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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)

Chapter 1

Introduction

When we look back at racial representations from the time of the 1940s in films such as Disney's *Dumbo* (1941), we are likely to be shocked by how overtly stereotypical the ethnic representations are. By today's standards it would be unacceptable to show such caricatured representations of ethnicity. Even though the films of Walt Disney are "widely acclaimed as exhibiting positive constructive social values, a critical viewing will show that they generally reflect racist stereotypes typical of the period in which they were produced" (Spector 39).

This paper will explore how ethnic character representations in Disney films have changed in response to changing cultural attitudes and historical context, as seen from *Dumbo* (1941) to *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). The context and significance of the question lies in the influential role that Disney has played in shaping American and global popular culture. The globalization of the Disney Corporation ensures that Disney products reach an international audience, delivering Disney messages throughout the world. These messages are influential as they become engrained in the minds of the audience they reach. The cultural messages present in Disney films are created from the perspective of the Disney Studio; the values that they convey are not universal but are nevertheless communicated as such. This is discussed by Henry Giroux and Grace Pollack in their book *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. They argue that producers of such influential cultural messages are never neutral, for "all cultural texts have distinct biases, interests and embedded values, reproducing the point of view of their producer and often the values of the dominant social groups" (qtd. in Scott 6). It is therefore vital to be aware, as Neal A. Lester puts it, that "as a globally dominant producer of

cultural constructs related to race […] Disney reigns supreme, and part of that supreme reign is an unquestionable privileging of patriarchy and whiteness" (Lester 294).

Theorists have had differing opinions regarding the ways in which Disney has represented Race and Ethnicity. Broude, in his book *Multiculturalism and the mouse* praises Disney as being consistently positive toward difference, and credits him with having provided the key paradigm for the eventual emergence of multiculturalism in our society and our politically correct value system. He argues this primarily through Disney's *It's a Small World* exhibition. Whilst Broude is in strong favour for Disney other theorists such as Brabham and Said feel that Disney's representations are problematic. Brabham argues that Disney uses strong racial stereotypes to communicate race, using Donkey from *Shrek* is an example. He argues that these stereotypes "rekindle historic performances of blackness" (65) providing a distorted and inaccurate representation. According to Said's theory of Orientalism, Disney views race and ethnicity through a Postcolonial lens. Representing other cultures in an undermining way "as if they could not represent themselves" (Said 875).

Post-colonialism

The key concept of post-colonialism, according to Bill Ashcroft et al., is that it is a point of view of experience that deals with the effect of colonization on cultures and societies (153). America was colonized by Europe and hence inherited an essentially Eurocentric perspective; now manifesting as a generalized Western point of view, this perspective still informs representations by dominant forces in American society (Ashcroft 153). In other words, Disney movies always perceive different cultures from the (white, Western) center: films like *Aladdin,* for example, provide an

interpretation of the Arab world through the lens of American Disney (Borthaiser n.p.). Through this essentially colonial lens the Disney Studio has represented other cultures "as if they could not represent themselves" (Said 875), often intermingling foreign sets of values with American ones so as to legitimize the film as "post-colonial" (Borthaiser). This is highly problematic; as such portrayals flood the popular mind both in America and internationally, leading to the "naturalization" of manipulated and distorted representations. Yet even though the Disney perspective has influenced the way that other cultures have been being represented, these cultures have still been featured in Disney narratives, instead of being absent entirely. And in his book *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*, Douglas Broude makes a compelling case that Disney's consistently positive presentation of "difference," whether it be of race, gender, sexual orientation, ideology, or spirituality, provided the key paradigm for the eventual emergence of multiculturalism in our society and our politically correct value system. He argues this point through his analysis of the *It's a Small World* attraction – one of the most popular attractions at the Disney theme parks – maintaining that it encapsulates Disney's prophetic vision of an appealingly varied world, each race respecting the uniqueness of all the others while simultaneously celebrating a common human core (Broude 2).

Multiculturalism

It's a Small World was unveiled for the first time in1963 at The New York World's Fair (Broude 1). After this premiere the attraction was relocated to Disneyland in California in 1966, to continue to spread the message of multiculturalism by means of entertainment. The exhibition consisted of;

> A Boat ride along a picturesque canal that passed through a recreation of the worlds various regions. Diverse peoples were signified by children living everywhere from the frozen North to the rain forests of Africa, via a collection

> of 297 puppets augmented by another 256 toys. Each wore authentic clothing from his or her land, whilst their colouring accurately represented specific regions. Yet these representations offered a common face, modified a little for skin colour and racial characteristics, the colour schemes underlining rather than ignoring racial difference. Each child sang the same title song in his or her own language; at the end all the children of the world joined together perform the song in unison, offering a rich variety within the through-line that is the human race. (Brode 1)

It's a Small World celebrated ideas of equality, togetherness and harmony among people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The ideological implications of this have been realized in the racially and ethnically varied societies that exist today. Disney used *It's a Small World* as an "innovative pavilion" (Broude 1) to create a bridge between an idealistic cause in need of proper funding and the financial strength of a major corporation (Broude 2) – in order to offer a vision, his vision, that would in due course come to characterize the thinking of mainstream America. The *It's a Small World* exhibition helped particularly to influence change in American attitudes toward race.

During the first half of the twentieth century, attitudes toward race and inclusiveness in the US were very different from how they are today. "The term diversity [was] exclusively in the vocabulary of radical minorities yet is in the lexicon of most people today such a staple of our everyday speech that we may forget such an idea did not exist even among liberals committed to the civil rights movement" (Brode 1). In terms of race relations, integration was the buzzword of the time – the 'melting pot' concept of assimilation – with those on the political Left calling for "full assimilation of ethnics and others deemed different into the vast national middle" (Brode 1). In strong opposition to them was the political Right, strict segregationists who "reeled in horror at the thought of mingling the races" (Brode 1). Significantly absent from the way that people thought about racial issues in the mid-twentieth

century was a middle ground now seen as the "preferable alternative to the two extremes – Multiculturalism" (Brode 2):

> Multiculturalism was based on the maintenance of any one group's beloved background whilst simultaneously asserting that all lingering value distinctions as to worth, based on race, gender or other arbitrary, outmoded, intolerable standards, must be eliminated. (Brode 2)

It's a Small World was unveiled only 3 years before Disney died and offered a first significant glimpse of this new avenue of perception (Broude 6).

Some critics have subsequently complained that the multi-ethnic dolls featured in the *It's a Small World* exhibition are stereotypical, "reductive instead of realistic" (Brode 2). In the opinion of Brode, to a degree they are correct; but Walt Disney defended his approach as embodying "rather than a caricature of individuals [. . .] our work is a caricature of life." His words are reinforced by the current practice that no one group is singled out for caricature or stereotyping in Disney films: "all people are equally open to the same approach as an aesthetic caricature is benign, so long as it is not misused for negative purposes" (Brode 2). Whether or not this is acceptable will be examined and assessed. It nevertheless remains true that Disney entertainment, "the most prevalent single media conglomerate in existence, exerts a greater influence on our line of vision than any of its competitors" (Brode 6). Through his *It's a Small World* exhibition, "Disney offered his portrait of the future that ought to be hailed in intent and impact as a prototype perhaps even progenitor of the way we perceive the world today" (Brode 2):

> To what precise degree exposure to the ride created a new generation that would envision and then insist on diversity is impossible to say. What can't be denied is that exposure to mass media experiences, be it theme park diversions, the music that forms our aural environment or the omnipresence of televised programming subtly but significantly alters our vision of the world. (Broude 4)

Synonymous with America

The Disney Company, its logo and characters have become almost synonymous with the notion of American popular culture and an idea of innocence that aggressively rewrites the historical and collective identity of the American past (Giroux and Pollack 13). According to Janet Wasko, "Disney is a primary force in the expression and formation of American mass consciousness" (183). Disney films generate representations that are ordered and structured in such a way that they mobilize a notion of popular memory and audiences come to identify themselves and their relationships to others in accordance with this constructed representation (Giroux 30).

As one of the most significant media and cultural institutions of our time, Disney is a brand that has been carefully nurtured and controlled as well as marketed and promoted globally (Wasko 222). The company and its products are widely idolized for representing wholesome, positive American family values and a sacred nostalgia for the experience of childhood. But when we look more closely at the company, its histories and products, we start to see that Disney is "ripe with tensions and contradictions' (Wasko 224).

> The problem is that these attributes also form the basis of many American values that have either been mythologized or are not necessarily embraced by everyone, indeed Disney values can be associated with such all-American values as conservatism, homophobia, manifest destiny, ethnocentricity, cultural insensitivity, superficiality, lack of culture, etc.: Disney did not create these traits but it is possible to argue that the Disney empire helps to perpetuate them. (224 Wasko)

The Disney Company itself is not ignorant of its history: rather it "reinvents it as a pedagogical and political tool to secure its own interests, authority and power. Innocence is not only a face of discursive domination but also a pedagogical device that locates people in particular historical narratives, representations and cultural practices" (Giroux 29).

Disney is a product of America, and it perpetuates American values through its products.

The Impact of these Messages on Children

If the representations seen in a Theme Park diversion such as *It's a Small World* can be so powerful as to change the way in which racial relations are perceived throughout America, then how much more powerful is a medium such as film? In the film *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*, director Chyng Feng Sun warns that children are especially vulnerable to unconsciously absorbing lessons from all the pop culture they are exposed to. "Such children are most strongly influenced by films that like Disney are seen over and over again and by generation after generation."

> Encoded in media images are ideologies about how we think about the world: belief systems, constructions of reality. And we develop our notions of reality from the cultural mediums around us. One of the most important cultural mechanisms that we have today is indeed the media. It gives us a wide array of image stereotypes, belief systems, about race class and gender. It is important to analyze how we as consumers and citizens understand the role the media plays in socializing us into certain belief systems. (Sun 5)

It is important to understand the impact of racial representations in popular culture on a social level, especially representations aimed at children as they are in their formative years of learning about the world around them and are apt to internalize any information they encounter. In "Look out New World, Here We Come," Carmen Lugo-Lugo and Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo argue that animated films aimed at children are important socializing devices (2). These films not only reflect prevailing racist stereotypes but also reinforce the stereotypes to their audiences. Narratives embedded within those stories provide children (the primary target audience) and even adults with audio-visual reinforcement of ideologies concerning social issues, making these stories powerful agents of socialization (Lugo-Lugo and

Bloodsworth-Lugo 2). Silverman (2002) insists that, "as a quintessential form of American public culture, animated movies may be examined as a site where collective social understandings are created and in which the politics of signification are engaged" (qtd. in Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 299). According to Giroux (1999), these films are part of a popular culture that "is the primary way in which youth learn about themselves, their relationship to others, and the larger world" (qtd. in Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 2);

> Media culture has become a substantial, if not the primary educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms, that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions – what it means to claim an identity as male, female, white, black, citizen, noncitizen. (Lugo-Lugo 2-3)

In agreement with Giroux, the authors believe that animated films offer children extensive information about race and sexuality by normalizing certain dynamics and rendering others invisible in the process. The films teach children how to manoeuvre within the general terrain of "race" and "sexuality," whilst highlighting differences. Giroux insists "entertainment is always an educational force"(*Mouse that Roared* 8). Within this "edutainment," "animated films operate [. . .] as the new teaching machines, possessing "at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning" (Giroux 84, qtd. in Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 2).

Animated films are aimed at children, and children are specifically vulnerable to unconsciously absorbing lessons from the media. For this reason racial representations in animated films need to be examined as their impact contributes significantly to the way that children learn about race in relation to themselves and others.

Racialized Anthropomorphism

The study by Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, "Look Out New World, Here We Come," demonstrates how racialization, including racialized anthropomorphism, as opposed to the outright racism of the golden age, now takes place on various levels within animated films (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 10). On a basic level the films provide children with

important signifiers that chart racialized, and racist, dynamics. On a more profound level, these films help to teach children to maintain the racial (and racist) ideologies that maintain the status quo (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 10).

In *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America*, David Gillotta discusses the useful term "racialized anthropomorphism:" "even though animals and other non-human characters are anthropomorphized in children's animated films these films also unfailingly racialize nonhuman characters in the process" (Gillotta 108). That is to say, such characters are not simply transformed into some kind of generic human, for there are no generic humans, rather they are inscribed as (for example) white humans, black humans or Asian humans. Since nonhuman characters do not usually have the physical signifiers that mark racial difference, animators generally rely on speech patterns and well-known stereotypes to make clear a character's ethnicity (Gillotta 108). This process is known as racialized anthropomorphism and is not a new phenomenon in children's films: a notorious example is furnished by the black crows in *Dumbo* (1941), who teach Dumbo how to fly.

> The crows speak an exaggerated African-American dialect and spend most of their time hanging around on tree branches (i.e. they are unemployed). Furthermore the crow's role in the narrative, to help the unracialized and presumably white Dumbo – conforms to a long history of fictional African-Americans helping white characters with their problems. (Gillotta 108)

More recent examples of racialized anthropomorphism are usually not as derogatory in their racial coding. More often ethnicity is nowadays signified in a

playful way as the animators use familiar ethnic stereotypes in an ironic tongue-in-cheek manner (Gillotta 109).

Changing Context

Film and its representations cannot be separated from the context in which they were conceived. It must be taken into account s that in the 1940s, the attitudes of American citizens as well as the Disney Company differed greatly from the attitudes we take for granted today. For this reason one, as suggested above, would expect progress away from such representations in current portrayals.

Considering such progress as an index of how attitudes to racial representations have changed, we should see race being dealt with very differently in recent films such as *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), featuring Disney's first and only African-American princess (Breaux 413). Additionally although not the focus of the paper, the way in which Gender is constructed in the character of Tiana needs to be addressed. The progression of representation in terms of race and class is also expected in the area of gender representation. A critical viewing will show that media texts often reflect racial stereotypes typical of the period in which they were produced, the same goes for the construction of gender.

Prior to the film's release, it was observed that people were really excited to see how Disney would handle the language, culture, gender construction and physical attributes of Tiana, the first African-American princess. As the start of a new chapter in Disney's history in terms of racial representation, *The Princess and the Frog* invites critical, political, and social interrogation (Lester 296).

However according to claims from theorists such as Johnson Cheu, America has not progressed in terms of race and class as much as it believes it has. Cheu argues that even though Disney is trying to be more multicultural in its characters, it

isn't actually dealing with race issues, employing instead a policy of [1]"colourblind racism"[1] (Cheu 5).

Goal of This Paper

The goal of this research paper is to critically assess racial representation in Disney films from the 1940s till today by looking at two films, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the period. I will analyze instances of racial representation found in two case studies: *Dumbo* (1941) and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). This analysis will be informed by an awareness that the offensiveness of these stereotypes is culturally determined and has changed over time.

By analyzing the way that racial representations are dealt with by the studio, from the early period of unselfconscious stereotyping[2] (that would now be considered overt racism) in *Dumbo* and comparing this with racial representations in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), we can interpret the manner in which the representations have changed.

Scope of This Paper

The scope of this paper will be limited to specific instances in which race is represented in key scenes in the films. In *Dumbo* the instances I will look at are the workers in the scene where the circus is being set up and the crows. In *The Princess and the Frog* I will look at the way race is represented in the main character Tiana,

[1]**Colour-blind racism**, also known as aversive racism, is racism based on the belief that skin colour does not matter. By ignoring issue of race, cultural values, norms, expectations and life experiences of people of color are negated and undermined. Where as Jim Crow racism was more overt, Colour blindness is a more subtle form of racism. (Bonilla-Silva 25)

when she is portrayed as human and when she is a frog. By analyzing the case studies in accordance with the theories discussed in my literature review, I will be able to determine the ways in which racial representations are constructed in each instance. I have chosen these scenes and characters specifically because they are where most criticism has been directed. What are being explored are American attitudes toward African-Americans and the way in which these attitudes influence racial construction in Disney films. [2]Thus a film from the 1940s in which African-Americans are only present in minor supporting roles will be compared with a film produced in 2009, which chooses to represent an African-American in a leading role. Although I will not be comparing main characters with main characters, the instances I have chosen to focus on may equally be seen as instances of racialized anthropomorphism.

Process of Investigation

How the investigation in this paper will proceed is through i) reconstructing the context in which these films were produced, and then ii) analyzing the instances of racial representation in the films in terms of Stereotypes, Othering and Hierarchy as theorized by Spector, Said and Artz, respectively.

In order critically to assess the complexities of changing racial representations in Disney films over time it is necessary to develop a thorough understanding of the conditions in which they emerged. For this reason I will provide an overview of key concepts such as Eurocentrism and multiculturalism with specific reference to Disney, while looking also at Disney's influence and impact on society and culture. Eurocentrism refers to having a point of view that has a European or Western centered perspective, and is the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing emphasis on European (and, generally, Western) concerns, culture and values at the expense of those of other cultures. (Stam & Shochat 3) Multiculturalism is the political

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[2] **Unselfconscious stereotyping** - Events of recent decades have given rise to a new level of consciousness about the nature of stereotyping and its association with social injustice. In the past stereotyping was practiced without the current expected social convention of feeling shy or embarrassed, whereas now days one are much more likely to view stereotyping negatively, as an unsavory practice to be avoided or concealed.(Macrae 232)

philosophy that people of diverse cultures and religions can exist in a unified society that preserves different cultural identities through recognition and positive accommodation of group differences. (Song n.p.) In *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Robert Stam and Ella Shochat provide a critique of the universalization of Eurocentric norms in relation to popular culture, film and the mass media (3). Eurocentrism sanitizes Western history whilst patronizing and even demonizing the Non-West (Stam & Shochat 3). This is so engrained in present-day thought that it is naturalized as 'common sense' (Stam & Shochat 1). At the other end of the spectrum lies radical multiculturalism, which calls for a "profound restructuring and reconceptualization of the power relations between cultural communities" (Stam & Shochat 47). The critique of Eurocentrism without multiculturalism runs the risk of inverting existing hierarchies rather than profoundly rethinking them (Stam & Shochat 359). Therefore the authors attempt "not to belittle Europe but to deconstruct Eurocentrism, to destabilize paradigms which simplify and make Europe a single source of culture" (Stam & Shochat 1).

Multiculturalism and the Mouse by Douglas Brode is a defence of Disney entertainment. Taking as his point of departure *It's a Small World* – Disney's "prophetic vision of an appealing and varied world, each race representing and respecting uniqueness whilst celebrating a common cause" (Brode 3) – Brode argues that Disney paved the way for today's multicultural values through its positive portrayal of women, ethnic minorities and non-Christian spirituality. Citing numerous examples, Brode affirms that Disney's consistently positive presentation of difference provided a key paradigm for the eventual emergence of multiculturalism in our society.

Disney has indeed had a major influence on society. In *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*, Janet Wasko provides a critical and theoretical understanding of the cultural, social, and global Disney phenomenon. Through analysis combining political economy with cultural studies, Wasko examines the processes by which the Disney Company, one of the largest media and entertainment

corporations in the world, manufactures fantasies that enthrall millions. In their book *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, Henry Giroux and Grace Pollack focus on the influential role that Disney has played in shaping American and global popular culture (5). Finding fault with the global culture industry in which Disney is a major player (Giroux & Pollack 15), they expose Disney's capacity to destroy individuality and even control the will of individuals toward consumption (Giroux & Pollack 9). Disney's power lies in part in its ability to tap into the lost hopes, abortive dreams and utopian potential of popular culture (Giroux & Pollack 8). Giroux and Pollack argue that producers of such influential cultural messages are never neutral, for "all cultural texts have distinct biases, interests and embedded values, reproducing the point of view of their producer and often the values of the dominant social groups" (qtd. in Scott 6). It is therefore vital to be aware, as Neal A. Lester puts it, that "as a globally dominant producer of cultural constructs related to race […] Disney reigns supreme, and part of that supreme reign is an unquestionable privileging of patriarchy and whiteness" (qtd. in Scott 13).

Why Did I Choose this Area of Research?

I am approaching these issues from the perspective of a white Jewish female from South Africa, a country where the system of apartheid legally entrenched racial discrimination. Although in the post-apartheid era every effort is being made to create an atmosphere of all-inclusiveness and racial equality, South Africa remains "one of the most comprehensively racialized societies in the world" (Price). The United States has experienced similar racial segregation policies in the past and today faces a comparable challenge of a society made up of a number of diverse ethnicities. Because of my background I am sensitive to the history of racial discrimination, from

both a South African and a Jewish point of view. I believe that this enables me to look at the American situation objectively yet with an informed awareness.

Animators in post-apartheid South Africa try to be as racially inclusive as possible. South African demographics require such variety in order that all of the population is fairly represented. In South Africa animation is a young industry in comparison to the much longer history of animation elsewhere. There is therefore much for us to learn from successes and failures in the history of more developed animation industries such as Disney.

Knowing something about how race was represented previously, and having an awareness of what was accepted and rejected by audiences, are both important. In South Africa audiences are a mixture of people of different race, ethnicity, and background, and therefore animated characters need to appeal to a wide range of races. Being part of a generation in South Africa where racial and ethnic difference is celebrated and confronted positively means that the topic of racial representation cannot be ignored. It is therefore imperative that we as animators in an industry of media and representation learn the best way to handle racial representation in our work. When we are representing characters of different races it is vital for us to know what audiences connect with and what they reject, so that we can learn from previous mistakes.

It is important to look at animation in South Africa as providing not only an opportunity to learn but also an opportunity to teach. As previously discussed, animated films are important socializing devices (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 2) and that “they possess at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning” (Lugo-Lugo &

Bloodsworth-Lugo 2). It is therefore important for animators to understand the social impact of the messages they are communicating through popular culture.

The 1990s, with its accumulation of new feature-length animated movies, and re-release of old Walt Disney "classics," came to be known as a time of Walt Disney revival (Malfroid 1). Since I was born in 1989, my childhood coincided with the period of the Disney Renaissance, which ended in 2000 (Finch 260), and a new Disney Classic was successfully released almost annually during my most formative years. Needless to say, during this "Disney Decade" (Wasko 36), I was constantly exposed to Disney. My clothes, bed sheets, toothbrush, eating utensils and bath towels were all Disney branded. It was a magical time and I am overcome with nostalgia at the thought of afternoons spent watching Disney movies and playing with my Disney Princess Barbie dolls.

However mesmerized I was by the enchanting tales of Princesses I never really felt that I myself was reflected in any of them. There have never been any Jewish Princesses: the closest was Arabic Jasmine with her black hair and dark eyes, and the only Jewish characters in Disney films I had heard of had negative connotations.

For these reasons, both political and personal, I feel that it is important to explore representations of ethnic character in Disney films, and to investigate how these have changed in response to the changing historical context and cultural attitudes.

Chapter 2

Introduction to the Case Studies

As indicated above, *Dumbo* (1941) and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) are the case studies I will be using to track the changing representations of race in films emanating from the Disney studio from these two areas of time. In *Dumbo* the instances of racial representation that I will look at are the workers in the scene where the circus is being set up and the jive-talking crows.

The critics Towbin, Alyssa Nelson and Ashley Nelson all take issue with the way that race is represented in these scenes.

In *The Princess and the Frog* I will look at the way in which the race of the main character Tiana is portrayed, when she is represented as human, and when she is represented as a frog. I will draw on the opinions of Lester, Gehlawat and Breaux in determining how race has been constructed in this representation.

The films and their representations cannot be separated from the context in which they were conceived. Dumbo was created in the 1940s, at that time the attitudes of American citizens as well as the Disney Company differed greatly from the attitudes we take for granted today which are the attitudes at the time The Princess and the Frog was created.

Disney Studio in the 1940s

In *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, Neal Gabler describes the Disney Studio of the 1940s as the biggest, most successful and beloved animation studio in America, staffed by white middle-class Americans, informed by white middle-class American values, and led by a man known to the American public as "Uncle Walt" (Gabler 12).

In his book *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child*, Nicholas Sammond paints a picture of Disney as a man who "exemplified the ideals of industry, modesty and thrift [. . .] a product of upright Middle America, an American rags to riches archetype"(30). A *New York Times* review describes the portrait of Disney that Gabler draws in his book an one of a "lonely, eccentric, immensely gifted man: an ambitious workaholic, driven more by perfectionism than by dreams of entrepreneurial power; a dreamer, obsessive about whatever project captured his imagination" (Kakutani n.p.).

The story of the Disney Company has almost always been the story of Walt Disney (Wasko 6). It is therefore difficult to separate the history of Disney the man from Disney the company (Wasko 7). From the early 1930s till his death in 1966 he received an enormous amount of public attention. Having built a corporate empire, owning, controlling and leading it, he was without a doubt a highly successful businessman. However Disney the man as a topic continues to be dissected and critiqued by historians, journalists and biographers.

Recent biographies have revealed that he was by no means a completely tolerant figure, the idealized, kind and accepting 'Uncle Walt' projected by the media. He is quite widely thought to have been racist, chauvinistic and anti-semitic. Recent evidence of this is Meryl Streep's outburst at the National Board of Review awards gala in New York. While presenting an Award to Emma Thompson for her portrayal of Mary Poppins author, P.L Travers, in *Saving Mr Banks,* Streep delivered a sharp rebuke to Walt Disney for alleged sexist and anti-Semitic views, claiming that Disney "supported an anti-Semitic industry lobbying group" and calling him a "gender bigot" (Gettel n.p.). There may be elements of myth and rumour in these allegations, but there is hard factual evidence too. He has been quoted as saying that communism is

"an un-American thing," and it appears that he "endorsed the (FBI) agencies' broader agenda of anti-communism during the tense days of the cold war" (Wasko 18).

As labour troubles surfaced at the studio Disney became more conservative. During the Depression he became ever more distrustful of bankers and the monopolistic practices of big businesses: "he increasingly moved from a more sentimental to a more paranoid version of populism, becoming vehemently anti-communist" (Wasko 17). He became a "conservative republican whose intense patriotism, loyalty to the work ethic, suspicion of regulatory government and support for American individualism [. . . grew] steadily more intense." He even had a role in the formation of the MPA, the motion picture alliance for the preservation of American ideals, the organization which set the foundation for the Hollywood Blacklist (Wasko 18).

The 1995 Channel Four film *Secret Lives*, a documentary by Joseph Bullman, looks at Walt Disney's often-unexplored darker side, revealing a man very different from the "Uncle Walt" public persona. By using interviews with his colleagues from the early days of the studio, Bullman revealed accusations of misogynism, puritanical tendencies and racism. In the film Bill Melendez, for example, makes provocative claims that Disney was anti-Semitic, and describes how Disney fires a man for being dark skinned, and conspires to get people fired whom he thought might be Communists.

By the 1940s Disney was reaching an international public, but the Second World War cut him off from these audiences and added to the financial crisis at the Disney Studio. At the beginning of World War Two, the Disney studio was experiencing financial difficulties due to the failures of *Fantasia* and *Pinocchio*, which resulted in the loss of bonuses, pay cuts and layoffs (Gabler 373). In 1941,

during the making of *Dumbo*, the animators' discontent culminated in a painful strike. Whereas before, employees at Disney had felt as if they were "one big family," the strike destroyed the collegial atmosphere, embittered Disney and caused irreparable damage to the psychology and mood of the studio (Gabler).

So at the time that *Dumbo* was made, the audience for Disney films was the mainstream American public. Access to Disney offerings was often gained in big screen feature films and shorts before movies. At this time in mainstream American culture, racial and ethnic prejudices were taken for granted. In *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow*, Jerrold M. Packard points out that attitudes to race limited African-Americans' opportunities for advancement in education and employment. Segregation was enforced through a series of legal measures known as the Jim Crow Laws. These laws forbade interaction in educational institutions, and most public facilities were expected to provide separate amenities for black and white patrons. The Civil Rights movement had not yet been established, and in the 1940s African-Americans simply did not have the same civil rights as white people. They were often forced to live in separate neighborhoods and denied the right to vote; employers could even legally refuse to consider African-American applicants for jobs (Packard). Since then much has changed in America: the official end of the Jim Crow laws, signaled by the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 (Klarman 422), ensured legal racial equality, and attitudes regarding what is acceptable regarding the representation of race have changed.

Dumbo

For years critics have debated whether or not the 1941 Walt Disney film Dumbo is racist (Ashley Nelson n.p.). The film contains many memorable sequences, with wonderful character animation and brilliant songs. After the flamboyant excesses and

box office disappointment of *Fantasia*, Disney needed a cheap profitable feature. For this reason Ben Sharpsteen the supervising director was told at the beginning of production to keep the film simple and inexpensive. A simple cartoony animation style was chosen, trending away from realism, heavily stylized, with thick outlines and bold bright colours reminiscent of the animations of pioneer Winsor McCay (Gertie the Dinosaur) in both line and movement (Russell-Gebbett n.p.). The limited resources and simplicity of style freed the animators from being overly concerned with detail, and allowed them to focus on the most important elements of character animation. As a result, *Dumbo* lacks the polish and lavish detail of the previous three Disney animated features (Canemaker n.p.). But this is made up for with expressive animation, utilizing the 12 principles and infusing character, personality and humor into characters and scenes. Sequences like the elephant pyramid and the ensuing chaos are just astounding in their complexity. The surreal pink elephant parade demonstrates the fantastical possibilities of animation as a medium. As was said by animation Director Ward Kimball, "We've done things that had a lot more finish, frosting and tricky footwork, but basically, I think the Disney cartoon reached its zenith with *Dumbo*" (Chaput n.p.).

Dumbo is one of Walt Disney's shortest and earliest feature films, running at only 64 minutes, but with a simple emotional storyline and a lot of heart (Hartley n.p.). The story revolves around a baby elephant born into a troupe of circus elephants who is ridiculed over his large ears. He is drawn as a semi-anthropomorphic elephant. Although e is named Jumbo Jr by his mother Mrs Jumbo, he is cruelly nicknamed Dumbo because of his big ears by the other matronly members of the elephant troupe. He is tragically separated from his mother after she defends her baby against the rest of the troupe. He is persecuted as a freak from all angles until he meets Timothy

Mouse who becomes his loyal friend. During their adventures together they discover that Dumbo has the ability to fly using his large ears as wings. Timothy Mouse uses this incredible talent to help Dumbo see his difference positively. In the end Dumbo is reunited with his mother, is accepted into the troupe and earns the admiration of all the circus for his flying skills.

Dumbo was originally designed as an "economical feature" to generate income after the financial failure of the previous two animated features, *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia*. Despite being made during World War II, it was still the most successful Disney movie in the 1940s (Alyssa Nelson n.p.). The initial reception of the film was positive, with no suggestion in any review of the possibility of offence being caused by its racial representations. The film critic for the *New York Times*, Bosley Crowther, described it as "the most genial, the most endearing, and the most completely precious cartoon feature film ever to emerge from the magical brushes of Walt Disney's wonder-working artists" (Crowther n.p.). However, as pointed out by Emily Woodward, since the 1960s racial awareness has entered the critical reception of *Dumbo,* with the film being publicly criticized for alleged racist intent (Woodward n.p.). Critics like Towbin et al. have found parts of the film problematic in terms of the way that race is represented, specifically a scene at the beginning of the film depicting workers setting up a circus and a scene near the middle of the film depicting a group of crows:

> The crows appear to have African-American voices; they depict stereotypically negative characteristics often associated with racist depictions of African-Americans, such as being poor, unintelligent and naïve. Also in *Dumbo* there are images related to slavery, with black workers doing manual labor while a white man is in charge. They sing, "We work all day, we work all night, we have no life to read or write, we're happy. We don't know when we get our pay, and when we do we throw our money away." (Towbin et al. 32)

Alyssa Nelson takes issue with the scene featuring circus animals and faceless black men. This scene has become known as the Roustabout scene, a term that according to the Oxford Dictionary refers to circus labourers (Pearsell n.p.). During the scene African-American circus labourers are seen pulling materials off a train for construction and then constructing the circus in the rain with the help of circus animals. While they work they sing a song known as the Roustabout song, originally sung by a quartet called The King's Men. The King's Men were formed in 1929 and comprised Ken Darby, Rad Robins, Jon Dodson, and Bud Linn. They sang with Paul Whiteman's Orchestra from 1934 until 1937, achieving national prominence on radio and records. After leaving the Whiteman band in 1937, the band worked with the Music Department at Walt Disney Studios. During this time they featured in *Dumbo* singing The Roustabout Song, some of whose egregious lyrics are quoted above.

In this scene the men who are setting up the circus tent are drawn as completely featureless, possessing no individual identities at all. This is characteristic of the time, reflecting the way in which African-Americans were perceived purely generically and as lesser people in American society (Alyssa Nelson n.p.).

In the other scene that causes offence nowadays, African-American members of the Hall Johnson Choir voice the crows. Hall Johnson, an arranger, composer, writer, and multi-instrumentalist formed the group. During the 1930s and '40s, they introduced that "unique sense of rhythm and intensity that Afro-American culture could bring to a musical performance on stage and screen" (Chadbourne n.p.), performing in famous segments in Walt Disney Classics of the '40s, such as *Dumbo* and *Song of the South* (Chadbourne n.p.). Ironically Cliff Edwards, who was Caucasian, voiced the main Crow, Jim Crow, considered the most racist aspect of the film. According to Ward Kimball, "Voice-wise, he really sounded more black than

the blacks [from the Hall Johnson Choir] we had backing him up" (Chadbourne). Jim Korkis, author of multiple books on Disney, reasons that

> For a brief time around 1922, Edwards teamed up with Lou Clayton doing a blackface act (that while grossly inappropriate and insensitive today was common practice for entertainment at the time) and received some recognition for achieving what one reviewer called a faithful degree of black speech nuances. (qtd. In Barrier n.p.)

That was one of the reasons that animator Ward Kimball cast Edwards as Jim Crow in *Dumbo* (Barrier n.p.)

The origin of blackface performance and indeed the name 'Jim Crow' lay in so-called minstrel shows or minstrelsy. Performed by travelling musicians called minstrels, this theatrical tradition – founded on the comic enactment of racial stereotypes – was popular from the early 19th to the early 20th century across America. Blackface refers to the theatrical makeup used by performers on stage during these minstrel shows (and later on screen), to create a caricatured representation of a black person (even black performers were expected to wear blackface makeup when performing). Blacking the face with burned cork and exaggerating the mouth and eyes achieved the look. The performance was intended to be comical and was created out of mocking African-American racial stereotypes of black laziness, ignorance, or crass behavior (Kelley n.p.).

One of the most famous minstrel performers, a white man named Thomas "Daddy" Rice, brought a character to the stage that he called 'Jim Crow.' According to Rice the character was inspired when he met a runaway slave on a trip through the South, who performed a signature song and dance called "jump Jim Crow." "Rice's performances, with skin blackened and drawn on distended blood red lips surrounded by white paint, were said to be just Rice's attempt to depict the realities of black life" (Kelley). In the hands of Rice and other performers, Jim Crow grew to be minstrelsy's

most famous character. He was depicted as a runaway, as "the wheeling stranger" and the "traveling intruder." The gag in these Jim Crow performances was that Jim Crow would show up and disturb white passengers in otherwise peaceful first-class rail cars, hotels, restaurants, and steamships. Jim Crow performances therefore served as an object lesson about the dangers of free black people, so much so that the segregated spaces first created in northern states in the 1850s were popularly called Jim Crow cars. Jim Crow became synonymous with white desires to keep black people out of white, middle-class spaces (Kelley).

The phrase was later used as the name of the racial caste system, which operated primarily, but not exclusively, in the southern and border states of America from 1877 until the mid-1960s (Pilgrim n.p.). Under the Jim Crow laws, African-Americans were relegated to second-class citizenship by being excluded from public transport and facilities, juries, jobs, and neighborhoods. The laws operated in conjunction with Jim Crow etiquette norms, which dictated the forms of interaction between white and black Americans. Both the laws and norms were underpinned and regulated through violence. The Jim Crow system represented the legitimization of anti-black racism, using scientific reasoning by craniologists, eugenicists, phrenologists, and Social Darwinists to justify the belief that African-Americans were innately intellectually and culturally inferior to whites (Pilgrim).

As Michael Barrier points out, Blackface and Jim Crow comedy is hard to understand or to excuse in modern times, at least for anyone born after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Barrier). According to Ward Kimball,

> "Now, I am thinking that maybe Edwards, always the performer and always 'on,' might have been goofing around when he was recording the voice for Jiminy Cricket in *Pinocchio* and might have done some of his old blackface act and that caused a light bulb to pop up over somebody's head to use him as Jim Crow. As a theatre major, I know that at the time even African-American performers had to 'black up' their faces and talk like their Caucasian

> counterparts in blackface because that is how audiences expected 'blacks' to sound and act. Certainly, at the time *Amos 'n' Andy* was still popular being done by two Caucasian radio actors" [who did public appearances and one movie in blackface]. (Barrier)

The crows in *Dumbo*, as Alyssa Nelson points out, are constructed as African-American through their use of slang words and Ebonics, calling each other "brotha," and speaking with southern accents and mutilated grammar. They sing in a jazz style complete with scatting, a style of music that was generally popular at the time in African-American communities (Alyssa Nelson). The leader of the crows, voiced by Caucasian Cliff Edwards, was called Jim; according to Ashley Nelson this can be construed as being a reference to the Jim Crow laws. Although the crow leader was known as Jim Crow during production, he is never referred to by that name in the film, and the name was an in-joke among those working on the scene. The crow scene, directed by Jack Kinney and animated by Ward Kimball (Hartley), can thus be viewed as racist, making fun of African-Americans by holding up the stereotypes of the time (Ashley Nelson).

It is important to note here the relationship between Stereotyping and Racism and how stereotypical beliefs, which are seen as innocent, can form a basis for Damaging Racism to occur. If a stereotypical idea reinforces a commonly held negative belief about a group, then the stereotype can "build a consensus of public opinion towards at best tolerance or indifference to oppression, at worst active participation in that oppression" (Spector 40). If those stereotypes are in regards to a certain race, generalizing their characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that group and distinguishing it as inferior or superior to another race, then those stereotypes cross the line into racism. Therefore negative racial stereotypes condone and perpetuate racism.

The Disney Studio in the late 2000s

Disney is now a huge financial conglomerate and a brand entrenched in both American and global cultures (Raiti 167), catering to a multicultural audience both internally in America and internationally, thanks to globalization. Disney has had therefore to change and evolve in order to survive. Ultimately Disney films are made to entertain the masses and create a profit; so they must appeal to mainstream audiences; and as mainstream values shift with time, so must Disney's products, if the studio still hopes to sell them (Scott 25).

In order successfully to appeal to these mass audiences and their changing and various values, the studio needs to know exactly whom they are targeting, because a generalized product offering will not appeal successfully across the vast reach of the Disney Empire. It is also important to assess and understand the audience to monitor and assess the effects of Disney and its products on this audience (Wasko 184).

Vincent Mosco and Lewis Kaye have even recently challenged the concept of an audience with regard to Disney, arguing that one should refer to members of what was traditionally termed the 'audience' as 'consumers' instead: it is "almost always the case that individuals experience Disney via the consumption process" (Wasko 185). One cannot talk about the Disney brand without reference to brand extensions such as theme Parks and resort activity, which contribute significantly to overall corporate goals, providing ongoing revenues and promotion for other parts of the corporate empire (Wasko 158).

Since The Disney Company was officially formed on 16 October 1923 (Wasko 9) the company has grown, in terms of markets, income and the audience reached by its products. The evolution of corporate Disney through television, theme parks and merchandising saw the Studio and the Disney brands success skyrocket.

Corporate earnings continue to soar and nowadays the Disney Brand is worth 103.96 billion dollars and as of May 2013, It was ranked the 17th most valuable brand in the world, according to Forbes (Forbes).

Disney's success can be attributed at least partially to its founder's part in realizing the importance of television, and recognizing its potential value in promoting and diversifying the film business (Wasko 21). But the Disney studio remains a business and Wasko reminds us that "we are fools if we ascribe all the actions and strategies of a company to one man or woman. The Disney Company is simply another capitalist enterprise with a history best understood within the changing conditions of 20th century America" (27).

As these changes in the conditions of 20th century America occurred externally to the company Internally Over the years The Disney Company through many internal changes. These Changes in the company, often initiated through changes in management have influenced the way in which the company evolved into the Disney Company we know today.

On December 15, 1966, Walt Disney died at the age of 65 from complications relating to lung cancer, and Roy Disney, Walt's brother took over as chairman, CEO, and president of the company. One of his first acts was to rename Disney World as "Walt Disney World" in honor of his brother and his vision (Smoodin 97). Shortly after on December the 20th, 1971, Roy Disney died of a stroke and the company is handed over to Don Tatum who became chairman and CEO of Walt Disney Productions and Card Walker, who was named President of Walt Disney Productions (Mosley 305). Now for the first time Disney began hiring outside producers for film projects, which had never been done, before in the studios history and in 1979 Disney entered a joint venture with Paramount Pictures. Then in 1984 Michael Eisner was

brought in from Paramount Pictures to replace Tatum as the new as CEO and Frank Wells from Warner Bros as President. (Becker n.pag.) Here Eisner, a businessman extraordinaire began a 21-year tenure as CEO and Chairman of the Walt Disney Corporation. During this time he transformed it from a $1.8 billion animation and amusement park company into an $80 billion global conglomerate. (Becker n.pag.) Whilst Eisner did a lot to improve the company's financial status he was a ruthless businessman as stated by Becker.

> Through the name-slinging power struggles, costly court battles, tattered friendships and public grumblings about his inflated earnings. He's been branded a micromanager, an egomaniac and a tyrant. But the one insult that hasn't been flung at Eisner is a failure. (Becker)

By 1988 Disney had moved to first place in box office receipts and had increased revenues by 20% every year and by the 1990s the company was reaching new heights. The Company branded this very successful time the "Disney Decade" due to the company's accomplishments. (Pearson n.pag.) Tragically Wells died in a helicopter crash in 1994 and Eisner recruited his friend Michael Ovitz, to be President instead of a more suitable candidate, after much scandal, Ovitz lasted only 14 months and left Disney in December 1996. (Pearson n.pag.) On September 30 2005, Eisner resigned both as an executive and as a member of the board of directors and on March 13, 2005, Robert Iger, an American Businessman was announced as Eisners successor as CEO. (Grover 37)

Iger has cited international expansion, technological innovation and a renewed focus on traditional animation as the company's top strategic priorities. (Lang n.pag.) Through Business deals such as the acquisition of Pixar Animation Studios in 2006 (La Monica n.pag.), Marvel Entertainment in 2009 (Wilkerson n.pag.) and Lucasfilm in 2012 (Leonard n.pag.), Iger has succeeded in further broadening Disney's intellectual property franchises.

Even Roy Disney, who had been critical of Iger for his role as Eisner's deputy, issued this statement praising him:

> Animation has always been the heart and soul of the Walt Disney Company and it is wonderful to see Bob Iger and the company embraces that heritage by bringing the outstanding animation talent of the Pixar team back into the fold. This clearly solidifies the Walt Disney Company's position as the dominant leader in motion picture animation and we applaud and support Bob Iger's vision. (Lang n.pag.)

Iger's position as Disney's CEO will remain until 2016. (McNary n.pag.)

Through these changes in management and the resulting changes in the company The Walt Disney Company, commonly known, as Disney has become an American diversified multinational mass media corporation and the largest media conglomerate in the world in terms of revenue. (Siklo n.pag.)

From its humble beginnings Disney currently operates as five primary units and segments: The Walt Disney Studios, which includes the company's film, recording label, and theatrical divisions; Parks and Resorts, featuring the company's theme parks, cruise line, and other travel-related assets; Disney Consumer Products, which produces toys, clothing, and other merchandising based upon Disney-owned properties; Media Networks, which includes the company's television properties; and Disney Interactive, which includes Disney's Internet, mobile, social media, virtual worlds, and computer games operations. (The Walt Disney Company n.pag)

In the 1990s, Disney produced three other princesses of colour: Middle Eastern (Arabian) *Jasmine* in 1992, American Indian (Powtan) *Pocahontas* in 1995, and Chinese *Mulan* in 1998. Disney included these multiracial multiethnic characters in an attempt at showing diversity within its films; but alas the racial features themselves were not represented in an entirely politically correct manner.

A common theme in all three films is that the physical ethnic appearance of the characters is tamed in order to comply with western ideals of beauty (Kahn n.p.).

Arabian Jasmine, although constructed as a clever, witty and brave woman, is made more exotic and foreign through her two-piece silk outfits, big wide eyes and jewelry. Whilst her character is not that of a stereotypical Arab woman, her appearance is straight out of a Persian fairytale, where women are dressed in revealing clothing and meant to be put on display. Although she stands up to her controlling father, she is unable to save herself from the story's villain, and relies on the prince to rescue her. This constructs women as weaker than men in Middle Eastern culture, and suggests that even if strong women try to subvert this hierarchy, real power remains with the man. By showing Jasmine as rebellious against her father and arranged marriage, traditional Middle Eastern values are undermined and Western notions of feminism are subtly introduced. By portraying Jasmine, a sympathetic character, as unhappy adhering to these non-Western traditions, the film creates a negative representation of Middle Eastern Culture.

In *Pocahontas*, the next Disney film to star a woman of colour, the theme of respect for "Mother Earth" gets wrapped up in everything the title character Pocahontas does, forming a large part of her identity. Her role as a Native American girl who can speak to nature and has immense respect for plants and animals is a positive one, but still stereotypical of Native Americans. Representing Native Americans as one with nature and therefore primitive is a way in which Western culture justifies their oppression. It confirms their place as people of the wild, thus helping prevent them from being represented in any other way. In the same manner that Jasmine rebels against her father and arranged marriage so does Pocahontas. What is worse is that in this situation Pocahontas chooses the side of the people who are a legitimate threat to her own tribe. In this way Native American traditions and

values are undermined from within, as a Native American confirms the Western notions as superior.

Pocahontas was also the first Disney heroine to be based loosely on a real person, with her story based on factual events. Unfortunately drastic liberties were taken in the retelling of the original story and the resultant Disney version is riddled with historical inaccuracies and misrepresentations (Bataille 101). In truth Pocahontas was 10 years old when she met John Smith in 1609; there was conflict between her tribe and the English, and in 1613 she was kidnapped and held for ransom. While in captivity she was forced to marry an Englishman named John Rolfe, convert to Christianity and change her name. In 1616 she was taken to England to be presented to the English court, where she later died of smallpox (Wood 19). But the Disney story introduces Pocahontas as a native woman who falls in love with an Englishman, John Smith, and portrays her as loyal to the white explorers who have invaded her land (Bataille 2). This inaccurate depiction undermines the Native American people and is problematic, as misrepresentation of the realities of the history of the Powtan tribe denies Native American people the truth of their past.

In *Mulan*, the title character defies the stereotype of Asian women as passive; instead, she changes her outward appearance to match her independence and inner strength. But even though Mulan's character fights against double standards and sexism by almost winning the war single-handedly, after all her efforts she is still not really accepted until she is recognized by the alpha male (Kahn n.p.). This restores the stereotype that Asian women are subservient and inferior to men regardless of their accomplishments.

These examples show some of the ways in which representations of foreign cultures in Disney films are still judged by Western standards. Inserting people of colour into Western fairy tale frameworks inevitably reveals historical

erasures that must take place for the fantasy to appeal to viewers (Wanzo 5).

While *Jasmine* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998) began Disney's engagement with political correctness through the inclusion of multiracial and multicultural diversity in the "Disney heroine lineup" (Breaux 296), no African-American princess existed until *The Princess and the Frog* in the fall of 2009 (Breaux 413).

The Princess and the Frog

The story is a modern day retelling of the classic tale "The Frog Princess" by the Brothers Grimm. Disney Studio had been planning on adapting the fairy tale into an animated feature for the previous18 years, never feeling satisfied with the versions they had created (Woodward). According to co-director John Musker, Lasseter asked himself and Clements to look at the project as he "felt there was something in it" (Musker n.p.).

In 2006 Disney bought the rights to *The Frog Princess*, a novel written by E. D. Baker in 2002, based on the original fairy tale. Ron Clements and John Musker were then hired to lead the studio in yet another attempt at adapting the story into a film. They chose to reimagine the film as a traditionally drawn American fairy tale, set in 1920s New Orleans, Louisiana, and as a musical with an African-American lead character (Bonanno n.pag). Musker and Clements thought that since all fairy tales were set in Europe, they would create an American fairy tale. The setting of New Orleans was chosen because it is Lasseter's favorite city; the film is a tribute to the history of the city and attempts to capture its "magical" qualities (King n.p.).

In the film, a hardworking waitress, Tiana, and an arrogant Prince named Naveen cross paths. When Naveen is transformed into a frog by an evil Voodoo

magician, Tiana tries to help him by kissing him, expecting, as the classic tale goes, for him to be turned back into a man. Unfortunately the spell causes Tiana to become a frog too and the pair, along with a colourful cast of characters, attempt to break the spell and fulfill their dreams. In classic Disney style they fall in love and the film ends in positive resolution for all, evil is conquered and they live happily ever after.

In the film Tiana is depicted as a young African-American woman. According to Clements and Musker, the decision to depict Tiana as African-American came naturally (King n.p.) and was simply a response to the setting of 1920s New Orleans in which the story takes place. As Clements explained, "we didn't realize it was that big of a deal" (Stanford-Jones n.p.). As Ron Clements remarked in an interview with Jeremie Noyer, the makers of the film never deliberately set out to make a movie with an African-American heroine and that it wasn't until later that they fully realized the importance of this to the African-American community (Noyer n.p.).

They did however feel that the film was unusually under the microscope as it developed and that this did create a certain kind of pressure. "Our goal was always to try and be as sensitive as possible while always staying true to the story we wanted to tell" (Noyer n.p.).

It is interesting that Clements and Musker chose to create a story in which an African-American woman is placed in 1920s New Orleans, and yet they do not address any of the issues related to racial segregation that could have potentially arisen as a direct result of her race and historical placement. In fact all the issues relating to the construction of race and the representation of the reality of an African-American woman living at this time and in this place have been avoided. This is perhaps evidence of the long-standing tradition Disney has established of rewriting history, denying the true nature of the time by sanitizing it of disagreeable matters and recreating it in a way that is pleasing (Breaux 399).

Tiana is brown in colour but her blackness is never addressed. Disney has perhaps been unable or unwilling to delve more comprehensively into its construction of blackness for reasons such as those listed by Neal A. Lester:

> Because the cinematic representation of blackness is the site of perpetual contestation, struggle, and consequently change, Hollywood's unceasing efforts to frame blackness are constantly challenged by the cultural and political self-definitions of African-Americans, who as a people have been determined since the inception of commercial cinema to militate against this limiting system of representation. (Lester 302)

In July 2006, early concepts and songs for a film originally titled *The Frog Princess* were presented to the public at the Walt Disney Company's annual shareholders' meeting (Jones n.p.) These announcements drew harsh criticism from the African-American media and critics, because there were elements of the *Frog Princess* story, characters, and setting that they considered distasteful. Elements of the film found problematic by African-American critics included the original name for the heroine, "Maddy," due to its sounding similar to "mammy," a derogatory term for a black maid, and the fact that the main character was given the job of a chambermaid (Misick n.p.). In May 2007, as a result of these early criticisms, the title of the film was changed to *The Princess and the Frog*, the name of the main character was changed to Tiana and her occupation changed to that of a waitress (Lainie n.p.). Other choices by the filmmakers that drew criticism included the use of a black male voodoo witchdoctor as the film's villain and the decision to cast the prince as racially different from the princess. Critics also claimed that the setting of New Orleans, a predominantly black area recently devastated by hurricane Katrina, was disrespectful of the African-American community (Misick n.p.). Because of this early critical response, Disney consulted with African-Americans throughout the rest of the film-making process to avoid potential problems resulting from perceived racial insensitivity. Oprah Winfrey was reportedly chosen as one of the race-sensitivity

consultants; she was also utilized in the film as the voice of Tiana's mother Eudora (Lester 297). Oprah's presence on the list of racial advisors does a lot for the credibility of the film: as one of the most recognizable faces of black celebrity, she is a prominent cultural force, and an advocate for the rights and representation of African-Americans (Garson 55).

Nevertheless, Disney, in its extreme care not to be offensive to African-Americans, neglected to confront any of the issues surrounding racial representation. Gehlawat's claim is that through doing this Disney, in its hypersensitivity to racial issues and its desire to fulfill so many competing agendas, has paradoxically created an animated feature, which generally elides race, even as it redeploys multiple racial stereotypes (Gehlawat 417). Chue argues that it does not actually deal with race issues, and the studio ends up employing instead a policy of "colour blind racism" (5). In "After 75 Years of Magic: Disney Answers Its Critics, Rewrites African-American History, and Cashes in on Its Racist Past," Richard M. Breaux claims that Disney has used Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* to atone for the absence of non-white characters in its line of princesses, and in the process to profit from it as a selling point (399). But mere presence does not mean equal participation, the same privileges, or the same degree of power: presence in disfiguring roles is as damaging as complete absence (Breaux 400).

Neal A. Lester states that "[p]recisely because of Disney's supreme reign as cultural capital, *The Princess and the Frog*, as a new chapter in Disney's history invites critical, political, and social interrogation" (296). Prior to the film's release, it was observed that "[p]eople are really excited to see how Disney will handle [the first African-American princess's] language, her culture, her physical attributes because of Disney's history of stereotyping" (Barnes, qtd. in Lester 296). However after the initial cultural excitement, pride, and celebration of physically seeing an African-

American princess in big screen Disney animation, many wondered how Disney would deal with the constructions of race: "Questions about representation still have critics trying to gauge precisely what constitutes Disney's true progressiveness in this cinematic and what constitutes Disney's suspicious dusting off and re-gifting of old racial stereotypes" (Lester 297).

According to scholars the most profoundly problematic instance of racial representation in the film is that of Tiana, the main character. As a social, political, and artistic first for Disney she comes with much historical baggage, concerns, high expectations, and pressing questions (Lester 297). Ajay Gehlawat describes it as a film in which race is "simultaneously ever-present as a subtext and yet never directly invoked" (429). Race goes unmentioned throughout the film, or as Manohla Dargis claims in her review, is strenuously avoided, even to the extent of Tiana spending 70 percent of the film being green (qtd. in Gehlawat 417). It should also be remembered that the fact that Tiana turns into a frog is a vital aspect of the storyline. In the original fairy tale, when the princess kisses the frog, it is the frog that turns back into a prince. However the movie is based on the novel by Baker, and in that book, when the princess kisses the frog she becomes a frog – a dubious twist on the fairy tale.

American Attitudes to Race in the 2000s

The way in which the white American makers of the film in the late 2000s handled the reality of an African-American woman living in 1920s New Orleans can be taken as evidence of current American attitudes to race. As discussed by Pearson et al., the prevalent American attitude to race is today one of ambivalence.

> Within the United States, a decline in the overt expression of racial prejudice over several decades has given way to near universal endorsement of the principles of racial equality as a core cultural value. Yet, evidence of persistent and substantial disparities between Blacks and Whites remain. The actions of even well intentioned and ostensibly non-prejudiced individuals can

> inadvertently contribute to these disparities through subtle biases in decision-making and social interaction. We argue that the current racial attitudes of Whites toward Blacks in the United States are fundamentally ambivalent, characterized by a widespread contemporary form of racial prejudice, aversive racism, that is manifested in subtle and indirect ways. (Pearson et al. 1)

The film itself is fraught with problematic historical inaccuracies. Instead of addressing the reality of racism and sexism in 1920s New Orleans the entire situation is omitted and audiences are expected to rely on their own knowledge about New Orleans during the Jim Crow era to imagine how race, class, and gender would have influenced life and opportunities for Tiana and her parents (Breaux 404). Despite the many ways in which Disney attempts to answer its critics, potentially controversial, and perhaps, teachable historical moments, are avoided by the Disney writers (Breaux 404). It does not seem to have ever been the intention or priority of the film makers to create an accurate historically educational film, although "entertainment is always an educational force" (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 2), and therefore inaccurate history shown in films creates or perpetuates inaccurate impressions among viewers. According to cultural studies theorist Henry Giroux, such renderings of history "are not merely an edited, sanitary, nostalgic view of history, free from poverty, class difference, and urban decay;" they also shape public memory in ways that benefit corporate interests, present US history as innocent and not a "historically specific, politically constructed, landscape of power" (qtd. in Breaux 404).

At the time the movie was made, America had just elected Barak Obama as its first African-American President. This is significant in that it seemed to offer Americans a new way in which to experience race. But according to John Dovidio, a Yale University psychology professor, attitudes toward blacks as a whole will not change overnight simply because of the election of a black president. Dovidio has studied social power and social relations among groups and individuals, and his work explores both conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit) influences on how

people think about, feel about and behave toward others based on group membership. He's also known for his research on "aversive racism," a contemporary subtle form of prejudice, and on techniques for reducing conscious and unconscious biases. In a recent interview he stated that President Barack Obama's election is the result of a general, steady decline of racial prejudice over time, coupled with Obama's efforts to transcend race by avoiding traditional stereotypes and minimizing the effects of racism that may have been directed toward him in his campaign. He also claims that "[a]ttitudes, particularly racial prejudice, which serves a number of psychological and material functions, often have a basic core that is resistant to change," but that people are also able to incorporate new information and change their attitudes with new experiences. In this way Obama's election does indeed offer Americans a unique and profound new racial experiences (Dovidio).

Therefore the reality of having had the debut of the first African-American president and First Family in the United States of America at the same time made the moment of Disney's first African-American princess even more boldly pronounced. This is important to note as history, race, and politics are inseparable in media representation, as explained by Valerie Smith: "Media representations of members of historically dis-enfranchised communities reflect and, in turn, affect the lived circumstances of real people" (qtd. in Lester 305):

> But the relationship between media representation and ''real life'' is nothing if not complex and discontinuous; to posit a one-to-one correspondence between the inescapability of certain images and the uneven distribution of resources within culture is to deny the elaborate ways in which power is maintained and deployed. (Lester 305)

Nevertheless, the film exists as a first that makes Disney history with its mostly African-American cast, its "first African-American heroine" (Fibbs), and its celebration of a distinctly American multicultural Southern culture and landscape.

(Lester 305). Such approval, however, has been far less vocal than those voices of disappointment, distrust, and displeasure, both before and after the film's release. Passions on both sides have run high, demonstrating that Disney certainly matters as an American/world cultural icon with an "outsize impact on children" (Barnes).

From the outset Disney were not oblivious to the challenges involved in representing an African-American princess. Due to critical response early on in the film making process, Disney knew that this was tricky terrain. The way that they chose to deal with issues relating to race was to avoid them. Tiana as the first Disney Princess of colour was expected to provide closure but instead left more questions than answers. The studio may have thought that just giving her brown skin was enough, but the underlying race issues are never actually dealt with and it is here that the real problem lies. As suggested above, the way that the whole matter was handled can be put down to current American attitudes to race, which are characterized by ambivalence and underpinned by a subtle racism that persists even in the age of America's first black president.

Chapter 3

Case Studies

The previous chapter served as an introduction to the case studies and discussed the ways in which scholars found key instances of racial representation in the films problematic. This chapter will discuss the ways in which the racial representations in each film were constructed, through the use of concepts of stereotyping, Othering and hierarchy, as theorized by Spector, Said, and Artz. Through analyzing the instances of racial representation using these ideas it can be seen how the films construct a representation of blackness that reflects the ideas behind the popular notion of African-Americans in America at the time when each film was made.

Hierarchy in a social order indicates a ranking according to worth, ability, authority, or some other attribute (Artz n.p.), and is communicated through devices such as the physical appearance of characters employed in specific roles in the narrative. In Disney, physical appearance is combined with goodness and values, so that in each animated narrative, heroes and heroines are invariably good, attractive, capable, worthy and, ultimately, powerful whilst in service of the narrative's social order (Artz par 20). Similarly, the narratives teach very specific messages regarding clear-cut dichotomies such as good and evil; namely, that good and evil are mutually exclusive, self-contained monoliths, and that good will always be good, and evil will always be evil (Lugo-Lugo 2).

Hierarchy can be achieved in part through the utilization of racial representation, which through repetition can become engrained as a stereotype. A stereotype is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as "a widely held but fixed and

oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing." If that idea reinforces a commonly held negative belief about a group, then the stereotype can "build a consensus of public opinion towards at best tolerance or indifference to oppression, at worst active participation in that oppression" (Spector 40). According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, racism is the belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, distinguishing it as inferior or superior to another race. These prejudicial ideas often fall into stereotype, as they are the ideas of the group dominating the social hierarchy.

Negative racial stereotypes therefore condone and perpetuate racism, which means that it is important to know what constitutes a stereotype and how to gauge if a given representation falls into stereotyping. In *Disney Does Diversity: The Social Context of Racial-Ethnic Imagery*, Alan J. Spector identifies three criteria central to the defining the distinction between ethnic and racist characterizations. The main distinction here is that of negativity. Firstly the stereotype must be negative to be considered racist as racism is based in prejudice. Secondly, if the target of the humour is an oppressed, subjugated or otherwise subordinated group the impact of the stereotype is significantly more potent, because racism lies in the oppression of one group by another, and stereotypes maintain this oppression. Thirdly if the stereotype feeds into or reinforces a common false stereotype of the group the impact is all the more damaging because it can add to the subjugation of the target group (Spector 39-42).

"Othering" is a related mechanism for constructing racial representation. Daren C. Brabham discusses this thoroughly in "Animated Blackness in *Shrek*." Otherness is a concept developed by theorists to describe how those in power in a culture define subordinate classes as unlike themselves or "other." By keeping subordinate classes at

this symbolic distance, the dominant class can maintain its power (Brabham 70). In *Edward Said*, Valerie Kennedy explains Said's notions of "Orientalism" and "Othering." For the West the Other is the Orient (41), that is, the Orient as distorted by a set of power structures and ideological values that Said dubs Orientalism (29). Inscribed in Orientalism is a will to power that takes as its point of reference the white, European, middle-class male (20). Clearly, there are connections between Orientalism and theories of racial inequality and hierarchy (19). Brabham cites Stuart Hall as having contributed much to understanding mediated texts that depict racial stereotypes, providing useful categories for understanding the "grammar of race" (64). Brabham argues that Donkey from *Shrek* is an exemplar of all three of Hall's tropes for black representation, a kind of "cultural shorthand for understanding the white narrative at the expense of blackness" (Brabham 69). Donkey is not human, so ethnicity is not seen in his physical features. Race is instead communicated through strong racial stereotypes in his speech and mannerisms, "rekindling historic performances of blackness" (65).

> Even though animals (and other non-human characters) are anthropomorphized in children's animated films, these films also, unfailingly, racialize nonhuman characters in the process. That is to say, these characters are not simply transformed into some generic "human"(for there are no generic humans); rather, they are inscribed, for example, as White "humans," Black "humans," Asian "humans," or Latino "humans."
> Thus, we maintain that animal and other nonhuman characters undergo a kind of racialized anthropomorphism within animated films. (Lugo-Lugo 3)

Dumbo

The following section of this chapter will discuss the ways in which the mechanisms of hierarchy, Othering and stereotyping have been used to construct a representation of blackness expressive of popular notions about African-Americans in America at the time when Dumbo was made (Ashley Nelson n.p.).

The first instance of African-American racial representation we encounter in the film Dumbo is at the beginning of the film when we see the circus being set up. It is nighttime and raining and we see animals and burly black men emerging from the circus train. They sing in unison as they begin to set up the circus in a display of intensive manual labor.

Although the scene is dark and it is hard to make out too much surrounding detail, it is immediately apparent that the men have no facial details, instead possessing flat brown-hued flesh in place of eyes, nose and mouth. In the opinion of Alyssa Nelson this renders the men featureless and without any personal identity at all (n.p.).

The physical appearance of characters employed in specific roles is an indicator of hierarchy being used to create social order and rank (Artz). By depriving these men of faces and therefore individual identity they have been constructed as lesser, perhaps even so far to the extent of equating them with animals. The men are shown to be manual labourers, which could mean that they are uneducated. The fact that they have been rendered literally as coloured (Black) bodies, of value only as muscle power, limits them to a subordinate societal position.

By not having faces they are Othered, made strange and unfamiliar, things that we cannot relate to. By keeping them at this symbolic distance the dominant class can maintain its power (Brabham 70). Castrated, as it were, de-faced, the men in the scene impliedly cannot assert their own power and are rendered submissive.

Whilst they work they sing a song, the lyrics of which reference negative stereotypical and generalized racial slurs. Singing whilst they work also reminds one of ideas related to slavery, of images of workers singing songs on the plantations (Towbin et al. 32). They sing, “We work all day, we work all night, we have no life

to read or write, we're happy. We don't know when we get our pay, and when we do we throw our money away." The lyrics to the song are blatantly stereotypical in that they express beliefs and ideas that are both negative and false. The fact that in the film this song is sung from the perspective of the workers themselves solidifies the ideas and gives validity to the words. This perpetuates the negative racial stereotype.

The next instance of racial representation comes at the point where Dumbo encounters a group of crows. The crow scene has been one of the most highly contested instances of racial representation in a Disney film. Critics such as Towbin, Nelson and Woodward have found their representation to be problematic, upholding the stereotypes of the time in which they were created but now considered irredeemably racist. Immediately one notices that the characters are not human, so ethnicity is not seen in their physical features. Race is instead communicated through strong racial stereotyping in their speech and mannerisms, "rekindling historic performances of blackness" (Brabham 65). These stereotypical visual cues carry information to the viewer, constructing the crows as African-American. Alyssa Nelson points out that the crows are constructed as African-American through their use of slang words and Ebonics, calling each other "brotha," speaking with Southern accents and mutilated grammar. It is also apparent through their physical appearance, attitude and fast-paced attempted wit that they are the kind of men who would be found loitering on a street corner. They are represented as unsavory characters in their appearance through elements such as Jim's zoot suit and hat, which remind one of a pimp, the large red eyes of one of the Crows hints at unhealthy activities such as drinking or drug taking. Their general manner creates the idea of a group of African-American men, not unlike a gang, not contributing to society, a generalized negative

representation of African-American males. They evince stereotypically negative characteristics often associated with racist depictions of African-Americans, such as being poor, unintelligent and naïve (Towbin et al. 32).

One of the first pieces of dialogue in the crow scene sets up a contrasting dichotomy between Dumbo and Timothy, who have not been constructed as racially Black, and the crows, whom we read as Black, when Timothy sees them (the crows) and not realizing yet that they aren't on the ground asks them what they are doing "down here," meaning on the ground, and they respond with "why are you up here?" This suggests that blacks are segregated from everyone else and are questioned when they are seen somewhere where they don't necessarily "belong." This reinforces the notion that everyone has their own place in life and they are expected to stay there (Alyssa Nelson n.p.). In this way the crows are Othered and a hierarchy is created in the relationship between the characters.

The leader of the crows is named Jim; therefore, Jim the Crow (voiced by Cliff Edwards) can very well be construed as being a reference to the *Jim Crow laws,* which were prevalent in the southern United States from 1876-1965. Alongside Jim are his fellow crows, voiced by members of the Hall Johnson Choir, a choir made up of African-Americans, perhaps surprisingly in view of the fact that the crows are seen as racist and making fun of African-Americans, holding up the white stereotypes of the time (Ashley Nelson).

In the scene the crows begin mocking Dumbo when Timothy realizes that he and Dumbo had gotten up the tree by flying there. They sing the song “When I See an Elephant Fly.” They sing in a jazz style complete with scatting, while one of the crows plays the jazz trumpet on his beak. This was a style of music that was generally popular at the time in African-American communities (Alyssa Nelson). Timothy hears their mocking and begins preaching a sermon to them, basically telling them that they

aren't good enough to mock him and that they should be ashamed of themselves. They are as a result moved to tears of guilt and remorse, and decide to help Dumbo learn how to fly. (Alyssa Nelson n.p.). This is an example of hierarchy in that the characters constructed as African-American quickly concede and become submissive as soon as a character constructed as white exerts his power. Even though Dumbo and his friend are in the crows' territory and outnumbered by them, and the character dominating them is literally a mouse, the mouse has power over them because of the social rank his race affords him. Timothy is constructed as white through his speech and costume. Voiced by Ed Brophy, Timothy has a Brooklyn accent and his dress is that of a circus ringmaster. At the time this movie was made, Brooklyn was a predominantly white area, and a circus ringmaster would surely have been white (and this is indicative of rank) (Cheu 108). Here we can see how the crows are made Other in the way that they are related to by characters constructed as ethnically white.

The Princess and the Frog

In 2006, at the time the Disney studio started working on *The Princess and the Frog*, John Lasseter, Chief Creative Officer at Pixar and Walt Disney studio, had just reinstated hand-drawn animation. (In 2004, the studio's then chief Michael Eisner decided that public tastes had changed, and that it was time to get out of hand-drawn altogether.) Often described as the most important figure in animation since Walt Disney, or even 'the new Walt Disney,' John Lasseter has worked for Disney since 1987, and his notable works include *Luxo Jr*, *Toy Story* 1 and 2, *A Bug's Life* and *Cars* 1 and 2 (Lasseter n.p.). The idea of making a film out of the fairytale about the princess and the frog had already been in the works as two separate existing projects, and Lasseter combined them in the hope that it would make a successful film (*The*

Independent). As stated in an interview with Rhett Wickham, it was Lasseter who chose Clements and Musker to write and direct the film. The pair had left the company in 2005, but were asked to return. They had previously worked on traditionally animated features such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Aladdin* (1992) and *Hercules* (1997) (Noyer n.p.). The film was Disney's first 2D hand-drawn film in six years since the transition was made from 2D to 3D (Henry n.p.). Therefore the studio needed to call back a number of animators who had experience in this style of animation. Ian Gooding was chosen as Art Director on the film (Kurtti 9). He had worked at Disney since 1990 (Henry n.p.) and had extensive experience in traditional animation. According to Gooding, "it was actually wonderful working with people I had worked with years ago, so we really poured our hearts into it and I think it shows in the film" (Henry n.p.).

The film *The Princess and the Frog* was intended by Disney to be a fantastic accomplishment, and a huge stride toward representing racial equality in the Disney Universe (Breaux 200). The selling point of the film was that it showed the "first African- American heroine" (Fibbs, qtd. in Lester 305). But after watching the film one is left feeling shortchanged. Race was meant to be part of the film's unique selling point but was left "simultaneously ever-present as a subtext and yet never directly invoked" (Gehlawat 429). The main character Tiana is Black in colour, but this goes unmentioned throughout the film, except for one instance when she is addressed by a white man as follows: "A little woman of your background would have had her hands full trying to run a big business like that" (Breaux 405). Yet this goes unexplored and can be read perhaps as a reference to gender or social class as well as race. In that particular instance we realize that even though Tiana is

> [i]ntelligent, soft-spoken and articulate, physically attractive, well-mannered, industrious, self-sacrificing, morally upstanding, energetic, assertive, curious,

> persistent, and resourceful [. . .] she has to go through two white male bankers for the loan to purchase her warehouse space to realize her restaurant-owing dream. Such a detail recreates America's entrenched southern economic power structure, defined historically by race and gender. (Lester 302)

Even though the film is set in 1920s New Orleans, where Jim Crow laws were in place maintaining racial segregation and the oppression of African-Americans (making it a highly contested time in history in a very specifically racially segregated place), no attempt is made to address racial issues or confront any area of society or politics that was affected by race issues. This lack of historical specificity is highly problematic. Cultural studies critic Henry Giroux (1999, p. 68) contends that such renderings of history

> "[. . .] are not merely an edited, sanitary, nostalgic view of history, free from poverty, class difference, and urban decay," they shape public memory in ways that benefit corporate interests, present US history as innocent and not a "historically specific politically constructed landscape of power." (Breaux 404)

These issues create a litany of legitimate critical concerns about the film, which, instead of addressing issues and dealing with race at a difficult time in American history, chooses instead to ignore it. The film therefore only succeeds in "eliding race, even as it redeploys multiple racial stereotypes" (Gehlawat 417). This, according to Lester, "valorizes the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct" (305).

The character of Princess Tiana herself is introduced as brown-skinned and the child of two brown-skinned parents – a typically self-evident and socially accepted physical fact of her identity as African-American (Lester 302);

> Her soft-spokenness and her quiet disposition contrast the loud, demanding, brash and whiny personality of her rich white best friend Charlotte, whose values are rather shallow compared with Tiana's more substantive values and judgment. Disney's fantastical design would have us believe that a poor black

> girl and a rich white girl in 1920s New Orleans can remain best friends without external social disapproval or scrutiny. (Lester 302)

Physically, she is young, thin, brown skinned, and with straightened hair in "an elegant upsweep" (Lester 298). Her appearance is modeled on the actress who voiced her and has generally been met with public approval: she is not just another disproportioned "Barbie doll dipped in chocolate" (Wolfe 22), but rather a brown female with "skin of a 'darker hue' and slightly full lips" (Tucker). Perhaps unsurprisingly, some African-Americans complain that Tiana's skin is not dark enough: for an African-American character, her skin tone is deemed "too light" (Badeau; Graff). "Even President Obama's pre-presidential days were plagued with this 'black enough' measuring stick by both blacks and non-blacks, primarily because of his biracial (white and Kenyan) parentage" (Lester 299). Tiana was animated by Mark Henn, and she was voiced by American actress Anika Noni Rosa. Mark Henn has worked as a Disney animator for 33 years; his contributions have included several leading or title characters, and he has created and animated almost every Disney Princess since Arial. He was chosen by Lasseter to take on the challenge of animating Tiana in all three forms in which she appears in the film (a little girl, a young woman and a frog), because of his experience in Disney Princess design (Ponti n.p.). Henn looked to the actress for inspiration, using her not only for her static physical appearance but also as a visual live action reference, incorporating distinct characteristics such as her dimples and left-handedness into the design. "Rose didn't want Tiana to resemble "a cookie-cutter princess who had been coloured in brown" (Fritz n.p.).

> The fact that Tiana is African-American was "never a big issue" for Henn when it came to animating her, but drawing her as both a human and a frog proved difficult. "Tiana appears in the movie in so many different forms [. . .] she's a little girl, she's an adult human, and then she's a frog." (Fritz)

The January 2010 issue of *Essence* that celebrates the movie features the actress together with a small drawing of Tiana together: Tiana's hair and skin tone match Rose's medium skin tone and Rose's own hairstyle and chemically-relaxed hair texture (Lester 299). She is in this way perhaps constructed as not entirely Black but a black person possessing light skin and relaxed hair, therefore less black, like the not fully ethnic appearance of the actress she is based on. In this way she is arguably Othered from African-American people, who see her as not possessing authentic African-American features. African-Americans may still not feel that they have been represented accurately, as they cannot identify with this westernized and Hollywood mediated caricature of a Black woman's physicality (Lester 299).

Tiana is wise beyond her years and humble, stating that she does not want to be treated like a princess but rather with respect and dignity. While her endearing personality is most certainly in keeping with the overall idea of the elegant, graceful and kind Disney Princess, she definitely has extra "attitude" and confidence – although not enough to "cross that finger-snapping, neck-rolling stereotypical manifestation of African-American female attitude" (Lester 302).

Then there is also the issue of Tiana not even remaining an African-American woman but instead magically being transformed into a frog. "Disney predominantly ignores rather than addresses the racial elements of [this] story. This disregard is easy when your [central] black character spends 75 percent of the movie being green" (Lester 302). Tiana is in this way Othered from humanity in that she is literally no longer a human having been transformed through witchcraft into a frog – which is a very strange non-human and emphatically anti-princess form. She is in this way even Othered from her own Blackness! The only real racial signifier tying her to an African-American identity was her skin colour, and now that her skin is green she is

de-racialized. Her Blackness and her femininity are in this was neutralized. Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* wrote, "These avowedly black people spend an awful lot of the movie being adorable, unthreatening little green creatures. Disney may wish to reach out to people of colour – but the colour green wasn't what we had in mind" (Bradshaw n.p.).

Hierarchy comes into play here too. As the main character and princess of the film she is transformed into a frog. Whilst in the past, princesses in Disney films have encountered trials and tribulations, this has never happened to the extent that they are equated with animals, least of all Frogs and bugs in a swamp.

Lester points out that Tiana is the first African-American princess in the history of Disney animated features, and that her character is written so as to enable her to accept circumstances that no other Disney princess has been expected to experience (304). In this way she is even further Othered from the norm.

She is shown as starting off poor (like many 'princesses' before her) and living in the poorer part of town, but even though she works very hard she seems only able to climb the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. While it is canonical for fairy tale protagonists to begin their stories with low social status, having a black heroine who was originally written into the story as a domestic servant could legitimately be read not as a fairy tale trope but a reinforcement of real world racial stereotyping (Shannon Price n.p.). At the gala dinner where she is refused her loan, she is only there to sell her baked goods even though you would expect her to have been invited as a guest, seeing as she is shown from the beginning of the film to be Charlotte's best friend since childhood. This is perhaps included as a moment in the film that actually recognizes the realities of the racist power structure in America at the time.

In her human appearance, Tiana is beautiful: in the Disney universe she is therefore deemed good and worthy of love! But she is also black and therefore must

work hard, harder than anyone else and save every penny. Although she must be overly sweet, self-sacrificing and ethical, she still does not seem to deserve a typical castle fairytale ending: all she can get instead is a restaurant. Moreover, to obtain this, she needs to be contained as a frog in green skin so we are not constantly aware of her blackness. It is true that Snow White and Cinderella were also made to work hard in poor conditions and were treated unfairly, but their servitude was not born out of racial discourse and in the end they rode off into fairytale castles with princes of the same race.

John Lasseter, Chief Creative Officer for Walt Disney Animation, says that Tiana was deliberately created as a "princess for today" and "the girl next door," and expressly for "a new generation of moviegoers." Perhaps this is what led to Tiana's being constructed as less otherworldly and less cosmic than other Disney royalty (Lester 299). Unlike most other Disney movies, this one features a love triangle where

> Tiana and a white southern debutante vie for the affections of one man. Fascinating, since in every other Disney princess movie – *Snow White*, *Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*, etc. – it is primarily the prince's job to woo the affections and love of the future princess. Then there's the prince himself. Tiana is the ONLY princess in Disney lore to have a prince that is not the same colour [as herself].(Lester 304)

In the film it is in fact Charlotte, Tiana's best friend, who embodies all the clichéd aspects of being a Disney princess, both in looks and in social standing. She fills all the traditional Disney princess criteria: one parent, spoiled, rich, big housedresses, maid. This almost by extension constructs Tiana as what would nowadays be the stereotypical black best friend, even though she is the actual princess. At the same time, because the story is situated in the 1920s such a relationship would not have been common.

Initially the main character was written to be a maid named Maddy, but this was changed in the early production stage because of the word's homonymous association with "Mammy," which referenced both American slavery and the Jim Crow race relations of black servitude and deference to whites (Lester 300). Despite her appearance being criticized for being not sufficiently ethnic some still complain that the name Tiana is "too ethnic" (Badeau; Graff). Her name indeed carries a degree of African-American cultural association; but as a name for a princess it bears a striking resemblance in sound and visual appearance to "tiara," every princess's and queen's key visual adornment. Tiana's and her family's Southern speech rhythms and physiological voice quality are identifiably African-American, yet they speak "standard English" and not a black street vernacular (Lester 300). This does not constitute a stereotype as it is not a damaging or negative association, nor is it limited to African-American people in the film as a site of contention:

> Although none of the highlighted traits above alone would necessarily define blackness, collectively, however, they perhaps signify Tiana's blackness by determining what she is not, racially or ethnically: she is not white, Native American, Irish, Jewish, Asian, African, or Middle Eastern. (Lester 300)

Although Tiana is not given the role of a traditional Disney princess, the film was made at a time when the studio was becoming more self-conscious about various kinds of stereotyping, not just racial and ethnic but also regarding gender, continuing an ongoing trend in the studio's female-centric films (Towbin 24). So whilst compared to previous Disney offerings of helpless white damsels in distress it can be seen that she is unusually hard working and active in her situation, when one looks at her in relation to Disney heroines throughout the studio's lifespan one can see that she has a place in a continuously progressing spectrum that reflects woman's roles in society at the time of the film's making.

> It is easy to excuse Disney's depictions of women in these early tales. Although women already had the right to vote in more than a dozen countries, including the United States, by 1920, the first three princess films, which were released between 1937 and 1959, were accurate representations of women – or the ideal of what women "should" be of the time. (Phillips)

Snow White was docile, naïve, and domestic, all qualities of the ideal woman at the time of the movie's release in 1937. In 1959 Sleeping Beauty was awakened by the kiss of a Prince and whisked away to his kingdom, completely passive throughout the entire film. But thirty years later in 1989 with *The Little Mermaid,* the studio had no reason for portraying Ariel as such a helpless character. But although she was less well behaved and disobeyed her father, she was no less dependent on the prince to save her. Continuing with the shift in attitude toward how girls and women "should" behave, in *Beauty and the Beast* Belle was very independent and uninterested in marriage. It was the prince who was in peril in this story and the princess who helps to save the prince. Despite this Belle still fell in love with the controlling, violent prince trapped in the body of a beast. In 1992's *Aladdin*, Jasmine (like Ariel) stood up to her controlling father, but also like Ariel, was defenseless to save herself from the story's villain and relied on the prince to save her in the film's climax. In 1995's movie bearing her name, Pocahontas was, like Jasmine, unwilling to marry her father's choice of suitor, and, like Belle, she was responsible for saving her prince. In 1998 Mulan refused to take a passive role in her life. She went undercover as a male soldier to prevent her elderly father from having to serve in the Chinese army, and she ultimately defeated the villain. However one must keep in mind that in order to accomplish this she is forced to dress as a man, and once she is found to be a woman, she is dismissed from the army in dishonor (Phillips n.p.).

In *The Princess and the Frog* eleven years later, Disney continued the studio's progressive treatment of its female protagonists. Tiana takes the lead in most of the active decision-making throughout the film and must take the credit for restoring

herself and the prince Naveen back to their human forms. She also achieves her entrepreneurial goal of opening a restaurant, which is something unheard of for Disney princesses (Phillips).

Creative works such as *Dumbo* and *Princess and the Frog* can also provide a challenge to the *prior* assumptions of cultural theorists. When looking at the two case study films it is clear that instances of racialized representation can be found and confirmed as problematic when these are analyzed according to the theories of Othering, hierarchy and stereotyping. But one cannot separate these instances from the films they come from or the context in which they were made.

The social context at the time when *Dumbo* was made was very different from the social context in which *The Princess and the Frog* was made. Since the 1940s a lot has changed in American racial attitudes, in terms of norms, behaviour and inner convictions.

African-Americans in the 1940s were considered second-class citizens, black and white people were segregated by law, and opportunities for African-Americans were restricted. The Civil Rights movement had not yet been established, and in the 1940s African-Americans simply did not have the same civil rights as white people (Packard). Their situation is evident in films and other media of the time, in terms of their complete absence from representation or the negative stereotypes invoked to represent them. When this is taken into consideration it is perhaps unusual for the time and highly progressive of a Disney film such as *Dumbo* to have representations of African-Americans that are not entirely demonizing. For example, if the crows truly were an expression of the popular notion of African-Americans at the time, then they would presumably not be as sympathetic to Dumbo's plight as they are.

Following along this path of reasoning, the crows also would not have appeared as intelligent as they are. For the crows make it obvious that they are more intelligent than what was commonly believed about African-Americans at the time when they discuss psychology and the need for the "magic feather" to give Dumbo the self-confidence he needs to believe that he can fly (Ashley Nelson n.p.).

In stark contrast, American culture is currently dominated by a discourse of political correctness. At the time that *The Princess and the Frog* was made the US had just elected its first black president and the nation was celebrating racial equality. Much had changed in America since the 1940s: the abolition of the Jim Crow laws and the passing of the Civil Rights Act had ensured legal racial equality, and attitudes regarding what was acceptable in racial representations had changed. Clements and Musker tried to approach the film with as much sensitivity as possible, going so far as to assemble a team of race sensitivity consultants (Woodward). For example when the original name and occupation of the lead character drew controversy, they were changed in an attempt to keep the film accessible to an African-American audience. Disney thereafter expressly consulted with African-Americans to avoid potential problems resulting from perceived racial insensitivity. Reportedly, Oprah Winfrey was one of the race-sensitivity consultants, while also voicing Eudora, Tiana's mother, in the movie (Lester 297).

Although some scenes in these movies contain problematic instances of racial representation, I think the films as a whole are more complex (and perhaps internally contradictory) than the racial-identity critics are prepared to acknowledge. When looking at their objectives and narrative goals it can be seen that the story of Dumbo says a lot about discrimination/bullying of people who are different from others, the moral being that one should never discriminate and exclude another on the basis of physical differences.

For instance, although *Dumbo* is often criticized for the inclusion of the black crows, it is notable that they are the only truly sympathetic characters in the film outside of Dumbo, his mother and Timothy. Initially they mock Dumbo's big ears and Timothy doesn't trust to them; but once he tells them off, saying how lonely the baby elephant is, they apologize for picking on him, and are in fact the ones who help Timothy teach Dumbo to fly using the "magic feather (Hartley n.p.).

Again, perhaps the portrayal of the black tent riggers in the Roustabout scene was actually trying to be sympathetic to their situation. Often workers at something like a circus are rendered invisible and work behind the scenes, their hard work never noticed or appreciated by front of house performers and audiences, because at a place of carefree fun and entertainment, seeing people doing tough manual labor in harsh conditions is distracting, a reminder of harsh reality. The workers being represented at all in this way is a form of inclusion and awareness, an acknowledgement of their existence and the situations in which they work.

Dumbo and Timothy have a relationship parodying the stereotypical animosity between mice and elephants, and this can also be considered as a representation of equality and the non-discriminatory treatment of those who are perceived to be different.

Taking into consideration era in which the film was made, it is also possible to assume that Dumbo's underdog story resonated with film audiences at a time when the world was being devastated by war. Its hopeful message of overcoming insurmountable obstacles struck the right chord with everyone who saw it. In *The Princess and the Frog* the moral lesson is very similar, in that the film encourages equality and the acceptance of those who appear different: this is clear in the climactic moment of the film when Tiana kisses Naveen in frog form. By portraying the idea of not judging others by their outward appearance the film propagates the

idea that it is not what someone looks like that counts but what is on the inside that is important. Despite the appearance of the characters, they overcome all odds and achieve a positive outcome. And even though the film is inaccurate in realist terms in its portrayal of racial dynamics, it is an imagining of a sort of post-racial America in which race does not dictate whom you can marry or be friends with.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

In this chapter I will compare the ways in which race has been dealt with in the two films according to my analysis in Chapter 3, to determine how ethnic character representations have changed in response to changing cultural attitudes over time.

As has been shown in the case studies, the two films contain instances in which race appears to have been constructed through the mechanisms of Othering, Hierarchy and stereotyping. However it is imperative to take into consideration the context of each film and the ways in which the norms and attitudes of the times affected the representations of African-Americans.

In the 1940s attitudes to race were dominated by the ideology of segregation, and opportunities for African-Americans were limited and regulated by law. Today, racial difference is ostensibly celebrated in a multicultural society. These drastically different attitudes certainly affected the ways in which race was be represented in the media. If the media are a reflection of the norms, behaviour and inner convictions of society, then significant changes in the latter area dictate that there should be significant progression in the former.

Dumbo

In the Roustabout scene in *Dumbo*, Othering and the imputation of hierarchy are used to demonstrate social order and rank. It has been claimed that by depriving these men of faces and therefore individual identity they have been constructed as strange and unfamiliar, dehumanized from people into things and therefore constructed as lesser through the way in which they are represented. When one sees these people without

faces it is disturbing, as it is through the face that humans access their senses, communicate and are identified.

But while it is true the black laborers are presented in a simplified manner that constructs them as foreign and unfamiliar, surely this is equally true of the clowns? In the scene showing the clowns deciding what cruel thing to do with Dumbo, the clowns are shown in silhouette. This view allows even less detail than the chiaroscuro used for the black men putting up the circus tent. The fact that they are accorded more detail than the clowns presents them as more familiar than the clowns, who are portrayed as sinister and threatening. Depriving the men of only their faces allows suggests that they are human being somehow denied individual agency, stripped of their power, which arguably hints at the situation of African-Americans living at the time the movie was made.

The representation of the laborers in the Roustabout scene makes use of stereotyping: the African-Americans sing a song while they work, whose lyrics reference negative stereotypical and generalized racial slurs. Singing whilst they work also reminds one of ideas related to slavery and the negative, false beliefs and ideas that perpetuated it. The fact that the songs are sung by the workers themselves solidifies their ideas and gives validity to their words. However the scene could also evoke feelings of empathy. It is a scene that is progressive relative to the time in which it was produced, for it shows that the men are forced to work in the rain, with animals, and for "no pay," as the lyrics tell us. Showing such a combination of racial stereotypes all together perhaps hints at the banality of such discrimination, and this may well have sparked troubling ideas or at least vague feelings of discomfort in the white American audience at the time.

The characters of the Crows, according to Nelson, are Othered in the way that Timothy (a mouse but a character constructed as white) relates to them. The

prevailing social hierarchy is invoked in the way that the characters constructed as African-American quickly concede and become submissive as soon as a character constructed as white flexes his power. Initially this may be the case, but the mouse and the crows soon start to work together so as to achieve the goal of helping Dumbo to fly. The subtext of this could be that people of different racial backgrounds need to collaborate to see how difference (such as Dumbo's ears) can be utilized in a positive way to achieve remarkable feats.

The ethnicity of the Crows is constructed through strong racial stereotypes in their speech and mannerisms. They are constructed as African-American through their use of slang words and Ebonics, calling each other "brotha," speaking with Southern accents and non-standard grammar. They exhibit stereotypically negative characteristics that are often associated with racist depictions of African-Americans, such as being poor, unintelligent and naïve (Towbin et al. 32). However, they also defy certain stereotypes of the time as they are also shown to be insightful into the ideas of psychology, a science that would take intelligence to understand and apply practically. They also help Dumbo and Timothy by giving them positive advice. In this sense the representation of the crows is arguably in racial terms progressive for the time.

The Princess and the Frog

It has been argued that Othering is used in the construction of Tiana because she is shown as Black but a black person possessing light skin and with relaxed hair, and therefore "not Black enough" (Lester 299; see also Badeau; Graff). According to this view she is in this way Othered from African-American people, who see her as not possessing authentic African-American features and cannot identify with her as a Westernized and Hollywood mediated caricatured version of a Black woman's

physicality. But Tiana is only a representation of the reality of the actress she is modeled on. Tiana's hair and skin tone match Rose's medium skin tone and Rose's own hairstyle and chemically relaxed hair texture (Lester 299). This reaction to Tiana's appearance was not so much a result of her being is too light or too dark: she is unfamiliar to African-Americans because even though she is brown she has not been constructed to represent blackness in any other way. Tiana is therefore Othered from her own blackness because she is not marked by any of the additional or underlying features of race.

She is also Othered from humanity in that she is for a time literally no longer a human having been transformed through witchcraft into a frog; as a green creature she is in this way also Othered from her own Blackness! Although the main character's being turned into a frog is a crucial aspect of the storyline, when a main objective of the film was to have an African-American lead who is now no longer African-American because the filmmakers did not address any other issues pertaining to racial construction and only made her different in colour, the fact that this is taken away becomes problematic.

Disney chose this film as an opportunity to challenge traditional Disney race and gender stereotypes. For that reason the character is forced to accept circumstances that no other Disney princess has previously had to experience (Lester 304). The fact that Tiana doesn't get the fairytale castles of previous Disney princesses is because the studio wanted to create a more realistic goal for young girls to idealize, and a princess of substance as opposed to the princesses in the past that communicated shallow values and unrealistic expectations. Although inadvertent, this could be interpreted to mean that her social standing is doomed to be lower than other

Disney female royalty (Lester 299), who can dream bigger than restaurants and get castles.

At the time that *The Princess and The Frog* was being made the studio was also becoming more self-conscious about various kinds of stereotyping, gender as well as racial and ethnic. For this reason the role of Tiana was written in such a way as to go against all the gender stereotypes that Disney had written into previous roles. But although female empowerment was meant to have been another strong aspect of the film (Walker-Craft n.p.), alas, it only served to reinforce male chauvinist tendencies. Continuing Disney's tradition of recent female leads, Tiana is a much stronger female character than her predecessors. She is shown as having her own dreams, goals and aspirations, and she works extremely hard to realize them. Unfortunately, she is shown as ultimately unable to realize them on her own. She instead relies on a man to save her. This reinforces the idea that a princess like Tiana can find happiness, but only within the construct of a white male patriarchal society (Marisha).

Comparison

When breaking down the ways in which Othering, hierarchy and stereotyping are used in these films to construct a representation of blackness consonant with public thinking at the time the films were made, it becomes clear that Disney's representations were more progressive in the 1940s film *Dumbo* than might have been expected. Representations of blackness in *The Princess and the Frog* show progressive changes influenced by changes in American attitudes, yet still leave room for improvement as some problematic representations are present. The biggest problem in this film is that the filmmaker's efforts at extreme political correctness

result in race being ever-present but never directly addressed, whilst at the same time reinforcing negative lessons.

Dumbo was at the time of its conception an achievement and a sign of promise for the Disney Studio, which was struggling due to the financial losses incurred by its previous feature *Fantasia*, and the general loss of income attendant on the Second World War. In the film difference and the underdog are truly celebrated, a useful lesson for the psyche of an American society that had been segregated and oppressed on the basis of difference. From that time on things began to change. As argued in the previous chapter, the representations of Black labourers and crows were a progressive move on the part of the Disney studio because the film exhibited progressive attitudes long before legal developments ensuring legal racial equality, such as the abolition of the Jim Crow laws and the passing of the Civil Rights Act. The Roustabout scene exposes and acknowledges the toil of African-American workers in way perhaps not previously experienced by white Americans. In this way they are made to understand such a situation, and this kind of awareness can introduce the idea that inequality and unfairness are wrong and should be changed. The crows are represented as intelligent and sympathetic, and the catalyst behind Dumbo's realizing he can fly. They are in fact among the most positive characters in the entire film.

In *The Princess and the Frog*, race was meant to be part of the film's unique selling point but was left "simultaneously ever-present as a subtext and yet never directly invoked" (Gehlawat 429). The way in which race is constructed in the film indirectly reinforces the same negative assumptions that it is trying to overcome. This, according to Lester, "[v]alorizes the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct" (305). Film makers Clements and Musker tried to approach the film with as much sensitivity as possible, going so far as to assemble a team of race sensitivity

consultants (Woodward). Yet they missed the opportunities that such a film had to offer and instead created a "superficially pro-multicultural film" (Walidah n.p.), which succeeds in "eliding race, even as it redeploys multiple racial stereotypes" (Gehlawat 417).

In *The Princess and the Frog* Tiana is constructed as black by her appearance alone and no other issues relating to racial representation are addressed. Even the fact that Tiana is African-American is ignored throughout the film. That is why African-Americans felt they could not identify with her, and why when she is transformed into a frog she no longer represents blackness, her colour having been the only aspect of her character's construction that represented blackness.

Disney also chose this film as an opportunity to challenge traditional Disney hierarchy and gender stereotypes. For this reason Tiana does not get a typical Disney castle and the status of a royal, instead working extremely hard to achieve her goal of owning a restaurant and joining the middle class. Disney did this in an effort to create a more realistic and modern fairytale, with a strong female character who achieves realistic goals. But because the studio did this in the same film in which its first African-American lead appeared, her difference from previous Disney princesses could be linked and attributed to her racial difference.

From this analysis it might appear that Disney has despite its efforts gone backwards in terms of its racial representations. But this is only in contrast to the progress in societal attitudes. Since the 1940s a lot has changed in American racial attitudes, and it may be that Disney's representations have not quite kept pace with this far-reaching change. The great irony is that this same multicultural society we see

today has been attributed to an initiative of Disney itself! In *It's a Small World* and its films, Disney paved the way for today's multicultural values through its positive portrayal of women, ethnic minorities and non-Christian spirituality (Brode 1). An example of this is to be found in *Dumbo*, when Disney provided African-American labourers with a sympathetic role and presented African-American crows as intelligent, at a time when they were effectively invisible or non-existent because they had no representation.

This shows the massive impact that Disney films can potentially have on society and also how cautious Disney needs to be when creating films. As previously stated by Giroux, the film medium is a powerful teaching tool and this places a great responsibility on Disney to design representations that perpetuate positive and accurate messages. A way in which Disney has not fulfilled this responsibility in the film *The Princess and the Frog* is by inaccurately depicting an aspect of history.

Rewriting of History

Clements and Musker chose to create a story in which an African-American woman is placed in 1920s New Orleans, and yet they do not address any of the issues relating to racial segregation that would have arisen as a direct result of her race and historical placement. As Clements remarked, "we didn't realize it was that big of a deal" (Stanford-Jones n.p.).

In fact the film avoids all possible issues relating to the construction of race and the representation of the reality of an African-American woman living at this time and in this place. This is perhaps evidence of the long-standing Disney tradition of rewriting history, denying the true nature of the time by sanitizing it of disagreeable matters and recreating it in a way that is pleasing (Breaux 399).

The rewriting of history is a problematic Disney phenomenon. In *The Princess and the Frog*, just as in *Pocahontas*, we can see an Americanization of the socio-political landscape, which erases a history mired in oppression and replaces it with a neocolonial feel-good version (this is discussed in a lecture by Walidah Marisha, entitled "Gender, Race and Empire in Disney").

In the *The Princess and the Frog* set in 1920s New Orleans, African-American Tiana is shown as an up-and-coming restaurateur and Charlotte (who is white) is portrayed as Tiana's best friend. Walidah describes the reality of 1920s New Orleans as a violent time for African-Americans. Lynchings were common and life for most black people was one of desperation and despair. Segregation was law and Black people were only two or three generations out of slavery. The majority of them lived in crushing poverty due to the absence of a proper economic foundation when slavery ended and the employment opportunities denied to them as a result of the Jim Crow laws. The most accurate likelihood in these circumstances is that Tiana worked for Charlotte as a maid (Walidah n.p.). Setting the film in this period allows for a neocolonial revision that says that:

> Slavery and Jim Crow segregation were not that bad, and that Black people were able even at that time period to achieve whatever dreams they set their minds to. This portrayal has repercussions today by engendering a lack of examination of the current political situation, which leads to a further discrimination of people of color. (Marisha n.p.)

This rewriting of history in films is dangerous: inaccurate Disney narratives communicate inaccurate messages to audiences.

But even though the film is inaccurate or unrealistic in its portrayal of racial dynamics, it does nevertheless represent an attempt by the studio at being progressive in terms of its racial representations. For this reason it has created the film as an

imagining of a sort of post-racial America where mixed race friendships and marriages are accepted.

The messages present in Disney stories need to be unpacked and questioned. As recommended by former Disney CEO Michael Eisner, "Everyone's going to have to deal with Disney" (Giroux 170). But without education that focuses on critical thinking and analysis skills, it is more realistic to say that everyone is going to have to consume Disney, unquestioningly (Marisha).

However it cannot be assumed that all inaccuracies are negative and damaging. Whilst Disney's fantastical design would have us believe that a poor black girl and a rich white girl in 1920s New Orleans can remain best friends without external social disapproval or scrutiny (Lester 302), it could also in *Dumbo* support the even more fantastical claim that an elephant and a mouse can be best friends with an underlying message of acceptance and equality.

South African Context

When looking at this research and its implications for the South African cultural context, it is perhaps best to do so in relation to a recent local animated film offering and its relation to the South African context. In this way South African animation can learn from the lessons of a big American studio such as Disney, even though animation as a South African industry is still in its infancy (Rorke).

Khumba is the second digitally animated feature film to come from South Africa's Triggerfish Animation Studios (Mallory): *"Khumba* is a coming-of-age story about a zebra searching for his missing stripes as a way to be accepted back at his herd, but really his journey is a personal one of *self*-acceptance" (Silverton). Anthony

Silverton, the film's director, recognized the potential for this extraordinary creature to be a strong visual metaphor for anyone struggling with identity.

Seeing as animated stories act as powerful agents of socialization (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 2), it needs to be realized that films such as *Khumba* have a responsibility towards South Africans to create representations that communicate positive messages about race. *Khumba* encourages the idea that it is not what someone looks like that counts but what is on the inside that is important, which is the same intrinsic moral lesson in *Dumbo* and *The Princess and the Frog*.

Being part of a generation in South Africa where racial and ethnic difference is celebrated and confronted positively means that the topic of racial representation cannot be ignored. It is therefore imperative that we as animators, in an industry of media and representation, learn the best way to handle racial representation in our work.

Because animators in post-apartheid South Africa try to be as racially inclusive as possible, looking at the way that race has been constructed previously in Disney films and having an awareness of what was accepted and rejected by audiences is very important. In South Africa audiences typically comprise a variety of people of different race, ethnicity, and background, and therefore animated characters need to not only appeal to but also represent a wide range of races. As seen in the case of *The Princess and the Frog*, it is important to look at all areas of racial representation and not just rely on physical signifiers to represent race. It is also important, whilst maintaining sensitivity, not to ignore race in an effort to be politically correct.

We can learn the importance of being aware of the rewriting of history and the implications of such an act from the example of Clements and Musker, who "didn't realize it was that big of a deal" (Stanford-Jones n.p.) to create a story in which an

African-American woman is placed in 1920s New Orleans, and to not address any of the issues related to racial segregation that would have arisen as a direct result of her race and historical placement.

Khumba is not without its problematic instances, such as clichés of racism in a sequence involving a herd of gemsboks who "all look so completely alike that even they can't tell themselves apart" (Mallory). But it is successful in not ignoring racial differences and constructing characters that represent different races based on positive aspects that define their uniqueness, whilst perpetuating the underlying message of acceptance and equality of those who appear different.

As these films are aimed primarily at children, these are the lessons that are being taught and perpetuated in the young minds of today and are part of the formative ideas they will take through to adulthood in the next generation.

Conclusion

Have the representations produced by the Disney studio changed over time in response to variations in the broader American sensitivity to race and ethnicity? Yes. The findings of my research draw attention to significant changes in sensitivity between the two films examined. I have discovered that the representation of African-Americans by Disney in the 1940s movie *Dumbo* was progressive by the standards of the time, and that representations of blackness in a current film such as *The Princess and the Frog* are significantly influenced by progressive change in American attitudes toward race. Yet the latter film is still marred by problematic representations, the biggest being that the filmmaker's efforts at extreme political correctness result in race being ever-present but never addressed, whilst at the same time reinforcing negative perceptions.

At the time that *Dumbo* was made American society had an established and engrained hierarchical system, upheld by laws in terms of which African-American people were considered inferior. The Roustabout scene acknowledges the existence of African-American labourers and the faceless situations in which they typically work. A white audience is likely to be disturbed by exposure to this representation and possibly moved to recognition of the inequality and unfairness in society. The 'African-American' crows are represented as intelligent and sympathetic and the catalyst behind Dumbo's realizing he can fly. They are in fact among the most positive characters in the entire film.

America nowadays has an African-American President and questions of race are approached with sensitivity and political correctness. Yet many would argue that there is still a social hierarchy in terms of which African-Americans and Hispanics remain on the margins of society, and that racism lingers in societal undercurrents. The makers of *The Princess and the Frog* attempted to be as racially progressive and politically correct as possible by showing extreme sensitivity toward racial representation. Their African-American heroine demonstrated a progressive move in racial representation, in a film that challenges traditional Disney racial and gender stereotypes.

Unfortunately, in their determination not to cause offence, the makers created a film that avoids confronting major issues pertaining to the representation of African-Americans and race more generally, and thus inadvertently serves to reinforce some of the attitudes they had sought to contest.

In *The Princess and the Frog* Tiana is constructed as black by her appearance alone, and no other issues relating to racial representation are engaged. The fact that Tiana is African-American is ignored throughout the film, which is why African-Americans felt they could not identify with her. Once she has been transformed into a

frog, her “blackness” disappears entirely. The laudable intention of creating a more realistic and modern fairytale with a strong female character who achieves realistic goals was thwarted by the fact that the studio decided to make their princess African-American. Tiana’s relatively modest success and difference from previous Disney princesses can unfortunately be ascribed to her race.

On the evidence presented above, it can be concluded that ethnic character representations in animated Disney films have changed in response to the changing cultural attitudes and historical context in America. There is much to be learned by the contemporary South African animation industry from the ambivalent achievement of a film like *The Princess and the Frog*: as difficult as it may be, issues of race and representation must be confronted, or the film maker can play into the hands of lingering implicit prejudice.

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