

Identity is Adaptation

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In my position paper, I want to make two points:

- That identity is adaptation. All expressions and experiences of the various components of our identities consist of adaptations of equally various cultural constructions of those identities, all of which are embedded in matrices of social power and privilege and the lack thereof.
- That identity as adaptation, especially in relation to casting, remains an understudied part of adaptation studies.

Toni Morrison's 1997 novel *Paradise* begins with the unforgettable sentence: "They shoot the white girl first." The novel then goes on to play a kind of trick on its readers. Morrison never indicates specifically who the white girl is among the main characters. Nevertheless, many of the first readers of the novel felt sure that they knew and that the novel must have made this clear. In a 1998 interview published in *Time*, Morrison explained, "Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information, but it tells you next to nothing."

Paradise forced its readers to become aware of how reading is itself adaptation as they mentally "cast" each character according to categories of race . . . and gender ("girl"), and sexuality, and class. The goal was not to create a neutral reading or adaptation—adaptation degree zero—because such an adaptation is impossible. Instead, we needed to ask ourselves what motivated our adaptations and what their effects were. Reading as adaptation does not just consist of repetitions of fixed modalities but is an intervention, intentional or otherwise, that reinforces, reinvents, reinscribes, or reimagines social constructions of identity.

In a previous LFA presentation ("Is Hermione Black? Is Anyone? Adaptation, Casting, Identity, and Ethics" LFA 2017), I argued that when it comes to adaptations from literature

into visual media, theater studies was ahead of cinema studies in terms of thinking about identity as adaptation, stemming from the “political need for a theater rooted in the shared cultural experiences of race, gender, ethnicity, ability, and other visually overdetermined aspects of identity.” By using the phrase “visually overdetermined,” I was referring to “those aspects of identity that are held to be marked by specific visual signifiers but that at the same time depend on the constant maintenance of an interpretive system for reading those signifiers.” Or as I put it in a blog post on the same subject, “Believing is Seeing.” Casting is not about accuracy but about invention, not about trying to faithfully represent a stable, fixed reality but about deliberate interventions into the social imaginary.

With increasing frequency over the last several years, identity as adaptation and the politics of casting have begun to acquire the urgency and centrality they deserve, as the default centrality of white identity has come under pressure in the recognition that “representation matters.” My ultimate recommendation is that we make questions about identity as adaptation—about considerations of how film adaptations resist or reinforce various “visually overdetermined aspects of identity”—a foundation of adaptation studies.