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A Black Girl's Guide to Love and Media:
The Effect of White-Centric Media on Young Black Women

The Proposal

Ever since I was a little girl, I've been in love with consuming media. I could sit in front of a television for hours and hours on end, with the promise of never getting bored. Countless summer days were spent cooped up inside watching *The Wizard of Oz* on repeat or watching *Full House* reruns for copious hours. During the winter months, I remember sitting in front of the fireplace wrapped in a blanket reading the latest adventures of my favorite characters in *Harry Potter*. As soon as one book was completed, the next was already in my hands, my eyes scanning the pages, devouring my next adventure.

If I wasn't consuming television or watching movies or reading, I was daydreaming.

I would imagine myself in ruby slippers, skipping down a yellow brick road. I would imagine myself laughing with Uncle Joey and Uncle Jesse on our plush gingham patterned couch. I would imagine myself running around Hogwarts after curfew, trying to solve a mystery. My heart would hammer hard in my chest and tears would brim in my eyes. My breathing became heavy and ragged. My hands often trembled. That's how severely those stories would affect me.

I've forged connections, bonds, and relationships with these worlds and characters. All I've ever wanted was to be in these worlds and be with these characters. Yet, that magic of pure hope was never truly there. Even if I wasn't conscious about it, I knew the truth... or at least what I was taught to be the truth.

People like me don't get these stories. They don't get to have whimsical adventures across distant lands. They don't get to be the heroes in their own stories. They don't fall victim to love at first sight. As an outsider always looking in, you start to understand that these situations are exclusive. You may be able to look but you certainly can't touch. You learn that the best someone like me can do is dream of it.

That's not how it should be.

Clueless

Growing up in a military town in North Carolina is a weirdly niche experience. You have a hodgepodge of people from various backgrounds, and at first glance, you may not be able to differentiate who is a part of which communities.

Although my town was seemingly diverse, as a little Black girl, I've always known I was an outlier. In your childhood, your community was centered around education. From your role

models to your peers, they were at school. And trust me... no one loved elementary school more than me.

Let's take a look at a typical day of my third-grade life:

7:00 AM: Wake Up

7:30 AM: Eat Breakfast; Watch the PBS Morning Program

8:00 AM: Bus to School

8:20 AM: Ask Mrs. Shearin for Permission to Read in the Class Library

8:30 AM -11:00 AM: Class

11:00 AM: Lunch Time (aka, sitting alone reading a book at the lunch table)

11:30 AM: Test Time!

12:30 PM: Recess (aka, sitting alone reading a book in the classroom)

1:00 PM: Gifted Class Time!!

2:30 PM: Battle of the Books Practice

3:30 PM: Home, Watching Noggin or PBS or Disney

8:00 PM: Bedtime

As you can probably tell, I was a big nerd. Regardless, I loved it. I was able to learn new things, read cool stories, and came home to watch my favorite television programs all day. This was my life for most (if not all) of elementary school. At the same time, I remember feeling a sense of longing; a sense that has yet to disappear and I expect never will.

This daily schedule may look normal at first glance, but there's an underlying component that has been detrimental to my growth: it's severely white-centered.

On the surface, Long Hill Elementary School was a diverse school. Yet, even from my youthful memory, I can assure you that there was a ridiculous discrepancy in diversity when it came to "gifted" education. This discrepancy from the elementary level only transformed into more complex issues as I grew older in various aspects of my life from my education to my development as an individual.

Gifted education has a racist origin that is rarely explored, and almost never explained. Gifted education was a tool used to resegregate schools while simultaneously giving white children educational advantages. Angela Y. Davis explores the history of Black women's education in America in her novel *Women, Race, and Class*. The novel focuses on education post-emancipation, slave education, and the white/Black women relationships in various educational fights.

Davis explains the white American ideology regarding the intelligence of post-emancipation Black people, stating "...Black people were allegedly incapable of intellectual advancement to the white epitomes of humankind." This is the foundation that the modern education system is built from as seen with the segregation of schools and the implementation of gifted education.

Yet, Davis combats this ideology with historical context, “But if they [Black people] really were biologically inferior, they would have manifested neither the desire nor the capability to acquire knowledge. Ergo, no prohibition of learning would have been necessary. In reality, of course, Black people had always exhibited a furious impatience as regards the acquisition of education. The yearning for knowledge had always been there.”

And through this thirst for knowledge, equity, and opportunity, Black people soon claimed these goals in the realm of education (Historically Black Colleges or Universities, *Brown v. Board*, etc). Gifted education was just another predicted obstacle Black people conquered by reclaiming it and reaping its benefits.

So, by the year 2010, when I entered the gifted program at my school, the history, and origin of the program were buried and long forgotten, although the effects of it were very apparent and omnipresent.

I was the only Black girl in my gifted class. So although my elementary school was diverse, my environment was not. Constantly reminded by my white teachers that my white class had the “brightest” kids in the whole school created its own set of issues. I was enveloped in whiteness and there was truly no way to get out of it. What’s worse? I didn’t realize there was anything to escape.

I grew up in the gifted program from the second grade through high school graduation. Our little gifted class developed into a gifted course in middle school and then honors and AP

courses in high school, but my peers never grew. The gifted parents knew me as the smart black girl from years of award ceremonies and extracurriculars. Yet, Caitlin was known as the sweet, pretty little thing who came over for dinner every Thursday night. Dawson was the energetic sunspot who placed third in last week's golf tournament. Ryder was the heartthrob future NASA engineer that every mother loved. These kids would all hang out together after school, at someone's big house hidden behind perfectly manicured shrubbery and white picket fences. They would *always* have partners for the group projects and their families were just so close (because "How could we not be? The kids have been in school together for a decade!"). Somehow I always ended up with just a book after a long day of school and always had to ask the teacher to do group projects alone because everyone was already taken.

Who truly knows if this isolation was intentional or a product of systems in place... Surely, I can't be the one to determine.

This isolation wasn't exactly recognized at any point but it somehow became law somewhere along the way. But I didn't feel lonely, and it was solely because of my hyper-fixation on books, tv, and film. I had friends through these stories. I idolized these stories. I silently worked in hopes of creating my own story.

Enchanted

Chapter One:

Out of all the genres, fantasy has always been my favorite. I've always gravitated toward the whimsical, magical, drama of a fantasy world, so naturally, I loved *Harry Potter*. I was the kid who read all the books, watched every movie, knew every spell, and cared about placing strangers into houses more than asking for their names.

My third-grade teacher, Mrs. Shearin, always gave me books to read from the class library and I had freshly cleaned out her Roald Dahl collection with *The BFG*. Mrs. Shearin and I scoured through her shelves together trying to find something -anything- that would interest me (all of my classmates were currently reading *Captain Underpants*, but I knew better).

"Do you like magic?" she asked. Little did she know that in first grade I devoured every *Rainbow Magic* fairy book the school possessed.

Keeping it cool, I replied a simple, "Sure."

Mrs. Shearin handed me a crisp, new paperback copy of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and I handed it back to her the very next day. I couldn't put the book down. I must've showered with the book; must've eaten dinner with it in my hand. I had fallen in love. I loved the idea of going to a magical school, of belonging to others who were just like you, of solving mysteries and overcoming obstacles. I loved the adventure, the whimsy, the magic, the friendship- the things I decidedly lacked, the story provided. It provided an escape truly like no other piece of media I consumed in my childhood.

What makes this series such a standout is the ability to establish a heavy awareness of morality in me. Yes, the story may be fiction, but the lessons and themes throughout are applicable to life. I've internalized many lessons from the books. From choosing your friends wisely to standing up for yourself, these instances are engrained in my psyche.

As much as I adored the series, it contributed to the negative feelings I had toward myself due to the lack of its representation. The vast majority of Hogwarts students were white. Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard of all time is an old white man. Voldemort, the most evil wizard of all time is a white man (-like figure). Harry Potter, the most brave savior of the wizarding world is a white boy and so on... The lack of representation in the books translates perfectly to the films where the visual lack of people of color is glaringly apparent. Regardless, this critique wasn't widely acknowledged until years after the films were released- the last one was released in 2012.

As a Black fan of the franchise, I appreciate the spread of awareness of the issues, but I find that many find the awareness to be a solution. Or worse, companies try to backtrack and recast beloved characters to be Black (or any POC) when they were never truly intended to be. Being Black isn't just a quick change of darker skin and curlier hair, it's an experience. To partake in this phenomenon of changing the race of established characters erase what it means to be Black in the name of being "progressive". An example is the character of Hermione. I am a big fan of the know-it-all girl-boss witch in the books and the Emma Watson portrayal in the films. Hermione has always been characterized as a girl with frizzy hair and brown eyes in the books, yet her race is never explicitly stated. Let's fast forward almost 20 years when a *Harry*

Potter play is put into production on both Broadway and the West End. All of sudden, Hermione is a Black woman, and her children are therefore Black as well. With the author of the stories, J.K R*wling, stating that the casting of Hermione was done so because “She was the best to audition” is valid and honorable, her work comes off as patronizing. A woman who had her hand in the franchise for over three decades experiences criticism for the creation of her white-exclusive world so she changes a vital aspect of the identity of a widely-beloved character to show “I like Black people, I swear!”

This example is one of many that I’ve observed over recent time (the past five years) and it’s clear that the majority of white people don’t see how painstakingly patronizing the phenomenon is. There are ways to feature Black characters while erasing their blackness, and this is only one example. Regardless of my qualms with the franchise, it’s still so revolutionary in my own life that I choose to learn from a critique like this rather than completely dismiss it.

My adoration has always been strong. I always look back at that day when I was introduced to Harry Potter with such fondness. From that day on, I was convinced that my 11th birthday would be the best day of my life.

I remember walking back to class the next day, excited to discuss the book with Mrs. Shearin. I walk up to her desk to hand back the book.

“I *loved* it!” I exclaimed.

“Have you watched the movie?” Mrs. Shearin asked as she took the book from my hands.

THERE WAS A MOVIE?!?

Episode Two:

My favorite TV show growing up was called *Winx Club*. I remember randomly stumbling across it on Nickelodeon on a Sunday afternoon (the only time they air the show in the U.S.). Unlike *Harry Potter*, *Winx Club* wasn't extremely popular. It wasn't until recently that I met some girls who used to watch the show, but I remember being the only person my age, that I knew, who watched it. My memory of the show functions like a time capsule; I can always go back to revisit it, but the show itself was integral at the exact time it entered my life. It reflects a time passed.

Winx Club follows six girls who are fairies that attend a magical school, Alfea, to hone their unique powers. Of course, there are villains throughout the shows like the evil trio of witches, the Trix, from the Witch's School of Cloud Tower who foil plans against the Winx for power. There's also another magical school named Red Fountain School for Boys where many male characters called “specialists” train. The fantasy in the show was unlike anything I'd ever been introduced to. The world had fairies, specialists, witches, ogres, trolls, sirens, and everything under the sun. It features a multiverse with many different planets and modes of transportation. The style of the fantastical elements varied from being based in magical realism to urban fantasy to whimsical, magical fantasy, constantly pushing the bounds of the genre.

The show was absolutely iconic because of its unique style, but *Winx Club* was a cultural reset because of its groundbreaking effect on representation in media for young girls and women. The show's target audience was young girls from ages 8-14 and instead of playing the show down because of this unassuming audience, the show subverted expectations by empowering young girls through other aspects of the show. The show centered around fairies, a fantasy creature that girls have proven to like, but these fairies were seen more often as normal teenage girls. They transformed into these fairy personas to fight evil or to protect themselves or others. As often as you would see the Winx as fairies fighting evil wizards or ogres, you can expect to see them running around doing teenage girl things as well like window-shopping, going to concerts, or having sleepover parties.

The show promoted the idea that femininity and traits like strength, drive, and confidence are not mutually exclusive. This is further explored through the diversity of the Winx Club. There are six girls- Bloom, Stella, Techna, Flora, Musa, and Aisha- and the team works in a collaborative manner with no leader, promoting the ideology that not only are women able to work together, but that one *type* of woman is not better than another. The girls are diverse in every aspect: clothing style, fairy powers, race, (fantasy) culture and ethnicity, financial background and class, politics, hobbies, femininity, and sexuality. The show makes it a point to distinguish these girls. They are products of separate experiences and the show explores this by featuring particular episodes like home-goings to showcase their differing cultures and episodes with their families visiting promoting the normalcy of differing classes and family politics. The Winx Club is a group of girls from all different backgrounds (some are Princesses, while some

are working class) and they often have conversations about the tensions of these completely different lifestyles.

The most special part about Winx Club is that it represents every little girl watching; it normalizes women supporting other women through their differences. I identified with Flora the most growing up. She's a nature fairy who's Black but is portrayed as compassionate, sweet, and sensitive- something not often shown by Black characters in media. She cheers up her friends by giving them bouquets of flowers, she only wears gold jewelry, she's always reading, and she was the last of the girls to have a boyfriend, consistently playing the 13th wheel with grace. I saw myself in Flora, not because she's a character who perfectly reflected my 12-year-old self, but because she was someone I could aspire to be. Most importantly, she looked like me *and* she had nuance and complexities. These two very important pieces of the puzzle made the character an enigma in my experiences of media consumption. Maybe there was some hope that these things could happen to people like me as well.

Mamma Mia!

I grew up with just my mom and my little brother. We never had a lot of money, but my mom always knew how to hide the everchanging financial severity from us. As far as me and my brother knew, we always had dinner, a roof over our heads, and each other. When I was younger, I loved books more than anything and my brother preferred to watch TV. But, when I got a little older, perhaps around 10 or 11, my mom and I made it a point to have our own special movie nights.

My mom always had good taste, so movie nights were always a special treat. She'd always take forever pursuing her own collection of DVDs. After what seemed like hours, Mom would pull out a DVD from her offensively huge DVD case (the old kind that resembled some sort of book or binder with the clear pockets that perfectly fit DVDs), and always make the same joke.

"Have you watched this at your dad's?"

The answer was always, "No."

"It's because he has bad taste."

"Ok."

Funnily enough, she would never ask *what* I watched at my dad's (*American Pie*) to truly verify if he had bad taste (yes).

She would make microwave popcorn and make a big show of her "secret" recipe (movie theater butter, Welch's fruit snacks, and M&M's). That familiar buttery smell would waft through our place as she would divide up the treat in classic popcorn cartons from the dollar store.

Curled up together on our beloved sectional with a million throws munching on home-famous popcorn with a "chick flick" on the TV is a recurring tradition I hold dear to my

heart. On nights like these, my mom introduced me to lifelong favorites like *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *Legally Blonde*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Notting Hill*, and *Sleepless in Seattle*.

Nights like those made me fall in love with love.

Pretty Woman

I have a lot of goals for my life. I want to attend college in a city. I want to have a fulfilling, creative career. I want to live in New York City- somewhere residential like Williamsburg or maybe even Greenwich. Eventually, I want to teach at a university. I want to write a romance novel. I want a cute little corgi, a summer home near a small beach, and let's face it- a hell of a lot of money. Yet, my biggest goal isn't really a goal at all, but a dream: to find love and start a family.

I don't know what's up with people in my generation, but I find solace in knowing that I'm not the only person under 20 years old who feels like they're running low on time... and fast. Rationally, I'm aware that there's all of the time in the world, but then I think of *The Notebook* or *When Harry Meets Sally* and I spiral. I'm not saying it's healthy, I'm just saying that it happens. Whether I want it to be or not, all of these years of consumption have painted my perception of the world. I'm often told I "romanticize" my life and I'd be a fool to disagree. I wouldn't want it any other way. Still, it took me a while to get to this point of self-realization and acceptance.

Believing it stemmed from underrepresentation in romance media along with personal experiences of being a Black woman in white environments, I never thought that I could be the lead in my own romance story. I never thought of myself as the one desired. I never thought myself worthy of it. Not because of who I am, but because of how I looked, because of the color of my skin and the features that came with it.

Mikki Kendall's novel *Hood Feminism* delves into the experience of being a Black woman surrounded by a white-centered beauty aesthetic, stating, "Even though the broader societal expectations around beauty prioritize things like an hourglass figure, smooth, clear skin, and symmetrical features, there are some distinct differences based on your proximity to whiteness in terms of skin color, hair texture, and body type... While a messy bun might be considered sloppy chic for white girls, any hint that a Black woman has failed to put effort into her appearance is met with ardent disapproval both inside her community and outside it."

Kendall highlights how "messy" hair from Olympian Gabby Douglas to Beyonce's daughter Blue Ivy caused backlash from the public. How white women criticized Meghan Markle's hair while she was dating Prince Harry and constantly compared her appearance to her white sister-in-law Princess Catherine. Kendall then highlights how Black women are often seen as unattractive due to their polarity of the white beauty standard, yet their bodies are often sexualized at higher rates than white women. Women have proven again and again that being deemed attractive solely based on one's body is perhaps the most damaging action to be done to a woman. In *My Body* by Emily Ratajkowski, she explains her complex relationship with her body and how as a model, it's her livelihood but as a woman, it's her source of torture. Carmen

Machado's book *Her Body and Other Parties* paints a similar picture. Highlighting many instances where a woman's body is the source of pain and torture through dark, twisted fictional short stories like "Eight Bites."

Personally, I grew up knowing I enjoyed particularly feminine experiences and things but often shied away from them. I never truly felt connected to femininity. I felt like I lacked the qualities to appear feminine, so to try to act like something I was not was to be foolish.

Needless to say, romance movies and books aren't following the leading lady because she has a nice ass; these stories are often made for women, but the female body isn't meant to be objectified by the very, same women. These romantic stories follow women who are conventionally attractive with non-distracting abled bodies. And unfortunately- with the exception of a handful of recent films- the genre only recognizes this certain type of woman. But this goes deeper than just representation and delves into the social insinuations of these casting choices. Are only white women worthy of romantic attention? Are people of color, particularly Black women, not desirable? These are questions that arise when a whole genre of film is supported solely by the continuous recasting of Meg Ryan, Molly Ringwald, Julia Roberts, Drew Barrymore, Kate Hudson, and Sandra Bullock.

And no... white-washing Jennifer Lopez doesn't fix the issue.

Pride and Prejudice

In addition to television, film, and books, I adore theatre. I hope it comes as no surprise that two of my favorite movies ever are *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Moulin Rouge*! Famous movie musicals with melodramatic romance plots and glamorous costuming and sets are the epitome of my kind of film. Both of the films are distinct but when you break things down, they share a lot of commonalities. They both take place in lavish, gorgeous theaters. They feature camp costuming, hair, and makeup as if they were normal. The stories feature dramatic love triangles with a secret relationship and a psychopath. They both follow a woman with an undeniable talent and star quality. They both end with death. Lastly, they both have amazing musical numbers that are unrelated to the purposes of this paper but deserve recognition all the same.

If you were to ask me about the greatest love stories, I would point you in the direction of these two films. Like many romance films, they're very white-centered, but something makes them feel like exclusions to the rule. Perhaps, it's because they're both set in Paris in the late 19th century. Maybe the fact that Christine Daae is being stalked by a raging lunatic. Or that Satine is dying of consumption. It's hard to be envious of their situations. I mean sure, I'd love to be the star of the Paris Opera or the Moulin Rouge, but not if it came with coughing up blood or making out with the Phantom.

I don't have answers for films such as these- films that coast by without raising the internal "this feels a little racist" alarms- but I'm actively looking. I'm aware of the stage adaptations of both productions and unlike the *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* play

(previously mentioned), they do the integration of people of color correctly- *Moulin Rouge!* being the best example.

If there was a spectrum of how “wrong” it is to make previously white characters in vastly white universes a person of color my *Harry Potter* example would be on one end and *Moulin Rouge!* would be on the other. With the issues of *Harry Potter* already discussed, let’s jump right into *Moulin Rouge!* It’s a story that is grounded explicitly in Bohemian ideals of truth, beauty, freedom, and love, effectively grounding this Hollywood film in humanity. Yes, the film has the flaw of casting all conventionally attractive white leads and features (with the exception of John Leguizamo, a Colombian-American actor who’s made his career off being the stereotypical and/or token Hispanic friend- to the fault of the industry, not the man) but the other characters littering the *Moulin Rouge* are clearly representing the other. There’s a sprinkling of color, different body types, women and men in outlandish wigs and crazy makeup, revealing costumes, and more. Showing that people who don’t fit into the standard white conventionalism exist and not only that but are abundant.

So naturally, when the film gets adapted for the stage the cognizant choice of including mostly people of color feels correct. It extends the show’s message of Bohemian ideals and supports these ideals. So yes, like *Harry Potter*, *Moulin Rouge!* received criticism (not on such a wide scale), and they applied the criticism for their new extension of the franchise but with nuance and clear care. With changes like creating a new character of Spanish descent and culture with his own plot, characterization, and issues or changing the character of Toulouse to be a Black man to emphasize his plot of isolation and little opportunity in Paris, the stage adaptation

is widely popular with young audiences and theatre-goers of color. The show isn't about race or issues surrounding it, nor did anyone ask for it to be so, but the representation within a show that is ultimately fun is greatly appreciated and widely praised when done well and with care such as this.

Poetic Justice

I've learned how to separate media from society, but I also use it as a tool to analyze it. Both of these skills are something that I've recently come into and the work to do so was much harder than one is to expect. So, when deciding what I wanted to study in college, the answer came pretty easily to me: Cinema and Media Studies. I spend hours a day consuming films and analyzing their social implications and industry impact. With this forced continuous practice, I've grown better at stripping away at a film and then building it back together again. It's a practice I've naturally done before, but polishing it up and fixing it with a pretty degree-shaped bow validates my thinking.

I know many might not understand why media is so important. I recognize that many simply don't care, but there are many who do care. Most importantly, everyone is affected by media. Books, television, film, and theatre simultaneously influence, educate, and reflect society.

For me, my introduction to Black media, helped me understand aspects of my identity I never thought to question. To learn that certain negative feelings that I thought were unique to me were actually a shared experience, allowed me to heal or at the very least, grow towards

healing. Dealing with the constant feeling of inferiority to my white counterparts is probably the hardest obstacle I've had to overcome and is my longest internal battle. From my experiences with education to my romance movie obsession, this ideology has been internalized as something unique to me. *The Help* is a film that I adore for many reasons but mostly for the feeling of empowerment and solidarity as Black women. The film is set in the Jim Crow South and follows Black women categorized as "The Help" as they work for white families, specifically white women. The white women find ways to dehumanize and invalidate Black women throughout the whole film from calling out their appearances to invalidating human functions. The Black women characters like Aibileen and Minny are resilient, strong, smart, and beautiful even if it's not highlighted in the diegetic. With this knowledge, I often remember that there are so many Black women who are overlooked and that there were many Black women who were overlooked and unfortunately will be many Black women who will be overlooked, but that's a part of our shared experience and therefore there's a community of women who understand something so unspoken and complex. In *The Color Purple: The Musical*, the character of Celie has this realization proclaiming "I'm beautiful and I'm here."

I find no collection of words better.

What a Girl Wants

I want to work towards an industry that does right by all of its viewers. I believe that young girls deserve to be seen and have a plethora of opportunities to feel seen. I want others to

be able to escape without having to exclude themselves from it. I'm hopeful that we will get there, it's a question of now or later.

My favorite show is *Bridgerton* and for great reason. Although the show is set in regency-era London and focuses on the aristocracy, diversity is abundant. The Queen of England is Black, and so is the Duke of Hastings and the most revered Duchess of London. The second season follows an Indian family and features many aspects of Indian culture from traditional rituals to their dress. Yet, the show isn't about race or race politics. It shows people of color having a good time going to grand balls, being seen as desirable, having fun shopping around town, and holding power and respect by others all without Black struggle or any struggle because of race, ethnicity, or culture. All the while, these cultures are not erased and given the nuanced treatment of full understanding and care that they deserve. *Bridgerton* gives Black people the luxury white people have had in media since its origin and for that it's revolutionary.

Bridgerton and color-blind and/or diverse media like it (*Hamilton*, John Greyson's *Lilies*, *Dynasty*, *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Never Have I Ever*, *Grownish*) should be the future of our landscape, especially in film and television. For everyone's benefit, it should be the norm. Exposing younger audiences to others who don't look like them and those that do will truly make all the difference. From a child who has suffered from the lack thereof, it's imperative that this change goes into effect.

