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Animal Representation of Race in *The Princess and the Frog*

Tiffany Tyantyan Enoch

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Animal Representation of Race in *The Princess and the Frog*

by

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Phillip, and to my children, Elisabeth, Alexander, Jacob, and the little one on the way. For always being there listening to my banters, watching Disney movies on repeat, and for your unconditional love. There is never a dull moment in our lives, which can be full of ups and downs. But when we have each other, we can get through anything. I love you all so much.

“You got to dig a little deeper. Find out who you are.”— Mama Odie

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ABSTRACT

Disney's 2009 film *The Princess and the Frog* was created in response to racial criticism. It features the first Black princess as a means of promoting racial equality. This film attempts to positively portray Black characters, who were depicted as violent and lazy in previous animations.

While the film showcases positive themes (e.g., internal beauty and virtuous work) and portrays Black characters in a more positive light than previous films, it still perpetuates the typical racism against people of color. The lack of accurate and equal representation of racial groups in recognizable and famous stories is a persistent issue, and this film attempts to counter this by offering Black characters empowerment within society and countering previous prevalent and degrading images of Black characters. However, the animated presentation of Black characters in *The Princess and the Frog* still perpetuates pervasive racial differences that marginalize and tokenize them.

This research explores the Black experience through the anthropomorphic representation of Black characters in Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*, with supported context from other recognizable Disney films.

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CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION

Historically, animated films have fed on caricatures and tropes of Blackness, and Black people were often omitted from the production of the films. For instance, Disney's *Dumbo* (1941) features a murder of crows that speak in a stereotypical "Blaccent" and exhibit other negative Black stereotypes. No Black people were involved in the production process of this film (Marshall, 2018). Similarly, Warner Bros.' animated short "Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs" (1943) is a parody of Disney's *Snow White* that features exaggerated and offensive caricatures of Black people. Again, no Black people were involved in the production process of this short.

Such animated representations depict biased and prejudiced versions of racial differences using Black characters, and animated production companies have continued to do so in subtler ways—even when this form of entertainment fell out of favor (Worden, 2009). The critics of such animated films in recent years contend that rather than address the issues affecting Blacks in society, Black protagonists are created as cash grabs for large corporations to profit from, and these corporations are owned by predominately white executives (Wormer and Juby, 2016). Even when such animated films are credited for the expressed purpose of depicting racial struggles and promoting anti-racism, the producers make no effort to dismantle the negative perceptions and images of Black people in society. In many of these films (e.g., *The Princess and the Frog*), very few positive attributes are presented to replace the negative stereotypes, thereby affirming that the producers are less concerned about projecting Blacks as equal to other races in society and more concerned

about virtue signaling, which can come across as tokenism. Even when multiculturalism pervades within the entertainment and marketing field, Black characters have remained marginal and tokenized (Wiersma, 2000). Disney films have often portrayed Black characters negatively with unspoken apartheid, while only honoring white heterosexual princesses.

Against this backdrop, *The Princess and the Frog* represented an opportunity to explore the importance of the animated depiction of Blackness using the character of a Black princess (Arnold 2016). *The Princess and the Frog* should have reflected our modern times, in which individuals are willing to end the stereotypical mindsets that exist in society. This film should have represented a shift towards more diverse and inclusive animated representation as a reflection of the changing attitudes towards racial representation in society. For example, it features the protagonist Tiana, a hardworking and ambitious young Black woman, who aspires to own her own restaurant. As such, this film should not rely on negative stereotypes or caricatures to depict Tiana or any other Black character. Instead, it should celebrate the beauty and complexity of Black culture, and as such, it should represent Black characters positively.



Figure 1.1 Disney's 2009 film, *The Princess and the Frog* movie poster.

CHAPTER 2 : THE PROBLEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF BLACK CHARACTERS AS ANIMALS IN LITERATURE AND FILM

The representation of Black characters as animals in animated films has a long history that dates back to the early days of animation in the United States. These representations were often based on racist caricatures and stereotypes that were prevalent in American society at the time. These representations further disseminated racism and contributed to the normalization of the harsh and inequitable conditions that Black people face in society. These films reinforced negative stereotypes and helped perpetuate a culture of racism and discrimination that is deeply ingrained in American society.

2.1 : BRER RABBIT, UNCLE REMUS, & UNCLE JULIUS

Joel Harris is credited with introducing his “Brer Rabbit” tales into white American culture through his “Uncle Remus” collection, which collects tales from Black plantations with the intention of restoring African-American vernacular and folklore (Klein and Shiffman, 2006). The “Uncle Remus” tales present the titular character of Uncle Remus, an elderly and contented man with fond memories of slavery (Marshall, 2018). Similarly, Charles Chesnut’s “Uncle Julius” stories can be viewed as a tool that uses our existing social structure to promote racism (Worden, 2009). According to Chesnut’s narrative, race has an external form that is secreted like an exoskeleton or shell, which emits an ideological message that promotes segregation. These writers were essentially legitimizing segregation and slavery, as they were engrossed in their desire to return to the “good old days” of slavery. Marshall (2018) adds, “*The Jones family didn’t have any moral objections to*

owing slaves, and were, like Harris, fantasists who believed that slaves, if treated in a way that they considered to be fair, were happy with the system of slavery and protected from the worst aspects of themselves.”

The only modicum of accuracy from the “Brer Rabbit” tales is the archetypal and straightforward plot (e.g., Brer Rabbit outwitting larger animals to win a prize). According to Marshall (2018), the only prize that the animal characters in the “Brer Rabbit” tales win is tricking their masters to avoid being eaten, while white characters are often rewarded for their efforts with an expansion of their businesses. Tales such as “Brer Rabbit,” in which smaller animals outwit larger animals to avoid being eaten, demean the heroics of Black people by portraying them as harmless and weak (Marshall, 2018). The depiction of Black characters as the weakest and most harmless animals (e.g., rabbits and foxes) is problematic. This approach portrays Black individuals as weak, vulnerable, and at the mercy of powerful predators, who are often represented as white characters. For example, in the “Brer Rabbit” tales, the men with guns who pose a threat to the Black characters are often depicted as white, which reinforces the idea of white dominance and thus further denigrates the Black community. The portrayal of Black characters as reliant on trickery and deception perpetuates negative racial stereotypes and undermines the achievements of all Black characters. Thus, while these collections have been praised for their presentation of Black history in America, they have also been heavily criticized for romanticizing the antebellum period, supporting slavery, and perpetuating patronizing stereotypes. These tales fail to address the lack of freedom, the exploitation, and the cultural assimilation that led to the extinction of African values in America.

The continued depiction of Black characters as animals (e.g., frogs) in popular

culture celebrates the denigration of Black people and often reinforces harmful stereotypes and prejudices, thereby promoting the idea that Black people are subhuman and undeserving of the same rights and dignity as white people. This type of representation can also reinforce power dynamics by positioning Black characters as inferior to white characters and thus subjecting them to violence and oppression. Despite being presented as entertainment, these tales are in fact part of a broader narrative that reinforces racist ideas and stereotypes about Black people. This dehumanization makes it easier for white people to justify slavery, segregation, and other forms of discrimination and oppression against Black people (Marshall, 2018).

2.2 : THE BESTIALIZATION OF BLACK CHARACTERS IN MEDIA

Media representation of Black people as animals has a long and problematic history that has been tied to racist stereotypes. This type of representation is known as “bestialization,” and it has been used to dehumanize Black individuals and thus reinforce harmful racial biases. Animal representations of Black people (e.g., as monkeys and other primates) often have negative connotations and are portrayed as primitive, savage, or uncivilized. German Marxist cultural critic and well-known sociopolitical commentator Theodore Adorno propounded a cultural theory which contends that popular culture in film is often presented in standardized storylines and structures. The theory claims that many Black characters are depicted as animals with barbaric traits.

Various studies and articles have explored this issue in depth. For example, Julia Smith’s 2014 article, “The Racialization of Bestiality: The Emergence of White Supremacy in Settler Colonial Canada,” highlights how bestialization has been used to justify colonialism and white supremacy. Smith (2014) argues that this type of representation is

deeply harmful and can lead to a range of negative outcomes for Black people (e.g., discrimination, violence, and exclusion).

Although Disney films often present the world as a place where animals (e.g., sheep, wolves, and foxes) roam free, their fate often relies on the Darwinian concept of “survival of the fittest,” in which only the fiercest animals survive (Condis, 2015). The imagery presented in many Disney films depicts Black characters as having a deeper connection to the beast within them, thereby perpetuating racism (Dundes and Streiff, 2016) and further reinforcing the stereotype of Black people as being “closer to nature” and thus “less civilized” than white people.

2.3 : DISNEY’S PROBLEMATIC HISTORY OF STEREOTYPING BLACK CHARACTERS

Since its inception, the Walt Disney Corporation has created storylines, characters, and themes that exist within fantasy spaces and tap into the transcultural myths of innocence and magic. Disney’s production of quality products has augmented the company’s eminence, while simultaneously building its reputation, image, and brand (Barker, 2010). This approach has helped the corporation capture its audience’s imagination. According to Benschhoff and Griffin (2009), the Walt Disney Corporation has incorporated anthropomorphic representations of animals into its products. By using the ethnic, gender, and racial identities of these characters, the corporation has imparted critical lessons on the dominant presuppositions, value systems, and perceptions of Western society.

The use of anthropomorphic characters in Disney’s films has played a vital role in creating the perception that the corporation is family-centric and wholesome, and that it

embodies a sense of childhood innocence (Cappiccie et al., 2012). Thus, incorporating anthropomorphic characters into Disney's films serves as a tool with which to impart important lessons on Western society's dominant presuppositions, value systems, and perceptions.

However, despite the positive aspects of Disney's animated films, a closer analysis reveals sociocultural biases that are often hidden within the animation. These biases are reflected in recurring themes throughout the films and can be interpreted as perpetuating problematic societal norms and values. A critical assessment of Disney's animated films shows that the characters of color are transformed into animals in most of their stories.

The main themes identified include: (1) negative representations of non-dominant cultures, (2) exaggerated class stereotypes, (3) depiction of strict Western and Christian values, and (4) characters who share similar values being segregated or pressured to "stick to their own kind."

Some examples of problematic characters of color in previously released Disney films include:

Dumbo (1941): In *Dumbo*, there are depictions of slavery, in which Black workers are doing manual labor, while a white man is in charge. The workers sing, "*We work all day, we work all night, we never learned to read and write, we're happy-hearted roustabouts ... we don't know when we get our pay and ... when we get our pay, we throw our money all away.*" Also in *Dumbo*, the character of Jim Crow is the leader of a murder of crows who help Dumbo learn to fly. Jim Crow is named after the racial-segregation laws in the United States and is portrayed as a caricature of a Black man, with exaggerated "African" facial features and a stereotypical "Blaccent." The rest of the crows also speak this way,

and they are depicted with stereotypically negative and racist characteristics often associated with Black people (e.g., being poor, lazy, unintelligent, and naïve).

Alice in Wonderland (1951): The character of the Caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland* has stereotypical Middle-Eastern characteristics and is portrayed as a lazy, short-tempered opium addict.

Peter Pan (1953): In *Peter Pan*, the titular character of Peter refers to the Indigenous tribe as “redskins.” He describes them as “cunning but not intelligent.” Also in *Peter Pan*, Nana the dog represents a stereotypical Black “Mammy” character archetype.

Lady and the Tramp (1955): In *Lady and the Tramp*, the Siamese cats are illustrated with slanted eyes and buck teeth. They are portrayed as dangerous, and they speak with poor English grammar and stereotypically heavy “Oriental” accents.

2.4 : THE PROBLEMATIC USE OF ANIMAL PROTAGONISTS IN *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG*

Disney’s representation of Black characters as animals has been criticized as problematic by some scholars (Tsipursky and Ward, 2020); unfortunately, this problematic representation of race is still exploited in contemporary Disney media, as was evidenced by *The Princess and the Frog*. According to Worden (2009), the placement of vulgar, slimy animals that are typically uncivilized serves to distinguish the superior humans from the savage animals. In *The Princess and the Frog*, the Black characters are presented as physically unappealing animals (e.g., frogs, alligators, and insects), and are therefore meant to be perceived as subhuman.

Although Disney’s creative team attempts to positively portray the Black characters in the film, this quickly collapses as the main story unfolds, and Tiana changes from a

human into a frog. According to Lester (2010), presenting Black characters as animals—particularly frogs—undermines their position as human beings. In *The Princess and the Frog*, the main character Tiana is presented as the first Black Disney princess; however, she spends most of the film as a frog, which fails to resonate with previous representations of white Disney princesses (England et al., 2011). In fact, Condis (2015) notes that Tiana spends more time as a frog throughout the course of the movie (57 minutes of the film’s 97-minute running time) than she does as a human being—let alone as a princess. Adding insult to injury, at the end of the film, Tiana transforms back into a human, yet she continues to wear green dresses, which remind the audience that inwardly, she is still a frog. This enforces the notion that Black characters cannot be fully changed into humans with a kiss, thus insinuating that Black people are innately animalistic, and no amount of magic can transform them into humans (Tsipursky and Ward, 2020).

Moreover, the relationship between the princess and the other animals in the film portrays the princess as a lesser creature, who is at the mercy of the other animals. Notably, Louis the alligator and Ray the firefly serve as her guides and protect her from the other creatures (Widestedt, 2012). Using a metaphor, the film shows that Louis the Alligator was willing to do anything to play jazz with the big boys, but he could not do so until he pretended to be wearing an alligator costume (England et al., 2011). Thus, Disney’s creative team was trying to allegorically show that Black people find it difficult to participate fully in aspects of life in the United States without pretending to be something they’re not. Regardless of talent, they must hide their true self or pass as white to be a contributing member of society. This perpetuates biases and discrimination towards Black characters and reinforces the misconceptions of all Black people as “disempowered.”

The only successful Black person in the film *The Princess and Frog* is Dr. Facilier (also called “The Shadow Man”), who uses trickery to acquire his wealth. However, his wealth pales in comparison to that of Eli “Big Daddy” LaBouff (Gregory, S.M., 2010). The Shadow Man uses Black spirits, represented by humanlike shadows that move like snakes, thereby further solidifying the representation of Black characters as vulgar and unappealing animals.

The Princess and the Frog ultimately seems to celebrate whiteness, while simultaneously suggesting that Black people should be satisfied with their position in society (Condis, 2015). This assertion is not only wrong; it also continues to perpetuate racism and propaganda against Black people.

Overall, the representation of Black characters as animals in animated films reflects the broader historical and cultural context of racism and discrimination in the United States and underlines the pervasive racial differences that have been perpetuated in media and popular culture for centuries. Portraying Black characters as animals in films contributes to the notion that Black people are beneath white people, and as such, this endorses a sense of cultural supremacy in the white majority. Black characters in animated films are often portrayed as animals, thereby reinforcing the idea of Black inferiority and serving as a tool for a larger system of white control. These representations manipulate the audience and perpetuate racial imbalance.

This highlights the need to critically examine how popular culture perpetuates and reinforces these negative stereotypes and biases. Questioning the inaccurate representation of Black characters is integral to end the negative portrayal of Black history that promotes racism

CHAPTER 3 : BLACK FEMALE CHARACTER TROPES IN *THE PRINCESS* *AND THE FROG*

Disney's animated films do not deviate from modern stereotypes when portraying Black women, and although the corporation has made strides in trying to represent a Black princess, *The Princess and the Frog* still draws from the shallow well of Disney's historical representation of Black women.

In particular, the character of Tiana draws from the stereotype that Black women embody strength and transcendence, meaning they are perceived as “tough,” “unbreakable,” and “capable of overcoming any obstacle.” Tiana tirelessly navigates her existence around family, love, and goals by benevolently supporting Charlotte, avoiding marriage, and struggling to fight off a prince who makes disparaging remarks and sexual demands from her. These experiences make Tiana join a long list of narrow historical representations of Black womanhood (e.g., “Sapphires,” “Mammies,” and “angry Black women”), thereby undermining her strength as a strong Black woman who believes in her ambition and autonomy (Garabedian, 2015).

Tiana and her mother are represented in a manner that reflects how a modern Black woman “should” look and behave (Flick and Powell, 1988), based on Disney's creative team's perception of what constitutes a modern Black woman's appearance and behavior. This perception is influenced by cultural, social, and historical factors, but it also incorporates what a Disney princess traditionally embodies.

3.1 : THE “MAMMY” ARCHETYPE

In contemporary film, the “Mammy” character archetype is constantly in a state of evolution. Popular culture is working hard to keep the “Mammy” character evolving, as it functions as a stereotypical foundation for Black female characters (Woodard and Mastin, 2005). Tiana does not endure the traditional stereotype of a “Mammy,” as she is tall and thin with wavy black hair, and as such, Princess Tiana represents a more contemporary “Mammy-inspired” character, which varies in the degree of servitude.

The Princess and the Frog is set in the 1920’s in New Orleans, and although Disney’s creative team does not present Princess Tiana as an enslaved woman, she still embodies the characteristics of the stereotypical “Mammy” archetype. For example, Tiana works in the service industry, which is in line with the few jobs that Black women could have historically occupied (e.g., maid, cook, seamstress, and caretaker) (Wanzo, 2012), and despite living in a Southern city that has always been known for its racial inequality and disharmony, Tiana is depicted as “happy to be of service.” The “Mammy” stereotype fully reveals itself when Tiana struggles to get home from an extensive night of waiting tables at a restaurant named Cal’s, and then works a double shift at another restaurant named Duke’s during the day (Hurley, 2005). As Tiana prepares for work and waits tables at the diner by taking up the load of three waitresses, she is hiding her true feelings and constantly smiling and pretending to be happy, just like a “Mammy” character, who is always ready to help. Tiana is also sleep-deprived after engaging in back-breaking labor; however, the scenes in which Tiana works multiple jobs are not presented as a consequence of oppression and racial disparity, but rather as a sign of character development and a way to achieve the American dream (Gregory, S.M., 2010).

Tiana's friendship with Charlotte depicts the history of young Black girls being assigned to care for their master's children, who were always more youthful than them (Gehlawat, 2010). True to the "Mammy" character archetype, Tiana follows Charlotte around, scolds her for being melodramatic, and offers a listening ear. As the movie progresses, Tiana becomes a frog and needs Charlotte to reverse the spell. Charlotte offers help, but in doing so, she still holds power over Tiana.

In *The Princess and the Frog*, Disney's creative team perpetuates the "Mammy" stereotype by promoting the image of an ambitious, hardworking Black woman striving to achieve the American dream (Collins, 2004), and in doing so, Disney's creative team adds to a long, painful history of emotional neglect and exploitation of Black women at the hands of white people. This representation allows the audience to revisit a time period when the white majority benefitted from marginalizing Black people, and as such, *The Princess and the Frog* plays a role in oppressing Black women through its overreliance on images of cultural oppression.

3.2 : THE "JEZEBEL" ARCHETYPE

The film and advertising industries in the United States usually associate Black women with animals. According to Worden (2009), "*These ads constantly associate African American women with typical African animals, such as zebras, cheetahs, and monkeys, which draws connections between them and savage, uncivilized wild animals.*" Furthermore, and often simultaneously, Black women are presented naked or exposing their body erotically, which promotes the notion that Black women have a wild sexual identity. As such, representing wild animals by using Black characters—particularly, Black women—creates an "otherness" that divides them from civilized society and is represented by the "Jezebel" archetype.

The "Jezebel" trope is a harmful stereotype of Black women that originated during slavery

in the United States. It portrays Black women as hypersexualized, immoral, seductive temptresses, who use their sexuality to manipulate men. This stereotype has been perpetuated in media and popular culture by portraying Black women as “promiscuous” and “lacking in moral values.” Black women in real life are constantly threatened with being perceived as a “Jezebel.”

In *The Princess and the Frog*, Prince Naveen responds to Tiana as if she were a “Jezebel,” and his attitude towards her suggests that he believes she has some sexual experience, due to his assumption about the innate sexual maturity of Black women. This emboldens Prince Naveen to boast about his sexual prowess to Tiana after a near-fatal experience with the alligators. Prince Naveen and Tiana find protection in an old hollow tree, where Naveen makes a sexual pass at her. Prince Naveen tells Tiana, “*Well, waitress, looks like we will be here for a while. So, we might as well get comfortable.*” Tiana hits Prince Naveen and shouts, “*Get your slimy self away from me!*”

It is important to recognize and reject harmful stereotypes like the “Jezebel” trope to promote equality and respect for all individuals.

3.3 : THE UNDERREPRESENTATION AND PERCEIVED INFERIORITY OF BLACK WOMEN IN MEDIA

Throughout history, the relationship between beauty and Black women has been fraught with tension and discrimination (Lester, 2010). According to Kismet Moffitt (1997), Mainstream media often pressures Black women to aspire to look like white women, thereby negating the natural beauty of Black women. As a result, Black women have internalized racism and have been conditioned to view their own bodies and beauty through the lens of white beauty standards, without questioning the underlying causes of such beliefs (Hooks, 2014).

The Princess and the Frog perpetuates this damaging trend by promoting the idea that only fairy tale princesses are beautiful, while neglecting the true beauty of Black women (Lewis, R.,

2016). Plus, the portrayal of Prince Naveen as only pursuing white women prior to entering a relationship with Tiana reinforces the notion that white women are more desirable and therefore superior to Black women.

This reinforces the notion that Black women must conform to Eurocentric beauty standards to be considered attractive, thereby further marginalizing their natural beauty. The representation of a Black princess as slim and light-skinned with a European hairstyle is a false pretense, as there is a broad spectrum of bodies that are considered to be beautiful in different Black cultures. The representation of a Black woman under these Eurocentric norms is evidence of unachievable beauty standards for Black women and girls, as they will never be white (Collins, 2004).

CHAPTER 4 : CULTIVATION THEORY, ANTI-BLACK PROPAGANDA, AND THE BIASED CULTURAL NARRATIVE OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

The cultivation theory asserts that the perception of the social reality of individuals in society is shaped by the media (Klein and Shiffman, 2006). This theory contends that people's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations are based on what they hear and see on television. The negative depictions and stereotyping of Black people in the film *The Princess and the Frog* is a concerning issue, due to the long history of propaganda against the Black community (Widestedt, 2012).

According to Chesnutt, racism in the United States is institutionalized, and the government plays a significant role in perpetuating it through its machinations, which routinely deny Black people services and opportunities. The legislative, judiciary, and executive branches of the government all contribute to the problem of institutional racism and even contribute to it by association. Chesnutt contends that race is codified as a significant class through American jurisprudence and legislation; hence, addressing racism should begin by questioning such legislation and jurisprudence. The use of media is adopted to promote racism and legitimize segregation, as it is responsible for the creation and dissemination of propaganda against Black people.

The films produced in the United States influence how individuals perceive racial issues, which affirms the need for individuals to question the narratives advanced by the media (e.g., films like *The Princess and the Frog*). Dominant cultural and racial groups often use animated characters to legitimize the inhumane treatment of minority groups

(Klein and Shiffman, 2006). By presenting a certain portrayal of minority groups, the dominant group can frame them in a way that serves their interests. For example, Black individuals have been historically depicted as “lazy,” “violent,” or “criminals,” which reinforces the dominant group’s belief that Black people are inferior and thus deserve discriminatory treatment (Klein and Shiffman, 2006). Such depictions have contributed to the perpetuation of systemic oppression and discrimination against minority groups. They have also lead to negative stereotypes, biases, and prejudice among members of the dominant group towards the minority group, thereby making it harder for the minority group to be treated fairly and equitably in society. Furthermore, these depictions impact the minority group’s self-image, thereby leading to internalized oppression and low self-esteem (Widestedt, 2012).

Historically, the relationship between the Black community and the film industry is unique, as it offers audiences an escape from reality, while also perpetuating cultural oppression. Cultural critic and feminist Bell Hooks (2014) says, “*Theorizing the Black experience is challenging, as many are convinced that their lives are simple; hence, unfit for reflection and critical analysis.*” (Wiersma 2000). Literary theorist Rebecca Wanzo (2012) opines that the commercialization and standardization of the film industry has created false narratives that the broader society uses as cultural framework. In other words, public opinion is often shaped by the trends and narratives put forth by the film industry. The combination of imagery and language in films positions the Black and white races in opposing roles, thereby perpetuating a negative perception of the Black race amongst white people and the endorsement of apartheid.

Malcolm X (1964) opined that the paradigm on animal imagery in films was a

response to the pervasive racism and segregation against Black people, and that white people developed these images to regulate the behavior of Black people, and they were then leveraged to promulgate segregation and legitimize institutional racism (Flick and Powell, 1988). Therefore, white people were the architects of these verbal artifacts and images, which controlled Black peoples' present and future conditions. Malcolm X also noted that white people had the unique ability to define and control these images, due to their ownership of the right to categorize the world based on their own rhetorical reasons (Cohen, 2013). Unlike white people, Black people were not afforded the same opportunity to assign themselves the images that would define their group. Due to these limits, this coding was assigned to white people. Therefore, Black representation in film was managed entirely by white people and thereby resulted in ideas and characters that displayed Black people as violent, irrational, aggressive sexual deviants who were inhuman insofar as they lacked human values and qualities (Flick and Powell, 1988). The most heinous and irresponsible part of this blatant injustice is that this imagery was presented not as a biased opinion but as factual information.

4.1 : DISNEY'S CREATIVE TEAM'S CHOICE TO SET *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG* IN 1920'S NEW ORLEANS

The film's setting in New Orleans in the 1920s was an interesting but misguided choice by Disney's creative team. The typical fairy tale setting is a 19th-century Bavarian castle in a fictional land with white inhabitants; this is a cliché made famous by the Walt Disney Corporation itself. As such, one must wonder why, when conceptualizing *The Princess and the Frog*, Disney's creative team did not choose to create a fictional kingdom (e.g., Agrabah in *Aladdin* [1992]) in which to set the story. In this theoretical kingdom,

Disney's creative team could have chosen to subvert the trope of the white princess by making Tiana the princess of her own castle in a magical land populated entirely by Black characters. This would have been a remarkable first for the Walt Disney Corporation; instead of simply adding the first Black princess to their roster, they could have added the first Black king and queen, the first Black kingdom, and of course, the first all-Black animated cast. One can only imagine the box-office records such a film would have broken, and the critical acclaim such a film would have received—not to mention the tremendous strides such a film would have made in the effort to bring more just and equitable Black representation to animated films. As such, one must wonder why the Walt Disney Corporation did not take advantage of such an opportunity.

Consider a version of *The Princess and the Frog* in which white characters do not exist. The debate over whether or not the anthropomorphic representation of Tiana as a frog for most of the film would effectively become a moot point, as she would already be a princess—even during her time as a frog—and as such, the audience would not need to wait for the payoff at the end of the film, as they did in the original version when Tiana finally becomes a princess. There would be no racial hierarchy with which to measure her worth against, and as such, even when Tiana is in her anthropomorphic frog form, the film would be filled with Black supporting characters with various degrees of power. Therefore, there would be no risk of tokenism, and Black audiences would not feel like they had been bait-and-switched with the promise of the “first Black Disney princess” in a film that features a mostly white cast.

Additionally, Tiana would already be a princess and thus have all the privileges, wealth, adoration, and power that comes with such a role, the major conflict of the film

would have nothing to do with racial and class struggles. Perhaps in this version of *The Princess and the Frog*, the kingdom is thrown into chaos when their beloved Princess Tiana goes missing. Perhaps Dr. Facilier is attempting to overthrow the monarchy and steal the throne for himself, or perhaps he merely wants to use Princess Tiana's disappearance to create a distraction so that he can lift the veil and allow his "friends on the other side" to come through into the world and cause mayhem and destruction.

Obviously, as Princess Tiana would already be a princess, then Naveen's dilemma about needing a kiss from a princess to break the spell that turned him into a frog would have to be a lie. Therefore, in this version of the film, perhaps the role of Prince Naveen is a traitor to the throne who helps Dr. Facilier bring his evil plan into fruition, or maybe his story is similar to the original version, and he is simply at Dr. Facilier's mercy or has been otherwise coerced into doing his bidding. Either option would work; the most important takeaway is that Princess Tiana would not be reliant on Naveen's financial help, as she would already have all the wealth, power, and agency she needed. The major conflict of the film would therefore be about restoring her to her rightful status, rather than putting her in the position of needing to bargain with her white friends to acquire the funds to make her dream of owning her own restaurant come true.

In other words, why did Disney's creative team decide *not* to place Princess Tiana in a world where her Blackness would not be an issue that stands in her way? There are only two possible reasons for such a choice: (1) Disney's creative team *couldn't* imagine such a world; or (2) they just didn't *want* to imagine it.

Neither of these reasons cast the Walt Disney Corporation in a flattering light. If Disney's creative team *couldn't* imagine a world in which white characters did not exist,

and Black characters were in the ultimate position of power, then one must assume that the majority of the team has been blessed with a tremendous amount of white privilege—so much so that they can be perceived as “snow-blind,” a term that is fairly self-explanatory: *They can only see white*. This may be passed off as simple ignorance, but even this assumption puts the Walt Disney Corporation into the familiar position of needing to ask for forgiveness from the Black community after offering them yet another subpar representation of their people—and one could argue that the Walt Disney Corporation has had enough “second chances” at this point.

However, the alternative explanation is far more nefarious. If the creative team behind *The Princess and the Frog* did not *want* to imagine a world in which white characters did not exist, and Black characters had absolute control over an entire kingdom, then it can be supposed that the marketing team behind *The Princess and the Frog* saw an opportunity to cash in on “the first Black Disney princess” narrative and knowingly offered a subpar product to the Black community by way of virtue signaling. Nonetheless, virtue signaling is often less about pleasing the demographic being targeted and more about convincing the moral majority that everything is above board, and there were never any intentions to oppress a marginalized group in the first place. In other words, it is a deceptive practice meant to cast a flattering light upon an organization that has often been criticized for catering to a single demographic (e.g., the Walt Disney Corporation to white people) at the expense of another (e.g., the Black community).

Therefore, one can suppose that Disney’s creative team’s choice to set *The Princess and the Frog* in 1920s New Orleans—a hotbed of racial tension and class struggles right smack in the middle of the Jim Crow era—was inarguably intentional, and *The Princess*

and the Frog was meant to exemplify the suffering experienced by Black people. As such, it can be inferred that Disney's creative team intentionally incorporated historically racist themes (e.g., the "Mammy" archetype and white superiority) into the film.

4.2 : FACTUAL INACCURACIES AND RACIST THEMES PRESENT IN *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG*

Black characters in films should capture the truth and accuracy of the Black stories being told. Films should avoid romanticizing the Colonial Era and should not advance damaging and patronizing stereotypes. *The Princess and the Frog* has been criticized for perpetuating harmful stereotypes about Black characters. While the film may attempt to portray Tiana as a strong and independent Black woman, it also contains problematic elements (e.g., the depiction of Tiana's family as poor and uneducated, and the portrayal of the villain Dr. Facilier, who has exaggerated "African" facial features and a stereotypical "New Orleans" accent).

For example, Tiana's work ethic is equivalent to the myth of the American dream, which claims that success will surely come if only the Black community works hard and shows dedication to their role. Although such opportunities were available to many Americans in 2009 when the film was released, it was also clear that poverty and economic strife were still widespread in America, just as they certainly were during the Jim Crow era depicted in the film when the popular culture in America was driven by race, and social-welfare attitudes were race-coded.

It is problematic that the film represents the Shadow Man as Black, as it portrays Black people as cagey, untrustworthy, and pretentious (Gregory, S. M., 2010). The film presents the spirits that the Shadow Man invokes as evil, thereby contending that Black

people are wicked, which negatively portrays the Black population. The voodoo practitioner contacts the spirits by using racist tribal masks with exaggerated, grotesque expressions. The spirits are presented as shadowy figures and are meant to represent Black characters that hold the Shadow Man accountable through their barbaric blood pact (Garabedian, 2015). When he refuses to adhere to their pact, the Black spirits drag the Shadow Man into putative Hell.

Put succinctly, the film does not effectively encapsulate the history of the Black community because it is more focused on creating images that benefit corporate interests, while simultaneously promoting racism.

Altogether, the portrayal of Black men and women in Disney films contributes to a broader cultural narrative that reinforces negative stereotypes and perpetuates inequality. By presenting Black characters in limited and often offensive ways, Disney's creative team fails to represent the full diversity of the Black experience and thus reinforces the systemic racism that has long plagued American society.

It is important to recognize the societal impact of the media's representation of racial stereotypes so that we may critically engage with and analyze unfair representations of people of color. We must challenge harmful stereotypes to promote greater understanding and work towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

CHAPTER 5 : POSITIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG*

The Princess and the Frog is a 2009 animated musical film produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios. It was directed by Ron Clements and John Musker and was produced by Peter Del Vecho. The film was originally titled *The Frog Princess* and is based on E.D. Baker (1991) 's novel *The Frog Princess*, and the fairy tale “The Frog” by the Brothers Grimm (Gregory, S. K., 2012). The film captures an accurate representation of New Orleans via its soundtrack, which features prevalent musical styles (e.g., gospel, jazz, blues, and zydeco) (Gregory, S. K., 2012). The score and songs were composed by Randy Newman (Callen, 2012).

Set in New Orleans during the 1920s, the movie tells the story of Tiana, a hardworking young Black woman who is the child of a day laborer and a seamstress. She is employed as a server and dreams of opening her own restaurant. One day, she meets a prince named Naveen, who has been turned into a frog by an evil magician named Dr. Facilier. Tiana agrees to help him become human again—in exchange for the funding she needs to start her restaurant. To break the curse, Naveen convinces Tiana to kiss him, but instead of turning him back into a human, Tiana is turned into a frog. Together, they embark on a journey through the bayou to seek the help of Mama Odie and break the spell, encountering various obstacles and making new friends, including a trumpet-playing alligator named Louis and a Cajun firefly named Ray. Along the way, they encounter a number of obstacles and challenges, and Tiana learns important lessons about friendship

and the importance of following her dreams. In the end, Tiana and Naveen break the curse and turn back into humans, and Tiana achieves her dream of opening her own restaurant while discovering a newfound appreciation for family and love. *The Princess and the Frog* is notable for featuring Disney's first Black princess and has received critical acclaim for its positive portrayal of Black culture and history (Dobson et al., 2018).

5.1 : DISNEY'S ORIGINAL INTENTIONS FOR *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG*

In making *The Princess and the Frog*, the Walt Disney Corporation underscored the need to deviate from films that perpetuate negative propaganda. Disney's creative team understood their role in using animation as a teaching tool when they produced *The Princess and the Frog* and as such, the corporation used its influence on children, who are vulnerable to misinformation and falsehood, to affirm that the beauty and strength of individuals is universal, rather than tied to race. In doing so, the film's original intention was to change the narrative and promote a deeper understanding of the struggles that people of color experience to question society's consent to the system that governs us and may or may not oppress us based on our race (Benshoff and Griffin, 2009).

5.2 : POSITIVE CHARACTER PORTRAYALS IN *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG*

Disney's recent portrayal of Black characters has been perceived as a positive and progressive shift from their previous depictions. The animators and producers of *The Princess and the Frog* tried to present the Black characters positively. The characters in the film were created to help warm the hearts of the audience, who have been hurt by the insensitive and negative portrayal of Black characters that has long perpetuated racist

beliefs and prejudice (Moffit and Harris, 2014).

In the beginning of the film, there is a clear deviation from the usual toxic representation of Black characters as “inferior” by presenting them instead as loving, honorable, decent, and hardworking (Turner, 2014). The introduction of Tiana as the first Black Disney princess shows a positive change in the portrayal of Black characters in animated Disney films. In *The Princess and the Frog’s* first scenes, the audience is drawn to the Black protagonist Tiana, rather than to her white friend Charlotte, which makes the film less exclusionary and more palatable to all little girls—regardless of their race (Barker, 2010).

The physical appearance of working-class Tiana at the start of the film is obviously different from the Disney princesses in other animated movies. For instance, she has full lips, a wide nose, rounded hips, dark skin, and curly hair. Tiana is portrayed as dedicated, hardworking, courageous, and loving. When the movie begins, Tiana is presented as a strong and motivated individual, who prioritizes social mobility and economic prosperity. She works hard and is saving to start her own dream restaurant. Tiana is similar to her father, who is also shown to have been hardworking, and this is a trait that he passes onto Tiana. However, Tiana’s father still failed to bring his dream of success to fruition because he believed that structural inequalities were impossible to overcome.

Interestingly, there is no instance in which Tiana complains about her assigned societal position—even when her situation upsets her. Arguably, Tiana is happy about her status as a Black woman in society (Benshoff and Griffin, 2009). During a conversation with her mother, Tiana acknowledges that Black people in society are undermined; however, Tiana believes that she can still achieve success if she sacrifices more than others,

and this further ingrains the notion that she can reach her goals with hard work. However, her aspirations are shattered by the real-estate agents, who believe that she should remain in her current position in society (Hodkinson, 2017).

Despite the racism that surrounds her, and regardless of her economic exploitation, Tiana carries herself with grace and love, thereby embodying the qualities usually given to white Disney princesses. Through her hard work and determination, she marries Prince Naveen and achieves her dream of owning a restaurant, thereby demonstrating that Black characters are capable of success and achievement.

The character of Tiana is meant to advance a positive narrative of Black people in society that deviates from past representations of the Black community as violent and aggressive. The character of Mama Odie affirms the positive representation of Black religious practices and beliefs, as she uses her magic to change Tiana from a frog back to her human form (Gehlawat, 2010). Interestingly, Mama Odie is depicted in glittery pastel colors and gold jewelry, which is similar to the Fairy Godmother character in *Cinderella* (1950).

Although the film portrays the Black characters as marginalized and disenfranchised by the negative structural inequalities and racial segregation of the setting in the 1920s American South, the process of hegemonic negotiation is shown in the ways that Tiana and other Black characters in the film resist and challenge the dominant ideologies that perpetuate racial stereotypes and inequality. They do this by pursuing their dreams and aspirations—despite the obstacles they face—and asserting their own values and beliefs in the face of oppositional authority figures. *The Princess and the Frog* presents Black characters as hardworking, which helps them overcome their hardships in life—even

when they fail to realize their dreams (Terry, 2010). As such, instead of focusing on traditional stereotypes and skewed portrayals, *The Princess and the Frog* pushes a positive narrative, and therefore intends to change the audience's attitude towards people of color (Tsipursky and Ward, 2020).

5.3 : THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG'S POSITIVE IMPACT ON SOCIETY

While *The Princess and the Frog* may have some problematic elements, it is also worth noting that the film does make efforts to promote diversity and inclusion by focusing on teaching the audience that when individuals transcend personal boundaries and are liberated from gender roles, class boundaries, stereotypes, and social hierarchies, success comes naturally. For example, Tiana is a positive representation of a hardworking and ambitious Black woman, and her interracial marriage to Prince Naveen highlights the potential for unity and equality between different races.

Overall, Disney's more positive portrayal of Black characters in recent years is a welcome change, and it has the potential to challenge and eliminate negative stereotypes and biases towards the Black community in society. By countering these dominant ideologies and biases, disenfranchised groups can increase the pressure on the leading hegemony to acknowledge and address their concerns and work towards a more equitable and just society

CHAPTER 6 : RACIAL AND CLASS DISPARITY PRESENTED IN *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG*

For many years, the Walt Disney Corporation and other media companies perpetuated negative stereotypes of Black people in their animation by depicting them as subservient, ignorant, and inferior to white people. These images reinforced the racial hierarchies and biases that already existed in society and further contributed to the marginalization and oppression of Black people (Roy and Sahharil, 2020). The struggle with changing these images and representations was complex and required a concerted effort from activists, artists, and other stakeholders to challenge the dominant ideologies and biases that perpetuate these negative stereotypes and to advocate for more positive and accurate representations of Black people in media (Arnold, 2016). This struggle was also tied to larger sociopolitical movements that sought to address racial inequality and discrimination.

While the film promotes themes of romance and individualism associated with Black culture, it also heavily relies on the values of whiteness (Dobson et al., 2018). A close analysis of the film reveals that *The Princess and the Frog* revolves around the intricate web of racial relations in the United States, and as such, it is shaped by the media's portrayal of class, race, and gender (Moffit and Harris, 2014). It perpetuates the deeply ingrained stereotype of a society in which Black individuals are deemed to be "inferior" to their white counterparts because their values, professions, and beliefs are often disregarded and seen as less significant than those of white people. Thus, the film presents the same

challenges that Black people face in our modern society; white privilege often leaves Black people lacking access to opportunities for advancement—and even basic necessities. Notably, the film constantly displays that it is difficult for Black people to lift themselves from poverty and climb the social ladder—regardless of their efforts—without the help of white characters (Dundes and Streiff, 2016).

While the representation of Blackness in *The Princess and the Frog* is a complex issue, it is not the only aspect of the movie that has received scrutiny. *The Princess and the Frog* demonstrates that class also plays a role in enhancing an individual's societal position—sometimes, even more so than their race. Similar to the real world, the film reveals that when an individual has a higher social status, they are oblivious of others who have not yet acquired their class, and they only become aware of lower-class individuals if they themselves lose power (Cohen, 2013). The film further affirms that money plays an integral role in society, as it defines an individual's limitations and achievable status (Condis, 2015). According to Barker (2010), "*The real power in this world isn't magic; it's money—buckets of it!*" (Barker, 2010). This reinforcement of class division only serves to exacerbate racism and promote segregation by preventing diverse groups from interacting with each other (Worden, 2009).

6.1 : PRINCESS TIANA'S LACK OF AGENCY IN *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG*

Despite being presented by the Walt Disney Corporation as the first Black princess in all the film's marketing and advertising materials, Tiana is initially portrayed as a poor woman who cannot afford fancy clothes, and she is first depicted as a traditional Disney

princess in the film only after wearing a dress borrowed from Charlotte, who is her white best friend (Flick and Powell, 1988).

Although Tiana opens her own restaurant at the end of the film, her efforts are still overshadowed by her relationship with Prince Naveen, as she does not achieve her dream with her own hard work and determination to succeed but with his financial contribution as her benefactor. Therefore, the film perpetuates the notion that for Black people to succeed, they must rely on charity and goodwill from other races, rather than their own conviction and belief that they can achieve their goals by working hard and saving money (Marshall, 2018).

Throughout the film, Tiana is encouraged to shelve her ambitions, stop striving to achieve her dream of owning a restaurant, and accept that she will never succeed in life. She is constantly reminded that efforts are futile in comparison to her competitors, who are white men with an abundance of financial resources. This implies that her color and background will always keep her in the societal class and position into which she was born, which it is equivalent to insinuating that the reason Tiana cannot achieve her dreams and goals is because she is Black. Even in the final scene, *The Princess and the Frog* still presents the white characters as superior to their Black counterparts, as after Tiana's dream of acquiring her own restaurant is fulfilled with the help of Prince Naveen, her social status is still defined by the fact that she is a Black woman, as she is still shown serving customers in her newly acquired restaurant.

In order to pursue her dreams, Tiana has to put in more effort than her white friends (e.g., Charlotte), but even then, she falls short and remains in the shadow of others. This is problematic because in film, Black women are often portrayed as hardworking and capable

of nurturing others, yet their own aspirations and ambitions are often overshadowed by someone else's success and beauty. This reinforces the notion that success is more attainable for white people than it is for Black people, as Tiana has to work much harder than her white friends to achieve her dreams, but she still falls short.

Thus, rather than challenging or subverting the dominant stereotypes that still exist in modern society, *The Princess and the Frog* instead falls into the trap of reinforcing them (Roberts, 2020).

6.2 : EXAMPLES OF WHITE PRIVILEGE IN *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG*

White privilege is predominant in *The Princess and the Frog*, as exemplified primarily by the characters of Prince Naveen and Charlotte, who embody traditional white privileges (e.g., wealth and aristocracy). In doing so, the film portrays these characters as superior to Tiana. This is depicted when Prince Naveen and Tiana have to rely on a kiss from Charlotte to break the spell, as well as when Prince Naveen is willing to marry Charlotte after being cut off by his parents, and Charlotte is willing to marry Prince Naveen because of his princely title. However, neither of them consider or acknowledge how hard Tiana is working to acquire the money to secure and sustain her dream restaurant. They only help her for selfish reasons.

Prince Naveen in particular is a privileged and self-centered character who fails to understand the challenges that Tiana experiences or the reality of racial inequality in society—until it confronts him personally (Lester, 2010). This is obvious because when confronted by someone from a lower class (e.g., Tiana, who is a waitress), Prince Naveen is oblivious to their struggles. He only starts to pay attention to these differences once he is turned into a frog (Cappiccie et al., 2012). Throughout the film, there are moments when

he unintentionally perpetuates stereotypes or biases. For example, when he first meets Tiana, he assumes that she is a princess because of her costume, and he makes further assumptions about her interests and values, based on his own privileged experiences and background. Prince Naveen even blames Tiana after he mistakes her for a princess by saying, *“You’re the one parading around with your phony baloney tiara!”* In this specific scene, Prince Naveen can be perceived as racist and/or sexist, due to his implication that Tiana was imitating princess-like behavior by wearing a tiara and was thus being purposefully deceptive to gain attention from wealthy white men.

Charlotte, Tiana’s white best friend, is portrayed as a kind and loving character. However, her behavior also reveals her limited understanding of the experiences of people of color. She believes that money and status can solve all problems and does not fully understand the systemic barriers that Tiana faces as a Black woman. Similarly, Charlotte fails to fully appreciate Tiana’s dream and vision, because as a wealthy white woman, Charlotte comes from a privileged group in society. Charlotte is portrayed as a romantic dreamer, who idealizes fairy tales and wishes to find her own “Prince Charming.”

The writers use Charlotte’s character to explore the disconnect between the romanticized ideals of fairy tales and the realities of life. Charlotte’s character serves as a contrast to Tiana, who is focused on working hard to achieve her goals, rather than dreaming about fairy tales. Tiana depends on Charlotte’s goodwill and charity, as Charlotte gives Tiana clothes that make people compliment her and mistake her for a princess. Tiana struggles to achieve her dreams and has to overwork herself to afford even basic necessities; however, Charlotte is provided with everything she needs or wants at will. The scene in which Tiana looks miserably and wistfully at her privileged friend as she gets a

custom-made dress and a puppy speaks volumes of the racial and economic privileges and differences between Black and white women in the real world (Hodkinson, 2017). Although the title of “princess” is given to Tiana at the end of the film, it is irrelevant, as she continues to live in Charlotte’s shadow in all other aspects. While Tiana ends up winning the love of Prince Naveen, it is insignificant, as Charlotte’s life is still better than Tiana’s, and Tiana is still an employee in the service industry, as her ownership is only over a restaurant, rather than a castle (Mughal, 2019).

By exploring the historical relationships between white and Black women in the American South, the film attempts to promote the myth of “interracial sisterhood” (Callen, 2012). Historically, interactions between white and Black women breed enmity (Callen, 2012), but Disney’s creative team presents Tiana and Charlotte’s friendship as one based on pluralism and equality; however, throughout the film, the myth of racial equity is revealed to be false, as Tiana plays a role in preserving Charlotte’s princess status. As such, the relationship between Tiana and Charlotte promotes the racial hierarchies of the time, which American society continues to experience today. This causes Tiana and Charlotte’s relationship to resemble more that of a slave-owner and their slave, rather than two best friends on equal footing.

Finally, although Tiana is the titular princess in *The Princess and the Frog*, Charlotte is presented as fair-skinned with blonde hair, thereby personifying the fundamental attributes of a Disney princess. However, instead of affirming that race is irrelevant in determining an individual’s beauty, strength, and work ethic, *The Princess and the Frog* continues to validate the white perspective when Charlotte only affirms Tiana’s beauty after lending her one of her own dresses. Charlotte muses, “Aren’t you just

as pretty as a magnolia in May?” (Baker, 1991). It would be a tremendous oversight on Disney’s creative team’s part not to have realized that the color of a magnolia flower is white. Unfortunately, while it is obvious that Tiana’s role as a princess is groundbreaking and unique, and it does change the notion of how a Disney princess should look, these muddled messages within the film can also lead one to perceive that Tiana is merely an imposter seeking to “steal the spotlight,” and the real princess in the film is Charlotte.

Another character who has been analyzed is Prince Naveen’s royal valet, Lawrence. Lawrence is portrayed as easily manipulated and is lured into the hands of the Shadow Man, who is presented as an evil swindler. Lawrence becomes one of the Shadow Man’s followers because he desires recognition and status, which causes him to seek revenge on Prince Naveen after having been his underling for years. Similarly, it is evident that while the Shadow Man has power, which he lords over Lawrence, he doesn’t really control things, as he is under constant threat of having his power taken away by his “friends on the other side,” (Barker, 2010) effectively making him an underling himself. This shows that in the world of *The Princess and the Frog*, even when Black people have power, there is always someone in a higher position who controls their actions, and as such, they are incapable of fully exerting their influence on society.

Racial and class disparity is also evident in the depiction of the characters of Mama Odie, the “Voodoo Queen of the Bayou,” and the “King of Mardi Gras,” Eli “Big Daddy” LaBouff. LaBouff is Charlotte’s father and is presented as a white, upper-class member of the social elite. He is chauffeured around town, served at his every beck and call, and hailed as the “King of Mardi Gras.” His source of power comes from the economic resources that he controls (Barker, 2010). In contrast, Mama Odie, who possesses a considerable amount

of stereotypical “African” features, is blessed with magical powers from a supernatural source; yet due to her race and class, Mama Odie only serves as an advisor, rather than holding a higher position.

These examples highlight how characters can be written to perpetuate racist and/or sexist stereotypes and prejudices, either implicitly or explicitly. By examining these examples, we can gain a better understanding of the complex issues related to racial identity and representation in media (Lewis, D. M., 1995), and thus help us start stronger discussions on how to dismantle oppression and discrimination in the real world.

CHAPTER 7 : COMPARISON OF TIANA VS. OTHER DISNEY PRINCESSES

The current 13 Disney princesses are, in order of appearance: Snow White, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Cinderella, *Cinderella* (1950), Aurora, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Ariel, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Belle, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Jasmine, *Aladdin* (1992), Pocahontas, *Pocahontas* (1995), Fa Mulan, *Mulan* (1998), Tiana, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), Rapunzel, *Tangled* (2010), Merida, *Brave* (2012), Moana, *Moana* (2016), Raya, *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021).

Marshall, (2018) opines that to be qualified as a “Disney princess,” the character must be human and introduced in her own standalone film, not as a new character introduced as part of a sequel or series. However, the character Nala from *The Lion King* (1994) is a lioness and thus is not considered to be an official Disney princess even though she is technically a queen by the end of the film.

7.1 : CHARACTERISTICS OF CLASSIC DISNEY PRINCESSES (SNOW WHITE, CINDERELLA, & AURORA)

The classic Disney princess films (e.g., *Snow White* [1937], *Cinderella* [1950], and *Sleeping Beauty* [1959]) end with the princess being granted their wishes without question or being otherwise rewarded for their kindness, after facing hardship and struggles. At the end of these films, the princesses took ownership of castles and did not have to work. As such, the typical moviegoing audience associates Disney princesses with affluence and privilege (Davis, 2014). While it is true that Cinderella was hardworking and depicted the struggles of the servant class, working class, and life in poverty, and as such, there are

similarities between Cinderella and Tiana, at the end of *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana only takes ownership of a restaurant, while the white princesses from the classic Disney princess films (e.g., Cinderella) were granted castles at the end of their struggles.

The classic Disney princesses (e.g., Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora) are presented as passive and heavily dependent on men for their survival and success. They are depicted as wearing trademark gowns and having overtly “girlish” features (e.g., delicate features, tiny waists, and small breasts).

7.2 : CHARACTERISTICS OF RENAISSANCE-ERA DISNEY PRINCESSES

(ARIEL, BELLE, JASMINE, POCAHONTAS, & MULAN)

The Renaissance-Era Disney princesses (e.g., Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Fa Mulan) are presented as independent thinkers. These princesses differed greatly from the classic Disney princesses, as they could be headstrong, stubborn, quick-witted, intelligent, capable, curious, competitive, determined, and full of wanderlust, and they were quick to question their circumstances in life and eager to make changes.

Despite these fiercely independent characteristics, with the exception of Fa Mulan—who is not actually a princess but a warrior, despite being part of the official Disney Princesses franchise—these princesses are still focused on finding romantic love.

This makes Tiana an exceptional princess, as her life revolves around realizing success and achieving her dreams, rather than relying on men or seeking romance exclusively.

7.3 : HOW PRINCESS TIANA COMPARES TO PREVIOUS DISNEY PRINCESSES

While Tiana shows the independent mindset of the Renaissance-Era Disney

princesses, she is more realistic, rational, and focused on her goals, rather than romance. Unlike the classic Disney princesses, she is not reliant on men to realize her goals. Tiana also rejects the notion that one's wishes are critical in helping them realize their dreams; instead, she emphasizes the values of working hard, saving, and staying focused to achieve her goals. Tiana's social life also differs from that of other Disney princesses, as she rejects invitations to social outings so that she can continue to work.

While Disney's creative team presents Tiana as a down-to-earth, grounded, and empowered protagonist in the film, she also struggles to start her dream business and requires assistance from Prince Naveen in exchange for favors to do so, as she cannot access the funds she needs—regardless of how much she saves her money—which is ironic, considering her marketed status as a “princess.” Indeed, despite becoming a princess at the end of the film, she takes ownership not of an actual castle but of a restaurant that *resembles* a large castle. She is still in the servant class, and it is assumed that she will work for the rest of her life.

Interestingly, Disney's creative team chose to incorporate a second princess into the film—the character of Charlotte, who is Tiana's white best friend. Charlotte's father is the “King of Mardi Gras,” which makes her the traditional character to play the role of princess. She is also seen dancing the “Princess Waltz” (Wormer and Juby, 2016). Charlotte is wealthy, privileged, and obsessed with finding her own “Prince Charming.” She is also depicted wearing elaborate ballgowns and pastel colors throughout the film, similar to the classic Disney princesses. This is in stark contrast to Tiana, and one must wonder why Disney's creative team would choose to insert a traditional princess character like Charlotte into a film that is supposed to celebrate Tiana as the first Black princess.

Finally, there is support for Tiana as the only Black princess since most of Disney's previous films featured no Black characters at all; however, Tiana is the only Disney princess that turns into an animal, and as such, critics contend that *The Princess and the Frog* takes cues from previous Disney films that were animal-centric but negatively portrayed its anthropomorphic Black characters. According to D. A. Gregory (2011), "*Tiana spends an inordinate amount of time in her anthropomorphic form and, I would argue, does not really move us beyond the stereotypical image of Black women as invisible or as solely attached to labor.*"

7.4 : PRINCESS TIANA AND PRINCE NAVEEN'S INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

The previous Disney princesses romanticized love and relationships, and love was presented as a product of happenstance, in which lovers kiss and fall in love at first sight. Tiana shares a kiss with Prince Naveen, but he does not fall in love with her immediately. In fact, their first kiss is what causes the major conflict in the film, and they spend the first half of the film despising each other.

However, Disney's creative team cannot completely abandon their traditional view of a fairy tale romance; in a scene that takes place while Tiana and Naveen are still frogs, they are shown sitting together on a balcony, with Tiana looking up at the stars and expressing her dream of owning a restaurant. Naveen then tells Tiana that he loves her, to which she responds in kind. The scene is a cliché and formulaic moment that has been used in many other Disney films, as well as many other romantic stories in books and media throughout history.

The difference between this scene and that of earlier Disney films is that Tiana

develops a romantic relationship with Prince Naveen only after learning about him and sharing a romantic intimacy that helps her decide to marry him. As such, their love is a product of extended communication, time spent together, and previous experiences, which makes it much more realistic.

Chesnutt proposes intermarriage as a means of reducing racial prejudice and breaking down racial identities (Marshall, 2018). However, Worden (2009) notes that race is not a social construct or identity that can be eliminated through intermarriage and the integration of social classes. Nevertheless, in *The Princess and the Frog*, the marriage between Tiana and Prince Naveen affirms that interracial marriage can play a vital role in possibly eliminating racism in society.

CHAPTER 8 : DEPICTIONS OF BLACK MASCULINITY IN *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG*

Black male characters in Disney films are often portrayed as shallow, disrespectful, and rude. They are shown to have little interest in dreaming or achieving anything meaningful, and their primary focus is often on women. *The Princess and the Frog* depicts Black masculinity in especially problematic ways.

By murdering Tiana's father—who is the most symbolically strong and confident Black male character in the film—Disney's creative team portrays Black men as having no power (Klein and Shiffman, 2006). During his brief appearance in the film, Tiana's father is characterized as being kind and a provider to his family. He also physically presents the epitome of idealized manhood, as he is tall and muscular, with a baritone voice. As Tiana grows, he is presumed to have died in World War I, due to an image of his picture hanging on the wall, in which he is wearing a military uniform. The exit of Tiana's father leaves no presence of any positive Black male characters remaining in the film.

Buford, who is Tiana's boss at Duke's, does not epitomize idealized Black masculinity; he represents the patriarchy, due to his powerful position. He also does not believe in her ambitions since he teases her and criticizes her dreams. Even Prince Naveen cannot escape this trope, as throughout the film, he is depicted as serenading only beautiful white women, while demeaning Tiana and her career as a waiter (Mughal, 2019). As such, *The Princess and the Frog's* portrayal of Black men does not serve to empower the Black community but only reinforces further harmful stereotypes that depict them as hypersexual and lacking in ambition and/or intelligence.

CHAPTER 9 : HOW THE WALT DISNEY CORPORATION USED VIRTUE SIGNALING TO PROFIT FROM *THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG*

Virtue signaling is an act of public expression designed to demonstrate social conscience or political correctness on a particular issue. *The Princess and the Frog* was produced as an attempt to fix the previous racist depictions of Black people in Disney's animated films and shorts. Tiana was the first Black princess, and she was designed as a response to these racist presentations, and as such, *The Princess and the Frog* was a market-driven concept.

Despite facing criticism for the film, the Walt Disney Corporation profited from their representation of Black culture in *The Princess and the Frog* by inviting Black audiences to engage in consumerism (Callen, 2012). The film generated more than \$200 million in global and local sales, and since its release, the characters have appeared in video games, albums, other films, theme-park attractions, merchandise, and other media (Gregory, S. K., 2012). However, as compared to previous Disney princesses, Tiana received less marketing during *The Princess and the Frog's* initial release, which led to a disappointing performance at the box office.

Critics contend that the Walt Disney Corporation failed to properly market Tiana, as much of *The Princess and the Frog* merchandise failed to perform well. Tiana had comparatively fewer items (e.g., posters, dolls, and clothes) in comparison to other princesses, most of whom have 15+ different merchandise items.

Therefore, it can be supposed that while *The Princess and the Frog* was produced

to bring hope to the younger generations of color, the Walt Disney Corporation failed to properly market and distribute the merchandise related to the film.

The issue shows that the Walt Disney Corporation intentionally created a Black princess to seek forgiveness for their presentation of the Black community in previous movies, rather than to promote the notion of equality, thus prompting the belief that *The Princess and the Frog* may have been an act of virtual signaling.

CHAPTER 10 : CONCLUSION

The Princess and the Frog offers several takeaways that shed light on issues of racism, stereotypes, the role that the Walt Disney Corporation has played in perpetuating harmful ideologies, and the problematic representation of Black people in media.

First, the film represents the continuation of a long history of negative stereotypes of Black people in Hollywood films. Scholars have argued that the film perpetuates the “Jezebel” trope, which is a stereotype that portrays Black women as promiscuous and immoral (Hooks, 2014). The character of Charlotte, Tiana’s best friend, is portrayed as white and embodying the feminine beauty ideal, while Tiana, as a Black character, is not given the same treatment (Callen, 2012). The film’s representation of Tiana is also problematic because it perpetuates the idea that Black women have to work harder and sacrifice more to achieve success, while white women are privileged and thus have an easier path to success (Callen, 2012).

Additionally, the Walt Disney Corporation’s role in perpetuating harmful ideologies cannot be overlooked. The Walt Disney Corporation has significant influence on popular culture and a responsibility to promote positive images of marginalized communities (e.g., Black people). However, scholars have argued that the company has a history of perpetuating negative stereotypes of Black people in its films (e.g., *Dumbo* [1941]) (Collins, 2004). Despite breaking barriers with its first Black princess, *The Princess and the Frog* perpetuates these negative stereotypes in subtle ways.

Consequently, the film highlights the problematic representation of Black people

in media. Black people have been historically underrepresented in Hollywood films, and as such, they have been subjected to negative stereotypes. When they are represented, it is often in a way that reinforces harmful ideas, rather than positive ones. This highlights the importance of promoting positive representations of marginalized communities in popular culture.

Finally, the film raises questions about the connection between New Orleans and Black culture. New Orleans has a rich history of Black culture, particularly in its music, food, and traditions. However, scholars have argued that the film appropriates this culture without accurately representing the history and experiences of the Black community in New Orleans (Gregory, S. M., 2010).

In conclusion, *The Princess and the Frog* perpetuates negative stereotypes of Black people and a white-centric idea of beauty. It also raises questions about the Walt Disney Corporation's role in promoting positive images of marginalized communities and highlights the importance of accurately representing the experiences of marginalized communities, so as not to appropriate their culture for commercial gain. These takeaways can help inform discussions about representation, race, and diversity in popular culture and thus serve as a starting point for further research in this area.

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