



Disability, Race, and the Black Satyr of the United States of America: The Case of Grover Underwood from Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief* and Its Film Adaptation by Chris Columbus¹

Abstract:

This article aims to present the book-to-film metamorphosis of Grover Underwood from Rick Riordan's novel *The Lightning Thief* (2005), adapted in 2010 by Chris Columbus for the screen. This character in both works is presented as an excluded member of the society: in the empirical world, as a disabled person, in the mythological one, as a satyr. What is more, in the motion picture, Grover, played by a Black actor, poses as an even more marginalised character, as a representative of a community discriminated in the USA. Therefore, the images of this character reflect the various levels of exclusion and show the ideological significance of a contemporary adaptation for the young audience. The comparative analysis is performed with the use of reception studies and critical race theory perspectives.

Key Words:

adaptation, children's and young adult film, children's and young adult literature, Chris Columbus, classical mythology, critical race theory, disability, *Percy Jackson*, race, reception studies, Rick Riordan, *The Lightning Thief*

* Anna Mik – MA, prepares a doctoral dissertation at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” at the University of Warsaw (Poland) on monsters inspired by Graeco-Roman mythology in contemporary children's and young adult culture. She works as an assistant in the project *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges* led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak. Contact: anna.m.mik@gmail.com.

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Niepełnosprawność, rasa i czarnoskóry satyr ze Stanów Zjednoczonych. Przypadek Grovera Underwooda z powieści Ricka Riordana *Złodziej pioruna* i jej filmowej adaptacji w reżyserii Chrisa Columbusa

Abstrakt:

Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie metamorfozy Grovera Underwooda zachodzącej między powieścią Ricka Riordana (2005) *Złodziej pioruna* i filmową adaptacją tego utworu w reżyserii Chrisa Columbusa (2010). Ta postać w obu dziełach zostaje ukazana jako wykluczony członek społeczeństwa: w prawdziwym świecie – jako niepełnosprawny, w mitycznym zaś – jako satyr. Co więcej, w filmie Grover, grany przez czarnoskórego aktora, jest przedstawiony jako jednostka marginalizowana w jeszcze większym stopniu – jako reprezentant społeczności dyskryminowanej w USA. Tym samym różne wizerunki tego bohatera ujawniają wielopoziomowość wykluczenia i ukazują ideologiczne znaczenie współczesnej adaptacji przeznaczonej dla młodych odbiorców. Analiza komparatystyczna została przeprowadzona z perspektywy studiów nad recepcją oraz teorii krytycznej rasy.

Słowa kluczowe:

adaptacja, film dziecięcy i młodzieżowy, literatura dziecięca i młodzieżowa, Chris Columbus, mitologia klasyczna, teoria krytyczna rasy, niepełnosprawność, *Percy Jackson*, rasa, studia nad recepcją, Rick Riordan, *Złodziej pioruna*

Concurrunt satyri, turgentiaque ora parentis [Sileni] rident.

– Ovid, *Fasti* 3, 757–8²

Storytelling is always the art of repeating stories.

– Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*

Introduction: The Case of ‘Black Hermione’

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child (Rowling, Thorne, & Tiffany, 2016), the play that is a continuation of the story known from books and films,³ raised hopes of millions of fans to enter the world of Harry Potter once again. In 2015, the play’s cast has been announced and there was a surprise. Among the actors, most easy to associate with the ‘original’ characters (Jamie Parker,

² *The Satyri come running and laugh at their father’s [Silenus’] bloated face* – Ovid, *Fasti* 3, 757–8 (A. J. Boyle, trans.)

³ The play tells the story of Harry Potter’s son Albus Severus trying to face his own destiny and also – his father’s burden.

playing Harry – with glasses, and Paul Thornley, playing Ron – with red hair), one aroused controversy, especially among the fans of the book series: Noma Dumezweni, as a Black actress playing Hermione, appeared to be an unacceptable choice for some representatives of the potential audience (Ratcliffe, 2016). Soon enough, J. K. Rowling (2015) tweeted: “Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever. White skin was never specified. Rowling loves black Hermione.” And even though some fans still posted on Twitter paragraphs from the books suggesting that Hermione might be a white-skinned girl (dylinskii, 2015), most recipients accepted the casting of an actress of colour for this role, finding it a reasonable choice because of the muggle upbringing of the books’ Hermione and her relatively bad treatment at school, where she was called a ‘mudblood’ by some (Ratcliffe, 2016).

Putting aside other issues concerning the play (Is it a part of the *Potter* canon? What is its value in comparison to other *Potter*-related works?), this example shows the ideological aspects of the adaptation process and the result of a decision of the creator of a certain text that can not only change the perspective from which their work is considered, but also upset the members of the audience that already know and love the original and have ‘imprinted’ depictions of their favourite characters. These visual representations are often very important to the audience even if its members prefer books over films – as in the statements suggesting that Emma Watson, a *White* actress, will always be Hermione, and that this character shall not be Black (Ratcliffe, 2016). This, probably, was one of the reasons for the fandom’s objection to casting a Black actress in this particular role.

There is certain risk in adapting (in most cases) literary texts into motion pictures, especially if we acknowledge the verbal-oriented approach to the adaptation, according to which a text is perceived as the ‘original,’ or as the ‘better’ variant of a particular story than its film version (Choczaj, 2011, p. 14). But, as Dorota Michułka and Ryszard Waksmund (2012) highlight: “[...] the new text [...] is not a replica of the original but a unique artistic work with its fresh *ideological structure* [emphasis added]” (p. 16). Małgorzata Choczaj (2011) also underlines that: “[...] a certain creator, in the moment of getting to know the primary material, chooses forms, adjusting the content to his or her needs” (p. 15).⁴ Therefore, every time we are dealing with a different text, with its own, often new, creators, new ideological context and, frequently, new elements simply adjusted to the new medium. Not necessar-

⁴ All translations, if not otherwise indicated, are made by the author of the paper – Anna Mik.

ily precisely indicated skin colour (in the book) and the necessity of visually specifying it (in the play) certainly would be such a case. The 'Black Hermione' example would be – at least at first glance – the realisation of the mentioned phenomenon: the skin colour of this character was not an issue in Rowling's books, even though it was never specified. On no account should it be an issue (in an ideal and healthily functioning society), and the fact that it was – in the case of the play – certainly reflects the struggle of (predominantly) White people with racial minorities.

A similar problem appears in many other adapted works,⁵ in which the casting or depictions of the characters differ from the original, like in Walt Disney Productions adaptations of children's books. Numerous cases of such issues with adaptation show that they concern mainly the most popular texts for children, from Lewis Carroll's (1865) *Alice* to the mentioned *Harry Potter*. The one that I want to focus on in this paper is the adaptation of *The Lightning Thief* (the first book of the series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians*) written by Rick Riordan (2005/2008). The story is about the titular young boy, Percy, living a life of an archetypical outcast, that finds out his father is actually a god, Poseidon. Since that moment, Percy is introduced to various concepts of the mythological world that have been transferred from ancient Greece to the United States of America (Olympus, for example, is on the 600th floor of the Empire State Building). The book has been adapted into a film titled *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (Rosenfelt, Barnathan, Radcliffe, & Columbus 2010)⁶. The director of this motion picture and the first two *Harry Potter* films, Chris Columbus (as well as the motion picture's other creators), adjusted a lot of elements that probably might have functioned better in the cinematic world than in the novel one – e.g. by making Percy older (from 12 to 16), changing several key-locations, etc. (MacNeill, 2018); nevertheless, these do not work as intended. In this paper, however, I will not list all things that have been changed – as may be expected. Instead, I would like to focus on the character whose representations in the book and the film – probably for different reasons – are particularly interesting in the context of

⁵ This phenomenon applies not only to children's culture and not necessarily only to race. Similar cases would be e.g. a German actress cast as Helen in *Troy* (Rathbun, Wilson, & Petersen 2004) while Helen was identified as a Greek woman, or a woman playing Doctor Who (Chibnall, Strevens, & Hoyle, 2018) – a character previously played only by men.

⁶ The book series was very often compared to the *Harry Potter* novels; the fact that the first *Percy Jackson* film was directed by Chris Columbus only strengthens the connection between those two universes.

the ideology of adaptation: a satyr named Grover Underwood, Percy Jackson's best friend.⁷

In his work, Riordan focuses on adapting classical mythology to the contemporary context and retells well-known ancient stories so that they would be suitable for young readers. Here, the word 'adapting' might not fully apply to the methodological approach to literature and films, however retelling myths is a type of adjustment too ('adaptation' derives from Latin *adaptare* which means 'to adjust,' 'to provide adequacy,' 'to correspond,' etc.). Nevertheless, although it has been attempted with folk tales, fairy tales, and legends (Woźniak, 2012, p. 26), it is hard to analyse an adaptation of a myth (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 8) as we do not have the 'original' version. Myths – as having been retold through the ages – are constantly transforming beings; they resemble living creatures that evolved, adjusted, and survived to this day – similarly to fairy tales.⁸ Contemporary authors also add new meanings and recreate 'old plots' which strongly connect their works to the phenomenon of adaptation – making them *aidos* of our times and contributors to the bibliographical base for the researchers of classical reception studies.⁹ Myths are products of the oral tradition. Passed from man to man, generation after generation, they have become common stories, with no author or one 'true' source to be claimed as the 'original.' Michułka and Waksmund (2012) write: "Adaptation as [an] *act of perception* [emphasis in original] becomes a sort of a palimpsest that reminds us of other works from our cultural memory" (p. 17). They also point to the pleasure drawn by the recipients from the recognition of already known features: the audience plays with the text or even becomes a co-creator of beloved works. And it can always be the most severe critic.

The first layer of the analysis – the description of the mythological satyrs – will illustrate the looks and personality traits of those creatures. Then, to analyse the film adaptation of the novel, I will attempt to present the depictions of Grover that appear in both of those works. It will allow (along with the mythological context) showing what aspects of this character (and why these particular ones) have been changed, and what are the consequences – if any – of such a transformation. It is particularly visible when we look at the character

⁷ For more about film adaptations of ancient mythology and history, see, for example, Janka & Stierstorfer (2017a, p. 24) and Marciniak (2018–Present).

⁸ However, there are very prominent standard versions of myths to which contemporary authors often refer to. One such example is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, presented as a primary source in many international media for children and young adults (Stierstorfer 2016, p. 43).

⁹ According to Lorna Hardwick (2003), reception studies cover the research tracing the motifs of classical antiquity in culture of later times and examining their meanings on various levels. Reception studies also include researching children's culture (Marciniak, 2016).

of Grover as a metaphor of disability and, in the motion picture, as a Black ‘funny’ friend of the main protagonist, a White hero Percy Jackson.

Satyrs, Fauns, etc.: From Myths to Children’s Culture

In Greek mythology, satyrs (in Roman mythology – also fauns), inseparable companions of Dionysus (or, in some accounts, of Pan, the god of nature and shepherds), originally were depicted as hybrids of a human and a goat (Grimal, 1951/2008, p. 318). Most often they would have had a torso and a face of a human, but their lower body, tail, and ears were told to be that of a goat (p. 318). Later, after the Hellenic period, satyrs were equated with Silenus – a creature with a human upper body and the lower body of a goat, similar to satyrs, only older and wiser (Stierstorfer, 2016, pp. 290–296); satyrs and Silenus were not distinguished anymore and became one type of creature with the traits of both beasts (Grimal, 1951/2008, p. 318). Satyrs rarely played any particular role in mythology (p. 318), as even Hesiod in his work calls them “worthless” and “helpless” (March, 2014, p. 435). Later on – as a result of satyrs’ depiction in Roman mythology, they were equated with Greek Pan himself (Roman & Roman, 2010, p. 384). All those creatures ended up being a unified symbol of nature and playfulness, guardians of forests and fields, and players of pipes.

Nevertheless, the main physical trait of satyrs was not the goat legs, but enormously large penises (often presented on statues from that time) that symbolised their insatiable lust and animal-driven desire for sex (with people and non-human animals). As Pierre Grimal (1951/2008) writes, satyrs were also imagined as chasing after Maenads and nymphs, who – with their consent or not – were the objects/victims of the beasts’ desires (p. 318). Mainly for that reason, these goat-like creatures were often exploited by later artists who used them in their works as a symbol of uncontrollable sexual power and fertility. However, as Grimal claims, “with time, images of satyrs lost their primal animal character” (p. 318). Satyrs’ penises became smaller (they were presented as ‘normal,’ human-sized), and even disappeared completely or were hidden by the authors of various works (e.g. on such paintings as *Two Satyrs* by Peter Paul Rubens, 1618/1619; or *Nymphs and Satyr* by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, 1873). With time, some artists also started to highlight their idyllic nature, connection to nature, passion for dancing and playing music – that might allude to the figure of Phaunos [*Faunus*], a Roman counterpart of Pan, who was also considered to be a kind and wise creature that often guided humans in their adventures. Satyrs’ depictions changed

throughout the ages, and if Grimal (1951/2008, p. 318) claims that they have lost their animal character, it is worth acknowledging what – if anything – they gained instead and if, maybe, their more recent representations point to other issues that they initially lacked in classical mythology.

We can encounter a fair amount of human-goat hybrids in the Western culture of the 20th and 21st centuries: in books such as *Baudolino* by Umberto Eco (2000/2003), or *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* by J. M. Barrie (1906); in films like *Pan's Labyrinth* (Navarro, Cuarón, Torresblanco, Augustin, & del Toro 2006), and also in television series, e.g. *The Magicians* (Gamble & McNamara, 2015–Present). They appear in children's literature too: apart from the early 20th-century Edwardian examples, like *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame (1908), we can mention a faun named Tumnus, the first creature that Lucy met in Narnia, who became her friend and guardian (Lewis, 1950), or satyrs featured in *Fableheaven* by Brandon Mull (2006), presented as playful, carefree, and a little bit lazy creatures living in an enchanted sanctuary. The words of Maciej Płaza from his conversation with Maria Urbańska and Aleksandra Wieczorkiewicz (2017), regarding the cultural metamorphosis of Pan in the Edwardian period, also apply to satyrs' and fauns' transformations in the course of their peregrinations from mythology to more modern works: “[in adult literature] Pan embodies the primordial, terrible, inhuman nature [...]. Pan who appears in children's literature [...] is different. [...] he is a good god because he is a god of animals and Nature” (p. 124).

As many mythological beasts, fauns and their 'relatives' often function as exotic, often liminal creatures that represent hidden wild emotions of a growing child. They rarely play the main role in the story and are either sidekicks accompanying the main character or representatives of the fantastic and unknown. Mr. Tumnus might be one of the rare examples of fauns that have a name and are distinct characters, acknowledged in the story. If not inferior to the protagonist, they are often separated from his or her world, as satyrs and fauns are part of the sacred world that is not compatible with the profane universe of heroes and heroines of children's culture. Grover Underwood, created by Rick Riordan, is yet another example of adapting a mythological creature into a character of contemporary children and young adult literature. He is a modernised version of the concept known from classical mythology and its later cultural transformations. Depictions of Grover – in the book and the film – will be analysed here in a chronological order.

In the Book

The Lightning Thief is the first part of Rick Riordan's pentalogy that is one of the most popular contemporary examples of telling a children's story derived from classical mythology (Paul, 2017, p. 231). As mentioned in the introduction, it is a novel about a young boy Percy Jackson, struggling with school and adapting to the society. He is diagnosed with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and dyslexia which are not facilitating interactions with the schoolmates or getting better grades. He is an outcast and does not fit in the 'normal' world. The reason for that has its roots in classical mythology. As it turns out, Percy is a half-blood person: half-human, half-god. His father Poseidon, the god of the sea, is absent and does not participate much in raising Percy; however, there is another way for him to train to become a grown man and a hero: he joins the Camp Half-Blood, a facility run by Chiron, a wise centaur, where the boy would improve his skills and prepare to face his destiny.

From the beginning of the book, a satyr Grover Underwood is Percy's protector and best friend. Before the mythological world is revealed to Percy (it is sealed under a magical mist), Grover, as a satyr, has to wear a disguise too. He is presented as a teenager with some sort of leg dysfunction and his hooves are hidden in ordinary shoes. The 'race' of the upper part of the satyr's body is also partially specified. Percy's first recognition of his friend's origins reveals Grover's possible Black roots, yet it is not explicitly defined, as he only mentions Underwood's curly brown hair (Riordan, 2005/2008, p. 3). Certainly, it cannot be assumed that every person with curly black hair is Black, especially if in the graphic novel *The Lightning Thief* (Riordan, Venditti, Futaki, & Vilarrubia, 2010) Grover has brown eyes and Caucasian skin.

Grover's first description given by Percy (he is the narrator of the book) does not present him as a very dangerous creature:

Grover was an easy target. He was scrawny. He cried when he got frustrated. He must've been held back several grades, because he was the only sixth grader with acne and the start of a wispy beard on his chin. On the top of all that, he was crippled. [...] He walked funny, like every step hurt him, but don't let that fool you. You should've seen him run when it was enchilada day in cafeteria (Riordan, 2005/2008, p. 3).

It might be assumed that Grover is several years older than Percy (in the books, the protagonist is 12 years old). Even so, he is not posed as one of the 'popular

kids' from the school. He is probably excluded because of his problems with graduating, vulnerability, and – maybe most of all – disability. However, the lack of popularity does not seem to be an issue for Grover. His main task is to protect Percy from any danger: whether it is getting in trouble at school or being almost killed by a mythological monster.

As we find out later, Grover has only been pretending to be disabled just to hide his goat legs, thus – he has a 'funny' walk. He reveals his true nature when he and Percy are in danger (Percy is accused by gods of stealing Zeus's bolt and frequently attacked by mythological monsters). When the appropriate moment comes, Grover does not need to hide his animal part anymore. Percy describes his friend as follows:

Grover ran for the Camaro – but he wasn't running, exactly. He was trotting, shaking his shaggy hindquarters, and suddenly his story about a muscular disorder in his legs made sense to me. I understood how he could run so fast and still limp when he walked.

Because where his feet should be, there were no feet. There were cloven hooves (Riordan, 2005/2008, p. 43).

After encountering the Minotaur, who also abducts Percy's mother into the underworld, the protagonist and Grover join the community of the Camp Half-Blood. Here Percy learns – *inter alia* – about Grover's goat traits: he eats soda cans; he bleeps like a goat. He is also able to read Percy's emotions, which is one of the satyr's abilities. In Riordan's world, these abilities and traits would also be: pride, stubbornness, fancying ladies (predominantly nymphs and dryads), gambling, but also the ability to control animals by playing pipes, communicating with them, and protecting them by placing a satyr's sanctuary (a blessing) on them – a sort of a protection spell, which also gives them the ability to find food and shelter (Riordan, 2005/2008, p. 257). Satyrs do not have a soul like humans and after they die, they can be reincarnated into a flower or another element of nature (p. 316).

Just like previously in the 'human' school, Grover is not appreciated in the mythological society. Chiron, the leader in the facility, says: "[...] Grover is a late bloomer, even by satyr standards, and not yet very accomplished at woodland magic. Alas, he was anxious to pursue his dream. Perhaps now he will find some other career..." (Riordan, 2005/2008, p. 78). Even though Grover resides in a habitat of mythological creatures, he still must earn his place in the heroes' society. To do that, he has to fulfil his destiny as a satyr and find the long-lost god of satyrs, Pan, which is his life's dream. Throughout the story, Grover is

most often presented as a 'hybrid,' not only of a human and a goat, but also of a human teenager and a mythological satyr. When he, Percy and Annabeth (daughter of Athena, the third protagonist) go on a quest, Grover is described as follows:

Grover wore his fake feet and his pants to pass as human. He wore a green rasta-style cap, because when it rained his curly hair flattened and you could just see the tips of his horns. His bright orange backpack was full of scrap metal and apples to snack on. In his pocket was a set of reed pipes his daddy goa had carved for him, even though he only knew two songs: Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 12 and Hillary Duff's "So Yesterday," both of which sounded pretty bad on reed pipes (Riordan, 2005/2008, p. 150).

The identity tension might even be detected in his musical taste and it might reflect Grover's double (because of his 'double hybridity' – quadruple?) nature. Not that it is impossible for one to like both – Mozart and Hillary Duff – but, apparently, when one is a satyr and a teenager, it also becomes likely.

Previously excluded from the middle-school society because of his disability, Grover, as a satyr, is also not that popular in the Camp Half-Blood, but – for different reasons. Here – he turns out to be perfectly healthy. Percy, however, is still confused and perceives Grover as Proteus: after losing his camouflage, the satyr does not become 'normal' in his friend's eyes but gains other forms of exclusion – an animal part, the goat legs. Grover becomes a mythological monster and his goat legs now represent a new form of disability. Even though with the animal part come animal and mythological skills, mentioned before, for Percy he is still a different creature, not equal to demigods. Percy even notes that Grover smelled of "a wet barnyard animal" (Riordan, 2005/2008, p. 4), automatically putting him in the discourse of animal-like dependency. Those two forms of exclusion – disability and animality – correspond to each other and represent a symbolic tension between the mythological and the disabled. Fantastic beasts become a metaphor for disability.

His exclusion, symbolised by the mythological status, is mainly focused on his disability, that in fact is his source of power he must hide from the world. In the book, it was a disability, not race, that marked Grover as excluded (which is not without a reason since Riordan's son also suffers from ADHD – thus the topic of disability seems to be important to the author). This changes in the film adaptation directed by Chris Columbus.

In the Film

As mentioned in the introduction, the issue of ‘Black Hermione’ aroused controversies and provoked a discussion about racism in Great Britain. Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017), the scholar researching and describing structural racism, devoted several solid paragraphs in her book *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* to this particular case. Black Grover Underwood’s case, however, was not as controversial in America as the ‘Black Hermione’ one was in Great Britain, probably because of the lower popularity of Riordan’s books than the *Harry Potter* series. In the motion picture, Grover Underwood is played by a Black actor, Brandon T. Jackson. He has – at first glance – similar plot functions as he had in the book: the protector of Percy (played by a White actor, Logan Lerman) and his faithful companion. The film Grover still pretends to be crippled and ‘becomes’ a satyr in the moment of need. Nevertheless, the general depiction of this character is quite different from the book in several aspects – and specifying the satyr’s skin colour might be one of them, especially considering the history and current situation of the Black people in the United States.

First of all, it seems quite risky to cast a Black person in the role of a half-animal beast that, in classical mythology, was presented as a creature that was always sexually unsatisfied and often violent towards women. It seems to be common knowledge that many prejudices from the White people towards the Black men are focused around their alleged intensified sexual needs and belief that they wait to seize their innocent White wives, as in the case of *The Birth of a Nation* by D. W. Griffith (1915). Secondly, for being half-goat, the satyr-like character is implied to have many animal or animal-like traits that also dangerously play with the idea of a Black man, often compared to unreasoning animals, that ‘real’ humans feel superior to (Fryer, 1984, p. 175). Those two comparisons should be made even before casting the Black actor, and in such a case – they should be somehow highlighted and reflected on in the film.

Another race-related association that comes to mind after juxtaposing the book and the motion picture is the type of relationship between Percy and Grover. Although Grover was subordinate towards Percy already in the book, in the film, the relationship between the boys is even more unsettling. Grover is Percy’s sidekick, he does whatever Percy wants him to do, even if it is camouflaged as potential friendship between them. When they think that Percy’s mother died, Grover blames himself for not protecting Percy’s family well enough. He is ready to take the punishment as he later does by staying in Hades. It is also indicated that Grover will have sex with the wife of Hades, the

Black Persephone, because an affair between them is outlined by Persephone's words: "I haven't had a Satyr... visit before!" (Rosenfelt, Barnathan, Radcliffe, & Columbus, 2010). Then she touches his body with her fingers lasciviously. After this implicit sexual initiation, Grover even has got a pair of small horns on his head.

In the movie, Grover loses almost every 'magical' trait that he had in the book as a satyr. He does not talk to animals anymore; he does not sense human emotions. His basic function is to throw a joke occasionally to reduce the epic or even solemn atmosphere of the story. His satyr attributes – besides the physical appearance – are the tendency to flirt with girls (not necessarily human ones) and to gamble. The depiction of a young Black boy in Columbus's film is simplified and shallow, as the director does not exploit the cultural heritage of African Americans, neither does he comment on their current social and cultural status. Grover is just a funny half-goat man, balancing the heaviness of the epic character of Percy – the White hero of a mythological story.

Conclusions: The Intricacies of Adaptation

The already mentioned Eddo-Lodge (2017) presented in her work an issue of structural racism in Great Britain. It is based on an assumption that racial exclusion lies within political, cultural, and social structures that have enormous influence on the Black people's (and other minorities') lives. The book is addressed primarily to the White readers, also to those who claim to be antiracists – they too often do not acknowledge, sometimes very complicated, cultural processes that impact the functioning of the society. Eddo-Lodge analysed numerous cases from political and cultural world (vide the 'Black Hermione' case) involving 'controversies' around the topic of the Black people's presence in the main discourse (or lack thereof). The case of Grover Underwood would probably be another one – but taken from the United States of America.

Eddo-Lodge's work is not a pioneer in this field; however, it is one of the most powerful and popular texts published recently that opens a discussion about racism that lasts to this day. Shirley Jean Better (2008) also writes that:

Cultural blindness and deafness [emphasis in original] relates to the unwillingness to acknowledge that racism is not simply the resistance of the few to equality for all, but the refusal to witness to the imbedded inequality that exists within the very social institutions that maintain the society (p. 25).

It seems like none of the creators of *The Lightning Thief* film adaptation have actually seen a problem with depicting Grover in such a stereotypical way, as 'cultural blindness' certainly affected them. While we are not able to fully analyse the racial depiction of Grover in the book, in the motion picture a lot of audiovisual elements (the way the Grover talks is also very stereotypical for the Blacks, he speaks in slang) may indicate that this character was created from a very 'White' perspective.

On the one hand, Grover clearly plays the role of a classic 'sidekick' character, with his ability to explain to Percy the intricacies of the mythological world, guide him, help him, and throw a joke occasionally. On the other hand – he might be a part of a tokenism strategy: putting a Black character in a cultural text (but generally – not only) just to forestall accusations about not involving minorities in the production, or rather – exclusion of the minority from the cultural discourse. Besides Grover, we barely encounter any Black characters (or rather Black actors playing the characters) in the movie: the main protagonists and antagonists, gods and goddesses, are almost all White. The only goddess played by a Black actress is Persephone (Rosario Dawson), a character suppressed by a dominating White god Hades (Steve Coogan). The only Black male deity is Hephaistos (Conrad Coates), also in a way excluded from the Olympus as 'lesser' of a god. The depiction of the Black minority in *The Lightning Thief* is poor and lacks any commentary from the creators and stands as a lost opportunity to raise an important discussion on social issues.

Grover's Blackness in the movie is also associated with non-human animality of his lower body. In the books, he also eats cans and bleeps like a goat. But the Black character behaving like an animal, unfortunately, brings the mistreatment of this minority in times of slavery to one's mind – and, what comes with it, the whole issue of cultural heritage of Black people in America. African Americans were treated by White people like animals and, moreover, in certain time periods they were used in freak shows as so-called 'natural curiosities' (Sani, 2013, p. 56).¹⁰ Even if the creators of the film did not attempt to create such an image, the mistake of delivering this very depiction is highly disturbing.

In contemporary popular culture, we might encounter various strategies concerning representation of any minority – also African Americans – rather in the direction to include them in the main discourse. Walt Disney Pictures created the first Black princess in *The Princess and the Frog* (Del

¹⁰ See also the case of including Black people in the European 'menageries' (Wieczorkiewicz, 2009, p. 62).

Vecho, Lasseter, Clements, & Musker, 2009), and the studio's remakes of its classic animations included Black actors, for example in *Cinderella* (Kinberg, Barron, Shearmur, & Branagh, 2015) and in *Beauty and the Beast* (Hoberman, Lieberman, & Condon, 2017), but unfortunately those too are only other examples of tokenism, symbolic inclusion to fake the equal representation of minorities. There is also a Black superhero in Marvel's *Black Panther* (Feige & Coogler, 2018), that was called "a subversive and uproarious action-adventure, in which African stereotypes are upended and history is rewritten" (Bradshaw, 2018), which probably is the proper example of the progress in thinking about contemporary culture and the need of change. Another example of the real big step towards equalisation in the American culture was the Broadway musical *Hamilton* created by Lin-Manuel Miranda and Thomas Kail (2015). The narrative of the founding of the United States and of the nation's hero – Alexander Hamilton – is rewritten into hip-hop songs, and many well-known characters from history (e.g. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson) are played by Black actors (the concept of the musical is based on the so-called 'race swap'). This is a material for a whole other analysis, but the example of such practices shows that the evolution in thinking about the representations of minorities is happening before our very eyes. Being five years 'older,' *The Lighting Thief* is not very distant to *Hamilton* temporally, and in this light, it may seem to be regressive and even offensive.

The first book from the *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* series is one of two that have been filmed; the second motion picture is *The Sea of Monsters* (Rosenfelt, Barnathan, & Freudenthal, 2013). The cinematic series has not been continued, probably because of its low popularity. There have been some rumours concerning the Netflix reboot of the series (actors would be replaced since they have aged), but those are not confirmed. Besides the films, there has also been an off-Broadway musical *The Lighting Thief* (Rokicki, Tracz, & Brackett, 2017) where Grover is also played by a representative of a minority (George Salazar, a member of the original cast, is half Filipino, half Ecuadorian). Nevertheless, in comparison to the *Harry Potter* series, the *Percy Jackson* motion picture cycle did not achieve such a level of popularity and has not become a transmedia worldwide phenomenon. Racism lying within its structure might not be the main reason for that, but maybe it was one of the factors that did not allow the franchise to develop and be loved by masses. As Walter Benjamin writes, it is an art to repeat a story (as cited in Hutcheon, 2013, p. 2), and also – to adjust it to the current trends and needs. Therefore, if another film adaptation of the books will be made, hopefully Grover Underwood, the mythological satyr, will fight for his rightful voice, instead of bleeping for help.

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