motivated by profit. Instead, fans may be driven by pleasures involved in remaking characters in their own likeness or simply in the participation of re-making the original texts in whatever way they desire. The act of racebending or "fan casting" (Gilliland, 2016, par 1.6) as performed by fans is seen as achieving a reclaiming and a remaking of popular culture in line with their commitments to and desires for more diverse and inclusive representation. As Elizabeth Gilliland notes,

> [t]he racebending movement on Tumblr suggests an effort by fans to reclaim books, films, and television from the whitewashing that often takes place in the entertainment industry. (Gilland, 2016, par. 01)

Gilliland even offers some more utopian ideas about fan recastings,

> The pervasiveness of these fan casting experiments on Tumblr (including hundreds of individual posts, as well as blogs devoted to fan art dealing exclusively with this movement) suggests that a demand for diverse casting exists that Hollywood isn't answering. Even more notable, these pieces of fan art indicate a dissatisfaction with a society in which white is constructed as the unquestionable norm to which all other cultures must conform. Through the diversified reshapings of popular culture touchstones, these fans are creating an online space which rejects the homogenous entertainment of the past and present in favor of a self-made, heterogeneous future. (Gilliland 2016, par. 1.7)

Here, the motivation for fans to racebend their favourite characters is seen as a desire to envision a more inclusive and diverse popular culture, both in the present and for the future. The 'Do-It-Yourself' aspect also speaks to an ideal form of democratised cultural production, written about extensively by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poaching* (1992).

While more optimistic ways of understanding racebending dominate writing about fan productions, the celebrated motivations that fans are understood to possess cannot be said to be completely absent from the entertainment industry's cultural productions. As Kohnen argues,

> Instead of dismissing branded diversity […] we should closely examine it to recognize the possibilities and constraints of emerging culturally diverse representations enabled by television brand management. (Kohnen, 2015, pp. 88–89)

For instance, the rebooted *One Day at a Time* of the original White American family sit-com by Norman Lear (1975–1984), has been widely praised for its casting of a Cuban-American family and the way the show represents Latin Americans, whatever the motivation for that casting might be ('*One Day at a Time* (2017 TV series)', 2023; Parry, 2021; Solá-Santiago 2019). In this vein, this article argues that the kind of racebending one views in popular culture texts also has the potential to make a positive difference to viewer's media landscape.

Racebending as Reparative Reading and Viewing "As If"

What is valuable about the practice of racebending becomes evident when framed using two different concepts: "as if" viewing and "reparative reading".

Viewing "As If"

First, this article explores Yang's re-reading and remaking of *Friends* in the "as if" mode, wherein the recast remake of "Moonlight" is considered a reading of *Friends* "as if" it was Black. Before delving into how the "Moonlight" music video is an "as if" remake, the following section engages with what the concept of "as if" refers to in this context. Though the focus on the "as if" relation primarily pertains to interpretation here, it is important to note that the "as if" can operate at both the level of text reception and production. When occurring at the production level, it simultaneously influences reception, as the creator engages with the original text during the adaptation process.

The "as if" strategy of viewing screen texts involves the viewer generating alternatives that could be on the screen, rather than focusing on what is actually presented. Consider the example of *Pillow Talk* (1959), a film based on phone calls between the heroine Jan and the male antagonist/hero Rex. In his analysis scholar Ned Schantz (2008, p. 66) laments the limited opportunities for relationships that the narrative/screen offers to Jan. It seems that the only opportunity Jan has for intimacy is with the manipulative and duplicitous Rex. However, in his reading of *Pillow Talk*, Schantz not only critiques the restrictions Jan faces but also provides an alternative possibility when he remarks that: "Jan never talks on the phone with a woman!" (2008, p. 66). Schantz's observation of *Pillow Talk* here is noteworthy: Schantz's sees certain images of Jan that he feels are lacking regarding his feminist commitments (Jan only talking on the phone with Rex) and he wonders about seeing alternative images that would be more in

line with those commitments (Jan talking on the phone with her girlfriends). His consideration is both a critique of the heteronormativity of the film and offers a potential alternative to the image of heteronormativity onscreen. This article is interested precisely in this type of viewing strategy where an alternative to the screen is imagined, especially in line with one's political commitments.

Importantly, the term "as if" is an adaptation and a tribute to what Schantz calls "reading as if in a female network" in his book *Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film and Literature* (2008), which is a springboard for the thinking about the "as if" viewing in this article, as well as elsewhere (Laugalyte, 2020). In this book, Schantz (2008, p. 4) challenges himself and the reader to approach the English novel and Hollywood films "as if in a female network" and to use one's resources (whatever the imagination can muster) to foreground female networks where they appear only in the cracks and margins of the text. He critiques, invents new interpretations of events, challenges accepted understandings of plots and characters and imagines alternatives to the events of well-known stories about women, all with the aim of bringing the female network that operates beneath the patriarchal surface of the text to our attention. The goal of this article could be described as, rather than "reading as if in a female network", to "view as if in an African American network", seeing the strategy of racebending as one avenue to do so.

While Schantz's concept of the "as if" was initially adapted for the level of imaginative viewing, i.e. reception, where viewers would ask "but what if?" (Laugalyte, 2020), this article is concerned with applying the "as if" way of relating with a text to interpreting the creative process and adaptations. As already outlined, in the case of the music video for Moonlight, this article considers Yang as inquiring into the TV show *Friends* "as if" it was about Black as opposed to White people; in other words, asking "what if" *Friends* were Black. This, the Black version of *Friends* both imagined and manifested by Yang, is an alternative to the White cast of *Friends*. Yang performs this "as if" reading/remaking by simply recasting the original cast of *Friends* with Black actors, but keeps the setting, the dialogue, and the costuming identical to the *Friends* scene being remade. The video does not inquire into the implications of this kind of recasting (i.e., what changes about the setting, the dialogue, the costuming when there are Black actors instead of White?). Since the audience knows that Yang's recasting is pessimistic of such practices, they are instantly made aware that keeping everything the same is the point of his video. But in other instances, following the ramifications of a recasting such as this one could lead to interesting results. For example, the 2016 *Ghostbusters* remake made far more systemic changes than merely swapping gender or ethnicities. Various elements of the film

were rewritten along with inserting female actors in the originally male parts. One notable change involved shifting the male Ghostbusters celebratory heroes' reception from the New York public to a scenario where the female Ghostbusters receive private acknowledgement from the Department of Homeland Security but are publicly denounced fraudsters. This clever alteration serves as a commentary on gender double standards. Thus, in practice, there are also examples of good imaginative efforts being made in the recasting of texts in addition to more straightforward ones like Yang's.

The "as if" mode of relating to texts, of which racebending can be seen as one strategy, is especially significant because it can be, and often is, aligned with one's political commitments and therefore is a politicised strategy of viewing. In other words, it is not so much about the texts or interpretations that result from engaging with the "as if" strategy, it is about the activity itself. It is about the search for better alternatives to what is onscreen or on the page. The importance of this kind of inquiry into alternatives as an approach to texts, especially where the identity of characters is concerned, lies not in the results arrived at but at the level of the activity itself. This incessant speculation matters in a White-centric popular culture because it emphasises the importance of plurality of bodies and voices that, this article proposes, constitutes an ethical form of relating to texts. Relating to the text in this way is productive for creators and viewers who want to see more just and ethical representations and commits creators and viewers to continually attempt to imagine ways they can make popular culture representations align with their political and ethical commitments. Thus, using the "as if" reading/remaking approach allows an understanding of Yang's remaking and recasting as a productive and worthwhile practice in these terms of searching for better alternatives to what already exists in popular culture.

Reparative Reading

Another way to think about how racebending can be seen as a productive practice for working towards more just representation is by considering it in light of what Eve Sedgwick calls "reparative reading", that is,

> the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them. (Sedgwick, 2003, pp. 150–151)

Racebending can be seen as one of these ways of "extracting sustenance" from cultural objects, through their transformation. In this way, this article considers racebending as a form of reparative reading, because of racebending's desire to create more welcoming and inclusive

popular texts across various spheres of textual production, from industry making mainstream popular culture to fans creating fan art, even when those efforts fall short of ideal representations.

To understand reparative reading in more depth, it is important to understand what an "unrepaired" reading is, or in Sedgwick's words, a "paranoid" reading. In her essay 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', Sedgwick (2003, p. 126) diagnosed the dominant form of academic analysis as paranoid (fearful or unrepaired). This type of reading or viewing has been previously examined by Paul Ricoeur (1970, p. 33) in his study of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as the "three masters of suspicion" and then later it has been tackled by Rita Felski (2009, p. 28) under the term "suspicious" reading. It emphasises a critical stance towards all texts where the reader assumes that they are always at risk of being duped and taken advantage of. Thus, when reading in the paranoid mode, the reader is on guard and focuses on critiquing the text for its shortcomings. This is the kind of "paranoid reading" that Yang can be seen to do when he introduces criticism of racebending practices into his "Moonlight" music video with, for instance, the Carmichael and Buress dialogue and its sharp criticism of the entertainment industry and what it offers to Black actors and audiences. Sedgwick (2003, p. 149) sees the critical paranoid reading as insufficient because it paralyses and fails to provide hope to move beyond critique to something that is sustaining and nourishing. In opposition to the paranoid mode, Sedgwick articulated an alternative approach which she called "reparative":

> a reparative impulse [is] additive and accretive. […] it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self. (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 149)

She sees the reparative as more joyful and subversive than the paranoid. The reparative mode is then about finding pleasure and sustenance for the self in a text and letting go of the critical stance, not because one is naïve about power structures, but because one wants to have a more hopeful and nourishing life. This article extends Sedgwick's reparative reading context and suggests that when creators adapt texts and changes them with a desire to also make them more nourishing for their intended audiences, they also engage in reparative reading, or reparative creating. It is the contention of this article that Yang has created a "reparative reading" through his adaptation of the *Friends* scene by racebending of the cast because it performs inclusions that a mere critical video cannot achieve. This racebending of the *Friends* scene can be seen as being in the reparative mode. Granted, perhaps not many will find much nourishment in this particular racebent scene in the "Moonlight" music video, and rightly so as it has a critical

paranoid edge to it. However, it is worthwhile to consider this proposal to highlight racebending more generally as a reparative form of reading, viewing and creating.

When one views racebending acts as "reparative", what is illuminated is the inclusions made, where previously there were exclusions, and importantly hope about cultural production and representation as opposed to paranoia arising from critiquing how texts do not measure up to a desired inclusive and diverse screen media landscape. Racebending is then about going beyond critique, producing something that is hopeful and about repairing the shortcomings of the text. Taking into account the criticism that U.S. popular culture centres and privileges whiteness (a paranoid criticism), racebending then goes on to create that ideal or preferred situation where whiteness is decentred, here by replacing White actors with Black actors (the reparative). Though racebending is not the ultimate solution, as Yang (cited in Rao, 2017), JAY-Z (cited in Ross, 2017) and Warner (2017, p. 34) point to the problems of this more facile approach to diversity, especially in a climate where original comedy written by and starring Black people has experienced difficulty surviving beyond a few seasons, such as *The Carmichael Show*, as mentioned earlier, racebending nevertheless begins the work of repairing the culture of White-centricism.

The Adaptation and Adoption Process

By examining racebending as more than just a plastic practice, one can elucidate its significance within the broader process of text adaptation, adoption and evolution. This approach allows one to understand how text continually mirror the socio-historical moment and its racial politics. One can do this by placing the music video in relation to *Friends* as well as other sitcoms about adult friends co-habiting together such as *Living Single* (Fox, 1993–1998), an all-Black cast show with the same format as *Friends* which aired one year prior, and looking at this context using concepts from the field of adaptation such as 'the original' and 'copy' to think about how these texts relate to one another and to undermine the primacy of any one of them.

To make this inquiry, one needs to ask whether there is something to be said about repetition and the copy, and especially the copy that makes alterations which are not deemed to have any originality. Texts and textual production are so closely bound together, as one sees in genre films and the formats of television series. Screen texts are always loose copies, sometimes the copies become increasingly better, stretching, challenging and subverting the genre they belong to, and thus they become increasingly more complex than their predecessors, their "originals", while in other copies it is difficult to perceive invention and novelty,

sometimes, because there is not any. Sometimes texts get better with repetition, sometimes they get worse. And sometimes, they remain exactly the same. Remaking, mimesis and repetition is a pervasive practice of culture. Consider Orson Welles's celebration of the copy and copying in *F for Fake* (1973), a film that puts into question people's dislike and condemnation of the forged artwork. When the character in the film played by Nina van Pallandt is asked why she wants people to make forged art works, she replies, "because the fakes are as good as the real ones, and there's a market, and there's a demand". If the culture market, high or low, is so dependent on copies, then the racebending within the "Moonlight" music video that is deemed so plastic by Warner, does not appear so problematic—at least from the perspective of the market.

Turning to the adaptation history of the "Moonlight" music video, the centrality of repetition and the copy is brought to the foreground further. Though the "Moonlight" music video is an adaptation of a *Friends* scene, *Friends* is not necessarily the original text. There are claims by the creators of *Living Single* and the media that the makers of *Friends* copied *Living Single* (Djvlad, 2020), which prompts the inclusion of the latter show in this discussion about remakes and recastings. *Living Single* was a show about a Black group of single friends also in their thirties, but which did not garner the hype and status that *Friends* enjoys to this day, certainly they did not get a reunion revival as *Friends* did in 2021 (*Friends: The Reunion* [2021]). If one can consider *Friends* to be a kind of remake or adaptation of *Living Single*, however loose, then what is also foregrounded is the pervasiveness of adaptation and the falsity of the canon text without precedent (one of the basic ideas underpinning adaptation studies is the connectedness of cultural texts and the falsity of the idea of the 'original'). What emerges then, is that *Friends* itself can be read as an "as if" reading of *Living Single* (*Friends* as a White version of *Living Single*) where the primacy of *Friends* is erased and where *Friends* is understood as a whitewashing of *Living Single*. What this does is it allows one to read the "Moonlight" music video's recasting not as a "blacking up" but as a reclaiming of a format initially spearheaded by Black creators. One of the main cast Kim Fields Freeman commented about the lack of recognition *Living Single* still garners,

> the minute they start referring to us as 'Black Friends,' that's when I'll go off. It's better to call them the 'White Living Single'. (cited. in Izadi, 2017)

This sentiment is exactly what Yang's music video and its recastings can be seen to express when one considers *Friends* itself as an "as if" reading of its predecessor. The racebending of *Friends* seen in light of *Living Single* shows that Yang's music video is not just a case of inserting Black characters in canon texts of White casts, it reminds us that canon texts of White

casts are sometimes, or perhaps often, remakes of other texts populated by non-White casts. It is especially in this light that “Moonlight”’s racebending, and racebending more generally, can be seen as productive as it highlights the process of the constantly ongoing remaking of texts in which race and gender transformations never cease and often reflects dominant ways of thinking of the contexts and historical periods in which people live.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has argued for the recuperating of racebending, emphasising its significance beyond being mere plastic representation, but as an optimistic and enriching practice that can also subvert White centricity. Two perspectives in which racebending can be seen as productive are highlighted. First, when considered in light of how fans practice racebending, and when framed in terms of some recuperative concepts (“as if” and reparative reading), and, secondly, by framing the “Moonlight” music video in terms of adaptation and reading it in the context of *Friends* and similar shows that undermines *Friends* as an original, concluding that racebending is a practice that is part of the adaptation process. Finally, while noting that it is important to address the entertainment industry at its roots and to think seriously about the deep problems that exclude many types of people from creating and distributing their content, this article argues that one needs to acknowledge that racebending within the industry is a worthwhile practice within an imperfect system.

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