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Queen Phiona and Princess Shuri—Alternative Africana “Royalty” in Disney’s Royal Realm: An Intersectional Analysis

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Abstract: This paper explores the representations of two of Disney’s Africana royals, Phiona from the Queen of Katwe and Princess Shuri from Black Panther. Taking into consideration the pedagogical impact of media to reinforce ideologies of White supremacy and privilege, the depictions of these alternative royals in Disney’s royal realm are analyzed using intersectionality theory. The girls’ intersecting identities are juxtaposed with Collins’ matrix of domination concept. The analysis revealed that, while both Phiona and Shuri are challenged by the legacy of colonialization, capitalism, and globalization that constitute the matrix of domination, their approaches to these challenges are different as a result of the unique ways that their identities intersect. The author stresses that while it is commendable of Disney, and Hollywood, to allow for the affirming portrayals of these Africana girls on screen, the gesture is baseless unless a tipping point is reached where such films, and those depicting other non-dominant groups, become the norm rather than the exceptions. In other words, the challenge for those in the industry is not to resist the matrix of domination that stymies the creation of films that reflect the spectrum of the lived and fantastical experiences of Africana, and people of color; rather, the challenge is to dismantle it.

Keywords: Africana; alternative royals; intersectionality; matrix of domination

1. Introduction

Perceived as strong without super powers, Africana (African diaspora) women are also viewed, and often view themselves, as queens without crowns. Perhaps this is what renders us truly magical in our own eyes, as well as in eyes of a conglomerate like Disney. Notably, in the last decade, Disney has seen it as profitable, both in finances and in terms of an expanded audience demographic, to mingle its magic with ours in such films as *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Queen of Katwe* (2016), and *Black Panther* (2018). Yet, although *The Princess and the Frog* was much anticipated prior to its release in 2009, once screened, the animated feature film resulted in animus from some segments of the Black community. Some of the reasons for the dismay included but were not limited to the following: the film’s erasure of Tiana by a frog for the majority of the feature; the fact that she was not a princess from birth; her ambiguously ethnic and unambitious prince; and the presence of her spoiled White friend, Charlotte, appearing in big and bold contrast to the hardworking and sacrificing Tiana—all served to sour the highly anticipated cinematic experience for many. Rather than debunking the stereotypes connected with Africana women, and Blacks generally, the film served to reinforce them in creative and not so creative ways (Gregory 2010; Lester 2010; Moffitt and Harris 2014; Parasecoli 2010). Nevertheless, Disney has made progress in subsequent films featuring Africana women. Hence, while Tiana was the first Africana princess in Disney’s official royal realm, she has not been the last Africana female to hold a title, and she will also not be the focus of this paper. Rather,

alternative Africana royalty will be examined in the form of 10-year-old Phiona Mutesi from the *Queen of Katwe* (2016), and 16-year-old Princess Shuri from *Black Panther* (2018). These two girls not only improve on the representations of Africana females on the big screen, they also lend themselves to the creation of a new trope—noble Africana genius girls—that the writer defines as Africana girls who are intelligent and innovative, and who apply their knowledge and skills to advance themselves as well as their communities. Furthermore, even though one story is based on fact, Phiona's, and one on fiction, Shuri's, both girls serve as exemplars for all girls, and Africana girls especially. Needless to say, their images go beyond those usually seen in film.

According to hooks (2009, p. 255), when Blacks partake in cinematic images, it is with the understanding that those representations are designed to uphold and reproduce White supremacy. "... Cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people ... I began to realize that my students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all of the theoretical literature" (hooks 2009, p. 3). Sandlin and Maudlin (2015, p. 2) spoke specifically to the power of Disney's pedagogical practices, "from parks to movies to deluxe cruise line vacations, The Walt Disney Company goes to great lengths to create intricately fabricated fantasies of pleasure and fulfillment that promise an escape from the realities of our everyday lives". They described what they refer to as the Disneyverse as being an integral part of the affective economy, and a perpetuator of Whiteness in the form of heteropatriarchal privilege. Sandlin and Maudlin also stressed that "... we cannot rely on comfort or pleasure as a means of escaping the ubiquity of racist/colonialist/imperialist Disney narratives, there is a certain relief that comes with the relinquishment of Disney's impossible dream" (Sandlin and Maudlin 2015, p. 14). The perniciousness and the destructive impact of ideologies of Whiteness, and White supremacy in Western societies is also affirmed by the literature (Ayisi and Brylla 2013, p. 126; Lester 2010, p. 295; Pellerin 2012, p. 78). Lester (2010, p. 295) identified "beauty, fame, fortune, and desire" as being conflated with Whiteness as it relates to American media. Furthermore, when the concepts of Whiteness and White supremacy are expanded to include representations of the continent of Africa and its peoples, little shifts. Ayisi and Brylla (2013, p. 125) asserted that the media output of Western societies "consistently constructed cinematic images of African life and society that are reductive and even offensive". They added that as a result of Africans being perceived and portrayed as inferior to Whites, there tended to be an absence of culturally affirming representations. They said there is a need to move beyond the breathtaking landscapes, where the images of war, misery, and poverty remain. Pellerin (2012, p. 76) added that most of the images related to Africana women specifically contribute to the "assault of African humanity". Africana women are shaped by the experiences that result from their resistance (Alinia 2015, p. 2337). For Cartier (2014, p. 151), that resistance may take the form of a more expansive representation of Blackness on screen along the lines of Alondra Nelson's concept of future texts—namely a reconfiguration of Blackness that borrows from the past as it seeks to shift images in the present, while also envisioning novel representations of how Black women might appear on screen in the future. Cartier (2014, p. 151–52) posited that it is necessary to move beyond "... accepting blackness as a spectrum and refusing the primacy of the politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance as the most effective weapons black women wield against the intersecting oppressions of patriarchy, racism, and the prejudices that arise from class and sexuality". She added that there is still work to be done for Blackness and Africana women in order to be seen across the experiences spectrum on screen, as they exist in life. According to her, our Blackness is mined for its cool, while our full humanity is denied. Perhaps the future is now and a shift in the representations of gender and race ideologies as they pertain to Africana women on screen, as espoused by Collins (2005, p. 212) may be at hand, to a degree, in the films *Queen of Katwe* (2016) and *Black Panther* (2018).

In a sampling of reviews about the films, there was praise for the representations. Iyer (2017, p. 42) referred to *Queen of Katwe* (2016) as remarkable and an improbable Disney film. She appeared to credit Disney's new direction in the film to the insider's gaze of its director Mira Nair, who lived in the film's location, Uganda, for nearly three decades. According to Iyer (2017, p. 43), Nair refrains from

using the West as a standard for Uganda, but rather tells the story from Uganda's perspective, without whitewashing the complexities of that country. Shattuck (2017, p. 9) heralded *Queen of Katwe* (2016) as a film of female empowerment. Abraham (2017, p. 70) said that Disney had decidedly challenged its unenlightened representations of race and gender in the film, "Unlike most Disney and other Western films set in Africa and focused on Black people, this film does not employ lazy racist, heteronormative tropes. There is no White savior." (Abraham 2017, p. 71). The same can be said for *Black Panther* (2018), particularly for the character of Princess Shuri. Framke (2018) described Shuri as "... The feisty Disney princess we need and deserve". According to Finley (2018), Hickey (2018), and Thompson (2018), it is roles like that of Princess Shuri that provide role models in technology and other areas for African women. She is a multidimensional character.

The film reviews show that these two Disney productions may have the potential to be representation changers. In this paper, the extent of that change will be explored using intersectionality theory, as outlined by Windsong (2016, p. 136). The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. In a recent Washington Post piece she stated, "Intersectionality, then, was my attempt to make feminism, anti-racist activism, and anti-discrimination law do what I thought they should—highlight the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression were experienced ... " (Crenshaw 2015). Intersectionality, as defined by Collins (2015, p. 2), is "... the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequities". This paper's analysis is intended to provide a multidimensional understanding of the ways in which Phiona and Shuri are represented, and the oppressions and privilege that they participate in. Rather than engaging their identities and oppressions as additive, the theory will enable the writer to present the girls in their wholeness as they navigate what Collins, as cited in Windsong (2016), labels as the matrix of domination—namely the varied types of oppression faced by women in general, but particularly women of color. Alinia (2015, p. 2336) states "The struggle of resistance shaped around struggles of colonialism, racism, and foreign occupations has often been male dominated and patriarchal." According to Veenstra (2013, p. 648), intersecting disadvantaged identities experience oppression in a multiplicative fashion. In other words, one form of oppression is not added and/or ranked but becomes more oppressive than what would be expected "by double, triple, or quadruple jeopardy". When Windsong (2016, p. 136) speaks of shifting from an additive analysis, she cites Collins noting that one's intersecting identities do not exist discreetly and cannot be ranked in terms of privileged or oppressed, but rather one's identities intersect with one's oppressions and privileges resulting in an individual being capable of being both oppressed and the oppressor. "... The matrix of domination does not contain many pure victims or pure oppressors but instead each person experiences different forms of domination and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression" (Windsong 2016, p. 136).

Citing McCall, Windsong (2016, p. 138) would describe the forthcoming analysis as intracategorical in that the focus is on African women. The aspect of intersectionality theory, namely moving beyond an additive analysis perspective, as outlined by Windsong (2016, p. 136), will be applied as a means to unveil Phiona's and Shuri's cinematic representations as African females in *Queen of Katwe* (2016) and *Black Panther* (2018), respectively. It is important to note that Windsong (2016, p. 136) acknowledges that intersectionality theory does not dictate a design for incorporating and analyzing texts such as the films under discussion.

2. Film Summaries

Adapted from an ESPN news story, *Queen of Katwe* (2016) is set in the Kampala city slum of Katwe in Uganda. Filled with compassion and hope, the film depicts the extraordinary challenges faced by a 10-year-old Phiona over a four-year period as she strives to become an unlikely chess champion. Prior to a fortuitous meeting with the sports ministry's part-time employee, Robert Katende, also known as Coach, her days consisted of selling maize in order to supplement the family's (her mother, sister, and

two brothers) finances rather than schooling. By happenstance, she meets Coach while he is in the process of feeding children, his Pioneers, porridge in a room belonging to the ministry. He invites her to join them, and to learn an unfamiliar game. Initially rebuffed by the other children because of her offensive smell and dirty clothes, Phiona is drawn to the game. Indeed, Coach realizes that she is a chess prodigy, and highly intelligent. With his chess and life tutoring; reading lessons from his wife, Sara; the support of her mother, Harriet; and eventual formal schooling, Phiona literally rises from the poverty-stricken Katwe to compete, and win, in chess championships on the continent of Africa and in Europe.

Black Panther (2018) tells the story of the technologically and intellectually advanced fictional African kingdom of Wakanda, and its new king T'Challa—also known as the Black Panther. T'Challa and the people of Wakanda find themselves grappling with whether to share their nation's alien element vibranium to help others of the African diaspora advance and prosper. In the past, Wakandans believed that the key to their progress was best kept secret, but upon his ascension to the throne after his father's murder, King T'Challa finds himself challenged both physically and ideologically by his cousin, Killmonger. In the midst of T'Challa's crisis of conscious and country, it is his sister, Princess Shuri, a 16-year-old genius, who is instrumental in assisting him through the crisis. Shuri, in addition to being his younger sister, is also one of his greatest supporters and protectors. Everything she does is for her country; her family; and, after her father's death, her brother. Through experiments, creations, and innovations in her laboratory, she transforms vibranium, seemingly single-handedly, into time traveling holograms, technologies such as the Black Panther's suit, military armour, radio devices, and cures for previously mortal wounds. She is Wakandan royalty, its chief scientist, and a fierce warrior. Hence, when the nation comes under threat from her cousin Killmonger, she simultaneously "womans" the technology while also holding her own on the battlefield alongside the all-female Dora Milaje.

3. Film Analyses Using Intersectionality Theory

When examining the operationalization of intersectionality theory, as outlined by *Windsong* (2016), in terms of moving beyond the additive analysis of the identities, multiple layers of the girls are revealed. This section will begin with an analysis of the Queen of Katwe's Phiona, followed by one of *Black Panther*'s Princess, Shuri, in order to gain an understanding of how their identities synergistically operate with Collins' matrix of domination—namely intersecting oppressions—to manifest the young women's realities.

"Use your minds, follow your plans, and you will all find safe spaces"—Coach speaking to his chess Pioneers in the film *Queen of Katwe* (2016). This quote can be said to provide an umbrella for Phiona's journey in the film. Her knowledge and application of the game of chess also becomes a chessboard for her life. At first glance, it would appear that Phiona's life is one without privilege, based on her life conditions. She is poor, female, Christian, and Black. Yet, with all of these seeming disadvantages, Phiona is able-bodied and relatively healthy. As the hardest worker in her family, next to her mother, she enables them to eke out a fragile existence. She does not have to beg, but she suffers nevertheless.

In the film, it can be said that Phiona's major intersecting identities were her class, her gender, her Christian faith, and her race. How the identities shifted in their nexus depended on her circumstances, as well as the gaze (dominant or oppositional) being applied. Her identities pushed against the legacy of colonialism, capitalism, and globalization, which made up her opposing matrix of domination. The legacy of colonialism and its partner, capitalism, is what oppresses people like Phiona in the film; for people like her, while they are seen, are simultaneously invisible amidst the hustle and bustle of Kampala life. They are nuisance people. Fortunately, in her case, she is seen by someone who was once like her, but who managed to change his life through education. Yet, as an educated man, he is initially unable to land a coveted engineering job because of his low class status and lack of familial connections. Nevertheless, rather than despairing, he helped his Pioneers using his part-time job with the sports ministry, and his wife's teacher's salary.

Phiona's class and gender under the legacy of colonialism and capitalism are felt most acutely as she competes in tournaments at schools now occupied by the beneficiaries of the colonial past. There, she and her fellow Pioneers are scorned, and are tellingly out of place due to their lack of exposure to such environments. However, it is in these environments, and her overcoming gender stereotypes that she further awakens to the matrix of domination and her power to question and surpass her circumstances. Even when she wins a trophy for "Best Boy" in a tournament, because they had no prizes for girls, she realizes the power of the queen piece to better her life on the chessboard as well as in general.

Although now in full recognition of the matrix's impact on her life, when she traveled to Russia to play at a chess Olympiad, she forgets her skill and questions her very presence in such a space. As she played a White Canadian teenager, she lost her focus and her fortitude and resigned the match. Perhaps her meltdown was due to the pressure of globalization that affirms certain bodies in certain spaces. She seemingly felt out of place not because of her skill, but because of her experiences with class, gender, and now first-hand contact with the global negative perception of Blackness. It is a subtle but powerful scene. The messages of globalization—what one watches on film, the advertisements that one is exposed to, and the education canon—all contribute to the ideologies that promote White supremacy and Western superiority.

Back home in Katwe, Phiona recognized, through the experiences of her mother and older sister, Night, that her class, gender, and faith can make her the prey of some men, and the target of jealousy of some women. For example, after one of her brothers is hit by a car and requires stitches and hospitalization, her mother sneaks him out of the hospital just before she is to pay the bill. When she returns to her one room shack, she finds her family locked out by the landlady because the rent has not been paid. Phiona's mother explains that the money for rent was used to pay someone to drive them to the hospital after the accident, but the landlady is merciless. Before she throws their belongings into the street, she chastises Phiona's mother for being too good to sell her body to fulfill her financial needs. Harriet, a praying woman, continued to maintain her faith in God even as she walked the slum with her children and belongings in search of shelter. In another scene, Night, the sister, against her mother's warnings and tired of being destitute, becomes the girlfriend of a bad boy in order to get money, food, flashy clothes, and synthetic hair. Once she becomes pregnant, he dumps her. Phiona sees this and wonders if such a fate is inevitable for her. She asks Night if God is mad at them, and her sister responds that she does not believe God even thinks of them. Then, Phiona tells Coach that because she is poor and female, she fears that soon the boys will come for her. That nightmare never happens for Phiona. Coach and Sara's provision of a safe space for Phiona in their home, as well as schooling and chess tutoring, enable her to fight her oppressions in ways that her sister and mother could not. For while Harriet did not sell her body, she did sell a prized and beautiful garment given to her by Phiona's grandmother, so that Phiona would be able to study. In the end, although at times feeling beaten down by life, Phiona learned the aforementioned lessons vicariously, and with Coach's advice, "Do not be quick to tip your king" *Queen of Katwe* (2016), she was able to simultaneously affirm her gender, transcend her class, maintain her faith in a Christian god, and pull her family out of Katwe.

"We have watched with disgust as your technological advancements have been overseen by a child who scoffs at tradition" *Black Panther* (2018)—M'Baku speaking about Princess Shuri and to Wakandans before he challenges T'Challa for the throne. Princess Shuri's matrix of domination is similar to that of Phiona's with the legacy of colonization, and the presence of capitalism, and globalization. However, Shuri's intersecting identities, namely class, nationality, gender, race, and age manifest themselves differently in that she perceives her agency in interacting with the matrix of domination. Shuri is a supporting character in *Black Panther* (2018), she appears several times throughout the film. We are first introduced to her upon her brother's return to Wakanda after their father's death. Although she is solemn in the presence of her mother, the banter between her and her brother provides a clue to a mischievous side to her that is confirmed throughout the film. She is fully immersed in her royal

status, but does not take it for granted. She knows that her responsibility is to Wakanda, and based on the challenges for the throne, she knows that her status may not be for life. Nevertheless, being royalty does have its privileges, and in the Marvel universe, she is among the most intelligent—woman or man. Shuri knows she is also a young woman and Black. Although the matrix of domination is very real for Shuri, her identities appear to cause her no pain when pushed against the matrix. Her class alone gave her access to education, warrior training, and exposure to the global affairs that she monitors from her laboratory. And while she is taken aback by M'Baku's pronouncement about a child running the kingdom, perhaps it is due more to the sting of his words than to his menacing presence as he moved towards her at the Challenge Day ceremony. There is an African term "nommo" that means the power of the word. No doubt she is aware of this and may have momentarily felt convicted by his verbal venom.

Throughout the film her identities seem to operate seamlessly in Wakanda and in her laboratory. She creates and innovates using all of her identities. Her inventions are useful, humorous, reflective of African traditions and surroundings, and are internationally influenced. Her progress is by no means stymied by any of her identities, as long as she is dealing with Wakandans—even M'Baku. Beyond Wakanda, the story is different one. For example, once when she was called upon to assist her brother, Black Panther, through a hologram connection to Korea, she is undoubtedly aware of how Wakandans; Black Africans; and, by extension, African people, are perceived globally when Claw, a White Western villain, refers to them as savages undeserving of the power provided them by vibranium. Additionally, in spite of her healing him from a mortal wound to his back, CIA agent, Everett Ross, does not appear to thank Shuri for saving his life. Instead, nonplussed, he questions her expertise in disbelief. Rather than express gratitude for his life, he, as liberal as he appears to be earlier in the film, cannot prevent the dissonance from rising within him when he realizes that the fabled Wakanda exists. Shuri, on the other hand, is unimpressed by his Eurocentric arrogance and sarcastically calls him out for who he is when she says, "Do not scare me like that colonizer" (*Black Panther* 2018). She then shows her privilege and power by telling Ross who he is, without revealing her identity. When he asks for confirmation of being in Wakanda, she tells him he is in Kansas.

In another example, M'Baku silences Shuri when she, her mother Ramonda, and the spy Nakia, sought the help of the Jabari so as to defeat Killmonger. M'Baku cut her off when she spoke. He would not entertain the child he perceived her to be to have voice in his territory. Yet it was in Jabari Land where Shuri watched and learned from the Queen Mother—a tradition M'Baku believed her to be disinterested in, namely how to formulate the herb that gives Black Panther his power. Shuri was not a flouter of tradition, and she did not allow M'Baku's perception of her as a child or his silencing to thwart her acquisition of ancient and sacred knowledge. Not to mention, it was the same "child" who encouraged Nakia to don the armour of the Dora Milaje to fight for Wakanda against Killmonger and Wakanda's traitors. Then, while in battle, she guided the confused Ross to pilot a fighter plane to shoot down cargo planes with vibranium that was destined for sale globally by Killmonger. Shuri saw herself holistically, each identity necessary, but not all defining. It can be argued that her privileged position as a Wakandan royal first and foremost permitted this self-evaluation, and cushioned her from the often vicious impact of White supremacy and privilege that serve as the foundation of the legacy of colonialism, capitalism, and globalization.

4. Discussion

What constitutes the stark differences in how the analysis of the films using intersectionality theory differed for the alternative royals? One film is based on fact and the other on fantasy. While there may be more leeway given to fantasy, all Hollywood productions serve to replicate patterns and images of the dominant ideologies of White supremacy and privilege (Ayisi and Brylla 2013, p. 126; Lester 2010, p. 295; Pellerin 2012, p. 78; Sandlin and Maudlin 2015, p. 14). *Queen of Katwe* (2016) and *Black Panther* (2018) are not exceptions. We witness the films' directors, Mira Nair and Ryan Coogler, being able to challenge the cinematic tension between what (Kellner 2003) refers to as the modes

of production and political economy. Furthermore, the directors' oppositional gazes enabled these alternative royals to exist on celluloid. According to Kellner, "The system of production often determines what sort of artifacts will be produced, what structural limits there will be as to what can and cannot be said and shown" (Kellner 2003, p. 12). Hence, it is undoubtedly due to Nair and Coogler that viewers are able to see affirming Africana images like Phiona and Shuri on screen. As mentioned previously, Nair had an intimacy with Uganda, having lived there for several years. This appears to have enabled her to transcend the dictates that Kellner writes about, and use an oppositional gaze to tell Phiona's story in an affirming fashion. The same is true for Coogler, who gathered a predominately Africana team to tell Wakanda's story. He was so successful in his interpretation of the African jewel of the Marvel universe that some people of the African diaspora wished for Wakanda to be real. Like the alternative Africana Disney royals, Nair and Coogler recognized the matrix of domination, and resisted it—Nair in the form of a "cinematically" authentic Ugandan experience, and Coogler in terms of unequivocal box office success.

5. Conclusions

In both movies, steps were made to move beyond the stale tropes used to describe and erroneously define Africana women and people in general. Disney made room for alternative royals to exist, albeit outside of their official royal realm. Cognizant of it, the directors resisted the matrix of domination to excellent effect. They used their position to leverage their privilege in an industry with a pedagogical agenda to produce stereotypes in the representations of people of color. And while one can appreciate Disney's support for these films, resistance to the matrix of domination cannot be the focus in the quest for films that are reflective of the spectrum of experiences of Africana and other non-dominant groups on screen. The provision of a smattering of films featuring people of color borders on corrupt. More big budget feature films depicting both the lived and fantastical experiences of people of color must be produced and directed within and outside of Hollywood. Anything less relegates Phiona and Shuri to no more than diverse cinematic bumps in the road, and their royalty to the realm of illegitimacy. Box office receipts continue to indicate that audiences are ready to see, and are able to relate to, people of color on screen, as evidenced by *Black Panther* (2018) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). These films, and others produced in Hollywood, show, without question, that a foundation exists. The time is now to stop adding to it, and to actually build upon it with images that reflect and challenge us as human beings. Africana peoples, and others of non-dominant groups can create, in spite of the oppressions at every level of the production process; but should this be our challenge? Our challenge should be to dismantle the matrix of domination and its effects, rather than resist it. Imagine those films, and the box office receipts.

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