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# A critical and contextual analysis of the changes in African-American character representation in Disney animated films from Dumbo (1941) to the Princess and the Frog (2009)

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# A Critical and Contextual Analysis of the Changes in African-American Character Representation in Disney Animated Films from *Dumbo* (1941) to *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)

Abstract:

This paper explores how ethnic character representations in Disney films have changed in response to changing cultural attitudes and historical context over time in response to variations in the broader American sensitivity to race and ethnicity.

When we today look at instances of African American representation from the 1940s, such as in the Film *Dumbo* (1941), we are shocked at how overtly stereotypical these representation are. According to today's standards, it would be unacceptable to show such caricatured racial representations. But at the time in America such standards, and the attitudes that inform them, did not exist.

In view of the progress made in the intervening 70 years in thinking about race and the extent to which attitudes to racial representations have changed, we should now see the representation of African Americans being dealt with very differently in recent

films such as *The Princess and The Frog* (2009), which featured Disney's first African- American princess (Breaux 413).

In order to answer this question I in this paper critically assess African-American representation in Disney films from the 1940s to today. In order to see how race has been dealt with in one of the studio's first feature-length films and in one of its most recent releases I analyzed specific instances of racial representation in two case studies: *Dumbo* (1941) and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). This analysis is informed by an awareness that the offensiveness of such representations is culturally determined and has changed over time. By textually reconstructing the contexts in which the films were produced and then analyzing instances of racial representation according to how they have been constructed, making reference to concepts of Stereotyping, Othering and Hierarchy.