Race-Swapping: An Assessment

Race-swapping in film has been an odious practice since Burt Lancaster was cast in the title role of the film, Jim Thorpe in 1950. To add insult to injury, he then played ANOTHER Native American in the film, “Apache” a few years later. Most infamously, John Wayne was then cast as Genghis Khan in 1955. Then, in 1958, Kerwin Mathews was cast as Sinbad the Sailor. That was only the beginning. It is difficult to keep track of how many WASPs have been cast as Jesus of Nazareth: a Palestinian Jew.

In this direction, such race-swapping is colloquially known as “white-washing”–that is: using a White actor to depict a person of color.

Unfortunately, Hollywood producers seem to have not learned their lesson from those early mis-steps; and opt to persist in race-swapping—though oftentimes in the opposite direction. The point, of course, is that race-swapping is objectionable in EITHER direction. To recognize this point, one need only concede that casting a small Vietnamese man as Paul Bunyan wouldn’t make any sense. (Comes the

hypothetical retort: “What’s the problem?! Are you racist against the Vietnamese?!”) The flaws in the logic are exposed when they are applied universally.

Contemporary producers continue to treat race as a marketing strategy—as when Disney recently thought it might be a nifty idea to pretend Rapunzel was a girl of color. Disney execs mulled this daffy proposition over for a few weeks before coming to their senses. But one must wonder what sorts of discussions are still happening in corporate boardrooms. (Disney show-runners just finished making the majority of a girls’ youth hockey team p.o.c. in the sequel to “Inside Out”; so tokenizing p.o.c. seems to still be on the agenda.)

The gold-medal for race-swapping absurdity surely goes to Jada Pinkett Smith; who made herself a laughing-stalk by depicting Ptolemaic Pharaoh, Cleopatra II—a Macedonian monarch in Egypt—as a Black woman. (Spoiler alert: This did nothing to empower African Americans.) Nobody took Smith’s bone-headed stunt seriously; and only a few on the Regressive “Left” thought it was anything but a horrible idea. (The fact that Smith has proven herself to be a pathological narcissist surely didn’t help her case.) Historians slapped their foreheads, sighed, and moved on.

My contention here is that cultural desecration is worse than even the most egregious cases of cultural appropriation. (Alas. In handling exogenous cultural elements, some opt of assimilation; others simply opt for demonization.) Perhaps just as ridiculous as pretending that Cleopatra was Black was Christopher Nolan casting a Kenyan (Lupita Nyong’o) as Helen of Troy. (We should have expected the movie poster for Nolan’s “The Odyssey” to read: “Beware of Kenyans bearing gifts.”) One wonders: Is it possible that Nolan misread “Helen of Troy” as “Helen of Nubia”? Funny enough, the tag-line on the movie poster was “Defy the gods”—indicating that Nolan completely missed the moral of the story. (Note to reader: The ACTUAL moral was: DON’T defy the gods; see the Supplement below.)

Nolan playing the game of identity politics with ancient lore is disrespectful. He has a tenuous grasp of the material; and clearly has little respect for it. (“Helen” went from “a face that launched a thousand ships” to “a face that elicited an alluvion of head-scratching”.) Shall we assume that if Nolan had done a rendition of the Rama-yana, he’d cast Tom Hanks in the lead? (What’s all the fuss? It’s just another culture’s mythology, after all.) In the ACTUAL legend, Helen was Achaean; as she was from Argos. Her human mother was Aetolian. She is clearly described as having fair skin by Homer; and as being blonde by the most famous Lesbian author

of Antiquity: Sappho. Why did those bards make it a point to specify this in their descriptions? Because Helen was actually LIGHTER than most Achaeans (Greeks) of the time, who were likely olive-skinned (living, as they did, on the Mediterranean rim). In archaic art, they are depicted as slightly darker-skinned than the very fair-skinned Scythians, who they often enslaved. *

Meanwhile, a deeper olive complexion is described as “melaina” or “melas” (indicating a tan; connoting swarthiness)—as was the case with Eurybates (and, at one point, even Odysseus himself, after his years at sea). In the rare event that Homer wanted to describe a character as Black, he did so explicitly—as he did with the Aethiopian warrior, Memnon. At no point is Helen described as such. Quite the contrary: It is specified that she was “leukocheir” (white-armed) and “xanthos” (light-haired). This makes sense, as—when it came to women—beauty was equated with “leukos” (fair skin). We don’t have to agree with this aesthetic standard; but to be faithful to the source-material, we must acknowledge it.

(Author’s note: There are, of course, some on the far right-wing who don’t want to see a Black actor cast in ANY role…that is, in any story connected to the so-called “West”. This is simply because those commentators are racists. It is duplicitous to conflate THAT grievance with the points made in the present critique, which is based on a REJECTION OF racism.)

Only a little homework is required to ascertain the phenotype of any given character in a classic piece of literature. Doing so is not difficult. Basic literacy and a smidgen of honesty are the only prerequisites. Alas, there is a diminishing appreciation of—and respect for—other people’s cultures. That is the OPPOSITE of cosmopolitanism; yet so many Potemkin Progressives are no better than Reactionaries on the far right.

What those who defend Nolan’s nutty casting choices seem not to understand is that folklore is an integral part of a peoples’ cultural heritage. Cherished legends may be FOR everyone in the world, but they are still FROM a certain time and place; as well as ABOUT a certain time and place. They reflect the heritage of a certain people. (For a more thorough critique of Nolan’s “The Odyssey”, see the Supplement below.)

Want a goddess of color in an ancient Greek tale? Andromeda was half “Aethiopian”, which—at the time—meant half Sabaean (think the Biblical Queen of Sheba). Casting the olive-skinned Zandeya for THAT role would make sense. Oddly, instead, they placed Zandeya in the role of Athena…making her skin appear blanched in the

process. (There is an irony here, as one of the most striking aspects of Zandeya is her beautiful olive skin. So why in heaven's name would one cast her in a role where one felt the need to make her look lighter?) Prefer an ancient Greek epic that centers Africans? No problem. As it happens, the sequel to Homer's "The Odyssey" (entitled "The Aetheopis") does precisely that…recounting the tales of the dark-skinned (possibly Egyptian) Memnon, and accounts of the Amazonian (Scythian) Queen Penthesilea.

Alas. Nolan seems to be unconcerned with ethnic fidelity. (For his rendition of "The Odyssey", it would be apt for there to have been a disclaimer after the feature stating: "No Greek actors were hurt in the filming of this movie; as no Greek actors were cast in this movie.") So when he cast an Gujarati, a Korean, a Latino, and a Black man to play members of Odysseus' ACHAEAN crew, the ensuing bewilderment was entirely predictable. (One can't help but wonder: Were they filming a Benetton commercial or a Greek epic?) Meanwhile, even as he managed a compelling performance, Leguizamo spent the movie in Whiteface…as an old man.

Application of this principle goes both ways. Also off-base for Mycenaean lore was the casting of fair-skinned actors for other roles in Homer's epic—Matt Damon, Tom Holland, Anne Hathaway, Robert Pattinson, Samantha Morton, Charlize Theron, Bill Irwin, Mia Goth, etc. The imprudence of casting Celtic / Nordic / Anglo-Saxon actors in such roles is not quite as glaring as casting a dark-skinned Kenyan actress as a fair-skinned Argive princess; but—in each case—there were better options available. How about Efi Kiouki as Helen? Then…Tracy Spiridakos as Circe; Doukissa Nomikou as Calypso; Mena Suvari as Penelope; Klelia Andriolatou as Clytemnestra; Zeta Makrypoulia as Athena; and Theo James as Odysseus. Laertes? John Stamos would've worked. Nestor? Yorgos Karamihos. Eurylochus? Dave Bautista. Telemachus? Andreas Konstantinou. Antinous? Nicholas Galitzine. This isn't rocket science.

Want prominence of powerful female characters? Queen Arete and princess Nausicaa of Phaeacia both proved vital for Odysseus' ability to return home. Yet, quizzically, both were left out Nolan's tale. (For other peculiar omissions, see the Supplement below.)

To prioritize ethnic fidelity is not to say that everyone cast in "The Odyssey" needed to be ethnically Greek; it is simply to say that there needs to be at least the appearance of such fidelity in casting (at least in instances where ethnicity is relevant to the story). After all, cinema is about OPTICS; how things SEEM. To wit: If

actors are playing Greeks, they should be Greek-PASSING. That's how responsible casting works…in ANY context. If someone is going to be cast as, say, a great Viking warrior with the strength of ten men, then don't cast a petite, emaciated Taiwanese elder. One doesn't need to go with someone who is actually a stout Scandinavian; one need only cast an extremely muscular man who can PASS as Scandinavian. **

With a complete disregard for the themes of—and spirit behind—the source material, Nolan effectively colonized the classic Greek epic in a ham-handed attempt at diversity.

It's worth emphasizing the fact that race-swapping is problematic in any direction. Vexingly, White-washing continues to be common in Hollywood—as illustrated by, say, Ridley Scott's film about Exodus (another fictional story, by the way). When M. Night Shyamalan cast Caucasian actors in the leads for his disastrous rendition of "The Last Airbender" (also fictional), many—rightfully—took umbrage. (Perhaps we might try The Color Purple with an all-White cast. Then we can get Kevin Hart to play Peter Pan! What's the problem? It's just fiction, after all.)

The fact of the matter is: race-swapping in fiction often amounts to cultural vandalism…regardless of which culture it happens to be. There are few exceptions to this. When it comes to casting, discernment is imperative. For, in some cases, a bit of clever experimentation in racial identity can be done prudently—as was done in historical re-imaginings like the Broadway musical "Hamilton" and the Netflix series "Bridgerton". In fiction, there have been sober choices—as with Michael Clark Duncan as Kingpin, Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury, Lucy Liu as Watson, Idris Elba as the Gunslinger, Halle Bailey as the Little Mermaid, and—most notably—Eartha Kitt AND Halle Berry AND Zoë Kravitz as Catwoman. *** In any given case, there is a range of prudence involved.

It is arguable that race-swapping kinda-sorta worked with the 2014 rendition of "Annie"; and possibly even when a Rwandan was cast as Dr. Who in 2023. **** It did not work so well with Tessa Thompson as Valkyrie. So when is race-swapping NOT problematic? It seems to have worked somewhat for characters who's identity transcended race (that is: when the ethnicity of the character was not PART OF the character). In those few cases, though, we should bear in mind that tokenizing p.o.c. does not empower p.o.c.

The question we must always ask ourselves: Are you amplifying marginalized voices or simply engaging in stage-craft that uses individuals (of a certain pedigree) as props? Racism is not counteracted by obsessing over racial identity, day in and day out, morning 'til night. It is not attenuated by token gestures and PR stunts. The tokenization of p.o.c. is entirely about optics. Reality check: Mere "representation" onscreen is not a solution to racial injustice. (Friendly neighborhood reminder: Token gestures do nothing to reduce the structural inequalities that still exist along racial lines.) There is a reason we shouldn't cast a Korean actor to play, say, Malian king Mansa Musa. This wouldn't be a favor to disenfranchised Koreans; it would simply be idiotic.

In any given case, ethnic fidelity either matters or it doesn't. Flip-flopping ethnic identities does no great service to ANY ethnicity involved; it merely causes vexation. "But what of the need for 'representation'?" comes the retort. Digging into the semiotics of this query, we find that it is little more than a platitudinous way of thinking. We might pose the query this way: Do we really need to cast a Black woman in the role of a beautiful Achaean princess to remind people they, "Hey, Black women can be beautiful"? Yes, we know. (Reference the aforementioned Halle Berry and Zoë Kravitz in the role of Catwoman. Gugu Mbatha-Raw in "Belle" and Nathalie Emmanuel in "Army of Thieves" also come to mind.)

Do we need to cast a Black man as Isaac Newton to remind people that Black men can be intelligent? Seriously? Are we to suppose that the only geniuses in history were WHITE, so the only option we have for "representing" smart Black guys is to pretend some of those White guys were Black? Memo: We're still waiting for great biopics on William Nash Stevens, Frederick Douglass, Thomas Fuller, Benjamin Banneker, and Mark E. Dean. But never mind any of that. Let's just pretend that Isaac Newton was a Black guy.

Soon, we find that we're not being beneficent; we're just being ridiculous.

But what of "representation"? Such pseudo-activism is comprised entirely of token gestures—intended to ingratiate the target community. It is an example of performative morality. Here, a PR stunt passes as a serious effort to facilitate systemic change. It's not.

To be clear: We should certainly focus more on minority identities; but this is not the way to go about it. Identitarians fail to note the distinction between valuing diversity and fetishizing diversity. They often insist the former entails the latter. The

problem is not limited to just racial identity. The switcheroo can occur with gender and sexuality as well—whether it's Milly Alcock pretending that Supergirl was queer or Ruby Rose treating Bat Woman as sexually ambiguous. Such portrayals are not merely fatuous, they are annoying.

To be clear: Ethnicity is oftentimes part of the character. Tilda Swinton is not Tibetan, so she had no business playing "the Ancient One". Of course, that's just a comic book character, not an iconic figure in a three-thousand-year-old epic that defined an entire culture. *****

What, then, of the aforementioned casting choices of Duncan, Jackson, Kitt, Berry, Kravitz, Liu, Elba, Bailey, et. al.? In my estimation, in such cases, the modification was done judiciously, not gratuitously. Such choices were—one might say—nifty ideas; but fell far short of civil rights activism. Such castings were not done with the expectation that they will somehow break down biases against the demographic group to which the new actor belonged. Nobody has ever said: "I didn't used to think much of Spics; but now that they made my favorite character—who's normally a gringo—a Latino, I can see the error of my ways."

The point is that certain things transcend race…while other things do not.

John Leguizamo was right to say that only Latinos should be cast in Latino roles; yet he seems to have forgotten that the principle he invoked applies to more than just Latinos. The point is that this is a UNIVERSAL principle, not a Latin-American principle. (Casting James Franco as Fidel Castro was numb-skulled for the same reason that casting a Black actress as Cleopatra was numb-skulled.) It's the race-swapping that's the problem. (Next up: Leonardo DiCaprio starring in a biopic about Martin Luther King Jr.)

Giving Velma brown skin accomplishes nothing (other than eliciting eye-rolls from Scooby-Doo fans). At the end of the day, there are savvy ways to foster diversity and ham-fisted ways to foster diversity. Encouraging show-runners to take on stories about people of color—whether mythic or historic—is an estimable undertaking. Pretending that figures are of one race when they are of another is not just dishonest; it is asinine. (Next up: Jason and the Argonauts starring Denzel Washington.)

To be clear: Race-swapping is problematic in either direction. In her desecration of "Wuthering Heights" (scare-quotes included), Emerald Fennell decided to pretend that Heathcliff was Caucasian. In this blinkered adaptation Emily Brontë's classic

novel, Fennell elided its most important themes: racism and classism. In other words: She completely missed the point of the story. By glibly stripping the narrative of everything that really mattered, she did the story a grave disservice. Instead of an incisive critique of societal dysfunction in Georgian (pre-Victorian) England, Fennell opted for salacious interludes and overwrought set-pieces. (She overcompensated for fatuity with dazzling cinematography.) Her disjointed narrative managed to be as frothy as it was inane. This is typical of "woke" show-runners in Hollywood, who engage in race-swapping to bring about a manufactured diversity. And so we get imbecility garbed in taffeta.

To reiterate: The principle applies to mythology and historiography alike. Whether or not the characters are fictional or historical is beside the point. (One is a debasement of folklore; the other is simply bad history.) Shoddy casting is shoddy casting—meaning that there are various other reasons that one can make poor choices (Timothy Chalamet as Willy Wonka, anyone?)

We do nobody any favors by pretending a thing is something that it is not; or that someone was someone they weren't. In other words, in order to take noble stands, we don't need to be dishonest. We simply need to be principled. And that means, once we've embraced a principle, we apply it CONSISTENTLY. To reiterate: The principle of ethnic fidelity goes both ways. It is, of course, just as objectionable when productions race-swap a White person for a p.o.c.—as was done with the casting of Scarlett Johansson as the Japanese protagonist in Hollywood's adaptation of the anime classic, Ghose In The Shell. The examples of such White-washing go on and on: Joel Edgerton as an Egyptian pharaoh, Jake Gyllenhaal as a Persian prince, etc.

Only those with small minds insist that a great way to empower marginalized communities is to pretend that those who WEREN'T them WERE them. (Imagine someone saying, "Thai people need more visibility, so let's pretend Napoleon was Siamese!") Want powerful Black women on screen? Splendid. All the amazing Nubian (Kushite) queens of the ancient world are awaiting representation in feature films. No need to pillage European culture. (Indeed, there is a smorgasbord of African lore from which to pick—with amazing protagonists ranging from Mansa Musa to Shaka Zulu.) THAT would be how one bolsters "visibility".

Oddly, proponents of ersatz Progressivism fail to see how problematic race-swapping in film actually is; yet they end up having selective opprobrium. (Shall we presume that most would balk at the prospect of casting Cate Blanchett as the lead in a

biopic about Harriet Tubman, yet wouldn't bat an eyelash at Viola Davis being cast as Eleanor Roosevelt?) The double standards become evident when some (rightfully) complain when a White person is cast in the role of a p.o.c…yet remain oddly silent when the reverse it done. This happens over and over.

And so here we are. Dismayingly, those on the Regressive Left vociferously defend the casting of a sub-Saharan African in the role of a fair-skinned Spartan queen. Meanwhile, if Hollywood were to make a film based on the Afro-American folktale of John Henry and cast Jackie Chan in the lead role, many would suddenly see the folly of race-swapping. Funny how that works. (Reminder: They're both fictional characters.) The rationalization for casting Jackie Chan as John Henry, "But won't that help Chinese people?" would elicit a chuckle from any sane person. Why? Because it's absurd.

To the plea, "But we want representation!" the reply is simple: "Nobody's saying you can't have it. Just don't do it to the detriment of other groups."

If one were to insist that race-swapping is perfectly fine ONLY in scenarios that suit one's own sensibilities, then one simply announces oneself as a hypocrite. There are quick and easy ways to handle such interlocutors: Honor their request to betray the ethnic identities of key characters…then see what their reaction would be if we were to pretend that, say, Othello was Irish. Wait for them to clutch their pearls.

Calling someone's bluff on this double standard is quite easy. Queries might be posed: Would you be willing to cast Tom Cruise in the title role of a Black Panther remake? Such people would likely not have been placated by the rationalization: "Hey. It's fiction, so it shouldn't matter!" (Ghost In The Shell is fiction. It was still poor judgement to cast Scarlett Johansen in the lead role.) What would be the problem with Chris Hemsworth starring in the Epic of Sundiata? How about as Arjuna? How about as Confucius? Chris Hemsworth is wonderful to behold; but he doesn't belong in certain roles. Why? Because race-swapping is bad—whether in fiction or non-fiction—when ethnic identity is integral to the story (viz. cultural heritage).

The conclusion is unavoidable: In certain circumstances, supporting race-swapping is racist. Being against racism entails speaking out against race-swapping in those instances. To accuse those who are speaking out against race-swapping of "racism"—as some on the Regressive "Left" are wont to do—is to effectively treat ANTI-racism as a form of racism.

The true anti-racist will dependably resist—nay, rebuke—unscrupulous calls for race-swapping. He/she will do so precisely because it is a slap in the face to those belonging to the race of the character being swapped OUT. The key, here, is universality. Principles mean nothing if they're not consistently applied. (Friendly neighborhood reminder: Hypocrisy is not a good thing.) If pretending a Macedonian Queen was Black is okay, the same person doesn't get to complain when someone casts an short, overweight Japanese man as the Messiah in the next biopic of Jesus.

Rectitude aside, we need only look at the efficacy of different approaches. Not only does race-swapping help nobody, it actually exacerbates the problem it purports to ameliorate. (One might say that race-swapping in film attenuates racism in roughly the same way that a male chauvinist adding more women to his roster of mistresses attenuates his misogyny. Showcasing more affection hardly addresses the root of the problem.)

Bottom line: Using X as props does not mitigate bigotry against X. Casting Ryan Gosling as Nelson Mandela is idiotic for the same reasons that casting Will Smith as George Washington would be idiotic. Regardless of X, the principle is the same. If anything, there is a inverted bigotry involved; as the message seems to be: "We cannot create anything of actual meaning about someone from YOUR ethnic background, so the best we can do is swap you in for someone else, and pretend we're doing you a favor." The sad reality is that, while helping no one, this annoys almost everyone. In spite of all that, the daft fad of race-swapping in film continues apace; and—predictably—accomplishes nothing. Meanwhile, most people continue being annoyed; which does a grave disservice to the purported cause. Are we to suppose that vexation is somehow a viable means of edification?

Reality tells a different story. When show-runners of the series, "Dr. Who" cast a Black man as Isaac Newton, every sensible viewer rolled his eyes. Someone once even cast a Black woman to play Anne Boleyn. (!) After a while, the entire charade becomes just plain silly. And NOBODY becomes more anti-racist.

Alas. Such Tom-foolery is to be expected in a society where we have little respect for the world's cultures; and almost no interest in understanding them. This is cosmopolitanism in reverse.

One can't help but wonder: What is the incentive for engaging in such Tom-foolery. Most race- / gender-swapping in Hollywood affords producers an opportunity to congratulate themselves for engaging in "representation". This is treating

uprightness as mere spectacle; and doing so often backfires. At the end of the day, the more cockamamie instances of “representation” are likely to increase the audience’s aversion to cosmopolitan ideals, as regular folk rarely enjoy being bludgeoned with an ideological baton…especially when all they want is a well-crafted narrative. When people are looking to be entertained, they don’t want gimmickry; they want deftly-executed character development.

“But haven’t you heard? We made Captain America Black! That should appease everyone.” The thinking here is effectively: “We’ve checked another box for on-screen representation; so pay no attention to deficient school funding in poor Black neighborhoods, just go to your local cinema.” The idea is that if we pander to a community enough, then maybe they’ll simmer down, and not challenge—or even notice—the abiding structural inequalities. The mantra of D.E.I. is effectively: Placate them, and they won’t put up much of a fuss. For those without a moral core, such posturing is an easy way to come off as “with it”…without having to actually tamper with incumbent power structures.

To reiterate: The issue here is not merely of historical accuracy (which is moot when the material is fictional); it is of ethnic fidelity—something that is especially relevant when cultural heritage is at play. This concern attains irrespective of the historicity of the material-in-question. (In ancient times, myth was fictive with salient historical elements—somewhat resembling what we now call “historical fiction”.) I hope to have shown that whenever ethnicity is integral to the identity of the character, race-swapping is problematic.

Even in the 1950’s, those with a modicum of common sense could see that John Wayne playing an Mongolian conquerer was problematic. So we must ask: Why do so many play along with such daffy shenanigans? They’ve been led to believe that it is somehow “good” for p.o.c. The fact that it involves glaring double standards seems not to be an issue; as many are solely concerned with keeping up appearances. Honoring ALL cultures is not part of this agenda; so few care to actually apply their stated principles consistently. (Their “woke-ness” is entirely performative; so rectitude plays no role.) The thinking is: Hypocrisy is fine so long as the OPTICS are good.

It’s not that such people are ignorant; it’s that that are proud of their ignorance. They bask in it. They flaunt it. Sadly, we don’t live in a society that is MERELY culturally-illiterate (which would be bad enough); we live in a society where more

and more people are cavalier about their cultural illiteracy. Nescience, shallow thinking, superciliousness, and superficiality have been normalized; even glamorized. This does not bode well for our future prospects of civil society.

Take heart, though. A week before Nolan's dunderheaded rendition of "The Odyssey" was released, a live action rendering of Disney's "Moana" came out. Miraculously, producers had the sense to cast a talented Polynesian actress in the lead role. Presumably, Nolan would have opted for a Slavic actress…because, hey, it's just fiction, right?

* The Scythians—who hailed from the Eurasian Steppes—eventually populated in the region (primarily via a breakaway group known as the Cimmerians). It is possible that they were the fair-skinned progenitors of the ancient Slavic, Germanic, and/or Nordic peoples. Like the Celtic peoples of Western Europe, these peoples were all notably lighter-skinned than the olive-skinned peoples of the Mediterranean rim.

** This is why the Swedish actor, Dolf Lundgren worked well as the antagonist in Rocky IV. That he was a buff Nordic man rather than a buff Slavic man was unproblematic. He had the right look. (Memo: Gilbert Gottfried would not have worked in the role.) Another good example is Chris Hemsworth: an Anglo-Saxon actor who was cast as the Norse god, Thor in the Marvel movies. Even though he was not Nordic, Scandinavians all agreed that the choice was apt. (Memo: Steve Buscemi would not have worked as well.) Some Korean actors are cast in Chinese or Japanese roles (and vice versa) simply because they have vaguely East Asian features. Sometimes this works; sometimes it doesn't. It's largely about plausibility. When Venessa Williams played Calypso in 1997, it worked quite well because the beautiful, wily seductress was not fully human (she was a nymph), and was supposed to be—well—different from the Achaeans (i.e. exotic; spec. archaic Maltese). When it comes to casting, there's a difference between ethnically pure and ethnically plausible. So, in any given case, the question must be posed: As we strive for ethnic fidelity, how integral to the character's identity is his/her ethnicity? Insofar as it is a relevant factor, any responsible casting will recognize that fact.

*** In 1950, when Orson Wells had Eartha Kitt play "Helen" in a small, short-run stage production of a completely unrelated story, he was being playful. It was not supposed to be an accurate depiction of Helen of Troy lifted straight from the Homeric epic. And in 1989, when satirist, Terry Jones cast Kitt as the Norse goddess,

Freya in his cheeky rendition of “Erik the Viking”, it was not a serious rendition of Norse lore. Nobody cared about her skin color, because her race was irrelevant. (Reminder: Nolan was not purporting to do a zany satire.)

**** Along with Wicked and West Side Story, Annie is my favorite musical. The problem with the 2014 rendition was that, while it would have been nice if African Americans could have been billionaires in the early 1930’s, they were not; and, given the plot, it is rather implausible that the orphaned protagonist would have been Black. (Incidentally, one of my favorite lines of all time is from that particular rendition of “Annie”. In response to a lackey saying, “With all due respect…” to Daddy Warbucks, he responds: “None taken.” Oscar Wilde would’ve love that. This play on “No offense, but…” was brilliant.)

***** When it came to casting Swinton in that role, it was not an attempt at virtue-signaling; it was a craven corporate strategy. The decision was made in executive boardrooms simply to placate a virulently-racist Chinese government (so as not to foreclose a massive cinema market). In other words: The odd casting choice was about putting profit over principle. To heck with the Tibetans.

SUPPLEMENT:

A Critique Of Nolan's Riff Off Of Homer's "The Odyssey"

In Homer's "The Odyssey", the moral of the story was: If you try to defy the gods, there will be dire consequences. In addition to a paean to home-coming, the Odyssey was an indictment of hubris. According to the ACTUAL tale, Odysseus learned that he cannot—and should not try to—defy the gods. Weirdly, in the one place Odysseus WAS defiant (when he steadfastly rebuffed the allure of the lotuses), Nolan has Odysseus CAPITULATE (cravenly accepting the invitation to trade comfort for the recognition of reality). The hero of the story went from the only one to RESIST the temptation to the only one to INDULGE in it. So this nescient director seems to get things exactly backwards.

(That; and—peculiarly—Nolan decided to dispose of the iconic lotus-eaters altogether, and instead make Calypso the peddler of the magical plant.)

This was not an isolated case. Dismayingly, Nolan's overall characterization of the story's protagonist entirely misses the mark. Instead of portraying Odysseus as a heroic figure—brimming with pride—who longs for home, Nolan portrays him as a hapless bloke—wracked with guilt—who is reticent to go home. (Nolan's Odysseus is doddering, beleaguered, and remorseful—bearing little resemblance to the actual protagonist. Instead of a shrewd man grappling with his own vain-glory, we get a broken-down man dealing with PTSD.) The signature features of the ACTUAL Odysseus were pride and cunning. Nolan discarded those qualities entirely. He ended up with a protagonist characterized by contrition rather than by arrogance; addled with regret rather than impelled by the gravitational pull of "nostos" (a longing for home).

It's one thing to completely miss the point of epic tale (a dereliction of which many are guilty); it's quite another thing to make a high-budget feature film about it and STILL get such a fundamental thing wrong.

Peculiarly, Nolan saw fit to not feature the Phaeacians (spec. his enthralling liaison with Princess Nausicaä). Nor did he include the classic line about Odysseus saying to the cyclops that he was "nobody". Odysseus' pivotal meeting with the ghost of Achilles in the underworld—replete with the latter's profound existential message:

omitted. Odysseus dealing with the loss of his mother (including a poignant encounter with her ghost): omitted. Hermes: omitted. The bag of adverse winds: omitted. All the steamy coitus on the edenic islands of Aeaea and Ogygia: omitted. Calypso is changed from the embodiment of hedonic indulgence to…a stolid therapist. Instead of offering temptation, she simply peddles opiates. On Calypso's island (Ogygia), instead of a seven-year dalliance, it's a brief chat. Meanwhile, Circe is a crotchety witch instead of a beautiful sorceress. (She's more skittish than regal.) Rather than a wily seductress, we are given a crone bursting with resentment. As far as Odysseus' stay on HER island (Aeaea): instead of a year, it's an overnight visit.

There's more.

Athena is rendered a proxy for Odysseus' conscience. The jaded goddess of the original lore was entirely redacted. (Note: Athena plays a pivotal role in both The Iliad and The Odyssey. She is the one that egged on the Achaeans when they were considering an assault on Troy.) In lieu of an office couch (for more therapy), the setting is a desolate beach. Zendaya was actually not playing Athena, but Athena inhabiting the body of the slain Trojan maiden, Cassandra (who served as a phlegmatic interlocutor for Odysseus' inner monologue). * Menelaus is reduced to an abusive spouse (hence the scar on Helen's face). He is bursting with arrogance rather than fraught with remorse; so is depicted as more conceited than contrite. And as a peculiar narrative garnishment, Nolan shoe-horns Sinon into the story—a character from Virgil's "Aeneid".

But the film's main blunder is the portrayal of the protagonist. Nolan transplanted the theme of how a man deals with the consequences of his own hubris (Homer's actual theme) with the tale of a man grappling with post-war trauma. This is a distortion of the source-material. Above and beyond that, there is virtually no character development for ANY of the characters; and, in addition, poor characterization of virtually every key figure.

Rather than a purposeful trek where formidable obstacles are overcome, the fabled journey is depicted as a meandering sojourn where Odysseus broods over having flouted Zeus' law (by hoodwinking the Trojans with a wooden horse so that he might get inside to slaughter them)…only to transgress that very law AGAIN upon arriving home (hoodwinking Penelope's suitors with an unassuming disguise so that he might get inside to slaughter them). In other words: He ends up repeating the very transgression he'd spent the entire movie lamenting.

In the original material, Odysseus is upset because he misses home, not because he feels guilty about his military triumph. In Nolan's telling, the victory over the Trojans was Pyrrhic because subterfuge had been used. (It seems not to have occurred to Nolan that obligations of [philo-]xenia are suspended during battle.) The giant, wooden horse was a clever trick, not a source of shame. For thousands of years, from Alexander the Great at the walls of Tyre to Sultan Mehmet II at the walls of Constantinople, attacking armies use whatever trickery they can to breach a city's walls. This is almost always done by—as it were—cheating. Joshua invoked the powers of the Abrahamic deity to breach the walls of Jericho. (Think of the Visigoths orchestrating starvation to get into Rome.) This has nothing to do with "xenia", or a breach thereof.

The fabled "Trojan horse" was presented as readily-available booty—a clever way to smuggle soldiers past the city gates. Even children understand this concept. Yet Nolan depicts the horse as an abandoned relic, stuck in the sand. For dramatic effect, he then pretended that the Aegean tide was several meters instead of just 20 or 30 centimeters. (One would presume that the Greeks would have been aware of this fictive tide, having resided on the beach for a decade; so planned their ruse accordingly. Alas.) And what of the breaching of "Zeus' law"? The notion that there is supposed to be "xenia" during a military seige is asinine. The irony is that, if anyone DID violate Zeus' law, it was Odysseus himself–upon his homecoming. He spent the entire movie feeling needlessly guilty for a non-transgression…only to conclude by committing that very transgression (using subterfuge to infiltrate the abode, only to slaughter everyone, even those who hadn't done anything wrong). Meanwhile, Nolan himself showed sanguinity regarding Zeus' law when he filmed in southern Sahara with such heedlessness. The ironies never end.

So…why the outlandishly circuitous route to get back home? Well, Nolan's Odysseus states that he no longer wants to follow Agamemnon. Goodness gracious. (Poseidon's displeasure takes a back seat to the protagonist's obtuse thinking and impetuosity.) Again: Nolan switches shame for pride. Rather than a chronic yearning for hearth and home, the protagonist's guilt-ridden conscience is what drives him…as he stumbles through haphazard encounters during a series of maritime escapades.

Taken together, all this is not a matter of creative license; it is dereliction. Nolan's tenuous grasp of the material from which he was ostensibly is on full display. (My hunch is that Nolan has never actually read the full Homeric epic…on which he ostensibly based his movie.) That so many raved about this movie attests to the staggering level of cultural illiteracy to which we have sunk.

At one point, Odysseus refers to Hades (the underworld, where the dead reside) as "Hell" (an Abrahamic ideation). Ridiculously, Nolan had characters saying things like, "We're Greeks from Ithaca" and "Our Bronze Age is collapsing". (It's as if a ten-year-old wrote the script.) During the Mycenaean epoch, the people in question—precursors to the "Hellenes"—referred to themselves as "Achaioi" [Achaeans]; and the place-in-question was effectively a small island in Kefalonia. Not everyone on his ship was from Ithaca; though anyone who WAS from Ithaca was assuredly not African, Korean, or Indian. Whoever they might have been, they certainly did not refer to their own time as "the Bronze Age"…let alone perceive it as a "collapse". And it is laughable that they would have seen themselves as having caused it.

(Ancillary note: Troy was known as "Wilusa" / "Ilios" / "Ilium" during the Mycenaean era. Also, the "Sea Peoples" were not simply a few Achaean boats. And said boats CERTAINLY did not precipitate the collapse of the Hittites and Assyrians.)

After such a high degree of omission, alternation, and confabulation, there is a point at which the work ceases being an adaptation, and becomes—well—something else.

Alas, the director of The Odyssey was not the only one with glaring nescience regarding the subject matter. Lupita claims to have not known anything about "The Odyssey" until she was approached to play this role. That statement—in and of itself—would be rather odd. But once we realize that she graduated from Yale University (with a degree in the humanities, nevertheless), the only explanation is that she's either a moron or a liar. Add to this the fact that she's a hypocrite—something brought to light when, after insisting that fidelity to cultural heritage was imperative on the set of "Black Panther", she proceeded to blithely dismiss such concerns when it came to the Homeric epic. As if that weren't bad enough, she also exhibits a strange sense of entitlement—openly admitting that when she thinks about casting / characterization, "I think about what is due to ME." (In trying to make the case for how beautiful she should be considered, she seems to have forgotten how ugly narcissism can be.) Lupita's grievance was that Homer gave short shrift to women. This is ironic; as Nolan actually dialed DOWN the elements of female empowerment that existed in the source-material.

Granted, Lupita-as-Hellen was in the film for—cumulatively—only about three or four minutes; but this is rather beside the point. Even if there had been a shot of Hellen lasting only a few seconds (in, say, a brief flashback), the prudent reaction would be the same: “That’s not Hellen of Troy. That’s a Black woman. What the heck are you doing?”

Comes the fatuous retort: “The only reason anyone could possibly be displeased with that casting choice is because they don’t like Black people. Or perhaps they don’t think that Black women can be beautiful. So any qualms with casting Lupita as Helen must be based on racism.” This breaks the world record for straw-manning a legitimate grievance. It is a deliberate refusal to engage in the substance of the compunction. (I imagine a fussy child who insists, “They say she’s the most beautiful woman in the world; so I want her to be BLACK. If you don’t oblige, then you’re racist!”) The best reply to such petulance: “This isn’t about what YOU want. This isn’t YOUR story. And the world’s cultural heritages are not all required to be changed in order to accommodate YOUR racial insecurities.”

Incidentally, Lupita ALSO plays Agamemnon’s disgruntled wife, Clytemnestra…as if she were somehow the twin sister of Helen. (Helen was actually Clytemnestra’s maternal half-sister; as her father was Zeus. Friendly neighborhood reminder: Zeus wasn’t a sub-Saharan African. The mother was Aetolian.) Nolan changes Clytemnestra’s motivations for killing her husband upon his return from Troy: as revenge for sacrificing their daughter to Artemis (in order to secure blessings for the upcoming military campaign) rather than so that she could pursue her lover.

There were so many missed opportunities—a chance to address universal themes, to illustrate timeless principles—it’s exasperating. So many weighty issues could have been explored by a more competent writer. And so much more could have been exhibited of Greece’s cultural legacy…that is, had those in charge given a wit about such things. They opted for inane spectacle instead.

I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention that there were also problematic cinematic issues. Parts of the movie were filmed in West Sahara, where there are currently rampant human rights abuses being perpetrated (slavery is legal). The crew ended up making a mess of the place, then refused to pick up all garbage when they left. Whoever was in charge of costume design should never be allowed near a movie set ever again. (When it comes to costumes in period pieces, one can either go for historical accuracy or—instead—opt to make the outfits look super cool. Miraculously, this film opted did neither.) Aside from the poor costuming, Nolan

decided to use Viking longships from the 9th century A.D. …instead of anything resembling Achaean / Mycenaean ships from the 13th century B.C.—a discrepancy of over two millennia. (Note: The production borrowed the main ship from a Swedish non-profit, damaged it, then refused to pay for the damage.) The lighting was unnecessarily bleak. And in terms of cinematography, the color-palate was gratuitously drab.

The one saving grace is that Nolan refrained from over-using CGI.

Even the score was awful—reduced to cacophony rather than symphony. (It was more a clangor than it was a moving accompaniment.) The daft idea was to use a combination of wooden flutes and electronic equipment in lieu of a classical orchestra because the bassoon didn't yet exist in Iron-Age Greece. Gadzooks! Greeks could have been used here as well. (It turns out that there are Hellenic composers.) If you're not a big fan of Yanni…then there's Vangelis. Or Nana Mouskouri. Or the music of Mikis Theodorakis.

Bottom line: To be impressed by this cinematic product is to betray a stunning level of cultural illiteracy. Worse, it is to demonstrate that one is unconcerned about respecting others' cultural legacies. These derelictions would be bad enough for the average bystander; but they are inexcusable for anyone deigning to bring another culture's classic literature to life. Alas, this is emblematic of the shallow pseudo intellectual slop that is now the norm–catering to the historically illiterate masses.

The result: Another big budget Hollywood spectacle that disrespects the source material and is heedless of any cultural legacy that isn't American. (Regarding anyone who chortled about this film being a "masterpiece", here's a helpful tip: Never trust their opinion ever again.)

To assay "adaptations", it is necessary to distinguish between interpretation and alteration. This blockbuster movie is not Homer's epic tale; it is Nolan's peculiar riff thereon. It might be charitably characterized as a daft re-imagining; yet it is best described as a distortion. (Want an estimable re-imagining of "The Odyssey"? It's been done quite well already. See "O Brother Where Art Thou", "The Return", or Jorge Rivera-Herrans's "Epic: The Musical". Even Italy has a superior rendition…from the 1960's.)

In brief: This film is a clumsy re-telling by Nolan, which he entitled "The Odyssey"… and was vaguely inspired by Homer's classical epic by that name. Nolan didn't "interpret" things; he changed them. We have once again been subjected to a

vanity project–in which a Hollywood darling is profiting handily off of a cultural legacy he neither respects nor understands. There is a difference between creative interpretation and desecration. I would argue that this movie is most accurately described as the latter.

* Oddly enough, in the source-material, Cassandra was murdered by none other than…Clytemnestra (upon being brought to Mycenae). That definitely would not have worked within Nolan's revamped narrative.