

## Got Soul?

Welcome to The Black Box News.

I'm Cyrah Ward.

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TBB News is a platform rooted in challenging the traditional functions of the black box in American Society and its interdependence on stereotypes to survive. I seek to dismantle racially influenced restrictions of the assimilated mind or what I call "box-like thinking". Through my performance of Kitchen Conversations or uncut raw commentary deeply rooted in my triggered experiences as a Black Woman and performing artist– I hope you find release and healing from the ever-present shadows of racism. It is by inviting mixed company into my kitchen that I welcome you to a journey of busting the box.

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(Theme music plays)

"Your piercing gaze.  
Makes my blood boil.  
I feel so out of place.  
I'll topple your scale finally awake.  
I will escape your judgement day..."

.....

Alright yall it's the holiday season. AND let me tell you I LOVE Christmas and New Years for many reasons. I love being around family, eating holiday food, and giving the gift of laughter because I am entertainment all by myself okay! But what I also love are the movies we see come out that are centered around self-reflection, family, and the importance of being appreciative for the lives we have.

This year Disney released *Soul*, a poetic film that was created to help us all remember the importance of knowing our spark and drive all through jazz culture as a storytelling lens. At first glance I was swoon. I mean I still am...who wouldn't be? And as Jazz baby, I was taken back to my many memories of growing up with my father playing his trumpet through the hall ways of my childhood home dreaming about the day that I would inherit my spark and creative drive as well.

So what is there not to like...?

But as I come down from a high of "damn black people just got so much damn swag and perseverance" cause I mean let's be honest... Jazz is the sauciest music genre there is – and we created it. But even after all that something still ain't sittin' right with me....

Now let me first start by saying if you have not watched Soul please pause my voice and go watch the movie. I don't seek to unintentionally spoil anything for you or rid you of your opportunity to formulate your own thoughts and opinions around your experience.

Now I also know some folks will say, “damn Cyrah everything aint gotta be about race... AND can you ever just leave things be without having to serve it to us through a critical race theory lens?”

Fortunately no. No I can't. So let's call a spade a spade. Soul is a movie sugar coated with the Christmas/New Years reflective spirit that perpetuates the idea that as Black people it is our job to not only save white people but do so by sacrificing our lives in hopes that they find themselves in the process. And who better to perpetuate this narrative than white women.

Let me start my saying, in the beginning of the movie I was hopeful that this would be the movie of the year for Disney! One that allowed Black people to tell their own narratives inside their own bodies. And while to some this feels like such a random expectation to have of Disney. Let me remind you that the first black princess, Tiana, was a frog for 90% of the movie. And though Tiana was the catalyst for children all around the world to, for the first time, witness black love on screen— her partner, prince Naveen, was also turned into a frog while a white man sold his soul to the voodoo man in an attempt to steal Prince Naveen's body and reap the financial advancements of his outrageously attractive and physically fit physic. Hmm white men benefiting off of fit black bodies...? Now you tell me there ain't some subliminal messages there....

If you honestly think that anything we consume is completely free of racial programing good or bad then The Black Box News is not for you...

But for you that think otherwise lets continue into this kitchen conversation...

Now I can't be the only one who thought damn we 10 min in and Joe Gardner this middle school band teacher who longed to perform Jazz on the main stage, has already died despite being advertised as the main character. Not only did he die but he became an ambiguously colored character that was meant to represent his soul. And I'll give it to Disney and say I too believe that underneath all ah this skin there is no black or white. But if they wanted their message to be color blind and focus on a universal humanity that we all can relate to— introducing a Black man on the brink of his well-earned artistic breakthrough in the mecca of capitalist states wasn't it.

But I digress. After the virtual death of a black man into yet another interpretation of the sunken place, Joe Gardner escaping the white light in the sky, finds himself in what Disney named “The Great Before” or the place between The Land of the Living and The Land of the Dead. Stripped of his nose Joe is only allowed to maintain his black fedora and glasses as defining characteristics. Now how do glasses sit on a person's face without a nose and in this case Joe's negro nose? Mmm...they don't but it's a movie right? Mmm, well in The Great Before we learn that there are what I would call the great organizers of the space all of which are named Jerry. They are the ones who welcome new souls and are charged with assigning and programing personalities to prepare them for planet earth. These people control who live and die. They are the people in power.

You would think they would take on the same racially ambiguous form but they appear to be Picasso inspired figurines with white outlines, a halo type of glow, and a very sharp prominent nose. When sideways their noses come to a point signifying their white class membership. We see the great organizers shuffle Joe along to an assembly as he seems to have gotten lost from the crowd of mentors. These mentors' sole purpose is to help the baby souls find their spark.

Now, Joe clearly doesn't belong there so he randomly grabs a name tag assuming the identity of another mentor. When called to the stage we realize that the nametag he picked up belonged to Dr. Bjorn T. Börgensson. Dr. Börgensson in his past life was a world-renowned child psychologist who was recently awarded a Nobel Prize. To be honest I cackled at the commentary on the awarding of white male mediocrity that quickly followed this accolade announcement. BUT nonetheless the reality is that this white man Dr. Börgensson was presented alongside Joe Gardner forcing the audience to be in conversation with the Black Body as inferior to the so called extravagance of the white man savior complex.

It's then that Joe realizes that the only way to save himself and make it to his big break performance with Dorothea Williams at the Half Note is to assume the identity of Dr. Börgensson, a white man, and help 22, a white woman, find her spark and save her from a purposeless wandering in avoidance of her time on earth. 22 and Joe are then transported to a room filled with classical music illuminated by gold spotlights that reveal Börgensson's greatest moments in life. Moments like receiving his Nobel Prize, his many therapy sessions, the times he spent in his study, his love for astrology, the joys of playing the violin, times spent out on his canoe, and the moment society raised a statue in his name to immortalize his legacy.

All of this is well and good but in a movie like *Soul*, one that is rooted in Jazz culture—the presence of strictly white bodies alongside classical music, mental health therapy, doctoral education, science, effortlessly played violins, and white men monuments, unfortunately show once again what Disney does best—and that's subliminal racial programming. It's moments like this that program folks to see classical music as the white man's territory and mental health therapy as only belonging to white bodies. Y'all ever wonder why white terrorist who go on killing sprees are always presented as victims of mental health issues....this is where those seeds are sown. Not to mention that 22 seemed to be the only person capable of deep intellectual thought which was only triggered when in the presences of all Black bodies.

I honestly can't even begin to break down all the subliminal messages in this movie—especially the fact that Moonwind Stardancer, a white hippy mystic whose clan soothed spirits through what the closed captions called “folk music” accompanied by a djembe, was supposed to be the key to ushering Joe back into his body.

Child Disney said let's throw in sounds of blackness okay honey (laughs).

Yet it's in those moments of spiritual meditation that Joe almost makes it back to his body. BUT out of excitement he jumps down to earth accidentally taking 22 with him. When they both open their eyes Joe finds himself in the body of a therapy cat with 22, a white woman, assuming his physical identity.

If this was the plot all along why wasn't 22 a black child actor? Joe could have easily played a sort of father figure or something for black children to look up to as a guiding light character. Now I will say that I appreciate Disney having the physical presence of a Black character and many others throughout the entire movie. I know I ain't the only one who feels like each black character on screen looked like someone you den seen at some point in yo life.

BUT despite the familiarity of these characters what doesn't feel right is the fact that the soul and outer therapy cat shell of Joe was so dedicated to helping 22 find herself in hopes of gaining his spiritual freedom. What makes matters worse is that 22 tried to rob Joe of his own body. While I'm sure these small details might not bother many, for me it calls upon the deadly facts that white emotions always outweigh the value of black lives. Yall, Joe was not dead! He was in a coma! So why was he being hunted down like a runaway when he had every right to try and claim his freedom because he was wrongfully taken by the great organizers – who give and take life.

I am also eerily reminded of how black body aesthetics and black cultures are constantly used as costumes by which white bodies seek to find and express themselves. Black face is a performance culture built on the very ideology that white people assuming the identity of black folks was a way of expressing their own creative understanding of “othered” bodies which we all know was driven by the need to present docile happy to serve black folk to maintain their own social status. But you also can't ignore that these performances utilized these black costumes to propel themselves into the American Dream. Just like 22.

Everybody wanna be black okay, but nobody wanna be a nigga yall. How many black faced white bodies do we come across on a daily in their darkened skin, plumed lips, corn rolls, learned broken English, and expensive body alterations, I could go on. (sighs) And I use those examples with full understanding that those costumes are rooted in the stereotyped single story of the Black cultural body aesthetic.

Now am I arguing that Disney placing a white woman in a black man's body is modern day black faced minstrelsy. Eh I feel like that's a lil bit of a stretch in this THIS case. And by lil bit I mean gone head put your index finger and ya thumb together and separate them a tad. That's the lil bit we working with okay!

But I do question why it is that Disney is so dedicated to not allowing black actors and characters to tell their own stories in a way that doesn't prioritize and center the desires of white bodies as the primary narrative. Is it too much to ask an actor like Tina Fey to say, “hmm maybe I shouldn't take this role as it doesn't seem very culturally sensitive or appropriate in any time but especially in the racial political climate of 2020?” To me that's the bare minimum when I challenge folks to use their privilege to center marginalized voices. And that goes for all folks with privilege.

Don't get me wrong. I thoroughly enjoyed the movie Soul. And a couple thug tears might have been shed. But I also believe it is possible to love something while critiquing its pit falls in the

process. In fact I think it's a requirement if any of us are truly dedicated to doing the work of cleaning up the residues of racism.

Now I want you to ask yourself...

Have You checked Outside the Box?

...

(Theme music plays)

“Cause I'm not hidin anymore.  
See I have got a reason to be.  
And I'm gone keep on movin movin shakin.  
You won't ever get ahold of me.  
And though you keep me...”

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Thank you so much for listening. Our Vibes is a song called The Table provided by April+Vista. You can catch playback of this episode, past episodes, and all others to come by visiting [EnthronedOne.com/theblackbox](http://EnthronedOne.com/theblackbox).

I'm Cyrah Ward.

Artist.

Black Woman.

Griot.

Y'all stay blessed now!

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(Theme music plays)

“And though you keep me  
From the table  
When company, comes knockin  
One things for sure  
There is nothing you can do to starve my soul  
To starve my soul”