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# Almost There, Indeed: Disney Misses the Mark on Modernizing Black Womanhood and Subverting the Princess Tradition in *The Princess and the Frog*

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**Almost There, Indeed**

Disney Misses the Mark on Modernizing Black Womanhood and Subverting the Princess  
Tradition in *The Princess and the Frog*

by

**April R. Callen, B.A.**

**Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
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**Master of Arts**

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**March 2012**

## **DEDICATION**

To My Mother, Lula Callen – Without Whose Support and Encouragement, This Project Would  
Not Have Been Possible

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

While I am ultimately responsible for the completion of this thesis, I recognize that the final product was made possible by the support, guidance, and inspiration of many people—family, friends, fellow graduate students, and complete strangers with whom I shared my thoughts. Acknowledgments must be given to my thesis committee for their insight, guidance, and patience. Without their commitment to this project and desire to make it be all that I aspired for it to, I may have ended up on a completely different path. As importantly, I must acknowledge the prevailing problematic portrayals of Black female identity, beauty, and resistance that I saw throughout the process of completing this thesis. I used those instances as a reminder and inspiration for why I meet the challenge of cultural criticism head on and why it is so necessary to always engage with texts that attempt to tell your story and reflect your identity.

March 16, 2012

## ABSTRACT

### **Almost There, Indeed**

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By

April R. Callen, B. A.

DePaul University, 2012

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The Walt Disney Company released *The Princess and the Frog* in 2009 to much anticipation and equal antagonism; the movie features the princess franchise's first Black princess. In the spirit of *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, the studio touts the movie as a throwback to the classic era of Disney, but with an updated spin. Disney suggests that the marriage of classic and modern speaks to a return to hand-drawn animation and unlike the original story *The Frog Prince*, this princess becomes a frog, as well. This project argues, however, that framing *The Princess and the Frog* within the context of a "modern twist on a classic tale" has multiple meanings and is ultimately problematic due to the movie's reliance on old hegemonic film characterizations of Black womanhood that promotes whiteness and assimilation, while simultaneously suppressing Blackness. In recent years, popular culture and media have made a greater effort to include the narratives and very existence of Black women in its texts. The increasing spotlight on the

intricacies of Black women and their lives calls into question who and what ideologies that recognition serves. This paper interrogates media makers' negotiation with the history of representations of Black people and modern Blackness in the shadows of the United States first Black president and his family.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION .....	1
STORY AND CHARACTER SYNOPSES.....	4
THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY AS A CULTURAL INSTITUTION .....	6
KEY TERMS.....	7
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	10
CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS.....	16
FINAL THOUGHTS .....	19
CHAPTER 1 Mammy for the Mass(a)es : Protecting White Male Patriarchy and Promoting Assimilation Through Remnants of Anti-Black Female Stereotyping.....	21
INTRODUCTION .....	21
“I’D WALK A MILLION MILES/FOR ONE OF YOUR SMILES/MY MAMMY!”.....	23
NEGOTIATING THE MAMMY IN TIANA.....	26
PATRIARCHY AND MAMMY .....	30
MAMMY? MAYBE. JEZEBEL? NO.....	34
CONCLUSION.....	35
CHAPTER 2 Sisters by Circumstance: The Historicity of Southern White Superiority in Black and White Female Relationships .....	38
INTRODUCTION .....	38
THE MYTH OF SISTERHOOD.....	40
CHARLOTTE AS THE “CHOSEN ONE”.....	45
“DISNEY PRINCESS” MADE STRANGE.....	49
MASKING FRIENDSHIP .....	51
CHARLOTTE AS SAVIOR, THE “WHITE MESSIAH” .....	52
CONCLUSION.....	55
CHAPTER 3 The Politics of Recognition: Pushing Black Femininity Toward Heteronormativity.....	58
INTRODUCTION .....	58

LIMITS OF RECOGNITION .....	60
ANTHROPOMORPHISM, A METHOD OF RECOGNITION.....	64
THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION CALL FOR AUTHENTICATING BLACKNESS .....	67
RECOGNITION THROUGH HETERONORMATIVITY .....	70
SELLING RECOGNITION .....	74
CONCLUSION.....	77
CONCLUSION .....	79
NOTES.....	89
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	99



## INTRODUCTION

Never particularly drawn to the Disney princess franchise, favoring *The Sword in the Stone* and *Robin Hood* over *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, I took interest when the Internet became aflutter with news that the studio was working to develop a princess movie that would feature a Black-American princess. With great anticipation and little expectation, I saw *The Princess and the Frog* opening weekend. Walking into the theater, I immediately noticed the significance the movie would hold for many Black girls and women. Standing in the main lobby of the movie theater was a Black teenaged young woman dressed in a sparkling key lime green tulle and chiffon gown, similar to the one donned by Princess Tiana in the movie. As a “princess,” the young woman would visit sleepovers and birthday parties to read stories and perform other fantastical royal duties. As she genially stood by the table while her mother explained the business, a handful of young girls, Black and white, shyly approached her wanting a picture with the princess. Also at the theater was a large group of little Black girls dressed in lace and pouf, each with a tiara on her head, eagerly waiting to see the movie. Then, with no intention of embarking upon this project, the scholar-activist in me began organizing these images, and later the movie, wondering how these girls’ lives were, and could be forever shaped by seeing a princess that “looked like them.”

From the opening scene to the closing credits, I was IN LOVE with *The Princess and the Frog*. The film left me feeling like I had just witnessed magic. I finally understood that pure, unadulterated sentiment of being “Disneyfied,” glitter and all. I was under a spell. Walking away

from the theater, I went from scene to scene with a friend, singing Disney's praises. The sweeping animated shots of old New Orleans and the culture of the city were so vibrantly done. As a Black woman having grown up without seeing any Black Disney characters let alone a princess, I asked myself, "How was Disney able to capture the Black girl's experience so accurately?" Tiana's experiences and presence deeply reflected Black women's strong work ethic, our confirmed (or resignation to) singledom for the sake of our careers; our taking a backseat to our white female counterparts; and even the unyielding bond we share with our mothers. At that time, I felt like Disney had taken my life, my experiences, and put them in a musical, animated cartoon.

At first glance, I saw no real problem with *The Princess and the Frog*. At the time, I did not find it odd that Tiana and her prince, Naveen, became frogs only thirty minutes into the movie. I also dismissed the painfully obvious wealth disparity between Tiana and her white "best friend," Charlotte. At that time, my only real annoyance was with Prince Naveen. He serenaded beautiful white women—human and anthropomorphic—throughout the movie, while delegitimizing Tiana and her profession as a waitress in the process. I realized *The Princess and the Frog* reflects the complex duality that representations of race, class, and gender in popular media create. On the one hand, as I originally felt, the film clearly speaks to a type of Black female experience, similar to what I previously mentioned—tirelessly working, nurturing others, standing in the shadows of someone else's beauty, and having to always go that extra step to achieve their dreams. The parts of the movie that acknowledge those specific experiences can be empowering and comforting on a multitude of levels. On the other hand, however, and much more problematically, *The Princess and the Frog* also relies heavily on narrowly constructed

characterizations of Black women, using racial and class stereotyping that have been present in media and entertainment, especially film, since the late nineteenth century.

In this project, I suggest that while Disney promotes *The Princess and the Frog* as a progressive, “modern twist on a classic tale,”<sup>1</sup> it actually uses old hegemonic film characterizations of Black womanhood and femininity to advance whiteness and assimilation, while suppressing Blackness. These poorly evolved representations of Black womanhood stand to reify the oppressive roles under which many Black women live in the United States. While this textual analysis comes from the school of cultural studies, it is also deeply rooted in Black feminist thought, exploring how Black womanhood is used and abused throughout American film.

Black women have a unique relationship with Hollywood as it provides an escape, while simultaneously serving as the site of our cultural oppression.<sup>2</sup> As feminist and cultural critic, bell hooks expresses in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, “Theorizing Black experience in the United States is a difficult task. Socialized within white supremacist educational systems and by a racist mass media, many Black people are convinced that our lives are not complex, and are therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection.”<sup>3</sup> This admission enhances the importance of exploring the complexities of *The Princess and the Frog* and how it potentially complicates an understanding of Black femininity and womanhood for younger generations. The movie also invites the possibility for audiences to internalize the images and ideology it presents. As possibly the first introduction many children will have to race or class, and specifically themes surrounding the Black female identity, *The Princess and the Frog* stands to lay a foundation for the perpetuation of class privilege and racialized gender inequality.<sup>4</sup>

There has been much written about Disney films, including the consumerist culture it

supports; its potential effects on children; the commodification of ethnicity and culture; and the various objectionable gender roles it projects. All of those are important to investigate and are highly prevalent in *The Princess and the Frog*. This textual analysis, however, largely looks at ways in which the movie provides another example for the discussion and scholarly exploration of how Black women are represented in media.

This analysis will also show how *The Princess and the Frog* appeases whiteness by using a Black princess as the vehicle to promote an apolitical hegemonic construction of Blackness. *The Princess and the Frog* provides viewers with a wonderful, whimsical movie that perfectly falls in line with a type of merriment that only Disney fairy tales can provide. Underneath its grand musical sequences and “differences are only skin deep” message lies something deeper and more political, however. Its locale, during a time where Blacks would have been segregated from and actively oppressed by whites, and its protagonist in a profession that would have made her distinctively subjugated during that time, do not mirror any semblance of progression.

## **STORY AND CHARACTER SYNOPSES**

As Disney intended, *The Princess and the Frog* is reminiscent of the Walt Disney era of the studio, with its dark magic, a fairy godmother-type to come to the rescue, and a beautiful resilient princess. *The Princess and the Frog*, set in 1920s New Orleans, centers on Tiana, a beautiful young “African-American”<sup>5</sup> woman who works as a waitress for much of the movie, but following the unfulfilled dreams of her father, wishes to open a restaurant. In danger of losing her dream, Tiana promises to help Prince Naveen, who has been turned into a frog by the “shadow man,” Dr. Facilier, return to his human status. In exchange for helping him, Naveen promises to assist Tiana in getting her restaurant. Due to a loophole in the spell, Tiana also

becomes a frog. Disney-brand hijinks ensue as the pair tries to make it back to New Orleans. Along the way, Tiana and Naveen make a few friends and fall in love, which becomes key in breaking the spell.

Other characters that help fuel *The Princess and the Frog*'s narrative include Charlotte La Bouff, who establishes herself as not only rich, but spoiled within the first five minutes of the movie. Her father, Big Daddy La Bouff—King of the Mardi Gras parade—dotes on her constantly, from childhood through her adult years. Tiana's mother, Eudora, works as a seamstress and dressmaker for the La Bouff family. Dr. Facilier, the villain in *The Princess and the Frog*, creates all the conflict in the movie. Through clever word play, Dr. Facilier manages to give Naveen the freedom that “green” provides by turning him into a frog, instead of giving him the money he desires. That spell sets the movie in motion. Mama Odie, Queen of the Bayou, proves to be the righteous and stronger side of magic—offsetting Dr. Facilier's evil; she also serves as Tiana's fairy godmother in a sense, helping the princess recognize her true destiny (falling in love with a prince).

Tiana's father, James, is in the movie very briefly—only present long enough to impart wisdom on a young Tiana. In one scene Tiana relays the message that Charlotte's fairy tale book maintains that wishing on a shooting star grants one's dream to come true. James interjects explaining, “You wish and you dream with all your little heart, but remember that old star can take you only part of the way.” Tiana carries his vision to open a world-renowned restaurant.

Other supporting characters that round out the cast are Ray, the lovesick Cajun firefly and Louis, a trumpet-playing alligator. Ray leads Naveen and Tiana through the bayou to Mama Odie. Desperate to play his trumpet with great New Orleans jazz musicians, Louis wants Mama

Odie to turn him into a human. Louis and Ray become Tiana and Naveen's sidekicks and help them make it back to New Orleans to defeat Dr. Facilier and his spell.

## **THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY AS A CULTURAL INSTITUTION**

Since Walt Disney and his partner, Ub Iwerks, debuted Mickey Mouse in 1927, the company has been a mainstay in popular American cinema, consistently reinforcing notions of American possibility and individualism—ideologies rooted in Walt Disney's own moral coding.<sup>6</sup> Providing the world with more than eighty years of family-based entertainment, Disney is not simply a business, but more of a cultural institution that runs a multi-billion dollar operation.<sup>7</sup> It has had a large impact on how millions of individuals—children and adults alike—understand love, friendship, and possibly the world around them. The Disney Princess franchise has had a major influence on maintaining the Disney brand and its success.<sup>8</sup> Made up of Snow White, Cinderella, Jasmine, and Tiana, among other beauties, the franchise deeply relies on a process of what bell hooks terms, “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”<sup>9</sup> As a theoretical concept, the three main parts—“white supremacist,” “capitalist,” and “patriarchy”—reflect the framework on which *The Princess and the Frog* depends throughout the movie, where it pays favor to a benevolent white south, promotes the desire to sell one's products or labor at any cost in hopes of the American Dream and upward mobility, and upholds the notion that female autonomy or agency only serves as a placeholder for matrimony. Lessons on racial awareness or acceptance have no place within that model. As Neal A. Lester writes, “[A]s a globally dominant producer of cultural constructs related to gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, Disney reigns supreme, and part of that supreme reign is an unquestionable privileging of patriarchy and whiteness.”<sup>10</sup>

As a multifaceted corporation, Disney does not have the luxury of simply focusing on just creating an entertaining or good story that, at most, draws audiences in to the theaters when it makes a child-targeted movie like *The Princess and the Frog*. Rather, Disney has to go beyond making it a good story that draws audiences in without it being the most award-winning, highest-grossing feature of all time, and instead develop a narrative that fosters limitless partnerships and marketing possibilities. Each animated Disney movie must have the potential to become its own franchise with sequels, a Saturday morning cartoon, apparel, toys, video games, fast food tie-ins, gift-wrap, bed linens, soaps and perfumes, books, and wallpaper, among other commodities.

Longtime Disney directors and creative talents John Musker and Ron Clements were brought on to ensure *The Princess and the Frog* carried that type of marketing potential. Musker and Clements, who directed, developed the story, and wrote the screenplay<sup>11</sup> for *The Princess and the Frog*, have a history of success with adapting profitable Disney fairy tales. Clements and Musker's work with *The Little Mermaid* and again a few years later with *Aladdin* sparked resurgence in the Disney classic fairytale. The directors/screenwriters have proven their ability to immediately develop a classic Disney tale that also leads to a series of marketable products and lucrative partnerships. Award-winning composer, performer, and New Orleans native, Randy Newman, rounded out the formula for what has proven to be key in Disney's past successes, by providing the soundtrack for *The Princess and the Frog*. Newman has yielded wildly successful soundtracks for Disney and Disney Pixar movies such as the *Toy Story* franchise, *Cars*, and *Monsters, Inc.* Based on history, the combined talents of these men backing *The Princess and the Frog* would extend Disney's reign over classic American family entertainment yet again.

## **KEY TERMS**

There are a number of terms used throughout this textual analysis that highlight my argument of *The Princess and the Frog*'s double meaning. That duality is behind the progressivism represented by Princess Tiana's Blackness, while also promoting an inherent white superiority—an ideology that consumers and moviegoers have willfully bought into based on the princess line's success. Despite the implication of the terms, whiteness and Blackness are not postulated as a binary of white women versus Black women, or white media versus Black media, or Black entertainment versus entertainment for whites. Writer Nellalou for the blog *Madhushala* defines whiteness as follows:

“[A] social construct, a definite part of institutionalized racism [...] It's an attitude that comprises privilege and exclusivity [...] these attitudes are perpetuated and reinforced in white culture, especially in the media and they are deeply entrenched in institutions of all kinds. They are very much based on unchallenged assumptions. It is sometimes referred to as a colonization of the mind.”<sup>12</sup>

As a scholarly thought, when referring to *whiteness*, I position it as how much popular media constructs itself to reflect an allegiance to a white (upper) middle class, heterosexist ideology. Hollywood and popular media's favor toward whiteness places it at the pinnacle of human normalcy to which all should aspire.<sup>13</sup> Cultural gatekeepers and entertainment producers often employ stereotypical images and characterizations of nonwhite racial groups to reinforce a white racial hierarchy where “white” not only determines culture and class, but it simultaneously maintains a racial and cultural superiority over others.

Nonwhite characters serve as props to enhance that message rather than a way to positively engage audiences with the intersectionality of social constructions like race, class, and gender. *The Princess and the Frog* reflects that framework as not only the presence of a Black princess suggests a sort of *post-racialism*, but also her union with a nonBlack prince almost confirms it. After the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, news pundits and journalists



began to explore the notion that the United States may be post-racial—a country where race is no longer an issue.<sup>14</sup> The eagerness to deem the country post-racial mimics efforts of color blindness. Both labels function to erase racial difference and distinctiveness in favor of adopting a singular culture that more similarly reflects white, western heteronormativity. Engaging in a deeper analysis of *The Princess and the Frog* uncovers the movie's subtle efforts to reaffirm whiteness in the Disney Princess franchise no matter what new multiracial additions may be made.

Throughout the text I argue that Disney's monopoly over the princess market—from the birth of Snow White through developing an entire Disney princess brand—has reinforced a particular princess construct that owes its success to an assimilated generality. Though the United States is a nation built upon mixed racial and ethnic identities and cultures, assimilation relates to a color-blind sameness where Old World particularities no longer identify individuals or groups. Achieved assimilation tends to model a white European Christian aesthetic and ideology.

Considering the inherent socially conservative nature of fairy tales (e.g. heterosexual love, unchallenged gender roles, etc.)—Disney fairy tales, in particular—this project also highlights *The Princess and the Frog*'s use of heteronormative themes. Here, heteronormative/ity speaks to a social ideology that allows for male-dominated male/female relationships to exist as “normal” or the social standard, where relationships existing outside of that construct carry the label of “other” or abnormal. When using heteronormative/ity as a descriptor, I am suggesting extreme normalization that strictly reflects an unqueered heterosexual consciousness. While whiteness, assimilation, and heteronormativity have some overlap or intersectionalities, I use them in this text with the intention of the aforementioned separate

meanings.

Having previously acknowledged that feminism, and Black feminism in particular, guides this project, I must also disclose the liberties I have taken with the use of certain words. To reflect the strength of the word, as well as further empower its meaning and use, I have made the deliberate choice to capitalize ‘Black(s),’ ‘Black-American(s),’ and ‘Blackness.’ This arguably minute gesture stems from an appreciation for the Black Power Movement, which still stands as one of the more visible social movements to explicitly encourage Black people to avoid assimilation and find pride in Blackness. On countless occasions, I have engaged in conversation with nonBlack people who literally whisper the word “Black” when describing a person, as if saying it will spark a panic among anyone who hears the word uttered. It is my personal hope that constantly seeing Black(s)/Blackness/Black-Americans/Black people capitalized in this text will extract some of the fear or discomfort that the words clearly possess for many individuals. I also attempt to avoid the use of ‘African-American,’ and instead replace it with ‘Black-American.’ While the former term acknowledges the rich and distinct origins of most American Blacks, it also has come to represent a safer term that takes much of the political resistance out of living Black in the United States; and also many Black people no longer identify with it.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Understanding whiteness is key to understanding its influence on production choices made in *The Princess and the Frog*, including iconography, messages, and plotline. Though whiteness possesses an almost intangibility, its influence bears so greatly on *The Princess and the Frog* and many other movies in popular cinema that it has to be explored in an effort to constructively challenge it. Living in a world that seems to exist in binaries, in order for there to

be a space where Blackness can gain support, flourish, and have the opportunity to also be come a norm in mainstream society, whiteness—as a process of thought and action—must begin to share cultural production and the political landscape, at large. A number of theorists and scholars have taken on the task of exposing whiteness in film, governmental policies, and popular culture.

Acknowledging his own complicity in perpetuating whiteness, Richard Dyer, author of *White*, seeks answers for what “white” means exactly. Beyond whiteness, beyond the physical color of white, Dyer explores the racial imagery of white people, rather than the “images of other races in white cultural production.”<sup>15</sup> Dyer contends that traditionally, studies of racial imagery have rarely placed white people at the forefront of analysis. Instead, race is attributed exclusively to nonwhites, making white people “not racially seen.”<sup>16</sup> He adds that as long as “race is something only applied to non-white peoples [...] they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.”<sup>17</sup> By using white imagery to largely represent human beings, white-identified individuals or people who benefit from white skin privilege have the luxury to speak for and represent all of humanity, as well as construct it in a way that best suits their needs and desires. “Raced” individuals, on the other hand, must strictly speak for their race and manage the burden that responsibility causes.<sup>18</sup> This ability to dictate individual agency allows for whiteness to reign over political, social, and cultural productions, denying people of color access to represent themselves in the most accurate way they see fit, in their own voices. In the rare cases where nonwhites find an opportunity to express or represent themselves through a mainstream medium, they often have to remain within the confines of white, mainstream hegemony to become commercially successful. Dyer argues that in spite of supposedly now living in a “world of multiple identities,” mass society has not found itself in a place where white people and “white cultural agendas” no longer hold the majority of power. The dominant culture

is able to dually tout increased heterogeneity and inject whiteness into nearly all cultural expressions and political actions through “continued dominance of US news dissemination, popular TV programmes and Hollywood movies.”<sup>19</sup>

Alan Nadel acknowledges that only a person who is in fact white can possess whiteness.<sup>20</sup> Nadel extends Cheryl Harris’ argument to see whiteness as a “highly valued and exclusive form of property” that is “elusive as it is exclusive.”<sup>21</sup> Elusive, in the sense that as Daniel Bernardi notices in the immigrant narrative of early Hollywood cinema, whoever could claim white frequently shifted as different ethnic groups assimilated to the American way of life. The exclusivity of whiteness speaks to the sense that not all Americans could simply deem themselves white just by adopting or assimilating to white American ideals. Dyer follows this ideology noting despite its exclusivity, whiteness is not static, reserved for only Anglo-Saxon protestants. He argues, “White people are socially categorised as white because of what white means [...] rather than because that is the most accurate term to describe our skin colour.”<sup>22</sup> Dyer maintains people are sometimes white and “some are whiter than others”<sup>23</sup> or the right type of white. Dyer’s attention to the technicalities of white as varying shades of color highlights the arbitrariness of racing people by skin color. It is both the action of white and physicality of presenting as white that holds cultural and social significance. The scholar correctly surmises that one’s ability to fully achieve an assimilation to whiteness, subduing nearly all particularities of their original culture and religion, is more important than where an individual’s skin hue falls on the spectrum of white.

Since its early days, Hollywood has “inadvertently,” it would argue, made the preservation and elevation of whiteness its key mission in producing films for the general public. From the most extreme-*Birth of a Nation* (1915)-to the more subdued-*Mississippi Burning*

(1988), whiteness is the oldest, most employed actor in all of Hollywood. Daniel Bernardi, editor of *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, offers a series of texts investigating how, where, and why whiteness became pertinent to the success of early Hollywood film. It perhaps may be more accurate to say that the influx of European immigrants and their narratives are responsible for the success of early Hollywood films. The heavy promotion of whiteness in these movies was a response to this saturation of cultural and ethnic difference. During the 1930s and 1940s, classic Hollywood gave American film audiences a tutorial on how co-opting the European immigrant narrative transforms ethnicity into whiteness. Nicholas Sammond and Chandra Mukerji examine how performing “the Jew” was used to (re)establish whiteness and promote assimilation in the Golden Age of Hollywood.<sup>24</sup> As ethnicity became associated with immigrants and the working class, whiteness was attributed to the middle and upper classes. Hollywood reconciled the United States’ concerns about its growing European immigrant population by developing a discourse centered on assimilation.<sup>25</sup> If these European immigrants cashed out the traditions and distinctness of their native countries in exchange for adhering to and adopting homogenous white American middle-class idealism, they were inducted into the safe, powerful world of whiteness. To the contrary, the narratives of Blacks, Latinos, American Indians, Arabs, and Asians Americans were not granted these options on the silver screen and off.<sup>26</sup> Instead, their visible otherness (skin color) was used as a prop to reaffirm whiteness. Whiteness as a cultural agenda is identical to a political one inasmuch as it sets to reify a racial hierarchy that fosters economic disparities from the top (white) to the bottom (Black), create dissidence among races and ethnicities, and control the standards for beauty, desire, and disgust.

Donald Bogle offers an extensive analysis of exactly how Black-Americans have been used in film to uphold whiteness through a handful of specific typecasts. In *Toms, Coons*,

*Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Bogle explores some of cinema's most memorable films and how Black actors and actresses were used to reinscribe white racial and economic superiority. While the characterizations listed in the title reflect typical filmic tropes of Black women *and* men, this project, again, strictly focuses on the particular roles of Black women. Author of *Mammies No More*, Lisa M. Anderson brands "the icon of the Mammy" as "probably the most recognizable and longest perpetuated image of African American women in American society [...]"<sup>27</sup> The mammy is often portrayed as buxom, nonsexual,<sup>28</sup> sage-like, and maternal. Often characterized by her physical features as much as her personality, Bogle describes the mammy as usually "big, fat, and cantankerous."<sup>29</sup> He further describes her as having a "fierce independence," and being "headstrong."<sup>30</sup> Anderson adds "she is typified visually by the kerchief tied around her head, her apron, and her large size, as well as her racial markers of big lips and a wide nose."<sup>31</sup> Disney's Princess Tiana does not bear the traditional physical markings of mammy, beyond the apron she dons. Personality is where mammy and Tiana meet. As a figure constructed out of the white imagination, mammy's existence and personality largely relates to her love for and loyalty to her white charges.<sup>32</sup> Mammy is "the caretaker of the whites' homes and children first, and her own second."<sup>33</sup> Though Tiana never directly works for the La Bouff family beyond being contracted to make dozens of beignets for Charlotte's masquerade ball, she keeps Miss La Bouff in her thoughts. Fleeing through the bayou, Tiana reminds Naveen that he has promised himself to Charlotte, and initially steps aside to let that union occur.

An extension of the mammy figure is the Sapphire, also known as the "angry Black woman." This filmic characterization of Black womanhood was first introduced to the American public as Sapphire Stevens by way of the radio turned television show, *Amos 'n' Andy*. On the

show, Sapphire was the aggressive, emasculating, and nagging wife of character, George ‘Kingfish’ Stevens, who was known for being a lazy, unemployed con artist.<sup>34</sup> Since the role of Mrs. Stevens was introduced to the mainstream public, Sapphire has often been used to characterize a Black woman who voices dissent over the least infraction.

Prince Naveen frequently calls Tiana a “killjoy” when she expresses her displeasure at his lazy and misogynistic attitude, which links to the Sapphire construct. The Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia notes from the 1800s through the mid-1900s, Black women who purportedly fit this profile were actually referred to as “Sassy Mammies.” Not until the *Amos ‘n’ Andy* character was introduced did the name change. In *Mammies No More*, Anderson considers mammy to be multilayered, presenting one side of herself to her white employers, and giving another to her own family, providing that she had one. The Hattie McDaniel/Louise Beavers type of mammy etched in Americans imagination, eagerly dedicating her life’s work to the white households she ran, is one side of the figure. The other side of mammy, only witnessed by other Blacks, typifies the Sapphire characterization. Sapphires, or Sassy Mammies “ran their own homes with iron fists, including berating Black husbands and children.”<sup>35</sup>

The jezebel figure rests on the other end of the spectrum regarding portrayals of Black women in mass media. Where the mammy is nonsexual, nurturing, and unthreatening to the racial power structure and white dominance, the jezebel is a hypersexualized deviant who threatens racial purity, tempts the chastity of white manhood, and challenges his commitment to white women. Micki McElya contends that space for the jezebel was made only because the presence

of mixed race individuals “explained the undeniable fact that sex had indeed occurred across the color line between Black women and white men.”<sup>36</sup> The author adds that the jezebel image of Black female identity was able to coexist with the mammy because whites relied on them interchangeably depending on which performance served their racist, patriarchal, oppressive ideology of the moment.<sup>37</sup>

While the jezebel construct does not manifest itself in Tiana’s character, the trope is important to highlight because historically it has influenced a perception of Black women’s sexuality and morality. Further discussed in Chapter One, though Tiana does not present herself in a sensual or sexually available way, Naveen makes advances toward her that suggest otherwise. Naveen’s actions speak to the assumption of an open accessibility to Black female sexuality, which the jezebel character helps fuel and justify.

## **CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS**

This analysis does not seek to proclaim or suggest that *The Princess and the Frog* does not and cannot reflect the experiences of many Black women and girls in the United States. This critique of the movie also does not stand to suggest that people cannot enjoy what it offers, or that Disney does not have a right to make this story available. This project does, however, seek to highlight how the movie grossly subverts the historicity and present nature of Black women’s experiences, including reflecting a media pandemic of uncovering some “truth” behind Black women and their marriagability.

Distracting audiences—young and old—with grand musical scores, a bayou chase,



voodoo, and Technicolor evil spirits, *The Princess and the Frog* exploits Black women's history of being the uncelebrated backbone of America by using Disney's first Black princess as a vehicle to reinforce Black second-class citizenry. Further investigating long-standing representations of Black women in television, and specifically film, Chapter One closely charts Princess Tiana's connection to historical representations of the mammy figure. Audiences see a young woman who is strong, determined, and willful, as Tiana bustles from job to job, catching the trolley, and sleeping for a few minutes at a time. In a sense, Tiana serves as the perfect model of modern feminism for young girls—determined and autonomous. It is not until the plot unfolds that it becomes clear that the princess must subdue herself as a threat to patriarchy and hegemony through marriage.

Chapter Two focuses on the relationship between Tiana and Charlotte, the wealthy daughter for whom Tiana's mother serves as a seamstress for. Hip-hop feminist, Joan Morgan, surmises that Black and white women are sisters, and Tiana and Charlotte's relationship becomes even more familial as the latter's father, Big Daddy La Bouff, functions as a shared paternal figure for the two women. The intricacies of these relationships and their loaded meanings are intensified by the film's location, as New Orleans is historically known for its more liberal attitudes toward open miscegenation.<sup>38</sup> Mirroring the "Mammy/Scarlett" dynamic popular in movies that closely involve Black and white women, Tiana and Charlotte clearly live parallel lives. Despite the young women portrayed as friends, growing up side by side, there is a level of detachment that only comes from recognized differences.

As sisters by history and experience, and binaries by society, Black women and white

women have, historically, been pitted against one another, in a contest of most desirable, most cherished, and who most epitomizes femininity and womanhood. *The Princess and the Frog* is one of the few, if only, examples in film where the Black woman trumps all of that. Observing the unspoken story between Tiana and Charlotte and the historical contextualization swirling around them, Chapter Two investigates how Disney seems to suggest that the only way a Black woman could win in the game of love against a white woman is if a) the Black woman's race is removed all together by becoming a frog; b) if the white woman is characterized as a wild, status-hungry caricature; and c) if the white woman finds her redemption in becoming that Black woman's savior.

In recent years, popular culture and media have made a greater effort to include the narratives and very existence of Black women in its texts. The increasing spotlight on the intricacies of Black women and their lives calls into question who and what ideologies that recognition serves. This paper interrogates media makers' negotiation with the history of representations of Black people and modern Blackness in the shadows of the United States first Black president and his family.

Chapter Three investigates the politics of recognition regarding popular media and culture's interpretation of Black womanhood. Disney's use of *The Princess and the Frog* as a vehicle to showcase its first Black princess stands with increasing efforts on the part of popular culture and media to highlight the lives of Black-American women. Though the motives behind this sudden interest in Black women could prove altruistic, Chapter Three argues that the focus on marriage and heterosexism exposes recognition as a tool to push Black womanhood toward

heteronormativity.

The release of *The Princess and the Frog* falls in line with a larger media blitz that has constructed a narrative suggesting successful and ambitious Black women are facing a crisis in marriage. Beginning shortly after President Obama's 2008 election, various media reports, supposed relationship experts, and psychologists took a deep interest in the marriagability of Black women, asking whether they should forgo love with Black men and instead seek out interracial alternatives. As an ambitious young Black woman who has no interest in marriage or love (until the idea is put in her head), Tiana reflects this sudden social concern. Chapter Three considers the politics of recognition, where here, a representation of the Black female has been constructed through a hegemonic understanding of that identity.

When analyzing or critiquing popular media, one of the more frequent questions asked is, "Aren't you looking at things a little too deeply? After all, it is a movie...or a TV show, a song, or commercial." The conclusion sets out to answer those types of questions by bringing in the political practice of what bell hooks calls "loving Blackness."<sup>39</sup> Loving Blackness as a tool of resistance means creating spaces in cultural production—film, television, advertising, etc.—for Black insight and perspective. The hope is that bringing Black artists, writers, academics, and others into the creative processes of movie-making and storytelling will result in healthier, more multilayered, and loving representations of Black people, instead of a monolithic identity that does more harm than good.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

As consumers, our minds have been trained to perform as receptacles, receiving and digesting whatever images and messages are being sold to us without any call for critical analysis. Often popular media is looked at as innocent entertainment with no cultural, political, or social bearing on how we understand the world around us, or how we understand ourselves as citizens of that world. That argument bears even greater truth when children's media is factored in. This passive engagement with popular media often allows for particular messages with sometimes-dangerous implications to be promoted and accepted. Much of popular media that is rooted in consumerism and profit offers short-lived entertainment to mainstream consumers, while leaving behind long-term effects on its (ill) represented subjects. Thus, *The Princess and the Frog* and other instances of popular culture that take on the task of attempting to subvert history and construct Blackness in its own image, must be placed under careful observation and analysis.

## CHAPTER 1

### Mammy for the Mass(a)es : Protecting White Male Patriarchy and Promoting Assimilation Through Remnants of Anti-Black Female Stereotyping

#### INTRODUCTION

Deeply rooted in the foundation of Black feminist thought rests the assertion that little space has been made available for the Black woman's narrative in more mainstream political and social movements, or the larger American cultural landscape all together. How Black women's experiences have fallen through the cracks of public consciousness speaks to the early Black womanist idea that "all the women are white, [and] all the Blacks are men."<sup>1</sup> What that formula exposes is the lack of a clearly defined public space for the concerns or experiences of Black women to be shared. In modern media history, mostly placid, benevolent portrayals of Black women living in the United States—through slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and currently in "post-racial" America—overshadow opportunities for the represented parties to openly speak for themselves about those same moments in time. Films, television, and advertising, among other modes of media production, often misleadingly suggest that even through an oppressive racial hierarchy, Black women had, and continue to have, an engaged and positive relationship with an often oppressive, heterosexist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society.<sup>2</sup>

As it does best, Disney distracts audiences with a fun, adventure-fueled narrative while

touting a modern spin on a classic tale. What makes Disney's efforts to racially broaden the "princess industrial complex"<sup>3</sup> to encompass Black audiences duplicitous, is that upon closer inspection it seems *The Princess and the Frog* relies on the troubled history of Black women's labor exploitation (servitude, maid/housekeeper, nanny, etc.) and their perceived tough exterior (the ability to handle it all) by positioning Tiana alongside the historical markings of the mammy figure. Despite Tiana displaying some positive and progressive subversions away from traditionally white gender roles, especially for a Disney princess, framing her within such a self-defeating role, with her only release into the cultural mainstream coming from marriage, subdues her as a threat to patriarchy and throws her into assimilation.

For more than a century, popular culture—something J. Stanley Lemons describes as "neither high or art culture, nor is it folk culture"<sup>4</sup>—has been the driving force behind developing stereotypes about specific groups and distributing them to mass audiences for entertainment and consumption, within the United States and increasingly, abroad.<sup>5</sup> Debating which socially-mandated identities—race or gender—have been most afflicted by stereotyping is somewhat subjective depending on which examples one looks at. Racial stereotyping in America, however, has had a distinct and particular longevity that has almost proven to be indestructible—presenting itself as more sensitive, while maintaining the same problematic messages—as the larger society becomes more politically and socially aware.

Examples can be pulled from various points in American cultural history—Aunt Jemima pancakes, "Mammy Two Shoes" in the *Tom and Jerry* cartoons; "Annie," the Popeye's Chicken spokeswoman; the Pine-Sol lady; and Princess Tiana—where popular media draws Black

womanhood in a narrowly confined space of archetypes projecting joyful domestication. These images that relegate Black women to cooking, cleaning, and caretaking have intrinsic ties to slavery. When comparing how Disney represents Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* to other representations of Black girls and women in past Disney-produced texts, e.g. *Fantasia* and *Song of the South*, one can see that the studio has undoubtedly made great strides toward racial equity. However, for *The Princess and the Frog* Disney still pulls in particular characterizations of the humble domesticated Black servant, presenting Tiana (and her mother) within that same narrow scope of historical representations of Black womanhood. Though aspects of Tiana reflect an interpretation of what a modern Black woman could look or behave like, as well as what a modern Disney princess would embody, the studio still conjures up the spirit of some of America's most beloved anti-Black female stereotypes that simply add to a long, painful history of exploitation, abuse, and emotional neglect.

**“I’D WALK A MILLION MILES/FOR ONE OF YOUR SMILES/MY MAMMY!”<sup>6</sup>**

The history of Black women living in the United States often stands disjointed from the history of representations in film and popular culture of Black womanhood. That observation makes it necessary to look closely at the implications of Princess Tiana's existence beyond what Disney suggests. As audiences witness Tiana wearily navigate her way around friends, family, love, and ambition—benignly supporting Charlotte, fighting off a prince who either makes sexual advances toward her or makes disparaging remarks against her, or avoiding being married off by her mother—she joins a long list of other famed stereotypical examples of Black womanhood. Like the mammies and Sapphires, or angry Black women, before her, Princess Tiana's role very

specifically undermines the strength in Black femininity, womanhood, and autonomy in favor of heteronormative hegemonic appeasement.

Race, as a manmade social system, grounds itself in power, privilege, and economics. In the United States race necessitated the prosperity and effectiveness of slavery, where for free labor to have been justified and supported, whites with power and privilege socially constructed Blacks to be viewed as the inferior race. The institution of slavery and the propaganda that accompanied it became so lucrative a business, individuals who profited the most from the system appropriated it as a fact of life that everyone—including Blacks—benefited from and actually enjoyed. Despite being influenced by what white slave owners saw as the roles of their female slaves, the mammy, like race, has always been a manmade construct. Since her emergence around the 1830s, mammy has been a work of fiction, a mythological figure created by “members of the planter class [...] to animate their assertions of slavery as benevolent and slave owning as honorable.”<sup>7</sup> The “Mammy as the faithful slave” tale was a response to abolitionist work and former slave narratives that spoke to living under the violent, inhumane, and brutal regime of white Southerners. That story and imagery were mass-produced in the United States “[t]hrough every possible popular medium, from fine art and literature to the vaudeville stage and cinema, and in countless novelty items from ashtrays to salt and pepper shakers.”<sup>8</sup> These products, the marketable tales surrounding the mammy, and emblems of anti-Black male stereotypes like Jim Crow and Zip Coon helped usher in the United States’ first introduction to popular culture.<sup>9</sup>

Scholar J. Stanley Lemons argues that though these racist images began appearing around the 1840s, a true “popular culture” did not emerge until the 1880s with “the spread of education



and literacy through a large middle class which was coming to have more leisure time and more disposable income,” coupled with technological advancements that allowed for “high-speed presses, cheaper paper, and new methods of graphic representations.”<sup>10</sup> Here, middle-class Americans suddenly had access to comics, sheet music, magazines, advertising trading cards, and other propagandist materials that reflected and promoted anti-Black messages. So for the Americans who did not live below the Mason-Dixon line and own or have access to slaves could take part in a burgeoning national perception of Black people as a race. Similar to popular culture today, minstrel shows, vaudeville acts, songs, and printed materials that depicted Black adults as chicken and watermelon stealing, illiterate mammies and coons, and Black children with exaggerated, chimpanzee-like features, were grossly mislabeled as entertainment.<sup>11</sup> At this time in history where the ink had barely dried on the Emancipation Proclamation, Americans were humoring themselves at the expense of Black people and deeming it as simple fun.<sup>12</sup>

As Disney princesses thrive in a self-contained space of perfected femininity constructed by the studio, Tiana does not bear the more traditional markings of the mammy. Instead, slim, brown-skinned, with loose, wavy black hair, Tiana looks more like the voice actress who provides her vocals, Anika Noni Rose. A subtle physical expression of Tiana’s mammyism does appear in *The Princess and the Frog*, however. Tiana looks distinctly taller and larger than Charlotte La Bouff—as if she may be a few years older than her—when the young girls are playing on Charlotte’s bedroom floor. When Tiana rests in the comforts of her own home, preparing for bed and wishing on a star, she looks to be the size Charlotte was at the La Bouff mansion. Regarding mammy’s natural maternal and nurturing proclivities, Kimberly Wallace-

Sanders contends, “The image of a large, dark, powerful body with a small, white vulnerable one was enormously appealing, first in the South, and later on a national level.”<sup>13</sup> Wallace-Sanders adds that the mammy figure of the 1820s to 1850s was representative of a “devoted mother-servant to white children.”

Tiana’s closeness in age to Charlotte does not negate that history when young Black slave girls were often responsible for taking care of their master’s children who were not much younger than them.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the first half of the movie, Tiana remains a loving two steps behind Charlotte, following her around either offering a sympathetic ear or gently chide her for being melodramatic.<sup>15</sup> The only point in which Charlotte becomes the nurturer is when Tiana and Naveen are still frogs needing Miss La Bouff to help them reverse the spell. She then, naturally, towers over Tiana and her beau, symbolically maintaining power.

## **NEGOTIATING THE MAMMY IN TIANA**

Elements of Princess Tiana’s actions and personality are symptomatic of popular culture’s efforts to keep the mammy figure in a constant state of evolution while the basic principles of her functionality remain the same. Starting out as an effective marketing campaign for slavery, the mammy figure has also functioned as the base or foundation for what all Black female stereotypes and characterizations have stood upon from the nineteenth century into the twenty-first. More recent representations of mammy-inspired figures like Princess Tiana vary in their degrees of servitude. New Orleans in the 1920s is not too far removed from the antebellum past, and though Disney does not portray Tiana as a slave, the faithful slave/mammy narrative obviously held influence over developing her character. Early announcements of *The Princess and*

*the Frog* revealed that the “African-American” princess would be named “Maddy” and she would work as a chambermaid for a wealthy white family.<sup>16</sup> Cultural critics and bloggers expressed concern and outrage that the studio would be so insensitive or blind to the fact that Maddy sounded so phonetically similar to mammy and a young Black woman working as a maid for a white family held obvious racial implications tied to slavery.<sup>17</sup> Disney purists and individuals possibly less engaged with cultural criticism defended the studio’s actions, concluding that the movie’s target audience—children—did not carry the same historical baggage and thus would not recognize a name or occupation as potentially racist or problematic.<sup>18</sup> Though situated in the past, the continuation of images and storytelling like what are seen in *The Princess and the Frog* has a twofold effect. For its audience, *The Princess and the Frog* first stands to reify the dominant culture’s position as dominant, and secondly it stands to complicate an understanding of history, which poses as a real danger to American society when a positive or even existing dialogue about slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and other political movements are already not being properly discussed in many classrooms, especially throughout the Southern United States.

In a fairytale with a trumpet-playing alligator, a snaggletooth Cajun firefly, and humans turning into frogs, the options for what a Black-American princess’s occupation could “believably” be are limitless. Thusly it seems Disney imagineers could have pushed the limits of their craft to create a profession more fitting for the studio’s first animated Black princess, and transcend the few jobs that have historically been occupied by Black women, on film and beyond—maid, servant, slave, cook, pancake maker, caretaker, domestic, etc.<sup>19</sup> While Disney taps into a unique element of New Orleans’ culture, Richard Breaux suggests that taking Tiana

from a maid to a waitress and chef was not a selfless act, but instead allowed the studio to maintain the message it wanted to send. “[T]he two-dimensional hand-drawn animated cels of the Princess cooking, cleaning, and serving food could be saved and remain in the film, and the storyline could be reworked to salvage Disney’s image in the eyes of critics [...]”<sup>20</sup>

Disney is the premier producer of children’s entertainment, thus having the ability to influence cultural perception at an earlier stage than other producers of mass media. Thinking about the intersectionalities of race, class, and gender, especially within the context of United States history, it should raise cause for concern that Disney would develop a story that had a Black princess working in the service industry. The combination of those manmade labels—especially the fact of Blackness—takes on a particular meaning that does not exist for Cinderella, Snow White, or even Mulan. Disney films like *The Princess and the Frog* and *Pocahontas* serve to oppress Black-Americans and Native Americans respectively through their reliance on images and storytelling that were institutionally created to oppress them. *The Princess and the Frog* shows Black women in positions of service in a southern city, historically and presently known for racial disharmony and inequality where they are happy in those subordinate roles. That framework allows for audiences to (re)visit a time where whites, or the dominant culture mostly benefited and thrived socially and often economically from Blacks’ marginality. The movie immerses the dominant culture in a time where blacks interacted with but lived separately from whites, and were seemingly content in their servitude to those same whites.

The mammy, modernized as the “strong Black woman”<sup>21</sup> reveals herself in Tiana as the young woman drags herself home from a long night of waitressing at Cal’s then rolls over for a long day at Duke’s. In these scenes where Tiana prepares for work and bustles around the diner, audiences see her take on the workload of three waitresses and do so with a smile. Like mammy,

that faithful servant, Tiana creates the impression that not only does she manage being overworked, well, but she also appears to enjoy it (“Here your hotcakes!” “Napkin, sweetheart?”). Images of Tiana coming home from one job to immediately change for another are not presented as a sign of oppression or economic disparity between races, but instead as fodder for character-building. As Tiana’s father reminds her, nothing beats hard work. Providing for others seems to be her calling as she is seen doing it as a little girl, a mature young woman, and a frog.

Patricia Hill Collins argues cultural and media producers foster the perpetuation of the mammy by ascribing controlling images and messages of hard-working and ambitious Black women in search of the American Dream, and middle class Black womanhood.<sup>22</sup> She asserts, these modern middle class mammies have to cautiously tread a line between “aggressiveness needed for achievement in middleclass occupations [...] appropriately expressed for the benefit of others” and “being appropriately subordinate to White and/or male authority [...]”<sup>23</sup> Tiana strives to save enough money to open her restaurant while battling her biological mother’s (Eudora) and her spiritual mother’s (Mama Odie) contention that love is what is most important in life, not a career. While Tiana’s dreams necessitate a fair amount of hard work, which Disney does not let audiences forget, her sleep deprivation and backbreaking labor reflect a behavioral trait associated with many Black women on and off screen that makes them what Tamara Beauboeuf–Lafontant dubs “beasts of burden.”<sup>24</sup> This also allows for the mammy construct to remain active, feeding an idea that part of what makes Black womanhood distinctive is its ability to sustain all forms and degrees of labor.<sup>25</sup>

## **PATRIARCHY AND MAMMY**

The mammy poses as a truly complex figure, full of contradictions. On a single Black body, she reads as sexual—when considering forced interracial sex during slavery—nonsexual, sweet, sassy, dominant, and subordinate. One element of the mammy figure and characters like Tiana that embody her that has remained a constant is the allowance for white male patriarchy to rule. Cultural gatekeepers and producers draft the mammy figure as a faithful slave so committed to her white family that she almost becomes family within that white-dominated racial hierarchal structure. Within that structure, where the mammy figure provides a gateway to the “plantation fantasy” fulfilled, white males emerge as the father of that familial social system.<sup>26</sup> Part of what allows a hegemonic culture to live out that fantasy is a paternalistic family structure where Blacks and (white) women exist as children while the white male/slave master/land owner serves as the father and rule maker of the pack. Tiana and Charlotte become unified as figurative sisters with the absence of Tiana’s father and the strong presence of Charlotte’s. Disney enacts white male patriarchy by calling for Tiana’s father, James, to die.

As patriarchy works, only one male can emerge as the dominating figure. Where Black women and white women live distantly on a racial and gender hierarchal scale, Black and white men have ties as well. While Black and white women were/are competing for supreme womanhood, their male counterparts battle for masculinity and power. As the father of the plantation and society, the privileged white male, unarguably, had all of the power—over his wife, children, slaves, government, and laws. However, the struggle for supreme masculinity had yet to be definitively won by the white male slave owner. Selected and sold based on perceptions

of strength, where penis size was factored in, Black men, like their female counterparts, became the center of myths created to reduce them to bodies, not beings capable of holding actual power.<sup>27</sup> What emerged from these racist and sexist practices was the myth of the hypermasculinized “brutal Black buck”<sup>28</sup> who a) was made into a sexual beast through attempts to satisfy the supposedly licentious Black female and b) would rape any white woman who crossed his path.<sup>29</sup>

More appropriate for adolescent audiences, Disney addresses the Black male’s inability to possess power by essentially killing off the most symbolically strong and positive Black male figure in *The Princess and the Frog*. Here, “strong” goes beyond the physical implications of the term and instead speaks to how society views masculinity and manhood—a (cis-gendered) man’s ability to provide (food, shelter, and comfort) and protect his family and himself. In his brief five to seven minute appearance, Tiana’s father appears to be a kind, thoughtful family man. Physically, he appears to be the epitome of manhood: tall, muscular, a commanding presence with a baritone voice. He stresses to Tiana the importance of hard work, and though coded, the importance of finding love. As Tiana grows into a young woman, the story implies that Tiana’s father died while at war. Hanging from a photograph of him in a full military uniform is a medal of honor. So although Disney gives Tiana’s father an honorable death, his absence leaves no other representative of strong Black male masculinity for the rest of the movie.

Dr. Facilier, the evil Shadow Man, does not evoke hegemonic masculinity in a heroic sense necessary to replace Tiana’s father. His role remains as the villainous antagonist until he eventually succumbs to the evil spirits he conjures up. With his John Waters-styled pencil thin

mustache, exposed stomach, tailored three-piece suit, and flamboyant gestures, Dr. Facilier represents an Old Hollywood characterization of effeminized masculinity where a supporting actor—typically a shady figure—presents an ambiguous sexuality. George Macready's character, Ballin Mundson, in the 1945 film noir *Gilda* is as an example of this effeminized masculinity trope. Critical readings of *Gilda* argue that Mundson, the owner of an illegal high-class casino, is in an implicitly-stated homosexual relationship with the male lead, Johnny Farrell (Glenn Ford), though both eventually marry Gilda (Rita Hayworth).<sup>30</sup> Similar to Dr. Facilier, Mundson is the shadowy figure complicit in creating part of the tension throughout the movie. Like Mundson, Dr. Facilier carries a cane, which often reads as a phallus symbol in cinema. However, Dr. Facilier's effeminacy and eventual demise negates the general rule of the cane/phallus as a symbol of power or patriarchy.

Duke, another Black male figure in *The Princess and the Frog* and owner of the diner where Tiana spends her second shift, does not exactly epitomize masculinity—galloping in place, smacking his backside with a spatula. He does, however, represent a level of patriarchy in his position of power over Tiana—both as her employer and as a naysayer to her ambitions. He does not believe in Tiana's ability to succeed and he generally proves to be rather foolish, thus making him also ineligible to stand in for Black male masculinity, as a supportive, doting paternal figure.

Even in life Tiana's father never represented power because he did not possess any as a working class man, enduring backbreaking labor to support his family. Charlotte's father, Big Daddy La Bouff, becomes the only strong male figure, who by his girth and wealth, clearly lives



in excess. He has the power, representing white male patriarchy; the slave master, father of society, and as King of the Mardi Gras parade for the “fifth year in a row,” he also symbolically stands for the mayor of New Orleans. The meaning behind the signs attached to Big Daddy La Bouff—his wealth, prestige, and title—allow for him to operate as a sort of dominating male lead.

While Disney has a long history of half-orphaning its protagonists,<sup>31</sup> this throwback to a nostalgic antebellum south makes it appear as though a more systematic message lays in wait. James dying off leaves Tiana with only her mother. If Charlotte were also left with her mother, instead of Big Daddy La Bouff as her sole parent, the movie would become more political, and more subversive. The movie cannot function without *some* semblance of patriarchy; so two young girls left to be raised by their mothers would be completely out of the question. And as the ever-present concern of the threatening Black buck whom doubles as a rapist, *The Princess and the Frog* could not leave Tiana with a father and Charlotte with a mother. The movie instead has Big Daddy La Bouff overshadow Tiana’s own mother, as he becomes her surrogate father. Like a plantation owner, Big Daddy La Bouff is at the top of the social and cultural hierarchy in the movie. He is the overlord that allows the movie to function in culturally hegemonic normalcy.

With Naveen having more screen time and dialogue than most of the other Disney princes, especially those from the early days of the franchise—which this movie harkens back to—his presence, in a sense, dominates Tiana’s debut, which is, in essence, an effect of patriarchy. If one looks at socially or culturally mandated testaments to manhood, however—a (heterosexual) male’s ability to care/provide for his family, generate wealth, protect his property, and be admired by his peers—Naveen fails. When the young prince establishes himself as a playboy cut

off from the family riches, and in need of a rich wife, he loses credibility. From a heterosexist standpoint of traditional gender roles and masculinity, Naveen does not fully measure up. He has no money; no skills set, and for much of the movie, little desire to do anything other than play the ukulele. By the movie's end, however, he displays a more progressive, egalitarian approach to masculinity and marriage as he joins in with Tiana to build her restaurant.

### **MAMMY? MAYBE. JEZEBEL? NO.**

Focused on her career, responsible, and loving to those around her, Tiana carries herself with the same level of gentility and grace often seen in the Golden Era of Disney princesses. Distinct from other princesses, however, Tiana has an air of maturity that almost suggests she has seen or experienced elements of life that put her a step above the usual innocent, wide-eyed princesses of the past. While Tiana never finds herself forced to use her sexuality to get out of a situation,<sup>32</sup> Hollywood and popular culture's history of constructing Black female sexuality as openly available for consumption makes it so that that maturation seems fitting. The jezebel trope, which like the Sapphire, is an extension of the mammy. Despite differences in physicality, McElya asserts that these two representations—the mammy and jezebel—of Black women were “read onto a single black female body within shifting contexts and needs of white supremacy.”<sup>33</sup> She adds that the jezebel image of black femininity was able to coexist with the mammy because whites relied on them interchangeably, depending on which performance served their racist, patriarchal, oppressive ideology of the moment.<sup>34</sup> In movies like *Imitation of Life* and *Carmen Jones*, the jezebel emerges as sexually voracious and often a temptress of white men.

While Tiana reads as mature, she is not a jezebel; Disney does not characterize her as

such. However, it is important to highlight the history of the jezebel in relation to *The Princess and the Frog* because Prince Naveen reacts to Tiana as though she is one, and approaches her in a way that suggests he thinks she has some sexual experience. Like the mammy and Sapphire, the possibility of being read as a jezebel is always threat for Black women.

Though *The Princess and the Frog* functions as a children's movie, Prince Naveen carries a distinct sexual awareness as he spends the first half of the movie—as man and frog—winking, suggestively raising eyebrows, and attempting to engage women in a passing tryst. Naveen enacts his sexual prowess on Tiana, which not only speaks to sexual violence Black women have historically experienced<sup>35</sup>, but the scene also reflects their presumed innate sexual maturity.

Shortly after a near-fatal interaction with a group of swamp gators, Tiana and Naveen find refuge in an old, hollowed out tree where he makes a sexually-charged pass at her. Though audiences are not privy to a view of what is happening in that tree, Naveen says, “Well waitress, looks like we’re going to be here for a while. So we might as well get comfortable.” With what sounds like a loud smack, presumably from Tiana hitting Naveen, she yells, “Get your slimy self away from me!” Naveen’s actions fall out of line with the conduct of past Disney princes and princely nobility, in general. For a children’s film, this scene provides some understanding to how Disney regards its own first Black princess. Again, as the “beasts of burden,” Tiana, the strong young Black woman, has to manage such an attack without any acknowledgment of wrongdoing by her assaulter.

## CONCLUSION

Masked in innocence and “it’s a small world after all” rhetoric, Disney often escapes being held to a higher standard of progression in terms of racial and gender equality. The studio’s motivations for *The Princess and the Frog* must be questioned, however, when factoring in the cultural magnitude of introducing a Black princess after more than eighty years in business. Drafting a storyline that allows for the first Black princess to unimaginatively fulfill a role that has often been the only type available to Black girls and women in Hollywood films, suggests a desire to maintain and reinforce a racialized and gendered status quo in popular culture. While only a handful of Disney animated movies were produced during Walt Disney’s studio control (e.g. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Pinocchio*, *Cinderella*, *The Lady and the Tramp*, and *Sleeping Beauty*), those that followed in the late eighties,<sup>36</sup> also relied on the same particular form of storytelling that is deeply rooted in patriarchy, historical reconstruction, and timelessness. Though *The Princess and the Frog* situates itself in 1920s New Orleans, the universal message of overcoming obstacles (perhaps gender, race, economic instability, class differences) to find love, magic, and grand musical numbers allows for the movie to also exist in the unending Disney vault of storytelling. That timelessness provides distance between the viewers and the realities of a young Black woman living in post-World War I New Orleans.<sup>37</sup> As many critics have recognized the company to promote a conservative message in its movies, coupled with Walt Disney’s favoritism toward “the spirit of “self-help and cupidity,” ”<sup>38</sup> it would be easy to surmise that showing a Black Disney princess fulfilling life goals unobstructed or unaffected by her race and gender feeds into the very model of “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.”

Jennifer L. Barker argues how unlikely it would be that Disney would ever take up producing animated films that “focus on a serious engagement with reality or history; the

sanitized aesthetic [...] necessary to appeal to broad markets is fundamentally incompatible with a realistic representation of history.”<sup>39</sup> For *The Princess and the Frog* to see the level of success experienced by *The Lion King* or *Beauty and the Beast*, Tiana’s ethnicity can only be exhibited by her speech and skin, not in a message or underlying lesson about how her ethnicity affects her experiences as a young American woman. Disney adhering to this method repackages Tiana, her story, and what her story represents and makes them more tolerable and consumable in their timelessness and superficial universality. Mass audiences can easily forget they are watching a movie about a Black princess, and instead process Tiana’s story as a more universal embodiment of love, friendship, and opportunity, unaffected by social or institutional biases.

Supplying entertainment that relies on a racialized individual to promote diversity and acceptance while washing that individual’s history with whiteness for the sake of appealing (or appeasing) to wider, more mainstream audiences is, in effect, a consequence of living in a “color-blind” society.<sup>40</sup> Tiana, Mulan, Pocahontas, Jasmine, and other animated characters of color are used as physical proof of Disney’s tolerance and acceptance of “the other,” despite the otherness of their culture and race being used to reinforce long-held stereotypes, like the mammy/Black woman as mother and nurturer, maintained in a hegemonic society.

## CHAPTER 2

### Sisters by Circumstance: The Historicity of Southern White Superiority in Black and White Female Relationships

#### INTRODUCTION

Hollywood, as a purveyor of whiteness, has made it common practice in many mainstream films (*Mississippi Burning*, *The Matrix*, *Corrina, Corrina*, *The Family That Preys*) to display white characters unselfishly giving Blacks the gifts of life, love, freedom, and opportunity.<sup>1</sup> When these exchanges occur in Southern-based films, it has undeniable ties to slavery working as a social and race-based hierarchy. Slavery is at the root of the historicity of race in the United States as it relates to Blacks and whites. Remnants of slavery are ever present in the physical and mental spaces of America's southern states, including a sort of nostalgia possessed by the dominant culture for the antebellum past.

These acts of kindness committed by the “white messiah”<sup>2</sup> often suggest that Blacks' humanity is tied to whites' charity. Those emotional acts of charity are Hollywood's reparations: an acknowledgement of, and penitence for injustices committed against Blacks at the hands of whites throughout American history. Fostering Black liberation by way of white redemption, Hollywood screenwriters and producers display palatable relationships between Southern Blacks and whites to suggest that all has been forgiven. These benevolent interactions

simply whitewash history and perhaps move to absolve white guilt. Masked by anthropomorphism and hiding behind its connection to young audiences, which generally protects Disney from being viewed through a critical lens by the larger viewing public, *The Princess and the Frog* falls into these same old Hollywood trappings.

Despite weaving messages of beauty is only skin deep and solidarity through difference throughout its promotional materials, the movie actually adheres to traditional Hollywood modes of storytelling by putting white(ness) as the standard norm, and Black(ness) or “other” as its offset. Evidenced by observing the relationship between Tiana and her white best friend/mistress/employer/competition/sister, Charlotte, *The Princess and the Frog* relies heavily on the Mammy/Scarlett dichotomy, characterizations immortalized in *Gone With the Wind*, to exhibit a power play of white versus Black womanhood. That type of relationship is an oft-utilized theme in movies that closely involve Black and white women.

Similar to characterizations seen in *Gone With The Wind* and *Imitation of Life* (both the 1934 and 1959 versions), the dynamic created between Tiana and Charlotte reflects two old Hollywood tropes where first, the redemption of a generalized white race is found in the salvation of an equally generalized Black race and second, where the Black female—as body and being—is utilized to uphold white womanhood. What makes *The Princess and the Frog* unique to this genre of movies that highlight the supposedly strong, secret bond between Black women and white women is that it appears to subvert tradition by allowing for the former to eclipse the latter in a contest for most desirable. Disney relies on the cultural and historical significance of Tiana’s “Blackness” resting within the larger framework of the traditionally white Disney

princess franchise as a means to reflect its own racial tolerance, while simultaneously reinstating the power of whiteness through the presence of Charlotte La Bouff.

## **THE MYTH OF SISTERHOOD**

Exploring the discrepancies between Disney's character analyses, outlined in *The Princess and the Frog's* final production notes, and how those characters actually play out on screen reflect exactly how Princess Tiana and Charlotte La Bouff's shared experiences are used as a vehicle to smooth out the historically tumultuous relationship between Southern Black and white women. Charting the actual relational history of Southern Black and white women becomes pertinent in better understanding how *The Princess and the Frog* has the potentiality to perpetuate a gendered racial hierarchy between Black and white women and at the same time propagandize the myth of sisterhood between those same two groups. A number of feminist texts that explore that history surmise that there is a natural, or inherent sisterhood existing among Black and white women.<sup>3</sup> Having always lived parallel lives, Black women and white women in the United States appear to be sisters, both bound by history, oppression, and experience. The inclination to bind Black women and white women together comes from the idea that both were victims of the antebellum South, living under the same white male supremacist patriarchal rule founded under the principles of slavery.

Hip-hop feminist Joan Morgan makes the distinction that Black women, whom she characterizes as the "STRONGBLACKWOMAN," and white women, or "SOUTHERNBELLES," are stepsisters. Morgan asserts that these "stepsisters" were once so close that the existence of one was not possible without the existence of the other.<sup>4</sup> She adds,



“Both sisters were the bastard children of racism, sexism, and the white male Myth-makers need for absolute dominance.”<sup>5</sup> Considering force used by white slave masters onto Black female slaves, it would be a more accurate analogy to suggest that Black women and white women are half sisters—for the origins of both women’s experiences in the United States are literally tied to the blood of white male patriarchy. However, neither sister, stepsister, nor half-sister is an appropriate label for the relationship between Black women and white women because none factor in the gendered and racialized hierarchy that exist(ed) between the two groups, nor does it acknowledge white women’s complicity in Black women’s oppression, during slavery and thereafter. An example of that complicity can be seen in *The Color Purple* when Miss Millie requests Sofia come work for her, and when the latter declines, she is beaten into submission by white people and forced to work for the former anyway.

Disney attempts to misguide audiences into believing the same myth, that despite clear inequalities between Tiana and Charlotte, largely founded in racial and economic differences, the two young women possess a sisterly bond. An example of this apoliticization of history is in the production notes of the movie, Disney labels their relationship as a lifelong friendship, where Tiana supposedly “grounds” Charlotte, and some of Tiana’s “happiest moments” are spent playing in the La Bouff’s mansion.<sup>6</sup> That description does not acknowledge gross economic differences illustrated in the film where audiences see a young Tiana looking back sadly and longingly at her privileged friend, who is not only granted custom-made dresses at will, but also a puppy. That description also does not speak to how Tiana and her mother, Eudora, have major roles in maintaining Charlotte’s “princessibility” and privilege. By superficially creating that

type of dynamic between Charlotte and Tiana, *The Princess and the Frog* relieves whites from the responsibility of guilt rooted in history and whitewashes the historicity of Black-white female relationships in the South.

Tiana and Eudora assisting Charlotte in maintaining her princessibility is a Disneyfied version of Black women's servitude being used to uphold white womanhood. In *When and Where I Enter*, an in-depth text on Black women's history in the United States, Paula Giddings historicizes how "true womanhood" came to be synonymous with white women and what consequences Black women faced as a result. The Victorian principles that coexisted with slavery put the moral character of women into focus, where it was unquestioningly the white wife's responsibility to remain in her home, teaching her children moral character, while ensuring her husband maintained his.<sup>7</sup> This task of moral educator meant the "White wife was hoisted on a pedestal so high that she was beyond the sensual reach of her own husband."<sup>8</sup>

As discussed in Chapter One, powerless and at the bottom of the social and racial hierarchy, Black women were propagandized as being lascivious by nature, thus available to satisfy the sexual desires of white men. White women were made synonymous with womanhood (and motherhood) to project a standard to which all other women are held and a system to which all other women are bound to fail in comparison. Simply, in a world that functions best in binaries, for Black womanhood to represent the destruction of Western society, white womanhood must symbolize its repair.

What manifested out of white women's patriarchal responsibilities is the "cult of the lady" or a "woman of leisure."<sup>9</sup> Black women were forced out of this framework because,

historically, they have had to possess service-based out-of-home jobs like slave, servant, breeder, maid, housekeeper, and in Tiana's case, waitress. Compared to Tiana working two jobs, with no time to sleep in between, Charlotte represents the cult of lady or woman of leisure, as she has no responsibilities other than being a debutante.

In *Killing Rage* bell hooks explores mass media's influence on the "integrity of Black womanhood." Regarding Black women's morality, hooks relies on Ida B. Wells who maintains that nothing was as hurtful as "the taunt of immorality; the jest and sneer with which our women are spoken of, and the utter incapacity or refusal to believe there are among us mothers, wives, and maidens who have attained a true, noble, and refining womanhood."<sup>10</sup> The multitude of hegemonic and racially motivated constructions of Black womanhood that Disney projects onto Tiana fits into what hooks suggests is the continued devaluation of Black women through mass media, which "is central to the maintenance of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."<sup>11</sup> Through this practice, an intricate institutional system is created whereby the labor, essence, humanity, and visibility of racialized, often economically disadvantaged individuals is either exploited or ignored by mass society for the commercial, socio-cultural, and political advancement of that same oppressive group. Given that history, portraying Tiana as an overworked, overdriven "killjoy" who does not even initially raise desire in the prince, a desire that is supposed to be the guiding principle of the movie, suggests a certain deliberateness to fortify that economization of white supremacy found in much of Disney's work. Simply, positioning Tiana as a young woman who becomes so focused on her professional goals that she forgoes love and, in a sense, becomes unattractive, reifies the message that Black women are less

than—a message that remains present in Hollywood ideology based on the absence of available leading Black female roles.

The supremacy of white womanhood is a matter of desirability and presumed birthright where Black women's bodies and services are extensions of reinforcement. In its eagerness to market Tiana and Charlotte's friendship as one based in equity and pluralism, Disney ignores the historical fact of Black and white women as systematically bred enemies, not sisters. Though both sets of women experienced varying levels of victimization for white male need, building a case for some inherent sisterhood between the two detracts from the complete desecration of the black female body, psyche, and personhood during slavery for the sake of white male desire, dominance, and commerce.

The belief that the white female existed for the greater purpose of representing and maintaining “true womanhood,” white humanity and morality, rather than those attributes and fulfilling carnal desires,<sup>12</sup> resulted in Black women forced to fulfill the task of antebellum comfort women. As a white female plantation owner was aware of her husband's misdeeds, the resentment and anger was displaced to Black female slaves. Chronicling an archival of letters, diaries, and photos held by the last generation of Old South white women and their Black female slaves, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese attempts to highlight the everyday experiences of those white women, including the anguish felt over witnessing their husband's and friends' husbands infidelities. Fox-Genovese uses the report of southern belle, Sarah Gayle to tell of the callous and adulterous nature of one slave owner: “His children and his son's children are their slaves, and probably, nay I think I heard, that his *child* and his *grand-child* have one mother?”<sup>13</sup>

The unbeatable white male patriarchal power structure of that time made it a matter of survival and convenience for white women to accuse female slaves of seducing and enticing white male slave owners rather than acknowledging it was their men who employed a gross abuse of power in an already barbaric system. That dynamic laid the foundation for white women to see Black women as an enemy, competition for white male desire and favoritism. It is this juncture of colonialist thought that gave way for white feminine features and characteristics to be publicly valorized standards of desire and beauty, where Black femininity and beauty, by default, could not compete.

It is a struggle for *The Princess and the Frog* to upset that standardization of beauty with the debut of Tiana because Disney built its princess franchise on that particular dichotomy when it asked the question: “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” While Disney attempts to exhibit its willingness or ability to change that Disneyization of beauty by producing a Black princess, her features do not appear to be too far a departure from her fairer-skinned, wide-eyed counterparts. Since crafting a separate Disney Princess franchise in 1999, all of the princesses have been drawn to look similar to one another. On Disney princess-branded products, the young women—from Snow White to Rapunzel (*Tangled*)—have very large rounded eyes, looking demure or coy.<sup>14</sup>

### **CHARLOTTE AS THE “CHOSEN ONE”**

In its production notes Disney identifies Princess Tiana as “African-American,” but she is not specifically marketed as Disney’s “first Black princess.” Constructions of Tiana’s Blackness are made to be a nonissue in the movie, as well as *for* the movie, despite its clear

cultural significance. The “modern twist on a classic tale”<sup>15</sup> narrative surrounding *The Princess and the Frog* creates this duality of what Disney says that twist is—the princess also turns into a frog—and also what the twist actually appears to be—the princess is Black. Inspiration for *The Princess and the Frog* comes from the Brothers Grimm’s *The Frog Prince*. The original story relays the tale of a petulant princess who reluctantly befriends a frog who requests that she let him sleep on her pillow at night. When the princess throws the frog against the wall in disgust, he turns into a handsome prince. Over the years the story has switched to the prince was turned into a frog by an evil witch, and only a kiss from his true love/princess could reverse the spell. These newer versions of *The Frog Prince* that have manifested themselves in popular culture are most likely influenced by Disney’s monopolization of the fairy tale, which is extremely formulaic. That formula generally calls for a woeful princess, or a “princess-in-the-making,” a handsome prince, and a bit of evil that stands between their combined destinies. Disney fairytales have the added element of whiteness where their princesses look a particular way and behave in a particular fashion. While Tiana and New Orleans’ cultural Blackness is the unspoken modern twist in *The Princess and the Frog*, the movie simultaneously holds onto its affinity for the classic tale by contextualizing Charlotte La Bouff as a more “traditional” Disney princess, who embodies nearly all traditional modes of fairytale storytelling, including a reliance on birthright,<sup>16</sup> wealth, and whiteness.

*The Princess and the Frog* opens with a sweeping shot of the La Bouff family’s great soft yellow mansion and zooms into young Charlotte La Bouff’s luxurious pink bedroom. Sitting on the floor, Charlotte and Tiana listen to Eudora tell them the story of *The Frog Prince*. While

Eudora relays the story, Tiana and Charlotte sit in rapture, hanging onto her every word. Though subtle, here audiences get their first glimpse of the hierarchal structure at play between the two young girls. Charlotte has so much chiffon and tulle on her dress that it lifts her high enough to appear perched above Tiana as though she may be propped on a stool. Tiana, in her simple green frock, wearing a simple gold crown, seems to be humbly sitting just behind Charlotte. Based on the numerous economic signifiers shown within the first five minutes of the movie—such as Charlotte’s home, the rows of custom made princess dresses, and her wealthy doting father—Charlotte carries the traditional markings of Disney royalty. Despite wearing a little crown that could be her own self-fulfilling prophecy, Tiana does not represent or embody the future princess of Maldonia. From first view, audiences see her as not only Black, but also poor, two characteristics that are generally not present in a Disney princess unless it is understood that they are secretly princesses already with an inherited post on the throne and thus not actually poor. Audiences for *The Princess and the Frog* also know Tiana will be the princess of Maldonia by the end of the movie; therefore she will not always be poor, but she comes in without that inheritance.

Until 1992, with the introduction of Princess Jasmine (*Aladdin*), all Disney princesses were white. Snow White, Princess Aurora, Cinderella, Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*) and Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*) can be credited with reifying in audiences and consumers’ minds that “Disney Princess” equals white.<sup>17</sup> Despite the later additions of Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, and now Tiana to the Disney Princess lineup, the greater concept of who and what makes a Disney princess, and what she looks like, connects to traditional, Westernized standards of white

feminine beauty and upper-class sensibilities.<sup>18</sup> With exceptions given to Belle and Mulan, a Disney princess is also somehow always tied to the throne. Charlotte is not technically a princess in the sense of inhabiting a royal lineage, but she, by default, becomes a princess as her father is crowned King of the Mardi Gras Parade. The La Bouff family's excessive wealth, power, and privilege contextualize them as members of New Orleans monarchical aristocracy.

As *The Princess and the Frog* had not been released at the time *Animating Difference* (2010) was published, Richard King, Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo are only able to surmise its outcome from various promotional and marketing materials distributed by Disney. Factoring in Tiana's race and 1920s New Orleans as a backdrop, the scholars contend, "It is difficult to imagine a more awkward context than the Jim Crow South for the story of an African American princess [...] 1920s Louisiana poses obvious problems. After all, the 1920s are still painfully close to 1865 and are in the midst of segregation practices (which were part of Louisiana's law) and lynchings (which took place in Louisiana)."<sup>19</sup> Those unspoken, but clearly seen, racial and class politics of *The Princess and the Frog*, rooted in Tiana's Blackness and poverty, further place Charlotte and her whiteness in the realm of "The Chosen One."

*The Princess and the Frog* goes so far to visually imply that Charlotte is the rightful Disney princess, as when she's dancing with the prince (rather Naveen's handler masquerading as him), the scene looks exactly like the one from *Cinderella* when she and Prince Charming waltz around the palace for the first time. In fact, by interest alone, Charlotte would be the rightful "owner" of the prince and his affection. Again, in an earlier scenes of the movie, Little Tiana



proclaims, “There is no way in this whole wide world I would ever, ever, ever, I mean NEVER, kiss a frog. Yuck!” A young “Lottie” dreamily states, “I would do it; I would kiss a frog. I would kiss a hundred frogs if I could marry a prince and be a princess.” This scene is the first to establish that Charlotte clearly fits within the traditional fairytale framework, and more specifically Disney’s method to that form of storytelling, where a young, beautiful maiden dreams of her knight in shining armor.<sup>20</sup> By comparison, Tiana really is not the typical fairytale princess.<sup>21</sup> Where most other traditional princesses—in and outside of the Disney machine—daydream of castles, fairy godmothers, and a prince on a great white horse to save them from whatever despair with which they may faced, Tiana rolls her eyes at fantastical romance and all the distractions that come along with it. Disney constantly ensures that Tiana’s resentment toward royalty upholds Charlotte’s birthright by painting her as the willing non-princess princess.

### **“DISNEY PRINCESS” MADE STRANGE**

Within the first thirty minutes of *The Princess and the Frog* Disney establishes that Tiana is an unlikely princess, both within the movie and within the larger Disney princess operation. Cultural indicators point towards Charlotte as a natural, and possibly more preferred princess, based on her wealth, ethnicity, and physical features. However, to fit within the guidelines of the movie that call for Tiana to be crowned princess, *The Princess and the Frog* takes idealized or standardized white femininity and gentility—present in more traditional Disney princesses like Cinderella and Snow White—and makes them strange in Charlotte. In this particular context, *to make something strange* means taking an ideology or concept that mass

society has normalized, or made the societal standard, and then disrupting or deconstructing that belief in some way to make it no longer a standard. With her exceptionally large eyes, maniacal arm flailing, and general absurdity, Charlotte does not technically have what it takes to be a Disney princess. Despite her ridiculous nature, however, she still carries enough cultural markers that make a princess—the blond hair, blue eyes, and wealth—to receive valorization by many parts of western society.

*The Princess and the Frog* does not make whiteness itself strange, because that safely remains in place. Instead, it seems special measures are taken to subtly present imagery and messaging that could lead audiences to see Charlotte as a more worthwhile, or likely princess. At the very least, using Charlotte in that subtle imagery reminds audiences of where that tradition or history of princesses stands. The film, however, simultaneously subverts those same undertones by displaying Tiana with two characteristics fitting for a Disney movie: resilience and hard work. Those attributes reside in young Arthur in the *Sword in the Stone*, Mulan, and of course, Cinderella. As adults, Tiana works two jobs, committing herself to saving nickels and dimes so that she may one day open her restaurant, while Charlotte blossoms into a young socialite, still holding onto her plans for marrying a prince. With her blonde finger waves and big blue eyes, Charlotte emerges as an animated Mae West, taking chaste Disney white femininity and making it strange. Without the visual signifier of the mammy, Tiana becomes Charlotte's faithful friend and servant, like the slew of Black maids surrounding West in many of her films. Though Disney paints Tiana and Charlotte as friends, the former appears to function as a glorified servant of the latter. Miss La Bouff pays Tiana a large sum of money to make her "man-catching beignets" for

the masquerade ball, and while she does not serve them, she remains dutifully behind the table. In Charlotte's anxiety about the prince not yet arriving at the masquerade ball, Tiana tries her best to soothe the hopeful princess. In these scenes before Tiana morphs into a frog, she placidly walks behind Charlotte, who shakes, shimmies, and throws her hips around making requests and demands of everyone around her.

Despite its 'G' rating, there is something distinctly sexual or mature about Charlotte, very much like Mae West, from calling her father "Big Daddy" to hiking up her bustier to adjust her cleavage. Donald Bogle asserts that West's servants, who were generally rotund, boisterous, dark-skinned mammies, took on the task of highlighting the "hot white sexuality of their bawdy mistress."<sup>22</sup> Bogle adds, "The implications throughout the films were that black women could not possibly be rivals to Mae West's femininity and that only black women were fit to wait on whores."<sup>23</sup> Though Tiana does not fit the physicality of Ms. Beavers and Mae West's other servants, her modesty cannot compete with Miss La Bouff's hot sexuality. For Tiana to win the challenge that stands as the prince's love, Charlotte has to behave like a wide-eyed, garish, man-crazy harlot, making her an unsuitable "lady" for nobility.

## **MASKING FRIENDSHIP**

Charlotte's childish self-absorption incapacitates her from truly ever seeing Tiana on an equitable level. Again, looking at the relationship between Mae West and her Black maids, Bogle suggests, "seldom did the black maids have lives of their own. Instead they were comments on their mistress."<sup>24</sup> Audiences know the intricacies of Tiana's life—her wanting to open a restaurant and valorizing herself through hard work—but in Charlotte's presence, rarely does the

audience see a more in-depth look into Tiana's life or the aspirations she holds for herself through her friend's eyes. Even upon Tiana announcing she has enough money to start her restaurant, Charlotte squeals and jumps in excitement, but it is difficult to tell if her joy is for Tiana or the beignets she just paid for.

Charlotte has a particular level of self-absorption that prevents her from moving past her own worldview to better understand Tiana. An example of this is in a scene shortly before Tiana turns into a frog. Charlotte reflects on their supposed shared childhood fantasies, but only recalls her own dreams. Charlotte momentarily struck by Tiana's beauty in her borrowed dress and tiara, comments, "It seems like only yesterday we were little girls dreaming our fairy tale dreams and tonight they're finally coming true." Those fairy tale dreams were only of Charlotte's determination, and for her they were seemingly coming true. Unlike Charlotte, Tiana's dreams had just been slashed at the same moment it seemed Charlotte's were becoming a reality, as someone outbid her for the restaurant. Wrapped in her own daydreams, Charlotte is not perceptive to the silent Tiana standing next to her, heartbroken over the loss of her dreams.

### **CHARLOTTE AS SAVIOR, THE "WHITE MESSIAH"**

Hernán Vera and Andrew M. Gordon investigate "sincere fictions of the white self by looking at a series of Hollywood films about the white savior."<sup>25</sup> In *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness*, the pair recognize that "The messianic white self is the redeemer of the weak, the great leader who saves blacks from slavery or oppression, rescue people of color from poverty and disease, or leads Indians in battle for their dignity and survival."<sup>26</sup> Charlotte's presence and purpose in *The Princess and the Frog* affects the significance of Disney featuring

its first Black princess. This creative move is emblematic of Disney's own narcissistic infatuation with whiteness,<sup>27</sup> which is visible in nearly all of its productions and media entities.<sup>28</sup> Using Charlotte as a vehicle to relay Tiana's princess story is necessary to maintain the myth of the white messiah. Vera and Gordon maintain that images of white messiahs leading people of color is a "powerful cultural myth because it presents whites with pleasing images of themselves as saviors rather than oppressors [...]"<sup>29</sup>

These gloried, romantic images of Charlotte, and other white messiahs, providing Blacks the "gifts of life, love, freedom, and opportunity," detract from implications of economic disparity and class exploitation in images of a young Tiana and her mother leaving the La Bouff mansion late at night after spending the day making dresses for young Charlotte to look like a princess, or Tiana's father, James, dragging himself home, dead tired from back-breaking labor. Juxtapose those images to Big Daddy and Charlotte La Bouff's mass amounts of unexplained wealth. These particular images coupled with how Disney frames Tiana and Charlotte's relationship in the production notes—as lifelong friends and the La Bouff mansion serves as the site of some of Tiana's happiest childhood memories—gives the false impression that the United States' history of racism and a prejudicial socio-cultural/economic/political system were figments of a liberal imagination and are no longer in place. Vera and Gordon contend, "the white messiah movies enable the white self to live with itself and to absolve the guilt of racism by portraying whites as noble and self-sacrificing on behalf of other racial and ethnic groups [...]"<sup>30</sup> This overzealous sell of the image that Tiana and Charlotte are friends despite their economic and racial differences removes audiences from asking questions of the country's past and present,

where that level of benevolence is simply not real or possible.

*The Princess and the Frog* characterizes Charlotte as “the spoiled, demanding, and flamboyant daughter of Big Daddy [...] the ultimate early-20<sup>th</sup>-century little rich girl.”<sup>31</sup> Caricaturizing her as self-involved and shallow, but inherently good-hearted, throughout the movie leaves room for Charlotte to redeem herself. Disney grants her that chance by having her sacrifice her own opportunity to marry a prince so that Tiana may achieve her happily-ever-after. Nobly accepting her fate as a savior, Charlotte kisses Prince Naveen in an attempt to break Dr. Facilier’s spell. As a “princess,” Charlotte’s kiss should reverse the spell, returning Naveen and Tiana to human status, but because she is not legitimate royalty, the spell remains unchanged. Resigned to spending the rest of their lives as frogs, Tiana and Naveen return to the Bayou and marry, officiated by Mama Odie, and witnessed by all of their animal friends. Once Naveen and Tiana marry, she becomes a princess, and through a marital kiss they become human again. It could be argued that because Tiana and Naveen were able to reverse the spell through their own unique love and humility without relying on Charlotte, she does not represent their savior or messiah. However, much of *The Princess and the Frog* centers on Charlotte holding the key to Prince Naveen’s financial and bodily liberation, as he needs to marry her for her money and only a kiss from her will free him from a frog’s body, all in true white messianic form. Once Tiana morphs into a frog, it seems the fate of her financial and bodily freedom also rests in Charlotte’s hands. Prince Naveen’s need to marry Charlotte based on her class standing makes her a martyr at worst and a savior at best.

Despite Charlotte’s status as a supporting character and friend, her presence in the movie

becomes as instrumental in telling the story of *The Princess and the Frog* as Tiana and Naveen's budding love for one another. Never has a Disney princess story been constructed so that the princess must wrestle out of the grips of evil with help from her "competition." Again, despite Tiana and Naveen pulling themselves out of their own anthropomorphic misfortune, presenting Charlotte as the key holder to freedom for much of the movie still ties her to sainthood and to her inherent *princessibility*.

## CONCLUSION

Historically situating racialized individuals' stories or experiences are an effective tactic when the issue of race or racial integration looms overhead in popular culture. *The Princess and the Frog* is not about race. However, the debut of a Black princess that also lives in the southern United States during a tumultuous time in history quietly makes the issue of race a part of the narrative. King et al. note placing *The Princess and the Frog* in the past "distances audiences from the realities of racism today and distorts the historical legacies of exploitation and exclusion."<sup>32</sup> Audiences can look at their real, everyday lives and see the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and other social progress, while ignoring other practices of discrimination or racism. King et al. explain children's movies, especially those bearing the Disney marker, are created to be timeless. They argue that the genre of animated cinema has taken history and made it "more simple, sanitized, and consumable by whiting out much of the messiness associated with imperialism and cultural difference."<sup>33</sup>

In popular culture and mass media, racial integration seems to take the approach of having a Black person work in the service industry where whites are sympathetic to their struggles despite reaping the benefits of their marginality.<sup>34</sup> Hooks argues, “The fact that a black woman can be cast in a dramatically compelling leading role as a servant does not intervene on racist/sexist stereotypes, it reinscribes them.”<sup>35</sup> These roles become so normalized, as they have been, that it does not raise suspicion for a Black princess to be an overworked waitress or for her white female counterpart to be naturally wealthy. Hooks adds, “Mass media consistently depict black folks either as servants or in subordinate roles, a placement which still suggests that we exist to bolster and caretake the needs of whites.”<sup>36</sup> Again, Tiana’s Blackness becomes the agent that adds meaning and context to being the first Black princess and a waitress. Cinderella’s whiteness, and other Anglo-Saxon fairytale beauties that engage in hard work, does not take on the same meaning. Resting in the larger, normalized realm of whiteness, Cinderella and someone like Snow White exist as exceptions, not a general rule to what roles young white women can play in popular culture.

Featuring a Black princess in a Disney animated film speaks, in many ways, to the United States’ social and cultural progress. What becomes a problem in Disney’s form of historical storytelling through Tiana and Charlotte’s relationship is the reliance on whiteness and conservatism, which prove to be necessary tools for the company’s success. Audiences receive mixed messages that says *The Princess and the Frog* is a “modern twist on an old tale,” where the “modern twist” can be read as a) there is finally a Black princess; b) she better displays qualities of female gentility, grace, and male desirability than the white woman; and c) the



princess also becomes a frog, not simply the prince. Charlotte's privilege and whiteness had to be made strange and Tiana had to be a frog for much of the movie in order to make the story of a Black American woman becoming a princess more "believable" or authentic. Subverting the traditional fairy tale with a Black princess, while also placing the story in a tumultuous historical context, proves fruitless when it is done through a whiteness lens. Providing Charlotte with the blurred identities of savior, princess, and hungry prince-eater, reinforces her inherent superiority in a cultural context, that detracts from Tiana's narrative, thus leaving her to play second in her own fairy tale.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Politics of Recognition: Pushing Black Femininity Toward Heteronormativity

#### INTRODUCTION

As discussed in Chapter One, concerned audiences' response to original storyboards for *The Princess and the Frog* and Disney's counter response—bringing in Oprah Winfrey and members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as consultants—speaks to the politics of recognition. In a multiethnic/multiracial/multireligious society like the United States, which happens to also be deeply connected to ethnic/racial/religious homogeneity that problematically reflects a white, heterosexist aesthetic, recognition becomes key in creating an engaged nation for all citizens. The problem with mainstream heteronormative organizations producing texts that attempt to recognize groups resting outside of the dominant culture as showcased in *The Princess and the Frog*, is that the representations they create inherently serve the desires of that dominant culture—and in Disney's case—reaffirms a perceived entitlement to co-opt marginalized peoples' stories for consumerist gain, while directing them toward heteronormativity.

When Walt Disney Company executives announced to shareholders that the studio was in the works to release *The Frog Prince*—the seventh<sup>1</sup> installment to its princess franchise—featuring a young Black princess named Maddy, Black-Americans eagerly awaited in

anticipation. Black women's lifestyle magazines<sup>2</sup> like *Essence* and *Ebony* expressed their elation over the company's decision to finally showcase the beauty and spirit of Black women and girls.<sup>3</sup> Disney fans and skeptics alike took to the Internet to weigh in on the cultural meaning of such a movie and what kind of long term impact having a Black princess could have on young Black children, especially girls.

Adults who grew up watching the lily-white fairy tales of Cinderella, Belle, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White were eager<sup>4</sup> to finally have a princess of their own and one their daughters could look up to.<sup>5</sup> The Black princess represented an opportunity for Black girls to imagine themselves as not only princesses, but also as women who could follow their career aspirations *and* get the man of their dreams. Indeed, it seemed *The Frog Prince* represented Disney's contrition for failing to directly recognize its Black audience for so many years.

At its core, recognition in popular media and culture serve to acknowledge the existence, or more often the increasing social, cultural, and political influence of a once subaltern group. Theoretically, media makers and scholars may argue that recognition serves a few more purposes in the realm of media's relationship to society and culture. With narratives like *The Princess and the Frog*, studios or other cultural producers could be subscribing to recognition reductively where it becomes a way to appease an increasingly progressive society that demands such shakeups to the existing cultural output. In the case of Disney, recognition could also be a way to expand its reach across markets. Richard Breaux and Henry Giroux separately argue that *The Princess and the Frog's* take on Black themes appears to be a thinly-veiled attempt to encompass Black-Americans in its brazen consumptive consumerist model.<sup>6</sup> Finally, though Kathy Franklin, a Disney corporate executive maintains that Tiana's Blackness is coincidental,<sup>7</sup> recognition *can* function as a way to repair years of damage that harmful images and messages have caused

marginalized groups “in the failure, whether out of malice or out of ignorance, to extend to people the respect or esteem that is due to them in virtue of who they are.”<sup>8</sup>

With regard to much of the criticism that *The Princess and the Frog* has received, both in its original and final versions, recognition does not automatically signify inclusion or acceptance. If Disney only enacts recognition of Black people through employing long held assumptions about Blackness, and Black womanhood specifically, without giving context to the historical nature of those roles, or perhaps avoiding the roles all together, recognition then stands to reinforce social inequality. For *The Princess and the Frog* and other movies that attempt to take on Black themes through a historical lens to exist beyond a recognition that those narratives exist, or as an effort to diversify Disney’s marketability, space must be made for a real sense of history to come through. Otherwise, a sanitized or whitewashed approach to recognizing Blackness (or any other racialized group) leans toward superficiality. Tiana’s Blackness and exploring elements of Black culture, including jazz age New Orleans, complicates the movie’s ability to create an authentic or viable space for Black-Americans to exist as distinctly different yet equal beings in the socio-cultural and political sphere.

## **LIMITS OF RECOGNITION**

American popular media—which includes Disney movies like *The Princess and the Frog*—carries such influence over shaping culture and public perception that recognition becomes a necessary component of validation. If the dominant culture relies on popular culture and media to give it insight to which groups fit in where in American society, negative or adverse portrayals of those groups has the potentiality to dictate how much, if at all, mass audiences desire to validate their narratives and history. As discussed in Chapter One, the turn of

the twentieth century brought on the advent of popular culture, which was not only “produced by the ‘entertainment industry’ for mass consumption,”<sup>9</sup> but it also continues to almost exclusively reflect a monolithic mostly white middleclass way of life and belief system. Using nonwhite Americans as props in popular culture to uphold a white racial superiority has had a twofold effect on social dynamics among races in the United States. First, popular culture’s effectiveness has caused it be the greatest venue through which many people seem to understand themselves as citizens of the United States and what rights are imparted upon them depending on the social group they are members of. Secondly, using popular culture in such a way—where individuals’ must look to it for insight on how others live and think outside of their social group—creates imperativeness for perceived subaltern groups to be equally recognized through those same venues.<sup>10</sup> However, as evidenced in criticisms of *The Princess and the Frog*, the simple act of recognizing a group’s existence through various representations on television, advertising, or film does not always signify an act of redemption on the part of the media maker.

Again, Black women have a unique history regarding representations of themselves in popular culture and media. Hollywood and other mainstream film outputs have largely recognized them as nonsexual servants without delving into the complexities of their lives or how they fit into the cultural fabric of America. That particular act of recognition does not carve a more permanent space for Black women’s varied identities to exist in the greater American cultural psyche. Instead being perpetually recognized on film as the servant, caretaker, or in Tiana’s case, waitress, only reaffirms Black women’s marginality as supporting cast members rather than the lead. Audiences witness a number of microaggressions against Tiana that push her to the fringes of her own narrative. The fortuitous princess fades to the background in many of the scenes she shares with Charlotte. It is not until the end of the movie where everyone

celebrates the opening of Tiana's restaurant that she finally gets to sparkle in the spirit of a true Disney princess.

Until young Black girls grow to age where they can share how *The Princess and the Frog* impacted their perception of themselves, it is not fully possible to know the movie's influence. Sharon Raynor's essay "My First Black Barbie: Transforming the Image"<sup>11</sup> reveals recognition—both the positive and negative, whether from a Black Disney princess or a Black doll—matters. Raynor notes that the absence of Black dolls and other positive representations of Blackness forced her to "define" her "own standards of beauty and acceptance."<sup>12</sup> While that self-determination toward building confidence and a sense of self outside of popular culture reflects the positive effects of being ignored by much of mass media, it also highlights the dubious nature of recognition. Whether Disney sees *The Princess and the Frog* as a means to reprimand its past racist depictions of Blackness, tap into the lucrative Black buying power, or a response to an increasingly accepting society—recognizing Blackness through placing Tiana in a marginally updated role historically limited to Black women suggests that recognition is more linked to pushing homogeneity than accepting unique differences. For Disney's effort toward recognition to be subversive in its acceptance of Blackness, multilayered Black identities, and Black female narratives as they authentically are, it must step away from the comfort of portraying Black women in nurturing service positions.

Though a certain resiliency and strength registers in many representations of Black women in mainstream films, from Mammy in *Gone With the Wind* to Aibileen in *The Help*, constantly framing them through the lens of white supremacy or using them as props to avoid historical accuracy, risks fostering long term feelings of illegitimacy in the public sphere. On the impact of misrecognition, Charles Taylor notes, "[...] a person or group of people can suffer real

damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.”<sup>13</sup> Many Black women—as scholars, feminists, parents, teenagers—have expressed the complex feelings that misrecognition or the absence of it all together spark in them. Bell hooks says, “For Black people [...] it rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identity. Often it leaves us ravaged by repressed rage, feeling weary, dispirited, and sometimes just plain old heartbroken [...].”<sup>14</sup>

Scholar Melissa Harris-Perry asserts navigating around the politics of recognition proves a point of contention in Black women’s political lives. Harris-Perry maintains that Black women are routinely put in positions where they must concern themselves “with symbols rather than substance, cultural battles rather than economic ones, the appearance of power rather than the exercise of it.” She questions, “What difference does it make that other people recognize your uniqueness if you don’t have equal access to political and economic resources?”<sup>15</sup> Tiana gets her prince and restaurant by the end of the movie, but the path to getting there proves challenging, reflecting just how little power she has even when fitting within the confines of Disney princess assimilation. Once Tiana finally saves enough money to place a down payment on an old sugar mill that she hopes to convert into a restaurant, the Fenner Brothers—bankers in charge of the property—tell her that “a fella came in offering a full amount in cash.” At her indignation, one of the brothers tells her, “a little woman of your background woulda had a hands full, trying to run a big business like that.” Not only is this scene the closest audiences get to witness Tiana face racial and gender discrimination, but it also signals the gross inequality Black women face in being viewed as equitable contenders in business and on a larger societal playing field.

Recognition is inherently political because only those in positions of power—whether that is political, economic, or social—have the means to make recognizing an individual or group

mean something to the larger society. The aforementioned scene between Tiana and the bankers reflects how Tiana, as a young Black woman, becomes hindered by her marginality. Her lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the two men, based on their actions, reflects Tiana's lack of influencing power in the larger social hierarchy. As Disney represents the institution that has the power to inscribe meaning not only upon Tiana but also the Black women her presence represents, young audiences can internalize those messages of who has power and who does not in society, based on class, racial, or gendered identities, perpetuating those social hierarchies.

### **ANTHROPOMORPHISM, A METHOD OF RECOGNITION**

A point of contention in *The Princess and the Frog* was that Tiana is not human for much of the movie.<sup>16</sup> Though audiences go in with the knowledge that Tiana is Black and will eventually become a princess—even when she is a frog—representing her as nonhuman for such a large portion of the movie creates a certain disconnect from the active reality that a working class Black woman is hopping towards a royal crowning, and all of the politics that entails. Since nonhuman characters can fall victim to racialization in popular culture through racist and stereotypical accents, language, and behavior that are often attributed to specific racial and ethnic groups, anthropomorphism has the ability to function as a tool of recognition.<sup>17</sup> Relying on audiences previously-developed knowledge or assumptions about race or racial markers, *The Princess and the Frog* can still claim a sense of racial recognition throughout Tiana's stint as an animal because of her vernacular, without presenting her as actually Black for much of the movie.

Anthropomorphism functions as both/and because it can rely on vernacular or phrasing to suggest race, while also providing enough ambiguity to not disrupt prejudiced or whiteness-



centered socio-political standards in film regarding race and racial integration. As discussed throughout this project, *The Princess and the Frog*'s reliance on old Hollywood racially-tinged tropes speaks to that ambiguity, which not only influences the effectiveness of recognition in the movie, but it also casts Disney's intentions in recognizing Black-Americans in a dubious light.

An example of how anthropomorphism depoliticizes otherwise socio-political issues in *The Princess and the Frog* is the relationship between Tiana and Naveen. Where nearly all other protagonists in Disney princess movies fall in love with or marry a prince/love interest with the same racial makeup, Tiana and Naveen represent one of Disney's only interracial couples, behind Pocahontas and John Smith. Historically, anti-miscegenation laws, which enforced racial segregation, were put into effect to most specifically prevent whites from marrying, procreating, cohabitating, and engaging in sexual relations with other races.<sup>18</sup> Disney does not specify Naveen's ethnicity, but leaves a string of ethnic possibilities. The prince is from the nonexistent land of Maldonia; Bruno Campos, a Brazilian-born actor, provides his voice; and the name "Naveen" has South Asian roots.

Though Tiana and Naveen are technically a mixed race couple, the term "interracial" seems to most often speak to Black/white relationships. Naveen's unidentified otherness/non-whiteness/greenness offers Disney a layer of protection from racial politics that would otherwise be present if the prince were Black or definitively white. If Naveen were Black, the movie could potentially be branded as a "Black movie," which would diminish *The Princess and the Frog*'s marketability. Donald Bogle explains that in most Hollywood movies that deal with Black themes, a white lead character has to anchor the story so mostly white audiences can relate or identify with the narrative.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever Disney's motivation for not providing Tiana with a Black prince, the couple's blended racial identities do present a progressive contrast to facets of popular media marketed toward adults that still exercise extreme caution when approaching interracial love and relationships. Often, only specific types of interracial relationships are acceptable in popular culture and unique to Tiana, Black women's narratives present in films for a broader market often portray those women without a partner all together, least of all a nonBlack one. However, anthropomorphism allows Disney to craft Tiana and Naveen as frogs throughout the movie—including some of the more pivotal scenes, e.g. when they fall in love—which diminishes the impact of this otherwise subversive act. For audience members who may perceive Disney to be teaching their children a lesson in love trumping racial barriers, or what the studio may perceive its own audience to have issues with, do not actually have to face it because the couple is technically green for most of the movie, and not mixed race.

*The Princess and the Frog* reflects the loophole anthropomorphism provides in the politics of recognition because though Disney "recognizes" Blackness by creating a space for a young Black woman to be a part of the princess franchise, it also shrouds some of the social, political and cultural implications of adding Tiana to that space by crafting her as a frog throughout the movie. Under those conditions, Disney treads the line between acknowledging Black womanhood and femininity because an increasingly progressive society says it is time and actually recognizing it as an identity that needs to actively become a part of the dominant culture. Anthropomorphism provides Disney and other moviemakers with a unique line of defense against critics who take issue with nonhuman characters that mirror historically racist tropes because, in a sense, animals (or cars, aliens, monsters, etc.) cannot be a race. However, when animals are substituted for humans but still maintain some type of racial (or racist)

distinctiveness, the racialized meaning becomes inscribed upon their animalized bodies as much as it would on an individual.

Beyond race, anthropomorphizing characters also obfuscates the discomfort of class differences existing in the same space. Tiana's Cajun firefly friend, Ray, represents a poor and working class subset of New Orleans residents, with various hegemonically-inscribed cultural markers of poverty like missing teeth and jumbled speak. Tiana, Ray, and Louis the trumpet-playing alligator, are able to walk alongside Naveen without conflict in spite of their marked economic differences. In reality or a non-Disney society, growing disparities in economic wealth among citizens in the United States and the racialization of poverty, would make this type of intimate union difficult, if not nearly impossible—where the elite joins forces with the impoverished. In “Locating America: Revisiting Disney’s *Lady and the Tramp*,” Daniel Goldmark and Utz McKnight argue “the society imagined by Disney exists through the avoidance of class conflict rather than through the successful interrogation of class exploitation.”<sup>20</sup> Whatever politics could arise from Tiana’s Blackness and her and other characters, class standing does not have to be dealt with because greenness and their animalness hides the otherness that would be more blatant if they were humans.

## **THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION CALL FOR AUTHENTICATING BLACKNESS**

When a large corporation that has previously avoided directly engaging with socio-politically marginalized groups decides to create a product or campaign that recognizes that group’s culture or distinctiveness, authenticators are needed. Recognition is not effective or meaningful on its own; the simple act of recognizing a group of people through a particular product does not immediately render credit for the producer. Instead, cultural experts are brought

in to authenticate the proposed recognition of different racial and ethnic groups—they certify that the product is indeed a legitimate representation of that group. Along with using anthropomorphism as a protectant from having meaningful conversations on race, ethnicity, and class, the Walt Disney Company also relied on authenticators to legitimize *The Princess and the Frog*. Bringing in Winfrey and others suggests Disney truly wanted to get *The Princess and the Frog* “right.”<sup>21</sup> It also shows that the studio had a certain level of investment in and commitment to its Black consumers for it to make such painstaking efforts to be as inoffensive as possible. At the same time, however, calling on Winfrey and others to legitimize its products also highlights the precision at which Disney executes calculated moves that it knows will create more revenue for the brand. Employing Winfrey’s consulting services raises an interesting perspective in terms of who has the credentials to rightfully or effectively authenticate a product meant to reach out to a whole mass of people. Winfrey, like Disney, developed a multibillion dollar business based on self-branding and pandering to mass, hegemonic audiences.<sup>22</sup> Winfrey’s relationship with mass audiences does not necessarily fracture her ability to stand up to the task of being an appropriate consultant for *The Princess and the Frog*, nor does it suggest that there is a “Black test,” or proof of how “Black” she is, that her fan base, billions of dollars, and corporate ties force her to fail. Instead, the question highlights Disney’s own business savvy in using Winfrey and the NAACP as Black authenticators.

In *Cultural Moves* (2005), Herman Gray acknowledges that in terms of representing or recognizing Blackness in the United States, “the question of who has a rightful claim on a particular version of blackness [...] no longer defines the terms of black cultural production.” Thus approval or authorization from neither Winfrey, the NAACP, nor any other ambassador to

the Black community were actually necessary for Disney's interpretation of Blackness to move forward. Instead, reaching out to Winfrey and others further insures Disney's product. The basic premise of *The Princess and the Frog* remained the same, before and after its consultations. Having Tiana work as a waitress with ties to a wealthy white family versus having "Maddy" work as a chambermaid for a wealthy white family are marginally different in terms of cultural stereotypes placed upon Black women in film. Disney recognizes a version of the Black-American female experience, but still shifts from one problematic representation to another problematic representation. That is less about recognition for the sake of shifting the dominant culture's perception of Black womanhood and femininity and more about rounding out its princess lineup.

Citing a 1995 *Washington Post* article, Kent A. Ono and Derek T. Buescher note that *Pocahontas* was a four-year project, where Disney made great moves to avoid "ethnic stereotyping."<sup>23</sup> Disney went so far as to hire American Indians to screen voices and serve as consultants for the movie. The scholars argue that as the *Washington Post* article suggests, "Native Americans are only useful to Disney insofar as they provide information, images, and a commodifiable 'sense of reality.'"<sup>24</sup> A similar argument can be made for *The Princess and the Frog*. Though Disney hired well-known Black actors to voice characters in the movie, as well bringing on consultants, the resulting narrative still fits into a specific construct of Black womanhood that Hollywood still almost exclusively uses to "recognize" Black-Americans and Black women in particular. Cultural authenticators help Disney sell their message and product better, especially if what is being sold represents an underrepresented culture. Some consumers may even feel more invested in the subordinated culture and feel more authentic themselves if

the product has that stamp of authenticity. Employing Winfrey's Blackness as a means to validate Disney's version of Blackness not only offers some placation to critics, but it also offers nonBlack viewers, who may have otherwise been under the impression that a movie featuring a Black princess would push some guilt-inducing political message, some peace given Oprah's unique ability to reach audiences across the socio-political spectrum.

## **RECOGNITION THROUGH HETERONORMATIVITY**

Beyond commodifying culture and selling nostalgia through dubious representations, the protagonist in Disney princess movies have traditionally been known to reflect a cultural and political shift or attitude of the time. Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario divides Disney's most famed princesses created under Walt Disney himself, including Snow White and Princess Aurora of *Sleeping Beauty*, and those later falling under Team Disney's creative vision including Ariel of *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin's* Jasmine, and Pocahontas.<sup>25</sup> "Under the peasant costume, Snow White is a 1920s/'30s starlet with a flapper's haircut, rosebud mouth, and high-pitched warble. She matures in the Depression and is happy to pitch in with the working class dwarves in times of high unemployment and poverty until she is found once again by her prince [...]"<sup>26</sup> As Snow White represents a princess of the Great Depression, Tiana also functions as a princess for the United States current political times.

Tiana reflects a cultural period where mass media have set its sights on examining the marriagability of successful and ambitious Black women. Similar to themes seen in *The Princess and the Frog*, a myriad of media outlets have chosen to recognize Black women's presence in the United States' cultural sphere by investigating their relationship to marriage and career

advancement. Promoting heteronormative marriage in popular culture—even when children are the target audience—is one of the key ways to enact patriarchal ideals on the larger culture.

Popular media has a long history of reinforcing patriarchal tropes, which Disney does through its fairy tales. As discussed in Chapter One, Black women have historically been recognized in Hollywood films as a safe, universal bridge to racial harmony, but only if they are tied to some form of domestication that relates them to a white majority. If Black female characters are left alone, without that tie to patriarchy or white heteronormativity, they become a threat to it.

The sudden spotlight on Black women's lives literally speaks to the politics of recognition, as that increased attention stands in tandem to mass media's exploration of the cultural significance of President Barack and First Lady Michelle Obama and their family. *The Princess and the Frog* is not necessarily a response to the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States' inauguration, but instead an attachment to an ever-growing media-created narrative that stands to impose an order of traditional social systems founded on religion, whiteness, and capitalistic patriarchy.

Announcements for *The Princess and the Frog* were made in early 2007<sup>27</sup> when then-Illinois United States senator Barack Obama announced his bid for presidency.<sup>28</sup> Obama garnered national attention in 2004, however, when he delivered a moving speech at the Democratic National Convention<sup>29</sup>; that exposure put him on the map, and subsequently Black Americans that could be aggressively marketed. By the time advertising and press was issued for *The Princess and the Frog*, President Obama was deftly on his way to the White House. The constant images of President and First Lady Obama at the inauguration—stylish, accomplished, and in love—sparked an influx of news reports that questioned why Black women had such low marrying rates compared to other ethnic groups.

Using the Obamas image(s) as a gateway to push a heteronormative agenda onto all single and successful Black women does not signal progression from negative stereotypes, which recognition theoretically has the potentiality to do. Instead, relegating Black women to a perpetual unmarried (and not by choice) status only creates a new set of tropes and characterizations that take effort to break down.

Despite progressive and feminist efforts that have attempted to shift American traditionalism from seeing women's success tied to marriage, these reports inadvertently do the opposite. The elders in Tiana's life—her parents and Mama Odie—push her towards heteronormativity and marriage from the moment she is a little girl wishing on a star to a young adult singing amidst rainbow-colored glass bottles in the bayou. James not only reminds Tiana that hard work is the only way to make dreams happen, he also tells her that she must not lose sight of what is most important. As the movie develops, audiences learn that her father was alluding to love being what is most important. After singing “Dig A Little Deeper” with Mama Odie and all of the animals of the bayou, Tiana still has her sights set on opening her restaurant. Mama Odie and the other animals frustration over Tiana missing the message of that rousing performance highlights that love carries the greatest importance, not a successful career. Offering some leeway for the fairytale framework that lends itself to the protagonist being married by the end of the movie, Tiana's experiences somewhat reflect that of the real Black-American women popular news programs and outlets like *Frontline*, *CNN*, and the *New York Times* interviewed. In both examples, the women—Tiana and the individuals interviewed—happily focus on their careers while outside voices—Tiana's parents, Mama Odie, and news producers—suggest they have misguided priorities because marriage is not their focus.

Focusing on Black women's marriage statistics and overall marriagability as a tool of



recognition does not exactly meet the goals that recognizing marginalized groups supposedly sets out to fulfill. Instead, it does two other things. Again, if Black women are not rendered apolitical through domestication or working in a white supremacist framework, they are a threat to patriarchy. Marriage becomes a way to maintain a perceived subordination to the male power structure. Like Tiana's independence and focus on her career, mass media's growing fascination with Black women choosing (or not) to remain single until the right person comes along speaks to a patriarchal fear of single, powerful women. Secondly, media's takeoff of why *Black women* who seem to have it all cannot "find" a husband<sup>30</sup> subtly reinforces the historical notion that Black women are not desirable. Just as it takes Tiana to not be Black for Naveen to fall in love with her and later Mama Odie expresses disappointment that Tiana does not seem to understand that marriage should be her end goal, the constant focus on Black women and marriage suggests that a successful, single Black woman must be damaged in some way. How can society or her immediate environment fix her? Not expanding the conversation on marriage to explore where it stands for many people in this modern age reaffirms Black women's marginality. The point of recognition, as a positive, becomes lost when the focus falls on the group or individual's perceived flaws.

Responding to inspiring pictures of Barack and Michelle Obama at the 2009 inauguration with rampant news reports that suggest Black people are not getting married enough frames the First Family as an anomaly. No matter the intent of bringing those conversations to the forefront of Americans consciousness, it stands to, again, foster feelings of illegitimacy in individuals on the receiving end of these acts of "recognition." Though *The Princess and the Frog* was already in the works during Obama's road to the White House, both the release of the movie and his inauguration stand as "historical bookends"<sup>31</sup> in American culture and popular culture's efforts to

recognize Black Americans as equitable citizens.

## SELLING RECOGNITION

Many scholars and writers have criticized the princess industrial complex that influences generations of young girls and women to believe in the Disney concept of love, marriage, and beauty that is difficult and expensive to attain.<sup>32</sup> Trying to reach that level of princessibility, however, creates a lot of wealth for corporations, and Disney remains on the frontline of collecting that wealth.<sup>33</sup> Promoting a fantastical love that results in marriage keeps Disney in consumers' pockets. If women are not concerned about when or if their prince will come, companies not only lose influence through their failed messages, but they also stand to lose potential revenue from women attempting to buy their own version of a Disney fairytale.<sup>34</sup>

Richard Breaux argues that Disney recognized “African-Americans have a wealth of purchasing power into which *The Princess and the Frog* could tap.”<sup>35</sup> Notice of the movie and its eventual release led Black consumers to flock to local retail stores and online, searching for any piece of product branded with Princess Tiana and the movie. Breaux reports:

In southern California, stories of mothers' planning Tiana parties, fathers spending \$90 each on faux princess dresses, for their 4 year-old daughters, accompanied other reports of long lines at Disney stores in parts of the country. In Washington, DC there was a run on Tiana dolls and getting them online seemed nearly as impossible.<sup>36</sup>

Until Tiana finds out that Prince Naveen wishes to propose to her, she vehemently expresses her lack of an interest in love and marriage—even as early as a little girl sitting on young Charlotte's pink-carpeted floor. Having finally purchased the riverfront site for her restaurant, Tiana serenades her mother, “Just doing what I do/look out boys/I'm coming through/and I'm almost there/I'm almost there.” Tiana's independent steps toward upward

mobility signal a departure from social pressures that suggest she needs a husband to have a fulfilling and engaged life. Cultural and political producers like Disney must keep women in a constant state of desire that can only be produced through impairing women's self-esteem and suggesting they buy more to make themselves a viable marrying partner and a more well-rounded woman. Popular culture not only roots itself in reinforced hegemony, but it is also intrinsically linked to capitalism. The production of *The Princess and the Frog* reflects that.

While at its core the movie recognizes young Black girls and women's desire to be recognized as princesses. The less romantic side of that, however, is the movie also increases Disney's profit margin as it presents a hand-delivered invitation to Black-Americans to indulge in the studio's consumerist model. Any message or image that can be marketed for a profit will be, and marginalized or subaltern groups still may not receive a fair representation of themselves. Henry Giroux and Grace Pollack (2010) argue this point. "It is difficult not to be cynical at what appears to be less a tribute to African American culture than a barely disguised attempt to round out the Disney Princess market base by targeting young black girls [...]"<sup>37</sup>

In her analysis of *The Princess and the Frog* as it relates to the 1930s animated shorts, *Little Ol' Bosko*, Jennifer L. Barker maintains, in a subtle defense of Disney, that a "realistic representation of history" is "fundamentally incompatible" with the larger desire or goal to appeal to "broad markets."<sup>38</sup> That assertion not only stands to invalidate legitimate critiques of *The Princess and the Frog*, it also allows for Disney to profit off misinformation, and in a sense, push propaganda onto audiences, young and old. Conceding to the idea that because Disney is in the business of making money and creating non-stereotypical or balanced portrayals of Blackness are somehow mutually exclusive of that goal highlights the insincerity of recognition. For as long as popular culture remains the vehicle through which the politics of recognition

manifests, it will always incite that duality. While the proposed goal of recognition is to bring subaltern groups into the foreground for greater social awareness and solidarity, popular culture's reliance on capitalism really reduces it to a numbers game. Recognition through Tiana and *The Princess and the Frog* becomes the price, literally, that Black-Americans have to pay to be a part of the dominant culture or mainstream. Disney *sells* Black-Americans recognition; in exchange, Blacks *buy* Disney's products. Rooted in a particular ideal, Disney's acknowledged goal has always been to sell as much as possible to as many people as possible. To succeed at that goal and maintain its following, Disney has had to create a solid message that people can easily buy into, literally and figuratively; race or ethnic identity and class become pawns in those capitalistic efforts.

The global media giant uses recognition as a vehicle to promote mass consumerism, commodification, and appropriation. The massive corporation escapes critique by mass audiences because the themes that Disney associates itself with are rooted in happiness and child-like innocence. Barker adds to that escapism by suggesting historical accuracy and capital success are mutually exclusive. Under the Disney business model, any culture or message can be sold if it is mass-produced and marketed properly, making children mini-consumers and appropriators along the way. As the brand was built upon Disney's strict belief in American individualism, hard work, and self-motivation, the baseline of any Disney narrative forcefully remains the same: hard work, patience, and with regards to romance, love, are tools necessary for women's advancement in society. That "Disney" stamp is what audiences have come to expect, movie after movie. What becomes sacrificed in creating a project where the goal is always to reach the largest number of people, while also maintaining the mass audience-approved Disney code of ethics, is historical accuracy and a space for engaged racial awareness. Producers of

popular culture and media must go beyond recognition as simply an acknowledgement of underrepresented groups' existence. For recognition to be truly effective in subverting those “confining or demeaning or contemptible” pictures of already-marginalized people, some authentic engagement with history—even in children-focused films—must occur.

## CONCLUSION

Given the historical relationship between Black women and popular culture, *The Princess and the Frog* shows some improvement in how the latter recognizes the former. Conscious efforts seem to have been made to make the racial typecasting subtler than it was in past Disney productions. While a popular culture can provide a unified sense of community and nation, it has great power to also negatively impact how individuals view themselves in relation to the rest of the world, and how they, possibly, view others within that same social environment. Given the disproportionate power that popular culture possesses, an act of recognition through those means of television, film, advertising, and other modes of production can have great influence on who receives what opportunities and allowances. Finally providing audiences with a Black princess could impact how young Black girls recognize their own beauty in the face of countless other images of whiteness. The existence of a Black princess could also influence how the larger society understands and accepts diversified beauty. The intricately linked relationship between popular culture and consumerism creates a rift in determining whether recognition can be viewed as positive or negative.

In the Age of Obama, the dominant culture is eager to declare the United States a post-racial society, which evidenced by this analysis, the country has not moved to a place where race, prejudiced thinking, and racism are not present issues. Within that framework, the complicatedness of race, class, ethnicity, and gender can either be ignored or presented in any fashion without regard to accuracy or impact it may have on the represented or recognized people. Breaux and Henry Giroux argue, “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.’ ”<sup>39</sup> Though groups or individuals who may finally be recognized in some outputs of popular culture gain varying benefits, it is still the producer of that recognition who gains the most.

For marginalized groups in particular, such as Black women and girls, recognition does not stand as a positive force when the message being sent suggests the inability to possess agency or power without endorsement from a man, usually in the form of marriage. It is perhaps too idealistic to expect Disney to move beyond the formula that has successfully carried it through almost one hundred years of cultural influence. It is worth, however, investigating or exploring that impact to expose the bottom line of consumerism. For Disney’s success, social engagement and responsibility seem to be only as important as the profitability level of that Disney product. As it relates to *The Princess and the Frog*, dismissing the need for critical engagement and critical expectations of Disney simply because of the complexities of racial representation lay incongruent with selling tickets treads on dangerous territory.

## CONCLUSION

As a scholar-cultural critic, my initial positive reaction to *The Princess and the Frog* speaks to Disney's grasp on the art of storytelling. The narrative that has always surrounded Disney suggests they are in the business of dream building, imagination fostering, and innocence supporting. The House of Mouse clearly does well with that narrative, but behind it lays a greater, more sacred goal: to make money. Setting the standard for what it means to market to children and turn them in to consumers, materialists, and appropriators, Disney executives—from Walt Disney himself all the way to his reincarnate, Michael Eisner—have made it clear to all employees that, as explained by the latter: “We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective.”<sup>1</sup> While most corporations are in the business of making money, and making it the easiest, most efficient way possible, it seems to be a more ruthless mode of living when the corporation being discussed is responsible for the largest output of children's entertainment. What messages do we want children adopting and internalizing? Looking at Eisner's private admission, it becomes extremely important to assess, analyze, critique, and explore the messages we receive as audience members and consumers in popular culture and media. Our cultural, social, and political wellbeing as members of a civilized society relies upon that critical engagement.

As J. Stanley Lemons uncovered regarding the implicitly racist anti-Black stereotypes in nineteenth century minstrelsy, mass audiences generally interpret popular culture, the images it projects, and the messages it promotes as simply entertainment. That false label of entertainment allows media companies like Disney to escape accountability. Allowing corporations responsible

for producing popular culture to hide behind an idea of entertainment essentially provides them with a free pass to oppress, subjugate, and marginalize. Without engaging in “Oppression Olympics,” it could easily be argued that Black people in the United States have been most affected by stereotypes and false ideologies presented as truth in popular culture. For that reason, *The Princess and the Frog* demands careful observation and analysis.

As expressed in Chapter One, since the advent of popular culture, perpetuated by the evolution of technology that produces it, Black women have been subjected to almost exclusively occupying domestic spaces. Maintaining a cultural system that suggests representations of Black women and Black womanhood are most believable to mass audiences when said women are cooking, cleaning, caretaking, and coddling is, indeed, an effect of slavery. As Melissa Harris-Perry found in her research for the book, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, these near constant images of Black women marginalized by racialized gender discrimination have a real and tangible impact on women’s lives and how their/our identities form. Entertainment cannot innocently remain as such when many of the messages it promotes impacts how the larger society formulates thoughts and opinions on Black women, on the job, at home, in private, and in public.

Chapter Two also speaks to the slavery-rooted practice of having Black women stand in tandem to white women, both forced to battle for the title of true womanhood and femininity. Making Charlotte nearly intolerable for much of the movie so that Tiana may get the prince almost reinscribes the idea that white women *are* more desirable and epitomize womanhood and femininity. Charlotte’s extreme behavior suggests that such measures have to be taken in order for Tiana to outshine her white competition. Despite the subtle subtext of Tiana and Charlotte’s bid for Naveen’s love, Tiana wins the title of “princess” by the end of the movie. Largely



focused on saving money and dreaming of her restaurant, notions of love and marriage are put in Tiana's head by outside forces. Word of a marriage proposal and a little prodding from her spiritual mother, Mama Odie leads Tiana down a path toward matrimony and love. Previously disinterested in such fairy tale ideals, Tiana's ambition was focused on fulfilling her father's dreams. Tiana's autonomy regarding her plans for success that do not involve marriage speaks to a fear that ambitious single women—and historically speaking, Black women—are a threat to not only patriarchy, but also a disturbance to the very core of a capitalist, heterosexist culture.

Within the context of the movie, *The Princess and the Frog* is part of a multibillion-dollar franchise that has created the princess industrial complex, influencing women and girls to shop their way towards a happily ever after. As discussed in Chapter Three, extratextually the movie runs parallel to conversations happening in popular mass media that claims there is a crisis in Black marriage. Since the emergence of President Obama, these news reports argue that despite their success, beauty, and ambition, many Black women are “unable” to get married. This propagandist effort masked as investigative journalism and scholarship serves to lure more women into the capitalist trap that is heterosexist consumerism.

Through Disney's obvious difficulties with the historical nature of the intersectionalities of race, class, and gender in *The Princess and the Frog*, the movie must be recognized as a significant piece of work. Under the historical conditions of misrecognition and the effects it has had on women's lives, *The Princess and the Frog* was rightfully greeted with eagerness and anticipation. For the impact Disney has on influencing beauty standards in popular culture, a Black princess could potentially instill in young Black girls a greater sense of inclusion and self-worth that has not been fully possible before the movie. Seeing Tiana crowned a Disney princess could also have a meaningful impact on how the dominant culture receives Blackness as another

standard of beauty. Scholar Sharon Raynor talks of the impact her first Black Barbie had on her self-esteem and self-worth as a young Black girl living in a culture that too often ignores the beauty of racialized individuals in an effort to uphold an inherently racist and white supremacist standard of attractiveness. She says, “My first black Barbie blurred the lines between race, class, and gender because it became a symbol of acceptance, identity, and power. It allowed me, as a young girl, to identify with something that somewhat resembled me and to challenge the perception of others.”<sup>2</sup> That is the complex duality of popular culture and recognition. It is undeniable that *The Princess and the Frog* carries major cultural significance for many people, but it complicatedly subverts—with the presence of Tiana—and reinscribes—by creating her in the spirit of Hollywood’s apoliticized Blackness. That duality is at the root of the politics of recognition. The impact of that bipolarity cannot be known immediately, but it does carry influence in popular culture and the American cultural landscape.

Some may argue that as a children’s film, *The Princess and the Frog* does not have to be held to certain standards of criticism or cultural awareness. However, the genre it falls into means that it should be held to an even greater standard of awareness and sensitivity. Given *The Princess and the Frog*’s target audience, it obviously would not have been appropriate to display the full extent to what hardships a young woman like Tiana would have faced at that time in New Orleans. However, Disney’s avoidance of the complexities of American history and race relations diminishes the impact skin color and gender often has on one’s economic opportunities and social mobility in the real world. Race, as a social construction, in part manifests itself through a racialized individual’s distinct experiences related to standards placed upon them in a culture guided by whiteness. The American Girl franchise, which perhaps is the only other “little girl dream builder” to rival Disney’s princess line, has taken on complex social issues and been

met with great success. Thus, the issue becomes not so much if young children can handle authentic lessons on history like slavery, but if Disney is willing to produce them.

A fact that often gets overlooked is that we, as audiences, can be entertained by popular culture and still hold it accountable when it becomes problematic. Existing in a capitalist-commodity-consumerist-materialist culture, there is often little desire beyond academia, and now online blogs, to upset the system(s) that oppress and hurt us because we are trained to want to join that system instead of challenge it. Our ability, as Americans, popular media consumers, and individuals, to buy and consume, without questioning corporations intent, allows us to remain psychological and social prisoners to racial, gender, and cultural oppression. If we do not ask questions like: why after so many years of no positive Black characters, does Disney's first Black princess (originally) have to be a maid? Why did *her* prince have to be broke? What is the meaning behind her not marrying a Black prince when all other princesses have been able to marry intraracially? With having such a close relationship with her father, why did he have to die, especially when much of popular media paints Black men as neglectful fathers? Or perhaps even more relevant to modernity, why did Tiana need to get married at all? Should mass media or Americans still support the "every girl just wants to be a princess" narrative? These are all questions that can be asked while still enjoying *The Princess and the Frog*. These types of critically engaged questions hopefully hold media and cultural institutions like Disney accountable and challenge them to offer audiences something more progressive and reflective of the times.

Many facets of popular entertainment have finally begun to deeply explore race and the complexities of living Black in America beyond music and sports after years of neglect.<sup>3</sup>

However, in the eagerness to bask in finally being recognized on a larger level, many Black consumers are failing to critically engage in texts that hurt the overall progressiveness of the social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the images we see today of Black Americans are updated versions of what has been seen over the last 100 years. That is not to say there have not been great improvements to how Black people are recognized in popular culture, but much work still needs to be done.

Bell hooks' argument that most Black people have been educated in a white supremacist system therefore it makes it difficult for them to engage in critical conversations about mass media<sup>4</sup> suggests that it is almost easier to accept calls for assimilation and disengagement. Noting how promoting whiteness inevitably leads to the defamation of Blackness, hooks persuades Black-Americans to see “loving Blackness as political resistance” against the dominant culture. What hooks means by “loving Blackness” is that Black-Americans must begin to challenge, critique, and denounce mainstream representations of them. The scholar challenges many factions of Black representation and portrayals in popular culture, including film, music, and television by linking them to their implicitly racist foundation.

Blacks must view trends that say or suggest heterosexist, (upper) middle-class, white/whiteness is what all others should aspire to be or assimilate to, in terms of language, appearance, class, and culture, as harmful as they are. It takes more than deconstructing whiteness to make room for positive representations of Blackness in popular media, culture, and politics. To love Blackness, cultural producers must make spaces for Black artists' to create and offer insight. Allowing Blacks to have more agency over Black narratives does, in no way, mean whites are not allowed to explore Black issues or aesthetics. However, narratives about Blacks created by white producers, screenwriters, directors, and advertising creative teams cannot be our

only access to the Black Diaspora in popular culture. Hooks suggests liberal ideals about Black people, and race as a whole, promotes the “assumption that social equality can be attained without changes in the culture’s attitudes about Blackness and Black people.”<sup>5</sup> Consumers must in turn support those ventures; Spike Lee is not the only independent Black director with a message and desire to make movies.

Loving Blackness is not about hating white people; whiteness and white people are separate. It is the institution of whiteness that must be dismantled. Loving Blackness is not a task only to be fulfilled by Black people, either. James H. Cone finds the key to the dominant culture’s redemption is to renounce whiteness and adopt Blackness.<sup>6</sup> He suggests that in order for oppression to cease, whites, as a majority, must frame their minds within the spectrum of Black thought and experience. They must begin to shape their lenses from the perspective of the oppressed, rather than oppressor. Cone looks at the atrocities of American Indians, Black-Americans, “the persecution of Jews, the oppression of Mexican-Americans, and every other conceivable inhumanity done in the name of God and country—these brutalities can be analyzed in terms of the white American inability to recognize humanity in persons of color.”<sup>7</sup>

A sentiment also found throughout various feminist theories, Cone suggests that in order to dismantle the “oppressive character of white society,” Blacks and other members of oppressed racial and ethnic groups must begin to (re)affirm their identity “in terms of the reality that is antiwhite.”<sup>8</sup> Inspired by Cone’s work, hooks uses this model to build the foundation of her argument on loving Blackness as political resistance. Deconstructing whiteness leads to a more favorable understanding and acceptance of Blackness. However, Cone and hooks contend that in order for Blackness to be accepted by Blacks and nonBlacks, thoughts on whiteness all together must evolve.<sup>9</sup> Again, it is important to note that “whiteness” is an ideology, a cultural and

political thought. To call for an end to it, scholars like hooks and Cone are asking people to let go of the mentality that forces society to see “white” as good, dominant, and righteous.<sup>10</sup> We all benefit from loving Blackness.

Many news organizations have explored the possibility that the Age of Obama signals a post-racial America. The narrative that the United States has somehow moved beyond race with the election of Barack Obama makes navigating representations of people of color even trickier. Those who profit from producing popular culture, and the subsequent effects of its messaging, are able to use Obama’s election as proof that progress and social acceptance has been achieved and exist by the superficiality of skin color. This argument leads way to the problem with multiculturalism and assimilation discussed by Charles E. Fager after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling on desegregation. He argues there were essentially two options for Blacks: “token integration” or simply integration.<sup>11</sup> The former would allow for a select number of Blacks to be introduced into “white-controlled institutions” that would not upset the white majority, but would appease Blacks’ desire for entry into the American mainstream. The other type of integration reflected assimilation into a more colorblind society, which is where mass media and popular conversations in social politics attempt to lead us presently with talks of post-racial America.<sup>12</sup>

In the time that it has taken me to complete this project, there have been countless stories that mark the influence popular culture has on the dominant culture’s understanding of Black women and how they/we fit into American society. These stories also prove that the United States is nowhere close to being post-racial. There were the anti abortion billboards throughout the United States that said, “The most dangerous place for an African-American is in the womb.” That narrative suggests that compared to all of the other dangerous places a Black person could

be—like a KKK rally—the Black woman’s womb signals the demise of Black people’s sustainability. These skewed narratives may be innocently passed off as “information” or an ill-informed person’s reality, but they have real consequences on racial harmony, how the dominant culture understands Black women’s troubled history and experiences in the United States.

Popular images of Black women—less than two hundred years after the abolishment of slavery—working as maids, housekeepers, cooks, nannies, and white caretakers, even if on an emotional level, affect how Black women work themselves into a public space in the United States. Relying on old racist stereotypes of Black women as Sapphires, Mammies, and Jezebels—whose sexuality is either nonexistent or only raises male desire behind closed doors—only leads to racist psychology passed off as truth, as evidenced in a 2011 *Psychology Today* article that asserted a study revealed that, “objectively,” Black women are rated less attractive than other women. We, as consumers and viewers, allow for popular culture to continue producing narratives that only see Black womanhood and Black women as props to reinforce the superiority of white womanhood when we see the movie, buy the DVD, and purchase all of the branded products tied to its existence. Passive acceptance of mass media that attempts to assuage liberal white guilt over slavery, violence during the Civil Rights Movement, economic disparities from racial discrimination, and countless other forms of institutionalized oppression, manifest themselves in movies like *The Help*. The success of that movie (and the book) and the success of *The Princess and the Frog* reveal that Americans are in need of seeing Black women’s experiences on screen. How media producers supply that need, however, often proves to be ineffectual in creating real socio-political and cultural changes.

Through its distribution companies, production houses, channels and networks, and theme parks, Disney owns a large portion of the world's cultural resources. What makes Disney perhaps more dangerous than other culture producers is its ideology. The Disney-branded approach to life not only has the potentiality to influence public perception, but it has also shown proof of doing just that. Children's media is cleared of accountability because its target audiences are largely innocent, and seemingly without critical analytical or processing skills. Henri Giroux asserts, however, "This isn't just about entertainment, it's about education. We have to take pop culture seriously and put it into our curriculums [...] Students have to learn to read culture. We're not just dealing with friendly Walt."<sup>13</sup> The seeming disappointment many Black parents and cultural critics were faced with upon viewing *The Princess and the Frog*, in many ways, shows Disney's complacency toward being sincerely or authentically invested in the lives of those who remain hopeful of its ability to offer a recognition of Blacks' value beyond the South and beyond being the help can be revealed. Disney has developed into a multibillion-dollar business, not by specializing its narratives for the specific interests of niche groups, but by creating a grand, monolithic approach to life that can speak to all people, beyond race, beyond class, gender, and social politics. That disappointment from Black parents and cultural critics shows, in a number of ways, how much work Disney still has to do. While slavery and Southern-themed nostalgia has proven time and again to be a fruitful genre for popular culture to explore, the cycle has to be broken so that more nuanced, multilayered manifestations of Blackness, Black identity, and Black womanhood may flourish.



## NOTES

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### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Official Princess and the Frog Production Notes. Page 1.

<sup>2</sup> hooks, bell. (1996) *Reel to Real: race sex and class at the movies*. Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> hooks, bell. (1992) *Black Looks: race and representation*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

<sup>4</sup> Giroux, Henry A. and Grace Pollack. (2010) *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

<sup>5</sup> Walt Disney Company *The Princess and the Frog* Final Production Notes. 16 November 2009. p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Lester, Neal A. (2010) Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*: The Pride, the Pressure, and the Politics of Being a First. *The Journal of American Culture* Volume 33, Number 4. pp.294-307.

Schickel, Richard. (1997) *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art, and Commerce of Walt Disney*. Chicago, IL: Elephant Paperbacks.

Wasko, Janet. (2001) *Understanding Disney*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc.

<sup>7</sup> "Bidding for Disney: The Overview: Valuing Disney: What Is a Mouse Worth?" The New York Times. 13 February 2004.

<sup>8</sup> In November of 2007, *Newsweek* featured "Princess Power," a story on the \$4 billion profit Disney's princess line generated for the company since 2000.

<sup>9</sup> hooks, bell. (1995) *Killing Rage Ending Racism*. New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks.

<sup>10</sup> Lester, 2010, p. 294.

<sup>11</sup> Rob Edwards co-wrote the screenplay with Musker and Clements.

<sup>12</sup> Nellalou. (2011) *Madhushala*. Retrieved from <http://notwoo.wordpress.com/>

<sup>13</sup> In *Black Looks* (1992), hooks explores James Cone's work where he suggests that the United States was "founded for whites and everything that has happened in it has emerged from the white perspective."

<sup>14</sup> CNN, the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, among others began looking at the notion of a post-racial America and if the country was actually there. The idea was that with President Obama's election, the United States had finally come to a place where white people were finally able to see past race or at least no longer judge a person's merits and skills by their race.

<sup>15</sup> Dyer, Richard. (1997) *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. London, ENG: Routledge.

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- <sup>16</sup> Dyer, 1997, p. 1
- <sup>17</sup> Dyer, 1997, p. 1
- <sup>18</sup> McIntosh, Peggy. (1988) "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. Wellesley, MA.
- <sup>19</sup> Dyer, 1997, p. 3.
- <sup>20</sup> Nadel, Alan. (2005) *Television in Black-and-White America: Race and National Identity*. University Press of Kansas.
- <sup>21</sup> Nadel, 2005, p. 3.
- <sup>22</sup> Dyer, 1997, p. 50.
- <sup>23</sup> Dyer, 1997, p. 51.
- <sup>24</sup> Sammond, Nicholas and Chandra Mukerji. " "What Are You...I Wouldn't Eat" " Ethnicity, Whiteness, and Performing "the Jew" In Hollywood's Golden Age" (2001). *Classic Hollywood Classic Whiteness*, Daniel Bernardi (Ed.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- <sup>25</sup> Sammond and Mukerji, 2001, p. 4.
- <sup>26</sup> Sammond and Mukerji, 2001, p. 5.
- <sup>27</sup> Anderson, 1997, p. 9.
- <sup>28</sup> I use the word "nonsexual" instead of "asexual" because the latter regards a certain level of agency in one's sexuality that lacking, or taken away from women who fulfill the mammy role.
- <sup>29</sup> Bogle, Donald. (2001) *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- <sup>30</sup> Bogle, 2001, p. 9.
- <sup>31</sup> Anderson, Lisa M. (1997). *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- <sup>32</sup> Anderson, 1997, p. 10.
- <sup>33</sup> Anderson, 1997, p. 10.
- <sup>34</sup> Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia. Retrieved from <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/Sapphire/>
- <sup>35</sup> Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia
- <sup>36</sup> McElya, Micki. (2007). *Clinging to Mammy: the Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- <sup>37</sup> McElya, 2007, p.46.
- <sup>38</sup> Long, Alecia P. (2005) *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920*.

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<sup>39</sup> hooks, 1995, p. 146.

## **Chapter 1: Mammy for the Mass(a)es : Protecting White Male Patriarchy and Promoting Assimilation Through Remnants of Anti-Black Female Stereotyping**

<sup>1</sup> Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. (1982). *But Some of Us Are Brave: But Some of Us Are Brave: All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men: Black Women's Studies*. New York, NY: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York.

<sup>2</sup> Wallace-Sanders, Kimberly. (2008) *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

<sup>3</sup> Vanessa. (27 July 2007). "The Disney Princess Industrial Complex is coming for your soul!" *Feministe*. Retrieved from: <http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2007/07/27/the-disney-princess-industrial-complex-is-coming-for-your-soul/>

<sup>4</sup> Lemons, J. Stanley. (1977). "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920." *American Quarterly*, Volume 29 No. 1. pp. 102-116.

<sup>5</sup> Jewell, K. Sue. (1993) *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images & the Shaping of US Social Policy*. London, ENG: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> A lyric from the song, "My Mammy," with music written by Walter Donaldson and lyrics provided by Joe Young and Sam M. Lewis. First sung by William Frawley, of *I Love Lucy* fame, the song was popularized by Al Jolson, which he performed in blackface in many of his films and on Broadway.

<sup>7</sup> McElya, Micki. (2007) *Clinging to Mammy: the Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>8</sup> McElya, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Lemons, 1977, p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> Lemons, 1977, p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> Lemons, 1977, p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> Lemons, 1977, p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> Wallace-Sanders, 2008, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Wallace-Sanders, 2008, Figure 22

<sup>15</sup> Further discussed in Chapter Two, Disney clearly constructs Tiana as the more mature and levelheaded one of the two girls, which could be expressed through height or size. The historicity of mammy's responsibility to not only serve as a caretaker, but also nurture and protect her white charges, gives Tiana's size over Charlotte greater meaning.

<sup>16</sup> *The Princess and the Frog* final production notes, November 2009.

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<sup>17</sup> Polowy, Kevin. (24 September 2009). "Does Disney's 'Princess and the Frog' Deserve the Controversy?" *Moviefone*. Retrieved from:  
<http://insidemovies.moviefone.com/2009/09/24/princess-and-the-frog-controversy/>

<sup>18</sup> Polowy, 2009.

When analyzing children's media, it can always be argued that children are too young to process these images and messages as anything other than the supposed innocence they are marketed as. It could also be argued that children—those part of the dominant culture and those who are not—may not have yet developed skills to recognize their positionality in society to know how they benefit from racial, class, and gendered privilege or not. Unfortunately, at an early age, children do have an understanding of race and racial differences in terms of beauty, behavior, and opportunities.<sup>18</sup> In many cases, even without firsthand experiences or knowledge of racial discrimination, children—most specifically Black and white—recognize a difference between the two, which is only reinforced by much of popular culture and mass media, including children's entertainment.

<sup>19</sup> Tiana is not technically Disney's first Black princess. Walt Disney Television aired *Cinderella* in 1997 with pop/R&B singer Brandy in the title role. Also, regarding Tiana's role as a waitress turned renowned chef, former New Orleans resident and former Deputy of Communications for the Mayor of New Orleans, James D. Ross, admits making a living in the Crescent City as a chef and restaurant owner carries some prestige. "While I agree that this constrains Tiana to the service industry, I do think her role as a chef is complicated because she is in New Orleans, where everybody wants to be a chef and own a restaurant. These are the most prominent (and often most wealthy) people in town because this is a foodie town."

<sup>20</sup> Breaux, Richard M. (2010). "After 75 Years of Magic: Disney Answers Its Critics, Rewrites African-American History, and Cashes In on Its Racist Past." *Journal of African American Studies*. pp. 398-416.

<sup>21</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, Tamara. (2005). "Keeping Up Appearances, Getting Fed up: the Embodiment of Strength Among African-American Women." *Meridians Volume 5 No. 2*. pp. 104-123.

<sup>22</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. (2004) *Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

<sup>23</sup> Collins, 2004, p. 140.

<sup>24</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, Tamara. (2005). "Keeping Up Appearances, Getting Fed up: the Embodiment of Strength Among African-American Women." *Meridians Volume 5 No. 2*. pp. 104-123.

<sup>25</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, Tamara. *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance*. (2009) Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

<sup>26</sup> McElya, 2007, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Gubar, Susan. (1997) *Race Changes: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

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- <sup>28</sup> Bogle, Donald. (2001) *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- <sup>29</sup> Citing a series of examples from art, television, and film, Susan Gubar theorizes white obsession with the Black male body. She asserts, “The image of the black man has displayed both an intensification and a diminishment of masculinity.”<sup>29</sup> Through bigoted and racist constructions of Black male sexuality, the black man is reduced to his sexual appendage, which is only representative of masculinity, and not the phallus, a symbol of power. Using Lacanian terms, Gubar contends that the black man “has nor ever will have the phallus” or power.
- <sup>30</sup> Dyer, Richard. “Homosexuality and Film Noir.” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. Retrieved from <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC16folder/HomosexFilmNoir.html>
- <sup>31</sup> Do Rozario, Rebecca-Anne C. (2004) “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess.” *Women’s Studies in Communications Volume 27 No 1*. pp. 34-59.
- <sup>32</sup> In Disney’s *Aladdin*, when confronted with Jafar in one of the climaxing scenes, Princess Jasmine attempts to con him with what reads as an act of seduction.
- <sup>33</sup> McElya, 2007, p. 46.
- <sup>34</sup> McElya, 2007, p. 46.
- <sup>35</sup> McElya, 2007, p. 161.
- <sup>36</sup> Do Rozario, 2004, p. 35.
- <sup>37</sup> King, C. Richard, Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo. (2010) *Animating Difference: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Films for Children*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- <sup>38</sup> Schickel, Richard. (1997) *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art, and Commerce of Walt Disney*. Chicago, IL: Elephant Paperbacks..
- <sup>39</sup> Barker, Jennifer L. (2010) “Hollywood, Black Animation, and the Problem of Representation in *Little Ol’ Bosko* and *The Princess and the Frog*.” *Journal of African American Studies*. pp. 482-498.
- <sup>40</sup> Wise, Tim. (2010) *Color-Blind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat From Racial Equity*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books/ Open Media Series.

## **Chapter 2: Sisters by Circumstance: The Historicity of Southern White Superiority in Black and White Female Relationships**

- <sup>1</sup> Vera, Hernán and Andrew M. Gordon. (2003) *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

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- <sup>2</sup> Vera and Gordon, 2003, p. 33.
- <sup>3</sup> Morgan, Joan. (1999) *When Chicken-Heads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down*. New York, NY: Touchstone
- <sup>4</sup> Morgan, 1999, p. 95. .
- <sup>5</sup> Morgan, 1999, p. 95.
- <sup>6</sup> Walt Disney Company *The Princess and the Frog* Final Production Notes. 16 November 2009. p. 7.
- <sup>7</sup> Giddings, Paula. (1984) *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York, NY: Amistad, Harper Collins Publishers.
- <sup>8</sup> Giddings, 1984, p. 43.
- <sup>9</sup> Giddings, 1984, p. 47.
- <sup>10</sup> hooks, bell. (1995). *Killing Rage Ending Racism*. New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks.
- <sup>11</sup> hooks, 1995, p. 78.
- <sup>12</sup> Giddings, Paula, 1984, p. 47.
- <sup>13</sup> Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. (1988) *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- <sup>14</sup> Disney animators and cartoonists made some adjustments to the large, saucer-eyed look for Mulan and Pocahontas.
- <sup>15</sup> Walt Disney Company *The Princess and the Frog* Final Production Notes. 16 November 2009. p. 1.
- <sup>16</sup> Do Rozario, Rebecca-Anne C. (2004) *The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, The Function of the Disney Princess*. *Women's Studies in Communication, Volume 27*, 34-59.
- <sup>17</sup> Lester, Neal A., (2010) "Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*: The Pride, the Pressure, and the Politics of Being a First." *The Journal of American Culture Volume 33, No. 4*.
- <sup>18</sup> King, C. Richard, Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo. (2010). *Animating Difference: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Films for Children*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- <sup>19</sup> King et al., 2010, p. 163.
- <sup>20</sup> Categorically speaking, these characterizations of Disney princesses speak to princess characters from Ariel of the *Little Mermaid* down. The general trope of fairytale princesses is that they are waiting for the prince/knight in shining armor to save them from the drudgery that is singlehood.
- <sup>21</sup> Walt Disney Company *The Princess and the Frog* Final Production Notes. 16 November 2009. p. 4.

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- <sup>22</sup> Bogle, Donald. (2001). *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- <sup>23</sup> Bogle, 2001, p. 46.
- <sup>24</sup> Bogle, 2001, p. 45.
- <sup>25</sup> Vera and Gordon, 2003, p. 33.
- <sup>26</sup> Vera and Gordon, 2003, p. 33.
- <sup>27</sup> Cone, James H. (1986) *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- <sup>28</sup> Also, as a worldwide cultural institution, it could be argued that Tiana serves as both the world and Disney's first Black princess, which makes Charlotte, as the "Great White Hope," even more problematic.
- <sup>29</sup> Vera and Gordon, 2003, p. 34.
- <sup>30</sup> Vera and Gordon, 2003, p. 34.
- <sup>31</sup> Walt Disney Company *The Princess and the Frog* Final Production Notes. 16 November 2009. p. 7.
- <sup>32</sup> King, et al., 2010, p. 162.
- <sup>33</sup> King et al., 2010, p. 163.
- <sup>34</sup> hooks, 1995, p. 112.
- <sup>35</sup> hooks, 1995, p. 113.
- <sup>36</sup> hooks, 1995, p. 114.

### **Chapter 3: The Politics of Recognition: Pushing Black Femininity Toward Heteronormativity**

<sup>1</sup> Academic scholarship and online fan sites turn up different results regarding how many Disney princesses there are. Though Mulan and Pocahontas appear in some Disney princess-branded products, they are often considered heroines, rather than princesses. A banner on the Disney Princess website features Jasmine, Ariel, Tiana, Sleeping Beauty/Aurora, Cinderella, Belle, Rapunzel (in *Tangled* released 2010), and Snow White.

<sup>2</sup> Popular Black women's lifestyle magazines, including *Essence*, *Ebony*, and the online publication, *Clutch Magazine* ran stories, from the announcement of a Black princess in 2007 to the movie's release in 2009, about the promise the movie held and how it answered long held questions about the presence of a Black princess.

<sup>3</sup> Misick, Bobbi. "Controversy Over 'The Princess and the Frog'." *Essence*. 29 November 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.essence.com/2009/11/30/critics-dispute-princess-and-the-frog/>.

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<sup>4</sup> Lucas, Demetria. It Ain't Easy Being Green: 'Princess and the Frog.' *Essence*. 25 November 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.essence.com/2009/11/25/it-aint-easy-being-green-princess-and-th/>.

<sup>5</sup> Tiana's debut and influence on many Black parents excited for their daughters was so great that the princess sparked a suit filed on the *Judge Mathis Show*. A Black mother hired a children's party company to have a "Princess Tiana" come to her daughter's birthday party, and instead they sent over Snow White.

<sup>6</sup> Breaux, Richard M. (2010). "After 75 Years of Magic: Disney Answers Its Critics, Rewrites African-American History, and Cashes In on Its Racist Past." *Journal of African American Studies*. pp. 398-416.

Giroux, Henry A. and Grace Pollack. (2010). *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, Charisse. "Disney adds African American Princess Tiana to royal family." *USA Today*. 16 February 2009. Retrieved from [http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/retail/2009-02-15-disney-black-princess-tiana\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/retail/2009-02-15-disney-black-princess-tiana_N.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Harris-Perry, Melissa V. (2011). *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Lemons, J. Stanley. (1977). "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920." *American Quarterly*. Volume 29 No. 1. pp. 102-116.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, Charles. (1992). *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition."* Amy Gutmann (Ed.) Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Raynor, Sharon, (2009) "My First Black Barbie: Transforming the Image." *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* Volume 9 Number 2. pp. 179-185.

<sup>12</sup> Raynor, 2009, p. 183.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, 2011, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Raynor, 2009, p. 180.

<sup>15</sup> Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Prince, Shannon. (2009) "The Princess and the Frog and the Critical Gaze." *Racialicious*. Retrieved from <http://www.racialicious.com/2009/05/13/the-princess-and-the-frog-and-the-critical-gaze-essay/>

<sup>17</sup> Lugo-Lugo, Carmen R. and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo. (2009) "Look Out New World, Here We Come"? Race, Racialization, and Sexuality in Four Children's Animated Films by Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks. *Cultural Studies--> Critical Methodologies*, Volume 9 Number 2, pp.166-178.

<sup>18</sup> McGuire, Danielle L. (2010) *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York, NY: Alfred A Knopf.



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- <sup>19</sup> Bogle, Donald. (2001) *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- <sup>20</sup> Goldmark, Daniel and Utz McKnight. (2008). "Locating America: Revisiting Disney's Lady and the Tramp." *Social Identities* Volume 14 No. 1. pp. 101-120.
- <sup>21</sup> Breaux, 2010, p. 402.
- <sup>22</sup> Schlesinger, Jill. (2011) "Oprah's Billions: Adding Up the Money." *CBS Money Watch*. Retrieved from [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505123\\_162-38044105/oprahs-billions-adding-up-the-money/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505123_162-38044105/oprahs-billions-adding-up-the-money/)
- <sup>23</sup> Ono, Kent A. and Derek T. Buescher. (2001) "Deciphering Pocahontas: Unpackaging the Commodification of a Native American Woman." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. Vol. 18, No.1, March 2001, pp. 23-43.
- <sup>24</sup> Ono and Buescher, 2001, p. 36.
- <sup>25</sup> Do Rozario, Rebecca-Anne C. (2004) The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, The Function of the Disney Princess. *Women's Studies in Communication*, Volume 27, 34-59.
- <sup>26</sup> Do Rozario, 2004, p. 38.
- <sup>27</sup> msnbc.com news services. "Disney first: black princess in animated film." TODAY MOVIES. 12 March 2007. Retrieved from <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/17524865#.TnA-VRzerCA>.
- <sup>28</sup> Murray, Shailagh and Chris Cillizza. "Obama Jumps Into Presidential Fray." *The Washington Post*. 17 January 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/16/AR2007011600529.html>.
- <sup>29</sup> Murray and Cillizza, 2007.
- <sup>30</sup> Jumping into a sea of other reporters, Cynthia McFadden, journalist for Disney-owned Nightline on ABC interviewed a series of successful Black women living in Atlanta, alongside comedian-turned relationship expert, Steve Harvey, in 2009 about their—and forty-two percent of other never married Black women—inability to secure a (Black) husband.
- <sup>31</sup> Breaux, 2010, p. 415.
- <sup>32</sup> Dill, Karen. (2009) "First Black Disney Princess Debuts, 70+ Years After Snow White." *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/how-fantasy-becomes-reality/200912/first-black-disney-princess-debuts-70-years-after-snow-white>
- <sup>33</sup> Essig, Laurie. (2011) "The princess-industrial complex." *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/love-inc/201101/the-princess-industrial-complex>.
- <sup>34</sup> Wedding dress designer partnered with Disney to create a series of Disney princess-inspired dresses with the tagline, "Your Fairy Tale Awaits..."
- <sup>35</sup> Breaux, 2010, p. 414.
- <sup>36</sup> Breaux, 2010, p. 414.

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<sup>37</sup> Giroux and Pollack, 2010, p.123.

<sup>38</sup> Barker, 2010, p. 483.

<sup>39</sup> Breaux, 2010, p. 404.

## Conclusion

<sup>1</sup> Newsom, Jennifer Siebel. (Director). (2011). *Miss Representation*. [Documentary]. United States: Girl's Club Entertainment.

<sup>2</sup> Raynor, Sharon. (2009) "My First Black Barbie: Transforming the Image." *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies Volume 9 Number 2*. pp. 179-185.

<sup>3</sup> Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* debuted with a predominantly Black female cast, save for one white female, and was the first show of its kind to display an inside look at the personal and social lives of affluent Black Americans. Though the reality show sparked a lucrative trend in exposing Black new money wealth, which has led to a whole franchise of like shows on VH1 (*Basketball Wives*, *Love & Basketball*, and *Single Ladies*), it has only reinforced anti-Black (female) stereotypes like the Jezebel and Sapphire/angry Black woman, as well as Blacks can only gain wealth through sports and entertainment.

<sup>4</sup> hooks, bell. (1992) *Black Looks: race and representation*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

<sup>5</sup> hooks, 1992, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Cone, James H. (1986) *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

<sup>7</sup> Cone, 1986, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Cone, 1986, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> hooks, 1992, p. 12

<sup>10</sup> hooks, 1992, p.12

<sup>11</sup> Fager, Charles E. (1967) *White Reflections on Black Power*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>12</sup> Fager, 1967, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Robertson, Gail. (1992) "Snow Whitey?" *Canadian Dimensions. Volume 32 Issue 5*. pp.45-49.

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