

Racism in disney movies assignment

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Anastasia Trus WRTG 3020 Professor Pat Sullivan 30 March 2010 Racism in Disney During the last several decades, the media has become a strong agent in directing and controlling social beliefs and behaviors. Children, by nature, can be particularly susceptible to the influencing powers of the media, opening an avenue where media created especially for children can indoctrinate entire generations. Disney movies, like all other media “ are powerful vehicles for certain notions about our culture,” such as racism. (Giroux 32). Racist scenes in Disney movies are often identified as simply being “ symbols of the time” when the films were produced. Furthermore, Disney racism is often passed over as simple humor, or as a simple guide to children’s understanding of cultures. These explanations of racism in the films are incomplete because they fail to take into account the fact that the primary audience members of Disney films are not old enough to see the movies as relics of a different time and place.

This is not to say that Disney films indoctrinate children with racist tendencies; nevertheless, racist scenes in still-popular films cast a blanket of insensitivity over the subject of racism. Disney’s reputation of being racially insensitive has never been more evident than in the time leading up to the release of its latest movie Princess and the Frog. Nearly everything about this film has caused a storm of criticism both from the public and from people within the film industry itself.

It is curious that people are so enraged and concerned with this movie, when they ignore potentially more offensive racist elements in other films. If one analyzes society’s response to Princess and the Frog as a single phenomenon, then it does seem a bit odd that a children’s film could start

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such a heated social debate; however, after taking into account Disney's history with racism and racial insensitivity, it is not surprising at all that the first black Disney princess would be such a controversial figure.

Bombarded with accusations of anti-Semitism and racism, in the 1940's Walt Disney was an avid supporter of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, a "red-scare" anti-Semitic industry group that wanted to blacklist artists (Alan 12). Perhaps this is one of the reasons Disney's past is filled with questionable cinematic material. Fantasia was released in 1940, the third theatrical full-length animation, as shown in Disney's canon of animated films.

The original version of Disney's classic "Fantasia" (1940) features a character called Sunflower, a little black centaur handmaiden. Sunflower is an extremely insulting caricature, and a bluntly racist stereotype of the "servile grinning nigger" variety (Walker 22). In a featured scene during "The Pastoral Symphony" elegant white centaurs frolick through the woods and are waited on by Sunflower. She is noticeably smaller than the other centaurs??? ostensibly because she is half-donkey instead of half-horse, but more likely to exaggerate her inferiority??? and has a darker complexion.

Her sole function in the film is to eagerly polish and shine the hooves of the tall, sexy Aryan centaur women who glare down their petite noses at this pathetic servant. Such scenes were later censored in the film due to the characters being considered "ethnically offensive during the civil rights movement" (Walker 26).? In addition to reinforcing the stereotype of blacks as inferior beings, the scene from the "Pastoral Symphony" also furthers

racism by supporting segregation. Throughout the film the female Aryan centaurs pair up with the males of their “ race,” leaving Sunflower alone and separated from the group.

Rather than correcting the racism within the scene, Disney later chose to eliminate it from the film ??? as if it never happened. When the racial climate of America changed in the 60s, the portrayal of such insulting stereotypes in movies and television became politically incorrect, and Disney (fearing accusations of racism) deleted Sunflower from Fantasia for the theatrical re-release of the film. Her troubling presence was simply cropped out of the movie even though you can still see the Aryans she used to pamper.

Eliminating Sunflower from the movie may have been intended as harmless and as an attempt to be politically correct; however, it is cinematic decisions such as this that contributed to Disney’s reputation of being insensitive to issues of race. It was insulting enough for Disney to include the smiling servant stereotype to begin with, but to make matters worse, they started denying Sunflower’s existence with the Fantasia re-release in 1960. How does that possibly make things better? A few angered African American communities said, “ No, you misunderstand.

In our perfect, Fantasia world, Africans aren’t servants. They don’t fucking exist” (Weinman 64). A contemporary film critic said, “ What’s fun though is that Disney says they never had such a character! We’re all delusional” (Brunette 123). Maybe it was “ acceptable” in the past to portray characters that had such blatant racist features; nevertheless, it is strange to deny its existence to audiences who had already seen the original version. This is

how we deal with our ugly past: we deny it, trivialize it, gloss over it with pretty distractions and wishful thinking.

Doing so, we deny ourselves a glimpse of the compelling reality of naked history. The well-meaning rush to unmake evil deeds by hiding them from the critical eye of modern sensibilities does nothing to honor the people who lived and struggled in those different times (Walker 28). Sunflower's existence may be news to younger generations of Disney fans, but she has been here all along, and her presence as well as her absence carry great significance, especially in the context of how viewers and critics respond to other potentially racist films.

Dumbo, the fourth film in the Disney industry, was made in 1941 and produced by Walt Disney himself. It was originally designed as an economical feature to help generate income after the financial failure of *Fantasia*. The concerns people had against Disney being anti-Semitic and racist were still strong, especially after Disney projected his own sense of alienation onto "others" in Hollywood, namely, Jews, blacks, and union workers. In retaliation against the studio entrepreneurs, who were predominantly Jewish, Disney refused to employ Jews in high-level positions at his studio or as actors in his live-action features.

Not until 1969, two years after Disney's death, did a Jewish actor, Buddy Hackett, feature prominently in a Disney film, *The Love Bug*. Disney Studios also denied black workers even minimal opportunities, as technicians and support personnel. Because Walt Disney was an infamous racist, even for his time, it is not surprising that a film he produced himself would be racist as

well. Dumbo is full of racist images and themes. Dumbo's birth itself speaks to the foundations of racism when the other female elephants single Dumbo out because he looks different with his unusual ears.

Considering the fact that “big-eared elephants are African,” it is especially racist that Dumbo, who is seen as different and even freakish would be associated with Africa (Lugo-Lugo 167). Because Dumbo is different from everyone else, he is ridiculed for it. Just because his ears are bigger than those of a normal elephant, he is ostracized from the rest of the group. He only has one friend (Timothy Mouse), who ironically is also socially shunned because elephants are generally supposed to be scared of mice.

This could be seen as another form of racism where someone is ostracized because they are different. Furthermore, in the movie, when it is time to set up the circus in town, it is significant to take note of who performs the hard labor necessary to make the circus function. Not only are the circus animals themselves condemned to build their own chamber of humiliation, but there are also faceless black men working hard at this labor. The faces on these men are featureless, with no eyes, no mouths, and no noses ??? showing that they possess no individual identities, like a group of invisible men.

This is characteristic of the time period because the 1940s were right before the Civil Rights Movement, and although slavery had been abolished, blacks were still segregated and considered as lesser people. The song they sing while working is very appalling: We work all day, we work all night We never learned to read or write We're happy-hearted roustabouts When other folks have gone to bed We slave until we're almost dead We're happy-hearted

roustabouts We don't know when we get our pay
And when we do, we throw our pay away
We get our pay when children say
With happy hearts, It's circus day today.

The lyrics of this song portray slaves working day and night doing backbreaking labor. However, it says nothing about the system doing something wrong because the slaves seem happy to do the work. The song even mentions that slaves are also satisfied with working for no pay. The lyrics suggest that money was not something they worry about. The lyrics are insulting to the workers, stating that they do not know when they will get paid, but it does not matter because once they do get paid they will just throw their money away.

Furthermore, the lyrics construct and laud the image of the passive and content slave whose true payment and fulfillment is watching the joy of (white) children on circus day. Lyrics such as “ we slave until we're almost dead” but, “ we're happy-hearted” are utterly absurd and disgraceful. Slavery was a morally wrong institution and the fact that Disney condoned its practices in Dumbo is horrifying. Another overtly racist element in Dumbo is the characterization and function of the crows. Richard Schickel says, “ There was one distasteful moment in the film.

The crows who teach Dumbo to fly are too obviously Negro caricatures” (Schickel 113). Leonardo Maltint, after quoting Schickel, says that critics may be overreacting to the crows: “ There has been considerable controversy over the Black Crow sequence in recent years, most of it unjustified. The crows are undeniably black, but they are black characters, not black

stereotypes” (Maltin 56). Even though Maltin makes a valid point, he does not address the fact that the crows in the film are very specifically depicted as poor and uneducated.

They also use slang words such as calling each other “brotha” and speak in southern accents with incorrect grammar. Any one of these characteristics could be ignored as having racial implications; however, by combining them into one character, it is very reasonable, indeed, almost necessary to interpret the crow as a black stereotype. The other big argument for the Black Crow sequence being interpreted as racist is that the leader of the group of crows, towards the end of the movie, is named Jim.

Therefore, Jim the Crow 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 and promoted racism and racial segregation. The crows’ racial identities as black are further implied when they perform their song in a jazz style complete with scat stylization. The song “When I See an Elephant Fly” is part of the music style generally popular at the time in black communities. As the crows begin humiliating poor Dumbo, Timothy Mouse steps up to defend him with the following comments: “Suppose you was torn away from your mother when you was just a baby.

Nobody to tuck you in at nights. No warm, soft, caressing trunk to snuzzle into. How would you like to be left out alone... in a cold, cruel, heartless world?” What an ironic comment to make to a set of characters who represent African-Americans, who, at the time, would only have been a few generations removed from the time when black slaves were routinely torn

away from their families. The mouse continues: “ And why? I ask ya, why? Just because he’s got those big ears, they call him a freak. ” Finally, Timothy says, “ And on top of that, they made him a clown! Interestingly, Timothy’s reference to the clown points to the time when the white power structure practiced minstrelsy by making clowns of the socially despised blacks. It is important to recognize that Dumbo is racist not because of any single scene or image, but because of the message produced when all the racist scenes and images are combined. Dumbo is a freak with big “ African” ears who must be segregated from the others. Furthermore, the only role he can have in the circus is that of the clown. The crows also point to black stereotypes through color, dialogue, and even name.

Finally, the blatant reference to slavery through the figures of the circus workers contributes to an overall feeling of racism in the film. In many ways, analyzing whether one scene is racist is not nearly as important as understanding that racist undertones are present and noticeable in Dumbo whether we as a society want them be or not. It is important to note that not all racism in Disney films is directed at African Americans. One of the most well recognized racist symbols perpetuated by Disney is the portrayal of the Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp* (1955).

Like stereotypical Asians, they are buck-toothed and have slanted eyes, and speak in ridiculously exaggerated accents that bear little, if any, resemblance to actual Thai speech patterns. Their features, along with the banging of a gong at the beginning of their song, could not make the Asian-specific racism any more obvious, “ We are Siamese, if you please. We are Siamese if you don’t please! We are former residents of Siam. There are no

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finer cats than we am. " Goldmark comments: One can hear the confidence and superiority in their voices. Those two cats don't care about anyone but themselves, lacking any kind of empathy.

They are sociopaths, prepared to ruin Lady's life because it is fun and it serves them. They are portrayed as cunning and manipulative, giving the widespread idea that all Asians act superior, are cunning and manipulative. (Goldmark 115) In the film, the Siamese cats function not only as a racial stereotype but also as a stereotype of the upper classes in Oriental countries: " The cats prance around arrogantly in a Hollywood-invented style that is supposed to represent what the audience should assume are mannerisms of aristocratic Siamese or Chinese" (Romalov 46).

The ambiguity in the exact ethnicity of the cats is significant because it demonstrates how Disney films tend to combine different ethnicities under the umbrella of one: "(Disney's films, like many Hollywood films, often tended to lump ethnic groups together into a kind of undifferentiated mass-Asians, Chinese, Japanese, Siamese, for example Arab and East Indians as another example.) The cats even roundly sing of their supposed heritage" (Romalov 46). This practice of ethnic " lumping" is even more obscene in Aladdin where Arabic and Indian cultures are intertwined and assumed to be one and the same.

Like Lady and the Tramp, Aladdin attempted to include other races in the film that had not been included in other Disney movies of the past; unfortunately, we see many of the same racist undertones in Aladdin that are present in the film's predecessors. Perhaps the most controversial and

racist part in Aladdin (1992) is a set of lines in the opening song, “ Arabian Nights. ” It is one of the most contentious messages found in the film and begins the movie’s “ depiction of Arab culture with a decidedly racist tone” (Giroux 104). An Arab merchant sings the lyrics: “ Oh I come from a land/From a faraway place/Where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ears/If they don’t like your face. /It’s barbaric, but hey, its home. ” The message that is given right at the beginning of the film is that the Middle East is a desolate wasteland where the justice system runs on a simple limb-removal policy. The opening song alone sets a tone that alienates the Arabic community from Western culture: “ One would have to be very naive to believe that Hollywood would dare to use such a song if it did not see Arabs as belonging to an `other’ or `alien’ culture. Successive themes drive home the view that these creatures are suspicious, lazy, unethical, and violent outsiders. They’ most definitely are not like ‘ us’”(Shaheen 50). The lyrics to the opening song in Aladdin caused an uproar in Arab countries and the words were later changed to: “ Where it’s flat and immense/ And the heat is intense. ” Not only are the lyrics violent, but they are truly an example of the worst kind of racism. Disney distribution president Dick Cook was quoted as saying the change was made after meetings with members of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination League but that “ it was something we did because we wanted to do it [...] In no way would we ever do anything [...] insensitive to anyone,” he said (Shaheem 52).

Yousef Salem, a former spokesperson for the South Bay Islamic Association, characterizes the film in the following way: “ All of the bad guys have beards and large, bulbous noses, sinister eyes and heavy accents, and they’re

wielding swords constantly. Aladdin doesn't have a big nose, he has a small nose. He doesn't have a beard or turban. He doesn't have an accent" (Shaheen 56). This portrayal of Arab characters gives people a negative perception of Arabs. Furthermore, the Arab characters are mean whereas those who speak clear English and appear to be Americanized are " socially accepted", or the " heroes" of society.

In the first few scenes of the movie we see an Arab merchant, with a thick accent, wearing a turban and who is trying to sell stereotypical middle-eastern products (a vase which contains " a combination of hookah and coffee maker," which can also produce " a million fries"). In addition, the movie shows Jasmine almost losing her hand for giving a poor little boy an apple from the market stand. That is not accurate for most Middle Easterners who strive to help the poor and the homeless ??? they would not attempt to cut someone's hand off for giving an apple to a poor child.

These instances show the racist way in which people from the East are portrayed as barbaric. The film could also be considered racist in that it portrays Arab culture as deeply oppressive of women and brutally violent. Princess Jasmine is trapped mercilessly inside her palace home, and the palace guards threaten to cut off her hand at one point in the film. She is also constantly controlled by the men who surround her. Finally, she is the only other woman we see in the film besides the belly dancers in the opening scenes.

What does that say in regard to the significance of women in Disney? Of course, Disney does not intend to offend anyone ??? that would be bad

business. Most people who watch the movies are probably caught up in the Disney magic and do not notice these things. Problematically, one way in which Disney creates the magic is by using stereotypes that people respond to without thinking. Aladdin looks “right” for a hero; Jafar looks “right” for a villain; Jasmine looks “right” for a trapped princess.

We as consumers do not think about it, but the practices and images we internalize as being “right” are very dangerous for society. For example, it is especially concerning that the upper class in the film, the royal family, appears white. The Sultan, Jasmine, and Aladdin are all fair-skinned and do not speak with accents, suggesting that they are more “white” than the other characters in the film. This image perpetuates the white power structure in America, and most viewers are only aware of this on a subconscious level (Shaheem 54).

This subconscious awareness of practices such as racism in the media is especially hazardous for our society because if an individual is not perceptive of when she internalizes social evils, then she cannot be perceptive of when she perpetuates them. Even still, the fact remains that regardless of whether we think about it, recognize or denounce it, racism and stereotyping takes place in many Disney films, including the classic 1994 film *The Lion King*. The first and perhaps most noticeable example of racism in *The Lion King* mirrors a stereotyping practice seen in *Aladdin*.

Like Jafar in *Aladdin*, Scar is arguably one of the darkest colored characters in *The Lion King*. While the other heroic lions are lighter skinned, Scar is the only one with dark fur and a jet-black mane, reinforcing the stereotype

where the darker and more ethnic character is the villain (Twomey 1).

Another obvious example of racism in Aladdin, is seen with the hyenas, who are portrayed as stupid and violent, and are comprised of a lower-class animal group that feeds upon the scraps and leftovers of the more dominant, strong, intelligent creatures.

This dichotomy is then reinforced by the use of stereotypes, classifying these stupid, low-class hyenas through the use of African-American (Whoopi Goldberg as “Shenzi”) and Latino (Cheech Marin as “Banzai”) stereotypes. It has even been said that “despicable hyena storm troopers speak... in racially coded accents that take on the nuances of the discourse of a decidedly urban, black, and Latino youth” (Byrne 62). The speech patterns and accents of the hyenas present quite a stark contrast compared to the American and British accents of the rest of the cast.

The hyenas also serve as an interesting opposition to the thoughtful, strong, and intelligent characters of the rest of the film, who represent the upper class, indeed, mostly “white” culture. That is not to say all African-Americans are poorly depicted. James Earl Jones voices the role of the powerful and wise “Mufasa”, and Robert Guillaume voices “Rafiki,” the wise shaman. Yet even with two of the strongest main characters being voiced by African-Americans, it is hard not to notice the stereotyping Disney seems to be making about Black, Latino, and lower-class culture.

It is significant to recognize that The Lion King does not stop with racial stereotypes, but also cruelly targets other underrepresented groups including women and homosexuals. According to the Associated Press,

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Carolyn Newberger of Harvard University complained in the Boston Globe that “ the good-for-nothing hyenas are urban blacks; the arch-villain’s gestures are effeminate, and he speaks in supposed gay cliches” (Twomey 33). The film also furthers gender stereotypes by displaying women as subservient and dependent upon the strength of males.

The strong-spirited Nala can be viewed as a counter to this, but just as with the racial stereotyping, one strong female character does not undo the overall statement being made about the weakness of women. It is the combination of Disney’s insensitive treatment of stereotypes targeting not only non-whites, but also women, and other minorities in films such as Aladdin and The Lion King that can help explain the 21st century’s response to The Princess and the Frog.

Both before and after The Princess and the Frog was released, many of the film’s critics were very vocal about racism in the movie. Nearly everyone who has an opinion about the film has something different to say ??? in sum, nearly everything about the film is racist and offensive to someone and needs to be changed. As a starting point in analyzing the public’s critical response to Princess and the Frog, it is important to address all the criticism surrounding the black princess’s name. Many argue that the princess’s original name, Maddy, is too close to the slave term “ mammy”: “ A voice actor’s tongue wouldn’t have to slip very much to say “ mammy” while ordering Maddy to do a chore, and in such a context, the name “ Maddy” seemed both deliberately inappropriately evocative and easy for the audience to mishear” (Kareem 1). Furthermore, others argue that Maddy’s position as chambermaid for a spoiled, white girl is demeaning. Just as <https://assignbuster.com/racism-in-disney-movies-assignment/>

Disney changed the name of its protagonist to “ Tiana,” they have also changed her from being a maid to being a prospective owner of a restaurant.

True it is traditional for fairy tale protagonists to begin their stories with having a low social status, but a black heroine who is a domestic could be legitimately read not as a fairy tale trope but as a reinforcement of real world racial denigration (Kareem 1). Some may claim that it would be historically accurate for a 1920’s black woman to be a maid, but Disney does not even necessarily care about historical accuracy when animating actual history.

Another point of heated debate in the film centers on the fact that the black princess ends up with an arguably whiter prince, Naveen (or at least a prince who looks white and is voiced by a Brazilian actor who also looks white). Whatever Naveen’s ethnicity is, in her article “ The Word on the “ Princess and the Frog,” Disney’s First Film With a Black Heroine,” Nandra Careem quotes Shannon Prince who raises some interesting points about the problems behind Disney’s choice not to make him African American:

Some might argue that portraying interracial marriage in film is good - but why then weren’t any of the white princesses given non-white princes to save them from white villains? And since Disney doesn’t give white princesses non-white princes, isn’t this interracial relationship at the expense of black boys who deserve a hero just as much as black girls deserve a heroine? (Kareem, 1) Prince is not the only critic to take issue with the difference in skin color between the prince and princess. Cultural critic Hensley Jameson comments, “ The prince is lighter than she is.

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What's that say about black men? Sure, Boris Kodjoe is fine, and we come in all shades, but to be truly black, a character can't be any lighter than Denzel Washington (Kareem 1). Originally the prince was explicitly reported as being the jazz-loving monarch of a European country. By giving the prince an olive, but still white, complexion and a Brazilian accent, Disney gets to go forward with their original white hero yet make him ambiguous enough to not be unequivocally criticized as white at the same time. Tiana isn't the problem," says Angela Bonner Helm at Black Voices: " Was there any particular reason why her love interest, Prince Naveen of Maldonia, couldn't be black, too? Though America has a " real-life black man in the highest office of the land with a black wife, Disney obviously doesn't think a black man is worth the title of prince" (Kareem 1). The plot of *The Princess and the Frog* also follows Disney's pattern of making their evil characters more " ethnic" and darker than their good characters. The central villain in the film is the voodoo master, who is also African American.

Elaborating on the presence of voodoo in the film, Careem comments that Disney grossly misrepresented the purpose and reality of voodoo: " The foundation of voodoo is not charms but monotheistic faith, belief in saints and spirits, and a focus on moral values such as charity and respect for the elderly. People do perform rites for protection and defense, but suffice it to say that voodoo is not about being a magician or a fairy godmother" (Mathews 1). The fact that Disney uses uninformed voodoo stereotypes rather than accurate facts in the film furthers the racist undertones in the film.

The final major point of criticism in the film is concerned with the fact that the first black Disney princess spends most of the time in the movie as a frog: “ Why does the black princess have to be a frog the whole time? Are they saying black people should be green instead of black? ” wonders Shirley Wilson, a waitress at Rob’s diner who plans to boycott the movie: “ when I watched the film I felt disappointed to learn that the heroine spends a significant chunk of the movie not as a black princess at all but as a frog.

After decades of waiting, would it be too much to actually see an hour and a half of a black princess on the screen? ” (Matthews 1). Wilson’s response to *The Princess and the Frog* is especially significant because it demonstrates how many people, even on a non-academic level have serious concerns about issues of race in the film. When addressing the critical response to *The Princess and the Frog*, it is difficult to ignore the fact that even though it has been over half of a century since the first Disney films were released, racism is still a point of criticism, both in the older films and in the ones being produced today.

Furthermore, despite the fact that *The Princess and the Frog* features the first black Disney Princess, critics are even more upset about racism in the film than they ever were before ??? even in the case of more overtly racist films. Many of the points raised about racism and racial stereotypes in the film are valid and interesting; nevertheless, one cannot help but notice that they overshadow many of the advances Disney has made in eliminating other equally offensive stereotypes in their films.

For example, whereas other Disney films typically lack the mother figure completely and perhaps only reference the mother when explaining the past, *The Princess and the Frog* includes a mother who is present for the entire film. It may not be obvious to most viewers of *The Princess and the Frog*, but Disney takes a huge and important step in introducing a mother figure to their film ??? their past practice of eliminating the mother figure is arguably sexist and offensive to the female identity.

Another important change Disney makes in *Princess and the Frog* centers on the fact that unlike other Disney princesses who dream about meeting a prince, Tiana has realistic dreams and expectations ??? she wants to be a restaurant owner and works very diligently to achieve her goal. Despite this significant statement about female power, however, most film critics will probably instead choose to focus on the fact that Tiana, as an African American, is limited to owning a restaurant rather than a Fortune 500 company. Works Cited: Alan, Spector J.

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