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The Mouse Sees No Color: An Examination of the Disney Corporation's Recent Depictions of Race in American History

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ABSTRACT

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Walt Disney Studios possesses a checkered past in how its films dealt with racism and representation. Some of the earliest films involved songs and characters that go against modern sensibilities. In recent years, the studio's films have attempted to go against their forebears' racist connotations. Racism, however, proved a constant problem for the company. This paper shall explore the various ways Disney feature films addressed (or did not address) themes of racism and discrimination in its films from 1990 to 2018.

DEDICATION

For My Dad

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Spanning nearly one hundred years, the Disney corporation's history witnessed profound changes both in itself and American culture in general. Starting as a small animation studio in California, Disney and its subsidiary companies currently rank as one of the world's largest and most profitable entertainment businesses. A business like Disney is useful in understanding the ebb and flow of a time's perception of concepts like race and gender because such an entity has a vested interest in what current audiences view as acceptable and desirable. For this reason, this paper seeks to examine how Disney chose to represent race and discrimination from the company's renaissance onward. Recent events like the Me-Too Movement and Black Lives Matter's ongoing efforts show that a good portion of the American populace desire furthering race and gender equality. Subsequently, media platforms sought to create products that appealed to these individuals. However, the backlash to these movements also shows that a sizable minority were uncomfortable with such changes. Prominent examples of such distaste with change include the Charlottesville riots and the racially motivated Trump presidency. Not wanting to alienate the former completely, and more importantly, their money created a prerogative in the company still visible in films to this day.

As this paper will show, the result of these two competing ideologies was a process of deracializing issues of race and further reinforcing American exceptionalism ideals. Using the theoretical framework laid out by Edward Said and Toni Morrison, this paper will put the studio in the Orientalist and Africanist position when its feature films portrayed racism, discrimination, and of course, minorities. Particular attention will be paid to how the company shifted its approach in response to backlash from minority advocacy groups and the gaffs that occurred in the desire to reach wider audiences. The first chapter will look at how this colorblind approach

began in the 1990s and how it evolved in the subsequent thirty years. Chapter two examines the types of coding Disney creators implemented in carrying out their trademark colorblind approach between 1990 and 2007. Examples of blatant racism, backlash, and the company's response will form a significant chapter aspect. The last chapter explores the final aspect of Disney's colorblind approach, the settings of its films. Fantasy in one form or another always formed a significant aspect of Disney films, but the studio intentionally leans into the fantastic when discussing hot button issues to offend segments of their audience. The result of these three phenomena is a colorblind approach that either ignores racism entirely or presents an alternate history where race never played a role in the shaping of the United States.

CHAPTER 2. THE MOUSE SEES NO COLOR

In 2012, a YouTube video surfaced depicting a previously unaired segment from the 2002 film *Lilo and Stich*. The movie followed Lilo, a young Native Hawaiian girl, as she befriended an escaped alien fugitive named Stitch. The scene in question involved Lilo walking along the beach to teach her new friend about life on Earth. Throughout the scene, Lilo white tourists asked if she "can speak English," and one woman even remarks to her companion that Lilo is a "real native."[1] These remarks showcased the aloofness and insensitivity that many white tourists have towards Native Hawaiians, but the scene ultimately makes fun of such ignorance. The scene ends with an exasperated Lilo tricking the tourists into thinking that a tsunami is imminent, causing panic and showing the people's foolishness.[2] This scene suggested that Disney writers were unafraid to tackle themes of racism that occur in modern times by poking fun at the general ignorance of people who hold such beliefs. The inclusion of the scene, or more specifically, the lack thereof, suggests an issue prevalent in the company.

The exclusion of this scene and others like it show an unwillingness for Disney to address racism or inequality in the United States. For some unknown reason, the short scene from the movie was cut relatively late in production. The writers and animators most likely had a little issue with the scene, as evidenced by the fact that the scene was partially animated and fully voiced acted by before its removal.[3] The most probable reason for the scene's removal was that a producer believing the scene would make white audiences in the U.S. uncomfortable. Studio executives never gave an official reason for the scene's removal, but the likelihood of this

[1] Dona Dickens, ""Lilo & Stitch" Deleted Scene Took On Racism" *Buzzfeed*, October 2, 2012, accessed June 6, 2020, https://www.buzzfeed.com/donnad/lilo-stitch-deleted-scene-took-on-racism

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

assumption is furthered by the fact that the scene never appeared in *Lilo and Stitch*'s home releases. This exclusion is perplexing given how most studios, Disney included, include many deleted scenes in the home release of their films to entice more purchases. Knowledge of the scene only appeared once an anonymous person released the scene on YouTube in 2012.[4] This series of events gave heavy credence to the idea that it was someone in Disney's corporate sector that decided to remove the scene. This removed scene was but one of the numerous examples of how the Disney corporation did its best to avoid race issues in the United States in its wide release films.

The Mouse House was no stranger to controversies over race. Films like *Dumbo*, *Fantasia*, and *Lady and the Tramp* all contained caricatures of people of color. *Song of the South* became the most notorious of these early Disney films because of its depiction of master/slave relations in the American South and its characterization of African American characters. Changing times, however, caused the company to reevaluate its use of such stereotypes seriously. Under Michael Eisner and Frank Wells's leadership, Disney's renaissance in the 1990s saw characters of various races and nationalities take center stage in the numerous feature films release. While imperfect in their exaction, these films exemplified how the company (at least superficially) attempted to pave a new road for itself in a multicultural world. Two of these films even addressed the racism that had plagued much of the company's earliest features.

Released amid the Disney Renaissance, *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchbacked of Notre Dame* taught the evils of judging one based solely on physical appearance. The former dealt with racism in particular, with the song "Savages" illustrating the fear and hatred that can arise from

[4] Ibid.,

such feelings. The song appeared at the film's climax when Jamestown settlers and Iroquois villagers were preparing to go to war. The lyrics in the song make a strong connection between racism, hatred, and warfare, with the opening words stating,

"What can you expect

From filthy little heathens?

Their whole disgusting race is like a curse

Their skin's a hellish red

They're only good when dead

They're vermin, as I said

And worse."[5]

The song's lyrics paint both the settlers and the Native Americans in a negative light, arguing that racism and fear are toxic for both parties and leads only to destruction. Historical inaccuracies aside, the movie stood as one of Disney's earliest examples discussing race and racism. Pocahontas possessed racism themes between the unknown "other," but the following year, another Disney film effectively portrayed institutionalized racism.

1996's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* tackled themes of accepting differences in the world. The most prominent example of this theme is the title character, which people feared because of his physical deformities; however, one of the side characters' arc deals with an entire ethnicity's oppression. Esmeralda, a Romani woman, and the rest of her community faced

[5] *Pocahontas*, Disney Plus, directed by Eric Goldberg and Mike Gabriel, (Los Angeles: Disney, 1995)

oppression from the film's antagonist Judge Claude Frollo. Frollo saw the Romani peoples as heathens that must be destroyed, even killing a Romani woman and nearly drowning an infant Quasimodo in the film's opening scene.[6] Frollo's persecution of the Romani heightened to such a degree that Frollo forced Romai's to live in a secret ghetto called the Court of Miracles. At the climax of the film, Frollo arrested the Romanies and nearly burned Esmeralda at stake for refusing his romantic interests.[7]

Frollo's use of power and the injustices that Esmeralda and Quasimodo fought against served as parallels for many types of historical forms of oppression. Like apartheid and the Jim Crow South, discrimination Frollo and government members like him enforced this discrimination (many of whom may have shared the sexual urges that contradicted their racism.) In the pivotal scene of the film, where Esmeralda demands justice for her people's oppression, she carried the same themes as those like King, Gandhi, and Mandela. This action also implies to audiences that it is right to stand against oppression, even if the oppressor is a figure or institution of authority. Such a message is one reason why critics and historians have praised *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Film historian Verthandi Wonka noted that the arc of Esmeralda and Quasimodo are incredibly similar. Through Esmeralda's race and Quasimodo's physical deformities, both characters showed that outside appearance does not dictate their soul's nature.[8]

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[6] *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Disney Plus, directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise (Los Angeles: Disney, 1996).

[7] Frollo's attraction to Esmerelda remained one of the most blatant implications of sexual desire in a Disney feature film.

[8] Verthandi Wonka, "Why 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame' is one of Disney's greatest films" *Medium*, August 21, 2017, accessed June 9, 2020, https://medium.com/@Vbwonka/why-the-hunchback-of-notre-dame-is-one-of-disney-s-greatest-1c605ef30bec.

The seemingly progressive image of Disney these films created became tarnished less than ten years after their release.

The release of 2009's *The Princess and the Frog* epitomized Disney's issue when conversing about the topic of racism and social injustice in the U.S.. The motion picture reimagined the famous fairy tale by placing the New Orleans setting before the Great Depression. The film centered on Tiana, a young African American woman, and Prince Naveen, a monarch from an unnamed African country. Through a series of events, the characters learned to accept themselves and overcome obstacles in the typical Disney fashion in the form of magic and talking animals.[9] The film touched on self-love and female empowerment themes, aspects that the company had experimented with in its film for the previous decade. While critics praised the film for how its characters played gender roles, others denounced how the creators ignored one of the most prominent aspects of life in the 1920s, Louisiana.

The biggest critique leveled against the movie is that it depicts Jim Crow Laws' aspects but never addressed why these aspects exist. Tina, a young woman with dreams of opening her restaurant, lived with the other African Americans in a shantytown with little-to-know electricity or running water in the neighborhood.[10] Contrasting these poor circumstances was Tina's best friend Charlette La Boeuf, a white woman who was the heiress to her father's vast estate and wealth whom Tina worked for as a maid and cook. The housing and occupation of Tina was typical for African Americans during this time due to legalized discrimination. However, the

[9] *The Princess and the Frog*. DISNEY PLUS. Directed by John Musker and Ron Clements. Los Angeles: Disney, 2009.

[10] Ibid.,

writers either intentionally or unintentionally mislead audiences as to the reason behind Tina's circumstances.

While the most prevalent in academia's eyes, The *Princess and the Frog* was by no means the only Disney film in the twenty-first century to sidestep racism in the service of their color blind stance on American racism. These films include *Black Panther*, *The Lady and the Tramp* live-action remake, and *Zootopia*. The specifics of how the company avoided race (even in films where racism is the focus) shall be discussed the following chapters of the paper. Suffice to say that of this paper's writing, Disney has avoided directly addressing racism prevalent in the U.S. in its feature films for the entirety of the company's history. The impetus for the removal of these themes came as a result of the company's marketing, heavily influenced by the racial politics in the U.S. The avoidance of race may seem contradictory given several feature films, but there lay a critical difference between the *Princess and the Frog* and other films in the Disney canon.

While both *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Pocahontas* addressed the inherent evil of racism, both go to painstaking lengths to ensure that no direct parallels could be drawn to race issues in the modern-day U.S. Notre Dame's Hunchbacked had the most straightforward reason for lacking modern analogs because of its setting in Medieval Paris. *Pocahontas*, however, was at once an anti-colonialism piece and an endorsement for the U.S.'s values. The instigator for *Pocahontas*' problems and the main antagonist was Governor Ratcliffe, the leader of Jamestown's white settlers. At first glance, Ratcliffe's hatred and contempt towards the Native Americans may draw similarities to the U.S.'s treatment of First nations. The creators instead made sure to heavily code the villain as British instead of the American coding given to John

Smith, the film's secondary protagonist.[11] By coding John Smith as American, the filmmakers subtly suggest that Americans are inherently above racism and treating others as lesser, a stark contrast to what the U.S. did to Native American tribes. More recent Disney films went so far as to suggest that racism never occurred in the U.S. at all. Why the company went to such painstaking lengths requires a firm understanding of the marketing strategy that turned Disney into an entertainment juggernaut.

Films like *Pocahontas* possessed much heavier emphasis on racism than the small scene in *Lilo and Stitch*, making former films appear more progressive than others that were created nearly ten years later. The reason for this discrepancy links to the perpetrators of these acts of racism. In the earlier film, none of the characters who used racist rhetoric were white Americans. This progressiveness is not to say that *Pocahontas* is entirely free of issues of racism or whitewashing. Many Native Americans took issue with the film's reinterpretation of history, especially how the writers glossed over many of the more negative aspects of the title character's life.[12] The writers were willing to address gender issues and racism in a much more progressive manner than any previous movie from the studio to the film's credit. For example, Pocahontas is given more agency as a female character than any film previously put out by Disney, and the movie takes clear stances on the evils of racism. While imperfect in its execution, *Pocahontas* served as one of Disney's earliest examples of addressing race issues. However, the film could only have such a message because of the intentional lack of white Americans in the story.

[11] The methodology and importance of this coding will be further explored in the paper's second chapter.

[12] Chris Bodenner, "Does Disney's Pocahontas Do More Harm Than Good? Your Thoughts" *The Atlantic*, June 30, 2015, accessed June 7, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/06/pocahontas-feminism/397190/.

If flawed, the progressive nature of Pocahontas can be attributed to how the film lacks racism from white Americans. Given the film is set during the founding of the first permanent English colony in the New World, such characters' lack is a given. The film went to great lengths to remind audiences that none of the white characters in the film were American, with constant remarks about how Jamestown's settlers would bring riches for the Queen and England. Historian Leigh Edwards argued that the film propagated multiculturalism where a distinct and marginalized group is assimilated into the homogeneous Western consciousness. “To show different cultures,” Edwards stated, “the writers made the mistook cultural sameness for cultural difference.”[13] In this context, the writers of Pocahontas were attempting to address racism without offending people who hold racist beliefs. Such stance is made easier because the film is set nearly 400 years in the past because denouncing the actions of people who lived so long ago normalized. Disney appeared to make this method their default when addressing race in their wide release features, but issues arose when racism was all too modern.

To not offend any party in the U.S., Disney openly sidesteps race issues if they touch on issues that occurred in the country’s past or present. This stance on race issues is why the scene from Lilo and Stitch was cut late into production. While no nationality is given for the characters making racist comments in Lilo and Stitch, Hawaii's accents and location mean one can safely assume these characters are American. The methodology laid out by Edwards meant that by addressing the racism portrayed in the film, the studio would risk upsetting many white Americans who made similar comments while in Hawaii. This type of hypersensitivity only appears in Disney films where the characters are either American. Pocahontas fit into this

[13] Leigh Edwards, "The United Colors of "Pocahontas": Synthetic Miscegenation and Disney's Multiculturalism." *Narrative* 7, no. 2 (1999): 147-68. Accessed June 7, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20107179.Copy

through its constant reminders none of the white characters were American. Narratives about race can exist in the Disney features, but only if those with racist beliefs are expressly not American.

Disney's hardline stance on racism in the U.S. stemmed from the brand image that the company spent nearly eighty years developing. Disney's image is wholesome, family-friendly entertainment that the broadest number of consumers could enjoy. Lorraine Santoli served as head of the company's marketing department between 1990 and 2001. The memoir of her time in the Mouse House sheds a great deal on the methods behind the company's image, chiefly the protection of this image at all costs. In terms of Disney, maintenance of this image came through synergistic marketing, where all forms of the company's product conform to a basic version. Thus, creating a synergistic system where each of the products (in Disney's case films) adds to one another and further reinforces the company's image.[14] Disney's marketing department achieved this system by ensuring that all of the films produced corresponded to the family-friendly nature first established with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1939.

Disney's dedication to the synergistic marketing strategy appeared in virtually every department. Everything produced had to meet with the Disney image. These efforts meant cast members working as characters had to undergo special training for theme parks so their character's signature would perfectly match the signatures in another Disney theme park.[15] Depending upon their character, cast members act as if they do not know modern technology or

[14] Lorraine Santoli, *Inside the Disney Marketing Machine: The Era of Michael Eisner and Frank Wells* (New York: Theme Park Press, 2015): 82-83.

[15] Luke Winkie, "Odd Job: What's it like to be a real-life Disney princess?" *Vox*, Feb 21, 2020, accessed November 5, 2020, https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/2/21/21121163/odd-job-disney-world-princess-mulan-pocahontas.

events while in character. These instances exemplified the amount of work Disney put into ensuring consistency in the intellectual properties. Similar efforts appeared when the company purchased other studios and continued franchises under the Disney banner. For example, upon the release of *The Avengers* under Disney, it was noted how characters no longer used their pointer finger alone when giving directions.[16] This use of the "Disney point" (index and middle finger) is uniform in its films and theme parks because using just the index finger was considered extremely rude in certain cultures. Disney's marketing department achieved this system by ensuring that all of the films produced corresponded to the family-friendly nature first established with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1939.

Disney's tone and subsequently reinforced with each successive film, is family-friendly with the broadest appeal possible, but the studio still contained progressive elements. The main consequence of this strategy is that the company remained mostly conservative in its approach to hot button issues such as race and gender.[17] This phenomenon is evidenced by what professor Amy Davis referred to as the insistence of traditional gender norms, even into the Renaissance under Eisner and Wells.[18] Examples included how most Disney princesses possessed a romantic interest, and most females' characters revolved around a romance of some type. However, Disney still managed to show a great deal of progressivism in its films. Davis noted how the amount of

[16] Lucy Yang, "You'll never see a Disney employee point with one finger — here's why" *Insider*, February 2, 2018, accessed November 11, 2020, https://www.insider.com/why-disney-employees-point-with-one-finger-2018-2#:~:text=According%20to%20INSIDER's%20Micaela%20Garber,one%20finger%20is%20considered%20rude.

[17] This conservatism only appears in Disney's feature films. Made for TV movies, television shows, and books published by the company possessed much more creative leeway in what could and could not be addressed. Subsidiary companies and studios not directly tied to Disney (i.e. not Pixar, Lucasfilm, or Marvel) could address much broader and adult topics.

[18] Amy Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (Eastleigh, U.K: John Libbey Publishing, 2006): 75.

agency given to each female character subtly increased with each consecutive film the studio produced and how modern films went against gender tropes. Heroines like Esmerelda, Audrey (*Atlantis*), and Captain Amelia (*Treasure Planet*) were much more assertive than previous female characters from the studio, all willing and able to use physical force required to do what they deemed as right.[19] These depictions of women suggested the company was eager to create female characters that better represented their audiences, and some even argued that this belief existed in Disney from the very beginning.

Unconventional interpretations of gender roles found in Disney's feature films add to the desired broad appeal. Though typically subtle, these additions sought to encourage children who did not ascribe to specific gender norms to find a character they could relate to. The most predominant example of such a character was Mulan, a Disney princess who foregoes many specific aspects of princesses. Davis stated that Mulan exemplified the idea for women the "idea of finding oneself and combining both sides of one's self" through her redefinition and partial acceptance of traditional gender norms.[20] Douglas Brode even contended that Disney subverted common ideas about gender from the beginning, stating that Snow White's character (chiefly her increased age and willingness to surrender to her senses) countered 1930s concepts of "good" femininity.[21] While this progressivism may seem counterintuitive to the brand image that Disney tried to instill, these elements aided the company's overall goal. Brode argued that while cultural concepts of gender and sexuality still limited the company, Disney still managed to showcase progressive ideals in its earliest works. For example, Disney's *Peter Pan* attempted to

[19] Amy Davis, Good Girls and Wicked Witches, 207.
[20] Amy Davis, Good Girls and Wicked Witches, 202.
[21] Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005): 118.

"demystify sex" through the Tinkerbell character. The animators based the character off of the Marylin Monroe centerfold picture from Playboy's first issue to "present sexuality as wholesome and healthy, contradicting attitudes of the 1950s."[22] Depictions such as this, however, still fell into the sexual objectification of women that made women into a lesser. While more progressive than earlier iterations, Brode's argument still made femininity into a hinderance. This subtle progressivism also appeared in the caricatures that the company produced in its older films.

Counter to the color-blind approach used in the feature films. Some argued that Disney's films were progressive in their way. Some historians have defended these characters, if not the stereotypes meant to represent. Douglas Brode argued that Disney was quite progressive in his views towards race. For example, the crows in Dumbo all represented common stereotypes of African Americans in the 1940s. However, instead of being antagonists, some of the few showed any empathy towards the title character.[23] In this context, the crows went against the predetermined stereotype the white audiences had for African Americans. Brode even argued that Disney's most controversial film gave African American characters previously unheard-of amounts of agency. Uncle Remus from *Song of the South* was groundbreaking for the time it was created because it was the first instance where an African American was made into the moral center of the film rather than a tertiary piece of the background and portrayed blacks as hard-working, honest people.[24] Brode did not dispute that such characterization was problematic in certain respects; instead, Disney subverted many race expectations at the time. Like with his assertions on gender, Brode's declarations still shinned too favorably on Disney because

[22] Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*, 132-133.

[23] Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005): 51-52.

[24] Ibid.,54-55.

minorities still remained inherently lesser in the films. These subtle means type of progressivism, however, created certain issues for the company.

The combination of the studio's desire to depict the harmonious world Walt Disney envisioned and the equally vital need not to offend certain groups, namely middle-class whites, created the conundrum that Disney found itself in. The casting choices, story elements, and theming found in the studio's films from the past twenty years suggested that Disney sought to embrace the diverse future Walt Disney supposedly envisioned fully. However, the prospect of upsetting white Americans hindered the studio.

Fear of upsetting whites in America characterized Disney's stance on race in their feature films from the 1990s to the late 2000s. The studio chose to juggle its desire to address its lack of diversity and racism while trying not to what they felt would alienate white Americans. This creative decision was heavily linked to profits for the company. While Disney was a worldwide entertainment powerhouse, most of its profits came from sales in the U.S. Being the majority in population and levels of economic advancement, whites also stood as the premier consumers for Disney's goods. Economist Manuel Aalbers stated redlining (the lack of finical opportunities) primarily hit non-whites as a conscience effort by white businesses and governments to keep minority races poor. As a result of these practices, whites still possess an unequal share of both money and economic advancement.[25] By addressing forms of racism that do or have appeared in the country, producers and executives probably believed that such a decision would lead to controversy in white communities with a subsequent loss in revenue from

[25] Manuel Aalbers, *Place, Exclusion, and Mortgage Rates* (Hoboken, New York: Jon Wiley & Sons, 2011): 14-15

boycotts of the films. Recent experiences for Disney have suggested that these fears were not complexly unfounded.

Disney's handling of the *Star Wars* franchise came under a great deal of scrutiny from its fan base in a manner much more vehement than previous controversies in the franchise. The bulk of this blowback came following the release of 2017's *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. Fans denounced numerous aspects of the film, from the handling of certain characters' death to the perceived political message of the film. Hatred for the film rose to such levels that specific individuals attempted to review bomb the movie like *Captain Marvel* the year before.[26] While this particular type of outrage from fans was new, such controversy levels are not uncommon in the *Star Wars* franchise. The *Star Wars* fanbase had a long history of attacking actors and creators in the franchise, sometimes to outrageous extremes. For example, fans of the franchise bullied Jake Lloyd into quitting the acting profession due to his portrayal of Anakin Skywalker in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*.[27] Llyod's unceremonious exit from acting showed just how intense the ire of those in the Star Wars fanbase could be. This ire differed in the sequel trilogy because these hostile feelings came from a place of sexism centered on its female lead's characterization.

The outrage over Rey's characterization in the *Star Wars* franchise suggested that fans were uncomfortable with a female lead with equal competence to a man in the same role. Many fans decried Ridley's Rey character as a Marry Sue archetype. Marry Sues are defined as a

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[26] Julia Alexander, "Rotten Tomatoes tackles review-bombing by eliminating pre-release comments" *The Verge*, February 2019, accessed March 3, 2020, https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/26/18241840/rotten-tomatoes-review-bomb-captain-marvel-star-wars-the-last-jedi

[27] Teo Bugbee, "The Real-Life Fall of Anakin Skywalker: Jake Lloyd's Journey From 'Star Wars' to the Slammer" *The Daily Beast*, July 2017, accessed March 5, 2020, https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-real-life-fall-of-anakin-skywalker-jake-lloyds-journey-from-star-wars-to-the-slammer

female character who exhibits only positive traits, can beat any opponent, and overcomes any obstacle with the barest minimum of effort.[28] Rey did fit the parameters for this archetype on the surface because she succeeded in everything; however, there appeared to be a heavily gendered bias towards defining Rey as such.

The definition of Mary Sue, or more aptly the male equivalent of Marty Stu, fits all the main protagonists of the Star Wars franchise. Both Anakin and Luke Skywalker became masters of The Force, ace pilots, and mechanics with little to no effort.[29] By design, Rey emulated the hero's journey these last characters went through, with the only difference being Rey's gender. The backlash against a female character so similar to other male protagonists suggested that some Star Wars fanbase members showed discomfort with a woman possessing the degree of competency displayed by male heroes. While the *Star Wars* example centered on the sexism of a small yet extremely vocal subset of fans for a property, this controversy underscores how reactive audiences could be to seemingly unimportant aspects of films. Taken in terms of race, the knowledge of possible controversy created a unique aspect of Disney films.

Disney's films were only willing to discuss racism if and only if those characters possessing racist beliefs were expressly not American. *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* only addressed oppression issues because the films' oppressors were English and French, respectively. If writers chose to add sections that discussed racism from white Americans, then studio executives quickly removed even small scenes of this nature. The most extreme case of

[28] Dani Di Placido, "Why Is There Still Controversy Surrounding 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi?'" Forbes, July 2018, accessed March 6, 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2018/06/28/why-is-there-still-controversy-surrounding-star-wars-the-last-jedi/#582fd4455297

[29] Ibid.,

this ideology came in *The Princess and the Frog*, where the film outright ignored the legal segregation that was the cornerstone of life during 1920s Louisiana. This choice worsened because the film still portrayed segregation without acknowledging the reason behind these circumstances. To keep white Americans comfortable, Disney's films portrayed the U.S. as a bastion of racial harmony where racism does not or ever has existed. This type of American exceptionalism is disingenuous to the long history and the country's current problems with how the government and its people interacted with different races and ethnicities. While it is unreasonable for children's animation to tackle such sensitive and complicated issues like racism entirely, completely ignoring these issues is the wrong approach.

The Color of Friendship became the most direct attempt of the company to address racism up to that point. First aired in 2000, the Disney Channel Original Movie (DCOM) told the story of Mahree Bok, a young white woman, as she lived for a semester abroad in the U.S. with a black family congressman. Set in 1977, the film shows Bok's journey of learning the incongruities of the apartheid system in her home country of South Africa. This education is done primarily through her friendship with Piper Dellums, the daughter of her foster family. Through this friendship, Bok learns the ridiculousness of judging someone based on their skin color and the injustices inherent in creating legal systems based upon such assumptions. The film ends with Bok becoming a part of the movement to end apartheid in South Africa.[30] While the film never received a wide release, the message of overcoming racism proved to have a great deal of influence for *The Color of Friendship* earned a Prime Time Emmy Award based on its

[30] *The Color of Friendship*. Directed by Kevin Hooks. Screenplay by Paris Qualles. Walt Disney Motion Picture Studios, 2000.

themes of acceptance. The film showed that Disney had the potential to talk about sensitive issues like race, and this success can be accredited to the behind the scenes work of the film.

Directed and written by African Americans, *The Color of Friendship* marked one of the first instances in the company's history where such a combination existed. This perspective bleeds through into the film, creating honest and realistic depictions of how racist views manifest themselves and are created. For example, many of Bok's views derived from her police officer father, creating a dialogue on police violence and systemic racism in a time where Rodney King's injustices made national news.[31] The film was also too experimental for the film, marking one of the few instances where a Disney movie broke away from its peers' chipper tone to focus on a more grounded story. These factors combine to create what many critics cite as the most progressive films on race Disney as ever produced.[32] However, a candid discussion about racism may have only been possible given the medium on which the film was released.

Given the willingness to address such complicated and sensitive issues as racism the previous year, the editing decision in *Lilo and Stitch* can appear to be quite a shock. The difference in approaches is linked most heavily to the difference in the release. Being a wide release motion picture, *Lilo and Stitch* had a great deal more money involved in its production than *The Color of Friendship* (80 million compared to the 20 to 30 million given for most DCOMs).[33] Given the amount of money put into its wide release films, producers most likely

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[31] Ibid

[32] Cydney Lee, "'The Color of Friendship' Is Still Disney Channel's Most Progressive Movie About Race" Vice, February 26, 2020, accessed June 6, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/wxepk4/the-color-of-friendship-is-still-disney-channels-most-progressive-movie-about-race

[33] *The Color of Friendship* is mostly likely on the lower end of this spectrum because Disney is more likely to put more money into a DCOM if the film is a part of a series and/or involves musical talents that go on tour for live concerts. Examples of films that are on the

believed that their movies must be as acceptable as possible to the broadest array of people. Adding a scene that depicted common forms of racism, even if said scene lasted for less than two minutes, could upset the balance that those in the marketing department sought to achieve. With its comparatively lower number of viewers and profit practically assured (add revenue for television programming is negotiated ahead of time) Disney could afford to have such an overt message against racism in its DCOM.[34] This combination of factors is why many DCOMs and Disney Channel series possess much more progressive themes and plotlines. Having little in the way of risk means that Disney can afford to have less popular entertainment forms possess more progressive agendas. The platforms partially explain the disparity in the depiction of race, but *Lilo and Stitch's* removed scene also breaks from previously wide motion pictures in the Disney catalog.

This conservatism only appeared in Disney's feature films. Made for TV movies, television shows, and books published by the company possessed much more creative leeway in what could and could not be addressed by creators. For example, Rick Riordan's books and published through Disney Hyperion all tackled subjects Disney's feature films went well out of their way to avoid. Riordan's *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series touched on child homelessness, racism, and ableism within the first chapter of the first book.[35] Riordan's other works and those published by other authors contracted through Hyperion all showed a

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higher end of the spectrum are the *High School Musical* and *Camp Rock* series. Given the experimental nature and lack of heavy production requirements in the film, *The Color of Friendship* is most likely received only the bare minimum for its production.

[34] John Schoen, "How do cable companies make their money?" *CNBC*, April 20, 2015, accessed June 6, 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2015/04/20/how-do-cable-companies-make-their-money.html

[35] Rick Riordan, *The Sword of Summer* (Los Angeles and New York: Disney Hyperion, 2015): 4-5.

willingness to address hot-button issues. Even the dreaded American racism found its way into the publishing company. Julius Kane (a character in Riordan's *Kane Chronicles*) spent much of his time teaching his son of the discrimination he would face by due to his dark skin tone.[36] It is unknown whether this progressiveness is truly sincere or merely a marketing strategy, but regardless of this difference, drew a clear distinction between publishing and visual media. This tonal difference also appears in the television department of Disney as well.

The Color of Friendship could talk about race in such a frank manner because the Bok character is South African. While parallels to apartheid and Jim Crow were evident, the film still took great pains to focus solely on the injustices in 1977, South Africa. An approach is somewhat flawed when one remembers that the American Civil Rights Movement was less than ten years before the movie's events, but the writer either knowingly or not a side-stepped direct reference to these issues. While a knowledgeable audience could tie the themes of police violence and systemized racism to then-modern events like the Rodney King incident, the young children and teenagers may not have been able to draw such connections. One interpretation of the film could argue that the U.S. was free of racism. Dellums is the daughter of a black congressman, something that would not be possible in the segregated country of 1977 South Africa. The film subtly linked segregation and racism together, creating a narrative where only forms of blatant racism like exclusion and slurs are genuinely racist. Such a simple view on race issues is expected when coming from a film targeted at children, but the exclusion of these issues in the U.S. proved problematic. Taken to its logical extreme, Disney's approach with race ultimately ended with an interpretation of American history decidedly free of race.

[36] Rick Riordan, *The Red Pyramid* (Los Angeles and New York: Disney Hyperion, 2010): 78.

The television show *That's So Raven* represented the only instance property with the Disney name addressed racism in modern America. The show followed the teenage psychic Raven Symone's life as she traversed the trials and tribulations of growing up in middle-class America. The episode in question, entitled "True Colors," centered on how Raven and her friends discovered a local clothing store manager's discriminatory practice. The friends successfully concoct a plan with video evidence of the manager's racist actions, resulting in their termination and a happy ending.[37] Being a sit-com targeted at children, a quick and simple solution to such a severe issue was unsurprising. What is surprising is that "True Colors" initially aired in 2005 and remained the only piece of Disney's IP that directly addressed American racism. Several small subsidiary companies touched on such issues, but anything with the Disney name stirred well clear of this topic.

Disney's refusal to address racism was particularly confounding with the increased emphasis on diversity and real-life issues in their stories. From the Disney Renaissance on, the company began to expand its themes found in its media empire. This strategy meant creating stories that gave more agency to women and non-white characters in terms of films. *Big Hero 6*, *Zootopia*, and *Moana* were all examples of this continued push for diversity. *That's So Raven*, *The Proud Family*, and *The American Dragon: Jake Long* were the television corollaries to these more expensive wide releases. 2017's *Andi Mack* was generally considered the most progressive of these shows addressing sensitive topics such as coming out.[38] Some journalists like Aisha

[37] *That's So Raven*, "True Colors" Disney Plus video, February 4, 2005.

[38] Stacy Grant, "Andi Mack" Is Disney's Most Progressive Show" Yahoo News, October 30, 2017, accessed November 6, 2020, https://www.yahoo.com/news/andi-mack-disney-apos-most-180903710.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAI9qqfzG17py6NWRC39E-wjiYGNEcO0RRbeKJw3sRcv-

Harris argued such a push for diversity was the company's attempt to counteract the history of racism. Such an argument did have its merits because racism remained the only topic these progressive shows and films refused to address. What Harris and other journalists failed to realize was this was a dilemma the country had for decades.

The most prevalent outcomes of Disney's approach to addressing race in their films were oversimplification or the outright failure to acknowledge race. In the case of films like *The Color of Friendship* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the writers took a clear stance that the oppression faced by marginalized groups is inherently wrong. The types of racism and oppression expressed in these films are generalized into simplistic forms of blatant racism and segregation. Such an approach is expected; however, when considering these films were intended for children who may not be able to grasp more subtle and common forms of discrimination that occur in the world. The company also went to great pains to suggest that even these very upfront forms of prejudice are relegated to places, not in the U.S.

In summary, Disney's outright refusal to address the historical racism and injustice in its films expressed itself in its feature films through the ignoring that such believes do or ever had existed in the U.S. The most common method through which this goal was achieved was in removing any white American expressing any sentiment that could be construed as racist. This approach usually consisted of deleting scenes where such views appeared, but some films rewrote history to conform to this doctrine. In either case, these methods were disingenuous to the film characters because (as they typically were in the films where such removals took place) racism was a significant part of people's lives. By ignoring such issues, Disney implied that

9mckIriMfqNVSqt2DhUP_XL1DGlZ3rzKBJ-NUY_GSl0XXCYSj89X0bH2K9rcQKEWg_M-hzEAzqR6-Ip0C568jn-lY68agOttfWmAzlTw1BdUo1M3HNseMMJqobVdxhfm

these problems do not exist even when racial injustice has received more and more attention because of movements like Black Lives Matter.

The company has shown a willingness to address and pioneer issues for decades, but generally only in gender. Racism, primarily that which occurred in the U.S., remained a taboo that the company outright refused to acknowledge. Films like *The Princess and the Frog* and 2019's *Lady and the Tramp* completely reenvisioned how the American South treated persons of color for the sake of its films. Even in films where racism is central to the plot, Disney's refusal to link bigotry and the U.S. appeared. Both *Zootopia* and *Black Panther* made race-based injustice key to their plots but were hindered from fully exploring these issues because of the studio's stance. While these films were still groundbreaking for the company, the message for each was partially hindered due to the inability to link the films' events to modern-day American culture properly.

So far, this paper has discussed why Disney refused to acknowledge American racism in its films. Studio executives feared that venturing into territory deemed too controversial would negatively impact Disney's brand image and, more importantly, the sales of the film and merchandise. While this fear was somewhat well-founded, there was a little link between a film's controversy and poor box office reception. Both *Star Wars* and *Captain Marvel* received a great deal of negative press because of the perceived political message seen in both films, but both grossed well over $1 billion throughout their runs.[39] Regardless of these numbers, race continued to be an issue better left avoided.

[39] Leigh H. Edwards, "The United Colors of "Pocahontas": Synthetic Miscegenation and Disney's Multiculturalism." *Narrative* 7, no. 2 (1999): 147-68. Accessed June 7, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20107179.Copy

The following two chapters shall explore Disney's methodology for ignoring race in its films. Chapter two will focus on the implicit and deliberate coding that Disney's content creatures instilled into the characters. Whether intentional or not, this coding created a homogenous environment that Disney characters inhabited, which allowed racism to be ignored in the story generally. Chapter three will look into how the fantasy versions of life Disney created in its films occasionally bump into harsh realities. Such an occurrence was most common when the film set bore a striking resemblance to a real-world place or time. Disney may be the epitome of animated cinema in North America with wholesome and even progressive messages behind each film, but the ignorance of racism both in its history and that of the U.S. proved a continual failing for the company.

CHAPTER 3. DIVERSE CHARACTERS CODED WHITE

For as long as the company existed, Disney Studios made whiteness the default aspect for its characters. Excluding anthropomorphic characters like Mickey Mouse and Goofy, the studio only employed white characters as the main protagonists. The Disney Renaissance witnessed a change in this assumption of characters, but this change was literally only skin deep in many cases. Films like *Aladdin* and *Mulan* took what it meant to be a Disney protagonist away from being white, though several issues arose with the studio's implementation. The most vocal reactions to Disney's attempted diversification came in the various forms of coding that writers and animators imprinted on these characters. Such coding is merely a continuation of the synergistic marketing strategy the company continually used throughout its history. *Mulan*, *Aladdin*, and *Pocahontas* were similar to other Disney features because Disney films share similar story beats, character design, and other quintessential Disney features. However, the studio's features and deliberate choices also effectively code any "good" character as white Americans.

Disney's coding's strength was evidenced by how strongly people believe how a specific character should look. The best example of this outrage came with Halle Bailey's casting as the title character for *The Little Mermaid's* live-action remake. Bailey, a young African American woman, began her career on the Disney channel and was also a part of the duo Chole X Halle, meaning she possessed the credentials to portray Ariel. Despite her apparent acting talent, numerous individuals decried the choice on social media outlets. These posts stated that Bailey did not look like the "real" Ariel even though mermaids are mythical creatures and these

individuals claimed they would boycott the film upon its release.[40] Despite being relatively few, these comments illustrate how even the small act of casting a black actress for a role could raise issues in Disney's consumer base. The company, however, did not back down from its decision.

Following the *Little Mermaid* casting controversy, Disney made a public announcement that the casting would not be changed. Posted by Free Form (a cable network owned by Disney) on Twitter, the announcement stated that "The Little Mermaid could be black because Danish people could be black,"[41] This statement was made about how the creator of the Little Mermaid was a Danish music composer, his nationality and skin tone being the focus of detractors to Bailey's casting. However, free Form went on to state that the nationality of the creator and character had nothing to do with the skin tone of the actress portraying the character. "The character Ariel is a work of fiction," the post stated, "[if] you still cannot get past choosing the incredible, sensational, highly-talented, gorgeous Halle Bailey is anything other than the inspired casting that it is because she "doesn't look like the cartoon on," oh boy, do I have some news for you … about you."[42] This fiery and impassioned speech showed that the company stood by its decision to cast a black actress for one of its most famous roles. Disney's adherence to their choice of actress underscored the much more prevalent and harmful coding that the company used well into modernity.

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[40] Vanesa Romo, "Disney Cable Channel Defends Casting Black Actress As New 'Little Mermaid'" *NPR*, July 9, 2019, accessed July 13, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2019/07/09/739950750/disney-cable-channel-defends-casting-black-actress-as-new-little-mermaid

[41] Freeform, "Response to Halle Bailey's casting," *Instagram*, July 6, 2019, accessed June 12, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/BzmMah4gw-g/.

[42] Ibid,

The most prevalent way in which the company coded their characters as white Americans are through their accents. At least to English speaking cultures, accents can carry a substantial amount of meaning given cultural and period context. Rosina Lippi-Green's work on dialect found that films use a regional accent to further reinforce negative stereotypes about a group. Referring to the process of negative coding as language subordination, the author found that most American films code dialects not in the standard American accent as inherently lesser. Lippi-Green stated "the process of language subordination targets not all variations, not all languages varieties, but only those which are emblematic of differences in race, ethnicity, homeland, or other social allegiances which have been found to be less than good enough."[43] Language subordination therefore has serious consequences because it creates a level of implicit bias against those who do not conform to the "normal" dialect. In Disney's films, language subordination formed a major aspect of the coding process for its characters. However, accent also had other uses for the studio.

In terms of children's animated features, accent coding served two purposes aside from the language subordination. Sehar Azad furthered Lippi-Green's line of inquiry and concluded that dialect in these films is used to either form a setting or creates characterization. In the case of the latter, Disney characters from a real-life place possessed accents relevant to their background like Alice (*Alice in Wonderland*) and Jane (*Tarzan*). Azad stated that the second use of dialect is problematic in much the same reason that language subordination creates a hierarchy of "good" accents. Azad found that from 1990 to 2000 half of Disney's animated villains spoke

[43] Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent : Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011): 332, Accessed January 26, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

in either Standard British or another foreign accent.[44] However, the author also noted that most foreign accented characters (neither American nor British) found in their research were portrayed positively. Azad's research showed that while most non-Americans were presented positively, there still existed a very pro-American bias in how film makers chose to accent their characters. Several of Disney's most popular films highlighted this bias.

The previously mentioned *Pocahontas* exemplified this method of accent coding in Disney animation. The title character (voiced by Irene Bedard) and John Smith (voiced by Mel Gibson) possessed a standard American accent that contrasted the Governors faint yet distinct British accent. Kocoum, a warrior in the Powhatan village, also possessed an accent reminiscent of those attributed to Native Americans in traditional cinema. Kocoum, along with most Native Americans in the film, all possessed a similar accent while also expressing the same antagonism towards outsiders seen in most of the Jamestown colonists.[45] Pocahontas and John Smith's standard American accent and their beliefs in equality correlated accent with morality. This creative choice engrained that those who used this type of accent were free of the racial prejudice at the crux of the film's message. The historical inaccuracies aside, this type of coding disregarded the years of oppression the American government instituted against Native Americans into modernity. While public education generally overlooks the atrocities done to the Native American peoples, European colonialism directly led to the deaths of over eighty percent of the Native American population. At its worst, the accent coding reinforced common stereotypes of specific cultures and ethnicities.

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[44] Sehar Azad, "Lights, Camera, Accent: Examining Dialect Performance in Recent Children's Animated Films". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2009.

[45] *Pocahontas*, Disney Plus, directed by Eric Goldberg and Mike Gabriel, (Los Angeles: Disney, 1995)

Due to many factors, *Aladdin* became imboiled in a series of controversies stemming from blatant and coded racism. The film created a great deal of controversy upon its initial release due to its representation of Middle Eastern culture. Arab-Americans and Arab groups across the world decried several aspects of the film, especially the introductory song "Arabian Nights." The song's opening line stated:

> Oh, I come from a land
>
> From a faraway place
>
> Where the caravan camels roam.
>
> Where they cut off your ear
>
> If they don't like your face
>
> It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.[46]

The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee met with Disney executives immediately following the release of *Aladdin* to denounce the blatantly racist lyrics in the song. In response to these denouncements, Disney's distribution president promised to have the lyric altered upon home video release. The altered song removed references to cutting off appendages, but the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee president stated the change did not go far enough. Albert Mokhiber, the organization's president, called for the word "barbaric" to be removed from the film because it likewise placed Arab culture in a bad light.[47] However, Disney

[46] *Pocahontas*. DISNEY PLUS. Directed by Eric Goldberg and Mike Gabriel. Los Angeles: Disney, 1995.

[47] David Fox, "Disney Will Alter Song in 'Aladdin': Movies: Changes were agreed upon after Arab-Americans complained that some lyrics were racist. Some Arab groups are not

did not remove the word, and "barbaric" remained a part of Aladdin's songs as of the writing of this paper. Disney's use of lyrics may be the most blatant example of anti-Arab sentiments in the film, but the coding employed further cemented these ideals.

The combination of phenotype and accent coding in non-white characters was most prevalent in *Aladdin.* While taking place in a fictional country meant to represent the thirteenth-century middle east, many of the characters speak in an American accent. On its own, this choice misrepresents Middle Eastern culture but is almost benign given the more blatant example found in "Arabian Nights." The real issue with voice acting came in the fact that several characters did possess an Arab accent. Like with *Pocahontas,* this accent coding implied a moral failing existed in those of Middle Eastern accents. These characters, however, were exclusively villains and spoke in an extremely exaggerated accent. Examples of such characters included the main antagonist Jaffar and the town guards who attempted to arrest Aladdin in the film's opening scene. Contrasting these villains were Aladdin, Jasmine, and the Genie with their standard American accents. The sultan possessed a slight British accent, which further continues American-centric coding because the villainous Jaffar easily tricks his character. The American coded characters easily saw through Jaffar's words and knew that he did not have the kingdom's best interests at heart. While obviously coded to give specific anti-Arab sentiments in audiences, Jaffar's characterization falls into a specific type of stereotype that existed for Middle Eastern men for centuries.

As the main antagonist, Jaffar represented a power hunger megalomaniac similar to other villains like Maleficent. However, aspects of Jaffar bared a striking resemblance to stereotypes

satisfied." The LA Times, July 10, 1993, accessed January 7, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-07-10-ca-11747-story.html.

Said mentioned in *Orientalism*. Chiefly, Jaffar represented the strong sexual desire, and corruption Europeans believed existed in Arab governmental systems. While not overtly sexual in appearance, Jaffar's desire for Jasmine served as a primary motivator for his coup de tat for the throne. Disney began to explore themes and implications of sexuality during the Renaissance (*the Hunchbacked of Notre Dame* being the premier example), and this trend began with Jaffar's motivations in *Aladdin*. Jaffar's primary objective in the film was the power for power's sake. However, the control of Jasmine formed a major motivator as well. Jaffar's interest Jasmine never went further than the desire to own her, a link to women's perceived status that orientalists believed existed in the area. Said stated that orientalists propagated barbarity notions in the Middle East as justification for their continued involvement in the region.[48] In a similar vein, suggesting that men like Jaffar viewed women as only property told young audiences the culture Jaffar meant to represent was not a benevolent one. The increased involvement of U.S. forces in the Middle East following several oil crises undoubtedly influenced this type of American Exceptionalism. Jaffar may have represented the main villain of *Aladdin*, but he was by no means the only Arab character negatively coded in the film.

The guards in *Aladdin* represented the perceived brutish nature of Arab men Orientalists chose to see in the region. Being the first antagonists in the film, the guards' actions showcased the harsh justice that existed in the region. The audience's first and only time with these characters is the chase sequence in which they attempt to capture the title character for his theft. The threats of physical violence the guards used against Aladdin told the audiences that the punishment for stealing a single loaf of bread was severe in the kingdom. This scene furthered the removed section of Arabian nights that poked fun at the supposed draconian justice system

[48] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 38.

implemented in Middle Eastern Cultures. The accents the guards possessed were also the thickest and exaggerated of any character in the film. In the context of coding, the choice to give these characters such an accent meant that the studio continued the same process from *Pocahontas* of coding Americans as good through the accent. Aladdin, Jasmine, and the Genie all employed standard American accents that told audiences they were the protagonists and morally right. While not as prevalent in other Disney films, *Aladdin*'s accent code began the tradition of using American accents to code to audiences which the morally righteous characters were in their films. Accent, however, only functioned as the second type of coding that existed in *Aladdin*.

This difference also existed in the character models. For example, Aladdin possessed more traditional European features to match his American accent. Conversely, the villainous Jaffar had exaggerated features of someone of Middle Eastern descent.[49] These two factors combine to subtlety suggest to audiences that traditional Islamic and Middle Eastern features are inherently bad while European/American features are inherently good. While understated in the film, this depiction showed how heavily entrenched the concept of orientalism was in Western films. This message became further refined in the phenotype of the characters. *Aladdin* was not the only film in the Disney Renaissance to have Orientalist sentiments.

While not heavily overt, Esmeralda possessed much more implied sexuality than any previous Disney character. The best example of this implied sexuality came from the dance she gave during the beginning of the film, this dance that stoked the desire of Frollo, Quasimodo,

[49] Ilan Michael-Smith "The United Princesses of Disney" in Ed. Pugh, Tison and Susan Aronstein. *The Disney Middle Ages: A Fairy-Tale and Fantasy Past* (New York :Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 213.

and several other men.[50] Such sexualization is not inherently bad for a character; in fact, such themes present excellent role models for women because they show that one does not have to be the traditional "good girl." Esmeralda's sexualization issue is that such depictions unwittingly fall into the stereotypes that intellectuals like Edward Said railed against. Said argued that Western orientalists made the Near and Middle East (where Romani peoples originated) out to be controlled utterly by their sexual urges. Such depictions argued the inherent immortally of their culture and the superiority of Western values.[51] Esmeralda's sexuality was never the Ludacris extreme that many orientalists wrote, but the implied sexuality is a stereotype of people sharing the character's ethnicity. This stereotype was never overtly mentioned, and the sexuality was somewhat progressive for the studio, but having someone of Romani descent be the first to possess these characteristics is problematic. *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* showed that Disney was unafraid to tackle blatant forms of racism in its wide release motion pictures, but other films show the company could handle other, more discrete forms of racism.

Accent and phenotype coding also appeared in 1998's *Mulan*. American actors voiced the majority of the film's cast, with one notable exception. Much like Jaffar before him, the character Chi Fu possessed the same types of coding to further drive home to audiences the negative aspects of his character. Chi Fu character design included facial hair and teeth commonly attributed to East Asian caricatures, particularly the bucked teeth seen in anti-Japanese and Chinese from the first half of the twentieth century. Unsurprisingly, the character did receive some backlash from Chinese audiences for its portrayal of Chi Fu. Such controversy stemmed both from Chi Fu's characterization but also how the film generilaized by of China's

[50] *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Disney Plus, Directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise (Los Angeles: Disney, 1996)
[51] Edward Said, *Orientalism,* 38.

history and culture.[52] Unlike Jaffar, however, Chi Fu's did not function as an outright villain but more as a personification of the sexism the main character faced through the film's course.

Chi Fu's position as head of the kingdom's bureaucracy and his continued disparaging remarks about Mulan's gender encapsulated traditional Chinese views on gender roles. A significant theme in Mulan centered on overcoming gender norms. With its emphasis on filial piety and the requirement for male heirs, Song Dynasty China made a perfect setting for such a theme. Similar to that found in *Pocahontas*, the coding employed in *Mulan* implied to audiences the superiority of American culture and values. While initially slow to accept Mulan for her merits, the American coded characters in the film eventually recognized Mulan's value to society as more than just a wife. Chi Fu, however, never learned such a lesson and had to be forced to change by others. A cynical reading of Chi Fu's character makes him a justification for imperialism because the traditional and toxic values he represented could only be changed with "enlightened" American characters. In essence, he was becoming a modern evolution of "White Man's Burden."

Along with accent, Disney's animated characters' hair and facial features all subtly imply an American cultural heritage. In her paper, Dorothy Hurley stated that the association between "whiteness" and "goodness" was most clearly defined in how animators drew hair for their characters. Except for Snow White, Jasmine and Mulan are the only Disney Princesses to possess black hair. Jasmine is also physically different from her fellow princesses because she was drawn much more suggestively with her "cinched waist, voluptuous bosom, long hair…" that separates

[52] Brian Chen, "'Mulan' 1998: A Moment of Joy and Anxiety for Asian-American Viewers", *The New York Times*, September 4, 2020,

her physically from other princesses.[53] Hurley argued that this physical difference implied the "exotic" nature Western culture had continually ascribed to the Middle East for most of the twentieth century. This characterization was simply an extension of post-colonial sentiments that Edward Said continually railed against. According to Hurley, Jasmine and Aladdin's accents combined with their black hair put the characters in a peculiar position where they were "good" and "exotic" in terms of white coding.[54] This position is shared by many Disney characters who do not fall into the typical European system. In terms of American history, the coding of hair and body played a significant role in two recent Disney features.

Coding and setting form the crux of issues associated with *The Princess and the Frog*. All three forms of coding presented themselves in the film. Presenting what some would call a film about black characters with their blackness removed. For now, the setting shall be ignored and picked up in the following chapter. Accent coding uniquely presented itself in *Princess in the Frog* because, except for Naveen and his butler, all of the film's characters were Americans. The "good" characters still spoke in standard American accents, albeit with the tings of a traditional southern accent befitting the film's New Orleans setting. However, accent coding still took effect because the further a character's accent drifted from the standard American correlated with their morality or education. Dr. Facilier, The Butler, and several bayou hunters all possessed either extremely thick Cajun accents or a slight British accent that linked them as antagonists. The only outlier to this trend is the Ray character, but he still fits into the bumbling country hick stereotype. Although the film regularly made lighthearted jabs at whiteness in *The Princess and*

[53] Dorothy L Hurley, "Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess." *The Journal of Negro Education* 74, no. 3 (2005): 221-32. Accessed June 1, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/40027429.

[54] Ibid.

the Frog, the film still possessed coding aspects that stripped individuality from the black characters in the film.

The hair and lifestyles of African Americans in *The Princess and the Frog* and 2019's *Lady and the Tramp* showed the studio's basis against natural hair. In both films, African Americans are always portrayed with straight and freshly styled. While Hurley never went into great detail about hair's importance beyond color, African American hair was typically policed in American society and deemed unprofessional.[55] The straight and full quality of each Disney Princess are both phenotypes associated with Caucasians. It is worth mentioning that Tina served as the only official Disney Princess with short hair. The others were drawn with at least chin-length hair, while Tina's is perpetually kept up. This same trend occurred in *The Lady and the Tramp*, for all African American women kept their hair in traditional styles for the early twentieth-century upper class. While Hurley only focused on black as a physical color, black persons' natural hair contained the same negative connotations the author espoused. The coding of whiteness in African American characters also appeared in the occupations and the physical features.

While Tina's accent did make sense, the character's separation from those like her in the film did offer an issue. Like other African Americans in the film, Tina offered her services to the affluent white residents of New Orleans. Michael Smith wrote this aspect of the world created a degree of separation between the white and non-white characters that symbolized the difference

[55] Gwen Aviles, 'Hair Love' wins Oscar for best animated short film" *NBC*, February 8, 2020, accessed August 25, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/oscar-nominated-hair-love-normalizes-celebrates-black-hair-creators-say-n1132826

between the real and fake new Orleans in the world.[56] Tina's dream of breaking the cycles of poverty in the film may appear to be good at first but becomes problematic given Princess and the Frog codes race relations in its world. In terms of the film's world Tiana is attempting to become white in order to make a better life for herself, an element referred to as passing. This aspect of the film was not lost on several historians.

The Princess and the Frog did break from a common stereotype found in black characters to the film's credit. Skin tone in both white and black communities became a significant symbol of masculinity and femininity. Darker shading was associated with masculine traits and was occasionally coded as dangerous in white communities. Conversely, lighter tones aligned with feminine traits and female beauty. *Princess and The Frog* broke from this tradition by giving Tina darker skin than her male counterparts in the film. Tina possessed the darkest shading of any human character in the film. This choice is commendable given the other questionable directions the film took, but the argument could be made that the skin tones still conformed to certain stereotypes. For example, Naveen had lighter skin and expressed a few traditionally masculine traits during the film's runtime. His carefree attitude could be construed as a reluctance to do traditionally masculine activities such as obtaining gainful employment. Tina's hardworking attitude could be interpreted as a forming from her darker complexion in a similar vein. Her interactions with Naveen teach him to take more responsibility for his actions, in essence showing him out to become a man truly.

[56] Ilan Michael-Smith "The United Princesses of Disney" in Ed. Pugh, Tison and Susan Aronstein. The Disney Middle Ages: A Fairy-Tale and Fantasy Past (New York :Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 213

Following the *Princess and the Frog's* release, several historians published works that detailed the tone-deafness and insensitivity of Disney's ignoring segregation in the film. One of these papers included Ajay Gehlawat's "The Strange Case of "The Princess and the Frog:" Passing and the Elision of Race." Gehlawat's paper argued that the 2009 film followed the tradition of place persons of color into situations where they become animals for most of the film.[57] This trope appeared in other Disney features such as *The Emperor's New Groove* and *Brother Bear*, and Gehlawat argued that the use of the trope in this instance relates to the practice of passing as white. Tina is only able to achieve her dreams through her experience as a frog. Gehlawat links this plot device to passing because, in both instances, one takes on aspects of something they cannot function in society.[58] In Tina's case, this passing allowed her to become a business owner, an instance that has historical precedence. Gehlawat's work showed how Disney's modern renditions of race still carried with it the problems the company sought to avoid. Other authors looked at the film's depiction of 1920s New Orleans in a more performing since.

Coding in the film served to make African Americas appear "whiter" and allowed to divert attention away from the racism in 1920s Louisiana. The three main white characters in the film were written to show just how not racist they were. Charlotte is kind and caring to Tina, continually offering to give her friend the money to open her restaurant. Big Daddy La Buff attempts to arrange the marriage between his daughter and Naveen.[59] Other white characters,

[57] Gehlawat, Ajay. "The Strange Case of "The Princess and the Frog:" Passing and the Elision of Race." Journal of African American Studies 14, no. 4 (2010): 417-31. Accessed June 1, . www.jstor.org/stable/41819264.

[58] Ibid.,

[59] While female empowerment is a big theme in the story, some the traditionally sexist aspects of Disney's older films were still present in *The Princess and the Frog*.

anthropomorphic animals, or otherwise were made as comic relief, such as the lighting bug Ray's exaggerated Cajun accent.[60] Historian Sarita Gregory argued that these depictions of whiteness are caricatures meant to contrast the African American characters. Gregory stated that "The story means to appeal to all races, by giving blacks someone to look up to [Tina] and giving whites humor they are familiar with, thereby getting the audience to laugh at unrecognizable whiteness."[61] In several ways, *The Princess and the Frog* attempted to sidestep the issue of African American oppression by poking fun at aspects of white culture. The addition of good-hearted humor made the white characters more likable, but the presence of such an enormous racial divide in the film undercuts much of this progress. Despite attempting to turn Tina into an inspirational tale for people of color, her coding as a Disney Princess negated much of these efforts.

As one critic of the New York Times stated, "The movie addresses, or rather strenuously avoids, race," and this sentiment characterized almost every aspect of the characters.[62] The writers went to great lengths to argue that Tina and the other African Americans faced solely economic struggles and no racial discrimination. This idea appeared in Tina and Charlotte's friendship, whose relationship was much deeper than the employer-employee dynamic that would have existed at the time. Naveen also discredits race as the cause of ones' circumstance because he is the prince of a prosperous nation. Naveen only sought a wife in the film because

[60] Lawrence, Naveen's British butler, offers another avenue of comic relief through his low-class antics. His desires in the film mirror that of the prince, further solidifying the concept of personal choice that the film argues.

[61] Gregory, Sarita McCoy. "Disney's Second Line: New Orleans, Racial Masquerade, and the Reproduction of Whiteness in "The Princess and the Frog"." Journal of African American Studies 14, no. 4 (2010): 432-49. Accessed June 1, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/41819265.

[62] Manohla Dargis, "That Old Bayou Magic: Kiss and Ribbit (and Sing)" *The New York Times*, November 24, 2009, accessed June 4, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/25/movies/25frog.html

his parents demanded he settles down or be financially cut off from the allowance he lived off.[63] While Naveen's troubles may have begun in his own country, the consequences of the prince's actions suggest to the audience that personal actions are the most significant factor in one's life instead of race. The film also ignores racism through its depiction of through more direct means.

Following the controversies created by the *Princess and the Frog,* more recent Disney feature films heavily diminished the role of coding but did not altogether remove them in some cases. The most explicit examples of this backpedaling came in the form of 2018's *Black Panther*. The film removed almost all of the accent coding prevalent in Disney films from the past thirty years. Ryan Coogler (the film's director) managed this feat by meeting with the actors to create an accent similar to those in central Africa, where the fictional country of Wakanda exists. As *The Atlantic* stated, "Black Panther did not wash away its African influences, but revealed in them."[64] Such revelry is evidenced in both the sound design and the costuming for the film. The former implemented traditional percussion instruments used in central Africa, while the latter utilized aspects of various African societies to create a melting pot of cultures in Wakanda. Odokum praised *Black Panther* for not turning Africa into a spectacle or exotic location as other Western mediums have but used inspiration from the continent to respectfully showcase the beliefs and customs of those who call the region home. For example, the process of lip extension by implemented the Mursi peoples is seen regularly in background characters and is shown as a part of everyday life.

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[63] *The Princess and the Frog*. DISNEY PLUS. Directed by John Musker and Ron Clements. Los Angeles: Disney, 2009.

[64] Christopher Orr, "Black Panther Is More Than a Superhero Movie
The director Ryan Coogler's addition to the Marvel pantheon is a superb genre film—and quite a bit more." *The Atlantic*, February 16, 2020, accessed August 28, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/02/black-panther-review/553508/

2016's *Moana* similarly showed the company's attempts to distance itself from the continual coding that existed in its previous features. Set in a Polynesian inspired world; the film told the story of Moana as she sought to fix the supernatural threat to her homeland's wellbeing. Some Polynesians were understandably skeptical about the film due to representation issues, with one group decrying original versions of the character Maui as a caricature of American stereotypes concerning Pacific Islanders.[65] In a surprising move, Disney created the Ocean Trust, a foundation of Pacific Anthropologists and scholars with the express purpose of ensuring that *Moana* represented Polynesian culture in the most respectful way possible. Creators met regularly with the trust to discuss character design, song lyrics, and nearly every aspect of the film. The trust also had a great deal of creative control over the production process, shutting down the director's desire to have navigators dressed in the headdress and face paint of Papua New Guinea. The most significant change the trust implanted concerned Maui, whose original character design had little hair traditional in Polynesian legends.[66] The creation and powers of the Oceanic Trust showed that Disney took more excellent care in representing other cultures than in previous years. This change, however, did not mean the company was entirely free of controversy.

One of Disney's biggest scandals surrounding *Moana* came from the merchandising department rather than the animation studio. The item in question was the Maui costume meant to hit shelves in September of 2016. The costume consisted of a body stocking covered in tattoos and represented someone of a darker skin tone. Activities decried the addition of the costume,

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[65] Joanna Robinson, "How Pacific Islanders Helped Disney's Moana Find Its Way" *Vanity Fair*, November 16, 2016, accessed January 8, 2021, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/11/moana-oceanic-trust-disney-controversy-pacific-islanders-polynesia

[66] Ibid.

calling it a form of cultural appropriation and brown facing. In response, Disney had the costume pulled from stores and issued a public apology.[67] This incident shows that while the company attempts to make corrections on its historical and present acts of racism, the corporate desire to gain money still creates pitfalls Disney must deal encounter. The sale of costumes has always been a significant factor for the company. The Disney Princess line of toys was created for the express purpose of selling merchandise, especially costumes. Problems arose in this model when treating culture as just another costume for consumers to purchase. This same controversy arose in previous films like *Mulan* and *Pocahontas*; however, the studio is still willing to sell them. Public attention may be short, but the fact remains that cultural appropriation remains a vital part of segments of the corporation.

While falling short in many regards, the use of coding and cultural appropriation in Disney films and merchandise showed a great deal of improvement in the past thirty years. While undeniably improvements of the blatant racism of the Gold and Silver Ages, the major works of the Disney Renaissance still expressed severe aspects of pro-white and American coding in how films represented several cultures. In terms of films like *Pocahontas* and *Aladdin*, such coding suggested that Americans possessed an inherent moral superiority regarding racism and discrimination. The backlash from activist groups and historians to these films caused the company to quickly change focus by the mid-2000s, as evidenced by Azad's research into the prevalence of American accented villains during this time.[68] The resulting change saw a complete removal from race in *The Princess and the Frog* due to its setting (a topic the following

[67] Lawrence Yee, "Disney Pulls Controversial 'Moana' Costume After Complaints" *Variety*, September 22, 2016, accessed January 8, 2021, https://variety.com/2016/film/news/disney-moana-costume-pulled-after-complaints-1201868097/

[68] Sehar Azad, "Lights, Camera, Accent: Examining Dialect Performance in Recent Children's Animated Films". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2009.

chapter will go into greater depth). Despite the attempted removal of race in the film, *The Princess and the Frog* still showed pro-whiteness in its character design and accent coding. The resulting public relations fiasco caused the company to evolve to show people of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds further.

The current iteration of Disney films shows the previously unseen amount of sensitivity and attention to detail regarding minority representation, but individual departments still show the historical issues the company became infamous for. The creation of cultural think tanks mainly resulted in this new style of cultural sensitivity. By having the culture they sought to represent become part of the creative process, Disney's studios removed much of the Euro-American centrist underpinnings that defined the previous seventy years of the studio's history. The desire to capitalize on their films, however, illustrates that the company's traditional orientalist leanings. Commodifying a culture, quite literally turning it into a costume in some cases, counters much of Disney's progress in its efforts to become more inclusive. To the company's credit, the most egregious examples such appropriation were quickly pulled from stores. Disney's evolution, however, only proved half of the reason such change is essential.

The backlash that drove much of Disney's efforts shows that most populace desires a more inclusive world. Being driven by profits, Disney studios would not make such drastic and demanding changes to its process were it not for their consumer base's will. Time and time again, the company had to address its orientalist perceptions of the world at their audience's demand. However, examples from chapter one show that audiences (and the general population by extension) were by no means a monolith in their views of racial and gender representation. Disney proved quite willing to ignore critiques from the blatantly sexist sectors of internet chatrooms, but race issues still proved to be a stance the company was unwilling to take. In this

hesitancy, it can be surmised that the company fears directly addressing racism would negatively impact their bottom line. Thus, while the company can freely address culture and mention or allusion to the negative impacts of racism or colonialism remained mostly taboo. Recent Disney films did manage to address these issues haphazardly, however, the company implanted a method that distanced itself in an attempt to mitigate controversy.

CHAPTER 4. FANTASY SETTING WITH REAL-WORLD CONNECTIONS

One of the Disney studio's most defining features was the fantastic setting that each film, television show, and other pieces of media sought to capture. These settings bore a resemblance to historical locations in European history but were divorced from the historical context because of high fantasy elements. A recent example of this phenomenon appeared in 2015's *Frozen,* a film heavily inspired by Danish composer Hans Christian Andersen's works. The film borrowed heavily from Danish folklore, culture, and architecture, but the fictional country of Arendal remained separated from the historical events that shaped Denmark and the surrounding area. This setting characterized almost all Disney animated features, creating a uniform fictional world that most of the film inhabits. This fictionalized reality even appeared when the studio chose to have real historical settings.

When Disney used real-world settings, the studio typically employed two methods. The first involved only a brief time spent in the "real" world before the characters become transported to a more fantastic setting, known as portal fantasy. This method appeared in films like *Peter Pan, Alice in Wonderland,* and the more recent *Chronicles of Narnia* series. In all three cases, the characters began their story in England (more specifically in or around the greater London area) before they were whisked away to a world not our own. 2007's *Enchanted* flipped this convention by having the Princess (complete with animation and talking animals) transported to modern-day Manhattan, where the film's remainder utilized live action. However, in either case, the usage of this method, according to Maria Cecire was to "teach the characters, and the audience by proxy, a type of life lesson they would not receive in their original world."[69]

[69] Maria Cecire "Reality Remixed Neomedieval Princess Culture in Disney's *Enchanted*" in Ed. Pugh, Tison and Susan Aronstein. *The Disney Middle Ages: A Fairy-Tale and Fantasy Past* (New York :Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 244

Characters in this type of narrative undergo a form of odyssey where they grow up either metaphorically or literally in films like *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The second and more problematic method concerned adding elements of the fantastic to the real world.

The more common method by which Disney utilized real places and events was to fully embrace these aspects as part of the story, with more fantastic aspects prevalent in all Disney films. In features with more historical settings, fantastical aspects are typically less prevalent than in more wonderous films. *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchbacked of Notre Dame*, and *Brave* epitomized this method because the magic associated with most Disney features was notably reserved in each case. While either talking animals or transformations occurred in these films, the main characters possessed supernatural powers. This method, which I dubbed the fantastical reality, is utilized to create a degree of separation between the film and the audience. Being directed at children, Disney films need to have some level of fantastical to keep their younger audiences entertained.

By leaning into the fantastical, Disney films seek to create distance from real-world analogies to the lessons they seek to teach in their films. Whether it be from one of the live-action animation studios, Disney features all aspects of the fantastic story and themes. These additions can be as grand as creating an entirely new world divorced from our own, such as in the case of *Zootopia* or the newly acquired *Star Wars* franchise. The fantasy elements can also be comparatively smaller, reimaging Earth as we know it but with a few small additions. Both approaches have in common that aspects of our world and society present themselves in even the most fantastical setting so that audiences, especially younger viewers, will not be confused by the world. *Zootopia* and *Onward* may be utterly different from our world, but the respective urban and suburban settings mean that audiences can relate to the settings in a very intimate

matter. The fantastical reality also came with serious drawbacks in representation of other cultures.

The divergence from real-life events that characterized the fantastical reality creates serious issues with some films depending on how the writers chose to represent specific groups. For example, the two most common criticizes leveled against *The Hunchbacked of Notre Dame* involve word choice and its depiction of Esmeralda. While Disney is notorious for often disregarding historical accuracy in its films, Hunchback's depiction of Romani peoples' persecution is startlingly accurate. Claud Frollo continually made remarks of how Romani are vermin to be exterminated from Paris, mirroring the historical violence made against Romani throughout Europe. Historian David Crowe stated that the film failed by making Romani characters significantly different from other characters in the film, chiefly Esmerelda's beauty and Quasimodo's strength deformities. Crowe argued that this status as different castes of people is extremely harmful and has led to the anti-Romani sentiments prevalent in Eastern Europe at the film's release.[70] Throughout the film, Romani people are regularly referred to as "gypsies," a word that even possessed negative connotations and was viewed as a slur by those, not in the community.[71] Disney may have been attempting to convey the struggles of oppressed people properly, but the executives and creative team appeared to be ignorant of modern-day Romani's problems in the world. The characterization and implicant sexuality of Esmeralda also possessed several issues.

[70] David Crowe, "THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME' PERPETUATES NEGATIVE GYPSY STEREOTYPES" News and Record, August 3, 1996, accessed July 29, 2020,

[71] Ibid.

In the case of *The Princess and the Frog*, the fantastical reality creates a fictitious scenario where racial injustices of the era are overlooked. Historians took significant issue with the film for how it outright ignored Jim Crow Laws' existence despite being set in a stronghold for the laws. The company is no stranger to rewriting history when it is convenient. For example, *Pocahontas* made the title character almost ten years older than her real-life counterpart during the movie's events.[72] Changes such as these were made to fit in the romance subplot that princess features at that time virtually always required (especially when one considers the almost thirty-year age difference the two love interests would have had).

While these changes separate *Pocahontas* from the complicated series of events that created the first English settlers in Virginia and the Native Americans, some historians did not look too harshly upon these changes. Historian Leigh Edwards argued in her paper that Pocahontas' revisions to history are generally benign because the company chose to keep the racism and prejudice that settlers held towards the Native Americans, and the film's message was about acceptance of others.[73] Asking children 11 and under to understand something taught in college-level courses is unreasonable in the extreme. Liegh and her colleges, however, stated that the revisionist approach to American history in *The Princess and the Frog* are both tone-deaf and counter to the film's message.

The fantastical reality discarded race as a factor in one's life throughout *The Princess and The Frog*, making economic issues paramount to the characters' story arcs. This thought process

[72] Pocahontas. DISNEY PLUS. Directed by Eric Goldberg and Mike Gabriel. Los Angeles: Disney, 1995.

[73] Leigh H Edwards, "The United Colors of "Pocahontas": Synthetic Miscegenation and Disney's Multiculturalism." *Narrative* 7, no. 2 (1999): 147-68, Accessed June 7, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/20107179.Copy

most likely meant to give Tina a similar story arc to *Aladdin*, namely overcoming one's poor circumstances through hard work and possibly the aid of others. Tina personified this thought process, stating that "only through hard work can one truly succeed."[74] The character took this idea to the extreme, being unable to accept others' financial aid at the beginning of the film, but learns that cooperation is needed in life. However, Tina's arc was the ignoring of discrimination that African Americans faced in 1900s, Louisiana. New Orleans and a lot of the U.S. enacted strict laws that barred African Americans from living and working in the same place. Oddly, the film chose to show segregation at work because all of the African American characters lived in a shanty village far from the white residents' up-scale mansions.[75] While brief and lacking the historical context, this addition created a sharp sense of realism in an otherwise whimsical tale of talking animals.

The fantastical reality did offer new avenues to explore problematic tropes, though the results are debatable. *The Princess and the Frog* also drew from the plantation trope in the American minstrel tradition, much like *Song of the South*; however, the 2009 film does give more agency to African Americans. Heavily inspired by transcendentalists like Therou and Emmerson, the plantation trope called for people to find their most genuine self in nature. In terms of African Americans, depictions of this trope from the early days of cinema argued that blacks were at their happiest while in the fields and closer to nature. Historian Ester Terry stated that *The Princess and the Frog* subverted this trope by giving the black characters premier agency in the film rather than being subservient to their white master's whims. According to Terry, the bayou represented a temporary escape for Tina and Naveen that allowed them to gain

[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.

emotional and financial stability from their amphibian adventure.[76] The film updates the previously racist trope the company had employed to show how Disney and African Americans were a part of a new, modern world. However, what Disney and Terry overlook is the argument that race is or was a factor in one's life. While a film targeted at children cannot be expected to address issues as complicated as systematic racism adequately, the appearance of racial segregation in the film hinders the idea that Disney is in a "post-race" world.

The fantastical reality's third major use is creating links to the real world in films that diverge wildly from reality. In essence, the fantastical reality adds mundane features to otherworldly settings to give audiences a basis for understanding the world. 2016's *Zootopia* exemplifies this use of the fantastical reality because anthropomorphized predator and prey animals lived in relative harmony in a fictional city that bore a striking resemblance to real-world locations like New York, London, and Hong Kong.. The film follows officer Judy Hops, a recruit to the police force of the title city, and a con artist fox named Nick. The fantastical reality was implemented throughout the film to make Zootopia a city like and unlike any major metropolitan area. Common civil functions exist throughout the city including public transportation, police forces, and a government. The fantastical is used to create the different biomes (the neighborhoods of the city) where animals of different climates live. Using the backdrop of a similar but different city, *Zootopia* became the Disney wide-release film with the most overt themes of racism and overcoming prejudice

[76] Terry, Esther J. "Rural as Racialized Plantation vs Rural as Modern Reconnection: Blackness and Agency in Disney's "Song of the South" and "The Princess and the Frog"." Journal of African American Studies 14, no. 4 (2010): 469-81. Accessed June 1, 2020. .jstor.org/stable/41819267.

Zootopia set up this theme of racism early in the film by describing the relationship between predator and prey animals. Predators are a minority in the film, comprising roughly eleven percent of the city's total population. There also existed a great deal of fear and discrimination among the prey animals towards the predators. For example, in a flashback, Nick was beaten and muzzled as a child by prey children for his desire to join a group analogous to the Boy Scouts.[77] These fears are only heightened when it was discovered that the missing citizens (all predator animals) suddenly reappeared and attacked others without provocation. These events caused a great deal of panic in the prey community, with fears that any predator would "go savage" at any moment. What followed was a montage of predators receiving unjust discrimination such as being fired or segregated from the general population.[78] However, this discrimination ends when Hops and Nick find that the reason behind these attacks is a poison that affects only predator creatures and apprehend the person responsible for these kidnappings and attacks. This film's plot served as a very on-the-nose allegory for the discrimination that can occur in the modern-day. The writers also worked hard to show that even good characters can have negative views of others.

Zootopia's theme of acceptance was done mainly through the character of Judy Hopps. Hopps initially held negative views of predators, especially foxes, because of the bullying she received as a child.[79] These discriminatory beliefs were challenged upon her friendship with

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[77] *Zootopia*, Disney Plus, Directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore (Los Angeles: Disney, 2016)

[78] Ibid

[79] Hopps herself is an object of discrimination in her workspace. She is the first rabbit, and presumably female, hired as a part of Zootopia's police force. Originally dismissive dismissed to the menial labor of parking enforcer, Hopps' journey mirrored that of many women who entered traditionally male dominated fields.
https://www.vox.com/2016/3/7/11173620/zootopia-review-racism

Nick, but they quickly come to the forefront and are normalized throughout the city. Upon finding the missing citizens that had "gone savage" and cracking the case, Hopps stated in a press conference that the desire to attack prey something innate in predators' biology.[80] This statement instigated the discrimination mentioned above that swept across the city. Hopps learned to overcome her bias by the film's end through her friendship (and possible romance) with Wilde, but the character flaws Hopps portrayed characterized many whites' standard views in the modern-day U.S.

Through the characterization and character modeling of Hopps, the creators of *Zootopia* tackled the complicated issue of implicant bias. Hopps was intentionally designed to be as no threatening as possible. One essay stated the through the meticulous choice of species and gender in the film, "Hopps was as carefully designed to represent innocence, purity, and safety."[81] This unthreatening appearance did cause the character to be dismissed by bigger and stronger animals; Hopps' characterization also exemplifies the nature of implicant racism. In her thesis, Mariah Farbotko argued that Hopps was unaware of her biases against predators. "Judy," according to Farbotko, "had been raised to be suspicious of foxes her entire life, and despite believing she was unprejudiced, their fight reveals long-hidden biases toward foxes that Judy herself was not even aware of."[82] This bias is unknown and implicit, functioning as an allegory for the prejudice that many modern white Americans possessed. While most Americans would vehemently deny

[80] Zootopia, Disney Plus, Directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore (Los Angeles: Disney, 2016)

[81] GREGORY BEAUDINE, OYEMOLADE OSIBODU, AND ALIYA BEAVERS. "Disney's Metaphorical Exploration of Racism and Stereotypes: A Review of Zootopia." *University of Chicago Journals* https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/690061

[82] Farbotko, Mariah, Regine Rosenthal, Anna Minardi, and Don Pease. "'It Was All Started by a Mouse' - Examining Animal Representations in Modern Disney Films". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018. http://search.proquest.com/docview/2054006561/. 24

having racial biases, several studies have shown that 90% of whites subconsciously associate black with "fear" and "bad."[83] The studio's creative choices teach that even morally right characters can still possess negative biases without their knowledge. The film also subtly acknowledges the historical opposition between police forces and minority groups.

The U.S.'s "war on drugs" and its harm on minorities is highlighted through *Zootopia*'s main villain. When it is revealed that the mayor's aid was the one behind the kidnappings and creation of the feral citizens, she notes that her express purpose was to oppress the city's predator minority. By having predators "going feral," the secretary believed that the prey in Zootopia would rally to rid the city of the perceived threat to their safety.[84] While this sentiment may seem relegated to villains in an animated kids show, such rationale was used by those in the U.S. government. President Richard Nixon began the country's "war on drugs" to attack his political enemies, precisely leftists, and African Americans. His aid John Ehrlichman even stated in an interview that, "We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin. And then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities."[85] This parallel in the film is made even more severe given that Nixon's policies never went away, and in many cases were strengthened by successive administrations. The "war on drugs" still affects minorities in the country in higher rates, and *Zootopia* either intentionally or not links the drug used to oppression.

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[83]Jeff Nesbit "America Has a Big Race Problem." *USNews*, 28 March 2016, accessed June 11, 2020, https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-03-28/america-has-a-big-race-problem

[84] *Zootopia*, Disney Plus, Directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore (Los Angeles: Disney, 2016)

[85] Tom LoBianco, "Report: Aide says Nixon's war on drugs targeted blacks, hippies" *CNN*, March 24, 2016, accessed June 11, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/23/politics/john-ehrlichman-richard-nixon-drug-war-blacks-hippie/index.html

However, these attempts at dealing with complicated issues like implicant bias and drug crumble when taken out of the film's world.

Zootopia failed to adequately address racism in the U.S. because of two narrative reasons. The first reason why the film did not represent discrimination properly was that the movie never clearly defined which group was the oppressed or oppressors. While the sequence of firings and segregation did suggest that the prey was the group with the most power, the film leading up to this point did not support this claim. The film's predators hold a great deal of political and financial power, with even the mayor of the city being a lion. Jealousy of her boss's position was the motivating factor for the villain's plan.[86] Such a dynamic in the film would lead one to believe that the predators would be the oppressing rather than the inverse that occurred. Similarly, the film never puts any of the characters entirely into the role of an oppressed group.

Neither of *Zootopia*'s lead characters possessed privileges of being in a more robust social class, thus undermining the themes of racism that the film sought to explore. Hopps is both a prey animal and a police officer. These two facets would make Hopps a clear oppressor in many cases (her bias against foxes suggest this fact), but she herself faced discrimination. Becoming a part of Zootopia's police force as a part of the Animal Inclusion Initiative, Hopps is regularly referred to as the "token bunny" and dismissed by the bigger animals in the department.[87] This aspect of Hopps' arc is no doubt meant to parallel that of women who became a part of traditionally male dominated careers, and the studio's decision to address such themes is extremely progressive when considering she possessed racist beliefs as an officer of the law.

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[86] *Zootopi*a, Disney Plus, Directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore (Los Angeles: Disney, 2016)

[87] Zootopia, Disney Plus, Directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore (Los Angeles: Disney, 2016)

Hopps, and other characters in the film, did not possess the subtle benefits that come with no being a member of a marginalized group.

The problem with this characterization is that Hopps, along with all the characters in the film, lacks the privileges associated with being a part of a group with more power. As Farbotko stated, "all forms of racism and prejudice in *Zootopia* operate on a fairly even playing field, ignoring the fact that not everyone in society has the same amount of privilege and institutional power."[88] By lacking privileges associated with racism, *Zootopia* attempted to discuss race in a fictional world where race is a non-issue. The film's indented message is further muddled by the writers backpaddling on their own stance.

The second major issue with discussing racism in *Zootopia* is that using the medium of anthropomorphized animals detracts from the central message that everyone is equal. The writers attempted to argue that predators were not naturally aggressive towards prey while at the same time poking fun at the natural behaviors of animals. For example, there is a comical scene in the film where Hopps and Wilde attempt to gain information from the local DMV, where all the employees were lethargic sloths.[89] Similar innuendos exist throughout the film, from rabbits having hilariously large families to sheep possessing a herd mentality. By arguing that a group is not naturally destined to be a certain way and then displaying the opposite of this message, the theme of tolerance became very muddled in *Zootopia*. This mixed messaging did hinder the

[88] Farbotko, Mariah, Regine Rosenthal, Anna Minardi, and Don Pease. "'It Was All Started by a Mouse' - Examining Animal Representations in Modern Disney Films". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018. http://search.proquest.com/docview/2054006561/. 28

[89] *Zootopia*, Disney Plus, Directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore (Los Angeles: Disney, 2016)

theme of the film, but the attempt is still telling of the company's direction with its views on race.

While flawed in its execution, *Zootopia* did ask audience to think about their own biases and how they developed. Disney's inability to explicitly address race issues in the U.S. hindered how this theme was presented in the film, with stating "much more about diversity and social hierarchies than race relations."[90] These issues aside, addressing problems like implicant bias is a major step forward for Disney. Previous films in the company's catalog only dealt with explicit forms of discrimination like apartheid, but *Zootopia* asked audiences to look at where these prejudices originated. Framing racism in terms of anthropomorphized animals, the writers distanced themes from the true issues they were attempting to address. However, much more direct parallels to modern racism may be a lot to ask of an animated film targeted towards young children. One of Disney's other films with a much older target demographic addressed race in a much more direct manor.

The fantastical reality, and its limitations, also appeared in live action films. 2018's *Black Panther* proved both a cultural milestone for African representation, but also functioned as one of Disney's most upfront examinations of its own history and that of American cinema in general. The film's plot followed T'Challa/Black Panther's (played by the late Chadwick Bosman) emotional growth as he became the leader of the fictional country of Wakanda. Dealing with the emotional trauma of his father's death, T'Challa also had to face the negative consequences of his father's actions personified by Eric Killmonger (played by Michael B.

[90] Farbotko, Mariah, Regine Rosenthal, Anna Minardi, and Don Pease. "'It Was All Started by a Mouse' - Examining Animal Representations in Modern Disney Films". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018. http://search.proquest.com/docview/2054006561/. 29

Jordan). Like with any superhero feature, the fantastical reality allows for the existence of superpowered individuals in an otherwise mundane world. In the case of *Black Panther*, the fantastical reality created an avenue where several themes of racism and colonialism could be explored. While the Wakandan setting was fantastical, many aspects of the film drew inspiration from real places that linked its story to current struggles.

The film eschewed nearly every trope about African and black culture, with *The Atlantic* calling it a "celebration of blackness and the struggles we have gone through."[91] Professor Okaka Dokotum cited the film as the significant reversal of Hollywood's historical representation of the "Dark Continent." Rather than turning African culture into a homogenous monolith, *Black Panther* detailed the immense cultural diversity of central African peoples.[92] The film's creators addressed race in the film through the medium that captured the time's zeitgeist, the superhero story. Through this medium, *Black Panther* confronted the historical issues that Disney and other Western studios possessed with the representation of race and racism.

In many ways, *Black Panther* functioned as a counter to the color-blind approach that both Disney and many others took when approaching the issue of race. This confrontation is done using the fantastical reality because the setting of Wakanda (as with many superhero features) diverge widely from the history and the limits of science. Creating an technological advanced African nation free of limitations placed by colonialism and imperialism, created opportunities to look at the effects of those events. When confronted by Killmonger for his

[91] Christopher Orr, "Black Panther Is More Than a Superhero Movie
The director Ryan Coogler's addition to the Marvel pantheon is a superb genre film—and quite a bit more." *The Atlantic*, February 16, 2020, accessed August 28, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/02/black-panther-review/553508/

[92] Okaka Dokotum, Hollywood and Africa, 50.

inaction towards the injustices done against people of African descent, T'Challa stated, "I am not the king of Africa. I am the king of Wakanda."[93] This statement and Wakanda's isolation epitomized the shortcomings of a color-blind view of relations because it pointed out the hypocrisy of failing to help others. This realization is the center of T'Challa's growth in the film because he is an isolationist at first, like his father before him. When the king is faced with the personification of what these policies can create in the world, he sees the ignorance and cowardice behind such policies.

Black Panther also went against much of the implicit coding that other films under the Disney umbrella were guilty of. Gone were the uniform American accents that films assigned to their protagonist even in the Marvel department. Instead, the characters in Wakanda spoke a dialect derived from the area of central Africa where the fictional country is located.[94] *Black Panther* flipped the traditional coding on its head by expressly making the main antagonist American. The film also eschewed American coding through clothing and hairstyles by drawing heavy inspiration from central and west African cultures. Odokum stated that "the film showed Wakanda as an ethnically diverse country made up of five distinct tribes each with their own clothing styles and appearance."[95] These societies exhibited African culture aspects like scarification, lip extension, and hairstyles that previous films in the Disney canon caricatured. This change in coding was broadly attributed to the majority black cast, crew, and writers for the film who went to painstaking detail to work against many of the harmful tropes associated with

[93] *Black Panther*, Disney Plus, Directed by Ryan Coogler (Los Angeles: Disney, 2018)
[94] Okaka Dokotum, *Africa and Hollywood,* 250.
[95] Okaka Dokotum, *Africa and Hollywood,* 251

Africa and blacks in general. This attention to detail and refutation of traditional models also appeared in the central conflict and theme of *Black Panther*.

The film acts as a counter to colonialism, for Wakanda functions as an example of an African nation that was never ravaged by European expansion. This theming is common in Afro-futuristic works of fiction, from which *Black Panther* drew heavy inspiration. The break from traditional forms of European forms of success permeates in the characters as well. Professor Heather Harris stated that Princess Suri (the little sister to T'Challa) functioned as the personification of rejecting European influence. Rather than assimilate into European systems and institutions, Suri used her culture's system to measure her success.[96] She became a genius engineer whose inventions aided her people in innumerable ways, but she was not dogmatic to her Wakandan heritage. Throughout the film, characters note how Suri had "no respect for the old ways" because of her willingness to innovate and even use outside influences. Harris argued that Suri's willingness to adapt to changing times gave her (and the young people of color she represented) much more agency than those stuck in revivalist sensibilities.[97] According to Harris, this measurement method meant that Suri was not beholden to outside influences in ways that other Disney Princesses were in the film. Each section focuses on a specific theme that resonated with African history and the experiences of modern-day people of African descent. These themes are personified in the two antagonists of *Black Panther*

The main antagonist for the first half of *Black Panther*, Ulysses Klaw, served as a representation of both colonialism and traditional forms of racism. The most subtle link to this

[96] Heather E. Harris. "Queen Phiona and Princess Shuri—Alternative Africana 'Royalty' in Disney's Royal Realm: An Intersectional Analysis." Social sciences (Basel) 7, no. 10 (October 1, 2018). Accessed August 7, 2020. https://doaj.org/article/f6ffcde0f7b14fb6ba092bd05bfe9c37.

[97] Ibid.

theme is in Klaws background. Being an older man from South Africa, Klaw undoubtedly took part in the system of apartheid that yoked the nation for decades. Klaw's most direct link to colonialism comes from his occupation, namely his acquisition and trade in stolen goods. In *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*, it was revealed that he had stolen a great deal of vibranium (a fictitious metal that is nearly indestructible) from Wakanda. For the theft and the deaths he caused in the process, Klaw was branded and banished from the country.[98] Klaw's actions link him to colonialism because the process of stealing natural resources served as the very foundation for colonialism and imperialism. These European ideals became the thematic basis for Wakanda itself.

Wakanda represented an Africa free of European intervention. In the film, Wakanda went into a self-imposed exile following the start of the Atlantic Slave trade. Wakandians were successful in their hiding through the use of vibranium. The technological advantage the metal gave allowed the nation to advance decades ahead of the world's rest.[99] This particular type of advancement is referred to as Afrofuturism or an ascetic where African culture intersects with advanced technology. Ytasha Womack stated that Afrofuturism is a reinvention of African culture with the slave trade and later colonialism.[100] Klaw, therefore represented latent colonial powers because he sought to steal the recourse that gave Wakanda its independence from the rest of the world. His failure at gaining the entire stock of vibranium caused the villain to be extremely antagonistic of the nation and its people, even planning acts of terror against the nation. Klaw's lack of success in stealing vibranium and thereby exerting imperial control over

[98] Avengers Age of Ultron,

[99] *Black Panther*, Disney Plus, Directed by Ryan Coogler (Los Angeles: Disney, 2018)

[100] Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture. Afrofuturism*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013.

Wakanda is symbolic of Africa itself not succumbing to the centuries of oppression from outside forces. While ultimately successful in defeating both Klaw and imperial powers, Wakanda's success leads to other serious issues.

Eric Killmonger represents the lasting effects of the slave trade and racism on the African diaspora. Killmonger was raised in Oakland, California, where he witnessed his father's murder at the hands of T'Chaka (T'Challa's father). Killmonger's father was killed because he broke from the neutrality agreement of Wakanda, becoming a part of a militant civil rights group in the U.S. and fathering a child with a non-Wakandan.[101] Seeing his father for attempting to help those who could not help themselves caused Killmonger to become disillusioned with the grandeur of Wakanda. Killmonger then spent the rest of his life training his mind and body, becoming one of the deadliest men in the world with the express purpose of taking control of the country that took his father from him. However, he was not motivated purely for revenge for he sought to end Wakanda's isolationism and send weapons to the oppressed African peoples across the world so they could overthrow their tormentors.

The fantastical reality allowed for these diverse themes to be consciously added to a film series ostensibly about the acquisition of magic rocks, but negative uses also appeared in *Black Panther*. The injustices that Killmonger mentioned in the film are intentionally made vague. Throughout the film's runtime, Killmonger made constant references to the injustices faced by African descent people, both in the past and in modernity. The villain was intentionally vague about this discrimination, with the most direct reference stated as he dies at the end of the film. The villain stated, "bury me in the ocean with my brothers and sisters who knew death was better

[101] *Black Panther*, Disney Plus, Directed by Ryan Coogler (Los Angeles: Disney, 2018)

than bondage," when T'Challa offered to heal his wounds and incarcerate his cousin.[102] This line stood as one of the most direct injustices that Killmonger mentioned, but it is not the only example in the film. Previously in the film, Killmonger stated that the African Exhibit artifacts were all stolen from Africa, which gave him the right to steal them in turn.[103] As the villain states, the injustices faced by Africa and those with African heritage are all directly linked to the African Slave trade and imperialism. While this statement is mostly true, the writers were less willing to discuss these events' modern-day implications.

Modern examples of racism were left mostly vacant from *Black Panther*. The film did imply that racial issues still existed globally, and they needed to be combated, but it never stated what these issues were. For example, the movie's opening starts in Oakland, California where T'Chaka kills his brother for becoming involved in a militant black organization. The king justified his actions by stating that his brother's involvement in the movement threatened Wakanda's isolationist policy. The injustices that Killmonger's parents fought against were left out of the movie, however. The writers did suggest income inequality was a factor given the part of Oakland a young Killmonger lived in was a part of section eight housing. T'Challa later bought these apartments to convert them into a cultural outreach center for Wakanda, where their knowledge could be shared with the rest of the world. Like with *Aladdin* and *The Princess and The Frog*, *Black Panther's* writers pointed more at income inequality as the cause of oppression. The reason for this intentional vagueness stemmed from a combination of two factors.

The fantastical reality in *Black Panther* allowed for the film to address certain issues but ignored others. For Example, Killmonger's continued reference to colonialism and African

[102] Ibid.,
[103] Ibid.,

slavery appears to be the writers attempting to acknowledge the inciting events for many of the racial issues in the world. Sociologists such as John Jackson postulated that racism, as it is recognized today, began with European colonialism and African slavery in the 1600s. Before this date, national identity rather than skin color proved as the largest reason for distrust in the world.[104] While it is generally accepted that racism developed during this time, the reason behind such ideology proved a fierce area of debate in both the historical and sociological communities. Regardless, the film brought up these points without stating their results for modern day Africans and diaspora. Aside from Killmonger's references to colonialism and slavery, modern issues are completely glossed over. Adult audiences may know these issues, but their removal from a film that painstakingly presented African cultures and the beginnings of racism came off as jarring. Black Panther showed the fantastical reality when used at its best, but Disney colorblind approach to modern racism meant that this method played the same role of racial coding ten years prior.

Disney also used the fantastical reality in much more jarring fashions. In the case of several live-action remakes of Disney films, the fantastical reality was used to removed racist aspects of films and American history. Releasing in December of 2019, *The Lady and The Tramp's* live-action remake was the first original film for Disney +. Like many of the older Disney features, the original *Lady and The Tramp* possessed several racist elements. The most blatant example came in two Siamese cats who exaggerated Asian accents and possessed facial features standard with Asian caricatures.[105] The 2019 remake kept the cat characters but removed

[104] John Jackson, "Cognitive/Evolutionary Psychology and the History of Racism." *Philosophy of science* 84, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 296–314.

[105] *Lady and The Tramp*, Disney Plus, Directed by Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, Wilfred Jackson (Los Angeles: Disney, 1955).

the racist stereotypes, a tacit common in the company's numerous remakes in the past ten years. The studio's new remakes showcase the struggle the company has with addressing both its own historic racism and that of the U.S. These remakes removed much of what made the originals so controversial to modern audiences, chiefly the racist characters of minority groups. However, these new films show the reluctance to fully commit to addressing racism in the U.S. 2019's *Lady and the Tramp* best exemplified this situation because of the amount of controversy created upon its release on Disney +.

As with the original film, 2019's *Lady and the Tramp* is set in an unnamed American city during the early twentieth century. Both films follow an upper-middle-class family as they adopt the title *Lady and Tramp*; however, the latter sidestepped the racism prevalent during this time in a unique way. The couple in the 2019 remake is interracial, and the city in which they inhabit is similarly racially and ethnically diverse.[106] This creative decision is in line with companies' attempts to add non-white voices to their films, usually in the form of recasting previously white characters or making entirely new characters for the film. This decision met generally with good responses and showed that the company was making efforts to adjust to changing world dynamics. While the casting of human characters had little to do with the plot of the film, but Disney's decision held many of the same trappings found in *The Princess and the Frog*.

The difference that many perceived between the remakes of *Lady and the Tramp* and films like *The Little Mermaid* stemmed from the former's basis in a real-world place and time. Unlike most Disney features, *Lady and the Tramp* did not take place in a fictional country. While no specific date or location is given for either the original or the remake, the film's technology

[106] *Lady and The Tramp*, Disney Plus, Directed by Charlie Bean (Los Angeles: Disney, 2019)

suggests the events took place during the early twentieth century, sometime before WWI. The unnamed town was also meant to represent Marceline, Missouri, the hometown of founder Walt Disney.[107] These aspects create an air of realism that did not exist in the more fantastical tales like *Snow White* and *Cinderella*. Since many Disney features take place in entirely fictitious worlds, the addition of racially and ethnically diverse castes has little coded messages. European folktales may inspire these stories, but magic and other whimsical features divorce the source material from reality. With the lack of a fantasy setting, films like *Lady and the Tramp* intentionally or not create issues with representing the U.S.'s history.

Like *The Princess and the Frog*, *Dumbo*, and other Disney films in the U.S., the *Lady and the Tramp* had the problem of the racist institutions and beliefs prevalent in the country's past. In *Lady and the Tramp*, the Missouri town it was meant to immolate was one of the bastions for Jim Crow segregation and violence against African Americans. For example, the county the town is a part of contained one of the highest lynching concentrations in the entire state.[108] While the film's remake is progressive in its casting, this progressiveness comes at the cost of erasing the genuine issues that occurred and are occurring because of race. The approach used in the 2019 film is objectively better than that of the *Princess and the Frog* in dealing with racism in the U.S. Instead of showing (but not condemning) the segregation that occurred during

[107] Shuvrajit Das Biswas, "Where Was 'Lady and the Tramp' Filmed?" *The Cinemaholic*, November 14, 2019, accessed December 28, 2020, https://www.thecinemaholic.com/where-was-lady-and-the-tramp-filmed/

[108] Magic Ears Duero, "Is The Live-Action Lady And The Tramp "Problematic"?", *Medium*, February 17, 2020, Accessed June 2, 2020, https://medium.com/@the_disney_dudebro/is-the-live-action-lady-and-the-tramp-problematic-7b3c005439fb.

that time, the remake removes all instances of segregation from the film. Such a strategy improves upon the company's previous ideas but also removes aspects of history.

While a marked improvement, Disney's newest attempts at creating an inclusive and diverse catalog for their consumers still missed the significant issue that films like *Princess and the Frog* raised upon their release. Considering the film's primary characters are mainly canines, having the film seriously address segregation and racism is asking a lot from a film that targets children. This fact in mind, however, the lack of such a message in similar films by the company suggest that Disney is still too hesitant to discuss racism in the U.S seriously. For example, the 2018's remake of *Dumbo* shifted the focus away from the title elephant to humans' cast. Like with 2019's *Lady and the Tramp*, many of the original racist caricatures were removed, and a racially diverse cast was made to reflect modern sensibilities. The film's Depression-era American heartland setting meant that the film would still have to address the time's racist laws and customs. This issue was largely ignored in much the same way the *Lady and the Tramp* did the following year, however. The remake of *Dumbo* would have made a perfect platform to address such issues, given the film's message of tolerance and inclusion. These films' creative choices show how ardently Disney still holds to the color-blind principles for its wide release features it first began in the 1990s.

The fantastical reality became a part of Disney theming in the very beginning and now serves as the company's main method of sidestepping race issues. Being children's film studio, each film in the Disney canon possesses some moral lesson that children are meant to take away from the story once the credits begin to roll. *Zootopia* may possess the overt theme of tolerance and a nod to implicit bias, but the studio setting undercuts such a message. Going out of its way to remove examples of privilege and the conditions that lead one to have the negative bias

expressed in the film, *Zootopia* failed to properly convey to their audiences a realistic scenario in which prejudice would occur. This realism, or lack thereof, forms the crux of how the fantastical reality cannot be used to explore many themes fully. By initially removing the conditions that result in prejudice, *Zootopia*'s creators also intentionally removed significant parts of their theme. One can admit their own biases; however, the creation and continuation of such bias remain a more salient point that the fantastical reality cannot address by its very nature. These same results also appear in films where the fantastical reality is used to a lesser degree.

Disney's films with a more contemporary setting still employ the fantastical reality to sanitize many aspects of American and world history. In *Black Panther's* case, the fantastic reality allowed for the historic mistreatments of African and its diaspora to be addressed. However, modern injustices are implied rather than outright stated in the film using the justification of its fictional setting and events. The film's subject matter and themes are unprecedented from a company like Disney, but the studio's conservative roots. In terms of period pieces, the fantastical reality removed the dark parts of American race relations. Creating a world where race does not hold sway, as in the case with 2019's *Lady and the Tramp,* may offer a fun ideal that audiences can aspire to, but such an approach does overlook the numerous atrocities carried out in that era. Removing race from the equation, while an markedly better method than coding, still removes the blame whites in the U.S. have in propagating systemic racism. The fantastic reality may offer Disney a way to placate the anxieties of white America without themselves being racist, but it still places the desires of one group over another.

While falling flat in many respects, Disney's attempts to address racism show a desire in the American psyche to see these issues. Disney, like any corporation, the primary goal is to make as much money as possible. The recent attempts at inclusion, especially in the past ten

years, heavily suggest that audiences desire such films and result from the changing demographics in the country. The hesitancy to directly address these issues mirrors societies' aversion to focus on race issues. Recent events with police brutality illustrate that many institutions in the U.S. still have not progressed from the 1960s in assumptions and punishments for people of color. People's continued support for these institutions amid these tragedies show that a sizable portion of the populace is averse to even admitting that racism and discrimination still factor into an individual's life. Being a corporation that wants its product to relate to the most considerable number of people, Disney had its films meet between these two vastly different goals.

CHAPTER 5. HISTORIOGRAPHY

The numerous essays in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* explore the numerous aspects of Disney animation and its numerous impacts on American culture. Several of these essays were extremely critical of the company's white-washing of American history and other facets of American society. For example, Henry Giroux's "Memory and Pedagogy in the "Wonderful World of Disney" argued the light-hearted nature of Disney's films underscored the harsh realities the filmmakers were attempting to portray.[109] According to the author, the result of such branding and entertainment is an escapist reality none would desire to leave. Other essays in the collection highlighted the company's continued upholding of traditional gender structures. Susan Jeffords' "The Curse of Masculinity" stated that Disney's changes in *Beauty and the Beast* from the original French folktale shifted the film's focus entirely to the Beast. By making the Beast's behavior the result of a curse and the subsequent isolation, the filmmakers imply that women have to teach men proper behavior.[110] The film essentially argued for the same gender roles established in the earliest Disney features. While varied on the specific subject, each of the essays in *From Mouse to Mermaid* offered a harsh chastisement of how Disney shaped the perception of race and gender for children.

Monika Gagon's dissertation "Race-Ing Disney: Race and Culture in the Disney Universe" looked at the synergistic methods by which Disney's theme parks, films, and other media presented race. According to the author, these entertainment pieces should not be viewed

[109] Henry Giroux "Memory and Pedagogy in the "Wonderful World of Disney" in Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, *From Mouse to Mermaid the Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 45-46.

[110] Susan Jeffords, "The Curse of Masulinity" in Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, From Mouse to Mermaid the Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 169.

as isolated pieces but as parts of a greater whole. Instead of focusing on the offensive racial stereotypes employed in its various films, Gagon sought to examine how it viewed the ideal form of multiculturalism.[111] Starting from the Renaissance onward, Disney's animated features began to include heavier multiculturalism themes and racial harmony. However, Gagon stated that the studio chose to present these themes placed too heavy an emphasis on racial and cultural differences. Instead of celebrating commonalities and respectful representations of unique cultures, films like Pocahontas reinforce problematic stereotypes of racial differences.[112] The author concluded that Disney's harmful representation of multiculturalism would lead to serious negative consequences because the entertainment giant is a part of nearly every child's life.

Animating Cultural Politics: Disney, Race, and Social Movements in the 1990s studied the company's attempts at addressing political issues during Disney's Renaissance. The authors began by examining the early filmography of the studio to establish the tone and setting every feature film in the Disney canon is known for. Chiefly, these films showcase a very white-centric view of the world in both its protagonists and the racist depictions of minorities. These same sentiments still presented themselves in films that centered on themes of multiculturalism of social justice. For example, the authors heavily criticized the character design and voice acting for certain characters in *Aladdin* because they were at once extremely racist stereotypes and primers for children to distrust Arabs in a political situation.[113] The author has ultimately concluded that the multiculturalism attempts expressed in this new generation of films were not

[111] Gagnon, Monika, and Alison Beale. "Race-Ing Disney: Race and Culture in the Disney Universe". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1998. http://search.proquest.com/docview/304478550/.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Palmer, Janet, Julia P. Adams, and Michael D. Kennedy. "Animating Cultural Politics: Disney, Race, and Social Movements in the 1990s". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2000. http://search.proquest.com/docview/304628084/.

as progressive as the studio claimed. The "over political correctness" found in *Pocahontas*, which the authors stated was an attempt to fix Aladdin's issues, still misrepresented other cultures because it stripped uniqueness from both parties.[114] The authors ultimately concluded that Disney's failed attempts at multicultural films stemmed mainly from a desire not to upset their white audiences.

The mid-2000s saw a resurgence in the amount of work on Disney and race mainly due to its equally strong rebound during the past decade. Mark Pinsky's *The Gospel According to Disney* examined the religious and moral underpinnings of the wide release animated films in the Disney canon. Pinksy admits that he was lenient with the older Disney film's depictions of race because of the time they were created, but he did offer criticism of more modern films. For example, he stated how the opening line of Aladdin reinforced the idea of the "mysterious other" by implying the use of violence in Middle Eastern culture.[115] Similarly, the author did chastise the misrepresentation of Native Americans and Romani peoples in *Pocahontas* and The Hunchback Notre Dame. Despite the issues, Pinsky argued that the overall message of the films was positive. The author also stated that Disney is extremely successful in telling compelling narratives for children from any culture or racial background. While not as successful as similar films, *Brother Bear* saw a vast amount of praise from non-white communities because it represented Paleolithic spirituality and common bonds found in all cultures.[116] Pinsky's book was not above criticizing Disney's missteps, but the author ultimately states that it can make extensive appeal films when adequately motivated.

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[114] Ibid.,

[115] Mark Pinsky, *The Gospel According to Disney: Faith, Trust, and Pixie Dust* (Louville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004): 148-149.

[116] Ibid., 225.

Dorothy Hurley's "Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess" studied the effects of Disney's racial coding on children of color. Hurley postulated that stories, especially fairy tales, play a significant role in how children shape their view of the world and themselves. The author examined the differences with the source material in six Disney features: *The Little Mermaid, Snow White,* and *Mulan* to see where studio changes occurred.[117] Hurley concluded that all of the selected films have a decidedly pro-white form of coding in them that subtlety influences audiences into believing that darker-skinned peoples inherently deserve less. The author stated, "The Disney film versions of these same texts reveal indisputable evidence of White privileging and a binary color symbolism that associates white with goodness and black with evil."[118] The result of such coding resulted in a lessening of black and darker skinned children's self-worth. Hurley stated that the only way to combat these sentiments is to teach children critical literacy skills and the importance of transcultural education.

Professor Amy Davis' book *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* examined how the heroine's role changed over the company's long history. The root of her thesis argued that the company gave women more and more agency over the decades, and this agency was no longer coded as an inherently evil trait. The evidence she gave for this argument stemmed from how modern characters like Lilo and Mulan bear almost no resemblance to a classic princess in agency and even screen time.[119] This is not to say that Davis did not find critiques with modern depictions of women, for she did note that most characters are beholden to a heterosexual romance. Davis charted a clear line of improvement in how female

[117] Hurley, Dorothy L. "Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess." *The Journal of Negro Education* 74, no. 3 (2005): 221-32. Accessed June 1, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/40027429.

[118] Ibid.,

[119] Amy Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches,* 94

characters were represented in Disney's animated features even with these issues. This improvement also includes women of color.

Davis noted that female representation's improved nature in Disney animation coincided with an equally significant (or even more robust) improvement for people of color. In the earliest animated features, minorities were relegated to small supporting roles that usually involved a racist stereotype. This trend continued until the Disney Renaissance, when, according to Davis, the company took a completely different approach to portray people of color. *Pocahontas* became the pinnacle of this change for the film marked the first time that a person of color took the leading role in a film without being made into an anthropomorphized animal.[120] While minatory characters still fell into some classical characterization (Romani in Hunchbacked) they still showed a marketed improvement from the previous decades. Davis's work may have focused more on gender, but women of color in Disney animation are key to understanding how the company portrayed racism.

Douglas Brode's *Multiculturalism and the Mouse* served as a refutation of the numerous claims that Walt Disney and the company he created were inherently sexist and racist. Brode argued that "Uncle Walt" was extremely progressive in his views of the world, considering the place and time that he lived in. By creating theme park rides like the Carousel of Progress and It's A Small World, Disney envisioned a diverse world where people progressed together with a common purpose.[121] According to Brode, his feature films, even the ones that use racial caricatures, exemplify Disney's progressive nature. For example, the five crows in *Dumbo* depict

[120] Ibid.

[121] Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005): 2-3.

common stereotypes of African Americans; however, Disney did not make these characters harmful in any way. These crows are some of the few characters who showed any empathy for the title elephant's plight.[122] Even though Disney used images and techniques that are seen as racist in modern contexts, Brode stated that the creator's progressive views of race, gender, and ethnicity shown through in all of the forms of entertainment that he helped create.

Sean Harrington's *The Disney Fetish* looked at the methods by which the company successfully commodified its products into some of the most recognizable pieces of entertainment in the world. While not fetishes in the sexual sense, Harrington did note that the corporation's products' mass appeal to so many demographics did verge on the side of a real fetish. In terms of race and discrimination, the author argued that such a general commodification and acceptance of anything produced by Disney could and does lead to severe misunderstandings of history and culture. Harrington used the example of *Song of the South* because the film showed the nuclear family surviving uncertainty and depicted black characters as subservient and straightforward to white protagonists' will.[123] Examples such as these show that the films' mass appeal generally came at the cost of minority groups in the country and across the world. The Disney Fetish may only spend a small amount of time on race, but Harrington's work does chart the company's marketing division's success and the problems associated with them.

Published ten years after her first book, Davis' *Heroes & Vile Villains: Masculinity in Disney's Feature Animation* examined the depiction of masculinity in the Disney canon. The author noted how the earliest male characters (at least human ones) typically fulfilled secondary

[122] Ibid., 51-53
[123] Sean Harrington, *The Disney Fetish*, 194.

roles for comedic effect, with the stereotypical "Prince Charming" receiving the least screen time and characterization. These characters still had a great deal more agency than their female counterparts, but the characterization difference may have been due to the predominantly female target audience.[124] As the years progressed, however, the writers began to give male characters much more characterization and character development, with *The Lion King's* Simba being the start of this trend. Davis stated that this change began because traditional views of femininity and masculinity subtly changed throughout the decades, though vestiges of traditional gender roles still appeared even in modern films.[125] Much like her previous work, Davis' book scrutinized the concept of gender in each animated feature in the Disney catalog to understand how and why these changes occurred. This level of dedication also revealed how the company chose to view race.

Handsome Heroes and Vile Villains addressed issues in this thesis by addressing the majority of Disney films' white-centered nature. Davis stated that while male characters began to express traditionally female characteristics, the company still preferred white features. The best example of this was *Aladdin*, where the more antagonistic a character was, the more traditionally Arab the person was depicted.[126] While such methods fell out of favor by the start of the second millennium, the company found different ways to remove its male characters' race from their animation. Turning a person of color into an animal became the most common method in the company. While Disney made this choice with both male and female characters, Davis stated that this particular stereotype was used on men far more frequently. The most likely reason for this gender difference stemmed from how the most personal of color centered films possessed

[124] Amy Davis, *Heroes & Vile Villains: Masculinity in Disney's Feature Animation*, 145
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid,

male protagonists.[127] At the same time, Davis did not directly address how racism was depicted in these films; her work on how the company chose to address persons of color laid much of the groundwork for the thesis.

Following the Princess and the Frog's release, several historians published works that detailed the tone-deafness and insensitivity of Disney's ignoring of segregation in the film. One of these papers included Ajay Gehlawat's "The Strange Case of "The Princess and the Frog:" Passing and the Elision of Race." Gehlawat's paper argued that the 2009 film followed the tradition of place persons of color into situations where they become animals for most of the film. This trope is seen in other Disney features such as *The Emperor's New Groove* and *Brother Bear*, and Gehlawat argued that the use of the trope in this instance relates to the practice of passing as white. Tina is only able to achieve her dreams through her experience as a frog. Gehlawat links this plot device to passing because, in both instances, one takes on aspects of something they cannot function in society.[128] In Tina's case, this passing allowed her to become a business owner, an instance that has historical precedence. Gehlawat's work showed how Disney's modern renditions of race still carried with it the problems the company sought to avoid. Other authors looked at the film's depiction of 1920s New Orleans in a more performing since.

Brenda Ayres *The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom* examined its previous representation of cultures in its films. Functioning as a series of essays, Ayres wrote that each chapter investigates how Disney represented women and minorities

[127] Ibid.,

[128] Gehlawat, Ajay. "The Strange Case of "The Princess and the Frog:" Passing and the Elision of Race." Journal of African American Studies 14, no. 4 (2010): 417-31. Accessed June 1, . www.jstor.org/stable/41819264.

through its history. As with Edwards, Ayers pointed a critical eye at how the company chose to portray cultures given the modern examples. For example, Disney purposely coded characters like Jaffar as Arabic to prime their young audience to fear Middle Easterners just as tensions leading to the Gulf War were at their highest.[129] In the book, individual essays received some derision from the scholarly community for their overuse of emotion and lack of actual evidence. Grace Bullaro stated that the essay on Walt Disney's personal life served as little more than "pop psychology" because Ayre's analysis of Disney's mental state relied solely on the interpretation of films numerous people had a role in creating. However, Bullaro did accept that Ayer's research into the coding of minority characters proved useful if somewhat too emotional in execution.[130] While specific segments of the book prove problematic, Ayre's contribution does offer a good overview of the company's failings regarding minority representation.

Sarita Gregory's "Disney's Second Line: New Orleans, Racial Masquerade, and the Reproduction of Whiteness in "The Princess and the Frog" examined how Disney portrayed the concept of race in the film. Using the example of Mardi Gras parades, Gregory stated that Disney attempted to normalize whiteness in the film by removing racism from the historically segregated city. The most blatant example of this attempt is how the film keeps many of the trappings of segregation while ignoring these instances at the same time.[131] Gregory argues that this type of representation turns white privilege into a natural phenomenon. Thus, making blacks'

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[129] Brenda Ayers, The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom, 179

[130] BULLARO, GRACE. "The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom: The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom." Film quarterly 59, no. 3 (March 2006): 71–73.

[131] Gregory, Sarita McCoy. "Disney's Second Line: New Orleans, Racial Masquerade, and the Reproduction of Whiteness in "The Princess and the Frog"." Journal of African American Studies 14, no. 4 (2010): 432-49. Accessed June 1, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/41819265.

hardships in the film a result of their own life choices rather than the systematic racism instituted in the region.[132] The authors' paper examined how simply removing blatant racism does not remove the underlying issues, and even normalize such beliefs, a vital feature of this paper.

Leigh Edwards, “The United Colors of "Pocahontas,” examined the coding of the Renaissance era of Disney films implemented in *Pocahontas*. Edwards examined how the coding of the characters in the film presented an extremely Amero-centric and culturally diluted view of colonization. These views express themselves in how the protagonists are coded, chiefly regarding John Smith and Pocahontas. Both characters possessed the phenotype and standard American accent that characterized Disney protagonists of this era.[133] The author also criticized the final message of the film because *Pocahontas* essentially argued against diversity and inclusion for the sake of harmony. Edwards states that the film's multiculturalism only shows superficial differences for the Native Americans, with such societies being assimilated into the whole. To wipe away the company’s history of misrepresentation of minorities (predominantly Native Americans), the studio still mistakes cultural sameness for cultural diversity. [134] By, in essence, arguing for the assimilation of minority cultures into the more significant white majority, Edwards warns that Pocahontas creates a story of harmony that placates to the fears of whites who fear their way of life is changing. Edward’s examination of the film paints a full picture of the studio's attempts at multiculturalism in the 1990s and 2000s, showing how its strategy may have been profitable but missed the mark.

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[132] Ibid.

[133] Leigh H. Edwards, "The United Colors of "Pocahontas": Synthetic Miscegenation and Disney's Multiculturalism." Narrative 7, no. 2 (1999): 147-68. Accessed June 7, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20107179.Copy

[134] Ibid.,

Henry Giroux's *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* explored how the corporation's vast media empire influenced American popular culture. Giroux argued that the increased amount of time children spent in front of television screens meant Disney's film and television played just as much a role in their development as parenting and school. Therefore, the messages that Disney encoded into their media proved extremely significant, given how influential the films were with children.[135] In terms of race and racism, the author spent a significant amount of time discussing how the company still possessed issues representing people of color in their media. Upon the publication of *The Mouse that Roared*, the most recent example of such difficulties was 1992's *Aladdin*. The author noted how the film's protagonists were coded as white and American, while the antagonists were given facial features and accents more appropriate to the Middle Eastern setting of the film.[136] This same type of coding existed in the previous Disney films, creating a continued belief that white and American is inherently good and should be sought after. While Giroux's book may focus more on Disney's influence, his work with race showed seemingly small issues in films that could significantly impact children.

Lorraine Santoli's *Inside the Disney Marketing Machine* recounted her time as a part of Disney's marketing department during the latter part of the twentieth century. As head of the company's corporate synergy department, Santoli played a crucial role in many of the marketing decisions that caused Disney's revitalization in the 1990s. The bulk of these new ideas came from Disney Michael Eisner and Frank Wells's then chairs, whom the author credits with the

[135] Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock, *The Mouse That Roared Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995): 14-15.

[136] Ibid., 105.

company's immense change.[137] Key to the company's renaissances was what the author referred to as the "synergy approach" to marketing, a tactic that existed for nearly seventy years with the company. While many companies balked at the use of synergy marketing, Santoli stated that the vast entertainment resources Disney had at its disposal turned cross-platform marketing into an extremely successful strategy.[138] The author did note that even though she left the company in the early 2000s, these same strategies are used in the company and have only increased with the rise of the internet. While the book did not address race issues, *Inside the Disney Marketing Machine* did shed light on how companies perceived and reacted to some of the company's racial aspects.

Ilan Michael-Smith's essay "The United Princesses of Disney" argued that while the company has diversified its cast of characters, it remained mostly homogeneous. This consistency presented itself in two ways throughout the films. Firstly, the author stated that while modern films like *The Princess and the Frog* and *Aladdin* feature non-white non-European characters, they interact exclusively with people of their race/ethnicity. Michael-Smith argued the *Princess and the Frog* illustrated the extreme example of this trend because of the film's segregation.[139] Secondly, these diverse characters are also exclusively coded as American or European through their characterization. Princess Jasmine from *Aladdin* exemplified this trend because of her American accent and values despite being an Arabian royal. Michael-Smith stated that Disney did characterization in this way to create a unified sense of the "Disney Princess" for

[137] Lorraine Santoli, *Inside the Disney Marketing Machine: in the Era of Michael Eisner and Frank Wells* (Etats-Unis: Theme Park Press, 2015): 15.

[138] Ibid., 82-83

[139] Ilan Michael-Smith "The United Princesses of Disney" in Ed. Pugh, Tison and Susan Aronstein. The Disney Middle Ages: A Fairy-Tale and Fantasy Past (New York :Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 213.

marketing and consumer purposes, despite how problematic such characterization could be to the culture in question.[140] Russel denounced the film's message of sexual assault because Moana argued that women should forgive their attackers lest they become "true" monsters.

Brooklyn Russel's "Disney Minority Heroines: A Rhetorical Analysis of Race, Gender, and American Politics" studied the presentation of minority characters as they are presented as Disney Princesses. Russel examined the problematic associations seen in the *Princess and the Frog* and *Moana*. In the former's case, the author took a critical eye to the presentations of race in privilege presented in the film. The disassociation with economic power and white privilege proved a significant contention point in Russel's examination of the studio.[141] The author assented to *Moana*'s efforts to be more culturally inclusive, but these efforts did not mean the film was complete without error. Russel's main critique leveled against the Polynesian inspired film is women's treatment despite the story's female-centric nature. Maui's theft of the Heart of Tefiti and her ensuing transformation into the villainous Teka served as an allegory for sexual assault. However, such an allegory is problematic because rather than placing Maui as the villain, Moana shifts the primary blame on the actual victim.[142]

Lauren Dundes, and Madeline Streiff's work "Reel Royal Diversity? The Glass Ceiling in Disney's Mulan and Princess and the Frog" examined the intersection of race and gender between the two films. Narratively, both films share a lot in common because each centered on a woman of color who eschewed gender norms in the process of their respective stories. However,

[140] Ibid., 214-15.

[141] Russell, Brooklyn, Samantha Blackmon, Jennifer Bay, and Paul Schneider. "Disney Minority Heroines: A Rhetorical Analysis of Race, Gender, and American Politics". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018. http://search.proquest.com/docview/2111872466/.

[142] Ibid.,

Mulan and Tina aspire to have too modest goals in life rather than their white counterpoints' extravagant aspirations.[143] The authors argue that these divergent endings suggest that characters of color are not entitled to the same fairy tale endings in films. Both movies, and the rest of the Disney canon, all possess aspects of the fantastical that allow for any number of happy endings. Therefore, Mulan and Tina's modest endeavors form a conscious effort to deny these non-white characters access to the more standard and financially successful endings found in other Disney animated films.[144] This paper is significant because it shows both the use of racial coding to subtly suggest that non-white characters are inherently less-than in their films and show a use of the fantastic reality against persons of color. Having literal magic in both films meant that more realistic endings for the heroines made even less sense, especially considering the coding.

Kameelah Samuels' "Disney's Tia Dalma: a critical interrogation of an "imagineered" priestess" looked at that intersection of African spirituality and race in the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise. Samuels examined the "conjure woman" stereotype of black women who practice traditional African religions like voodoo and sangeet. The author ultimately concluded that the Dalma character's use served as one of the more egregious forms of cultural appropriation the corporation committed in its modern era. Dalma was continually othered throughout the two films she appeared in, serving as an amalgam of several forms of black spirituality.[145] Being both a priestess and later revealed to be a goddess, the character surprisingly had little impact on the trilogy's overall story. This irrelevance to the plot is further

[143] Lauren Dundes, and Madeline Streiff. "Reel Royal Diversity? The Glass Ceiling in Disney's Mulan and Princess and the Frog." Societies (Basel, Switzerland) 6, no. 4 (December 1, 2016). Accessed August 7, 2020. https://doaj.org/article/cbcbd23633b442c3bf32f5fca278ba07

[144] Ibid.,

[145] Samuel, Kameelah Martin. "Disney's Tia Dalma: A Critical Interrogation of an "Imagineered" Priestess." Black Women, Gender Families 6, no. 1 (2012): 97-122. Accessed June 1, 2020. doi:10.5406/blacwomegendfami.6.1.0097

compounded because the Dalma/Calypso bore tenuous ties to the traditional African religion that inspired the character. Taken together, these points make the character into an offensive gimmick that overlooks the marginalization of blacks and African spirituality.[146] Samuel's work shows the orientalists leanings in both the live-action as well as the animated departments.

The multiauthor piece "Disney's Metaphorical Exploration of Racism and Stereotypes: A Review of Zootopia" examined Disney's new attempts at addressing racism and multiculturalism in an era where racial coding has lost much of its appeal. The authors examined how the film managed to address racism issues without also creating an environment where prejudice and bias could likely form. The city of Zootopia possesses the distinction between predator and prey, which is meant to represent the ingroup and outgroups where prejudice comes from. However, the authors noted that the fictional world did not possess privileges for those in the ingroup.[147] The authors' primary example is the lack of true-second class status in either the predators or the prey in the film. Both groups are equally represented in the film in both the upper, middle and lower classes. The only form of discrimination found in the film before the villain's plans revolved around small and large animals, something the authors likened more to gender discrimination rather than racism.[148] The authors ultimately concluded that Zootopia's message only served as a metaphor for racism in the most general sense. Their review of the film is critical because it marks scholarly acknowledgment of Disney's change in representing

[146] Ibid.,

[147] BEAUDINE, GREGORY, OYEMOLADE OSIBODU, AND ALIYA BEAVERS. Disney's Metaphorical Exploration of Racism and Stereotypes: A Review of Zootopia. *University of Chicago Journals*. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/690061

[148] Ibid.

multiculturalism. Other scholars also found an issue with the methodology of Disney's new practices.

Esther Terry's "Rural as Racialized Plantation vs Rural as Modern Reconnection: Blackness and Agency in Disney's "Song of the South" and "The Princess and the Frog" served as one of the few publications that held favorable views on Disney's representation of blackness. Terry looked at the use of the plantation trope and nature as a setting for black characters. In terms of *Song of the South*, the plantation served as a reference to the longing for a simpler time many white Americans held.[149] Understandably harsh on both this sentiment and its implications for black Americans, Terry still commends the use of nature in the following film. *The Princess and the Frog* flip the concept of nature presented in *Song of the South* because nature does not form black characters' oppression. Instead, transforming into an animal and the sojourn to the bayou functioned as a black character's method to escape from their financial and social morays to discover their most authentic self.[150] Numerous scholars have denounced this method because it still relies on stereotypes for persons of color, but Terry argued in this particular instance it gave rather than took away the characters' agency.

One of the most recent additions in this field came from a collaborative effort from Mariah Farbotko, Regine Rosenthal, Anna Minardi, and Don Pease. Entitled "It Was All Started by a Mouse: Examining Animal Representations in Modern Disney Films," the paper examined how Disney used both real and fictional animals in the past ten years. Broken up into three

[149] Terry, Esther J. "Rural as Racialized Plantation vs Rural as Modern Reconnection: Blackness and Agency in Disney's "Song of the South" and "The Princess and the Frog"." *Journal of African American Studies* 14, no. 4 (2010): 469-81. Accessed June 1, 2020. .jstor.org/stable/41819267.

[150] Ibid.,

chapters that examined three different films, the paper studied how animals were used to address society's serious issues. The first chapter addressed race relations in the U.S., the second chapter examined American society's growing distance from incarcerated animals, and the final chapter questioned the concept of human exceptionalism. While each of these chapters contains a widely different premise and thesis, the author stated that the connecting tissue to each of these films is Disney's choice to use animals as a mouthpiece for social change.[151] The authors chose to examine three Disney properties because they stated that these films exemplified representations of animals in their works. The first chapter proved one of the first academic studies of *Zootopia* and its underlying themes.

Regarding this thesis, this paper's first chapter dealt the most heavily with racism and the shortcomings of using animals as stand-ins for minority groups for this section focused on *Zootopia*. The authors paid particular attention to how many of the story elements in the film mirrored real-life racism and racial scapegoating examples. The analogy of *Zootopia'*s "dust" to the crack cocaine epidemic served as a through-line for much of the authors' work.[152] While the paper does commend the filmmakers for utilizing an innovative way of discussing such a sensitive issue to children, the authors were equally critical of some of the film's creative choices. The biggest issue that the authors found with *Zootopia* are that animals made for a poor representation of racism because physical and mental differences do exist in the animal kingdom and the film. [153] The paper stated that "By focusing on animals, the filmmakers create a level of distance between the real and fictional issues." The authors agreed that expecting a children's

[151] Farbotko, Mariah, Regine Rosenthal, Anna Minardi, and Don Pease. "'It Was All Started by a Mouse' - Examining Animal Representations in Modern Disney Films". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018. http://search.proquest.com/docview/2054006561/.

[152] Ibid.,

[153] Ibid.,

feature to address all the intricacies of modern race relations in the U.S. is merely absurd. However, animals hampered the film's attempt because to spoke against prejudice while using stereotypes for comedic effect.

One of the latest published works on the subject centered on the similarities and differences between the two black princesses under Disney's corporate umbrella. Heather Harris's "Queen Phiona and Princess Shuri—Alternative Africana 'Royalty' in Disney's Royal Realm: An Intersectional Analysis" examined how *Black Panther* and *Queen of Katwe* depicted the newest black Disney royals. Harris stated that the two royals were both influenced by white supremacy and colonialism, but they took widely different approaches in dealing with these issues. In the case of Phiona, Harris argued that the character used white structures to prove African culture's independence and relevance.[154] However, Shuri rejects most European systems to create something uniquely African, a commonality found in Afrofuturistic stories.[155] Harris stated that the newest examples of African representation are commendable, but actual change will not occur in the industry until characters such as these become the norm rather than fringe examples. Harris' paper aided in the thesis because she created one of the newest additions to the field that touched on more modern Disney canon films. Harris was not the only individual to write on such topics.

Opio Dokotum's *Hollywood and Africa : Recycling the 'Dark Continent' Myth From 1908-2020* became the most recent work in studying Disney's current addresses of race and racism. The author's final chapter focused on the cultural and historical underpinnings that

[154] Heather E. Harris. "Queen Phiona and Princess Shuri—Alternative Africana 'Royalty' in Disney's Royal Realm: An Intersectional Analysis." Social sciences (Basel) 7, no. 10 (October 1, 2018). Accessed August 7, 2020. https://doaj.org/article/f6ffcde0f7b14fb6ba092bd05bfe9c37.

[155] Ibid.,

shaped 2018's *Black Panther*. Dokotum praised the filmmakers for not turning all of Africa and its inhabitants into a monolithic group, instead of making Wakanda a diverse region made up of culturally distinct tribes.[156] The film's assessment of the ongoing adverse effects of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade on the African diaspora also proved a significant book for Black Panther. Dokotum did find issues with the film, however, that derived from the exotic way in which western nations still viewed Africa. Examples included references to cannibalism and the extremism espoused by Killmonger.[157] The author concluded that these issues were relatively small compared to the rest of the film, and these issues stemmed from racism and sexism in American cinema rather than native tropes of Africa. Hollywood and Africa showed that Disney could fix many of the previous problems with defining race and racism, yet some improvement was still possible.

[156] Dokotum, Okaka Opio, Hollywood and Africa: Recycling the 'Dark Continent' Myth, 1908-2020 (): 250-251

[157] Ibid., 255-256

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

While the adage “division brings profit” can apply to many businesses, this is certainly not the Disney corporation's case. Being a company catered to children's desires meant that a family-friendly image had to be maintained throughout its various properties. However, the company was no stranger to controversy due to its historical and current racism and sexism. Despite being traditional orientalists as little as thirty years ago, the company’s recent decisions show a marked improvement in addressing minorities and even racism. However, the company almost invented a new form of orientalism in its attempts to side-step fully addressing issues of race in its films. The fantastic reality method summarily replaced the coding used to placate white Americans in Disney features because it created an intentional distance between the story and audience.

In terms of the audience, the company seeks to reach out to, Disney’s fractured approach to race and racism showcases the sharp divide that existed and currently exists in the country. The U.S. has never been a paragon of racial equality, despite what the coding of several Disney films would lead one to believe. The situation for minority individuals is undoubtedly better than that when Disney Studios first launched, but public instances show that two different realities exist between whites and non-whites in terms of privilege and power. Whether it be in the form of the police using deadly force with no provocation on black men or whites being aided by individual officers in the federal government's insurrection, race still shapes how one perceives and is perceived in the country. Certain groups in the country, chiefly middle-aged and older whites, perceive their historical monopoly on political power and moral authority is slipping away. To a degree, these fears are correct because the U.S., and indeed the world as a whole, is steadily moving towards a more secular, diverse, and globalized system. The loss of their de

facto power is happening a generation following the loss of their de jure supremacy with the passage of civil rights legislation and attendant court rulings. These factors create an environment that many white Americans believe to be extremely dangerous to their way of life and resulted in the subsequent resurgence of nationalistic movements across the country and world.

Occurring congruently with the rise of white anxiety and retaliation are several social reckonings from minority groups that have long been under the control of whites either overtly or otherwise. The continued efforts of movements like Black Lives Matter forced segments of the population to finally address systemic racism prevalent in some of the countries' most valued institutions. These movements also come at the heels of the two-term presidency of the country's first black president. President Obama may have been constrained in his ability to address racism because of his position; nevertheless, his election showed some marked improvement in the country. However, the backlash to both the Obama administration and BLM shows that this improvement was not as vast as some political theorists espoused. The election of Donald Trump and the resurgence of right-wing extremist groups across the U.S. illustrate that race and playing to white America's anxieties still form powerful political machines. The political divisiveness ran to such extremes that, in many cases, the belief in factual evidence and data, such as the existence of a deadly virus, became political.

Being a company attempting to create products for two groups that practically live in different realities, Disney continually had to reinvent how its films would be multicultural and still unoffensive to white audiences. The company's resulting attempts either backfired tremendously or lack the political bite needed to convey many of the issues presented in their films properly. Playing both sides may ensure that Disney's films remain popular and profitable,

but the country's ever-widening political divide will eventually force the company to take a direct stance on specific issues. Its smaller productions on the Disney Channel and other subsidiaries suggest that the company will move in the majority's direction towards one of diversity and inclusivity. However, such a change will continue to be slow coming as long as markets mean that plying to racists remains profitable. Disney may no longer be orientalists in function, but the market created by social divisions the country continues to put the company in such a position to placate its audience.

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