From the Advent of Multiculturalism to the Erasure of Race: The Representation of Race Relations in Disney Animated Features

(1995-2009)

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Abstract

As one of the most powerful purveyors of entertainment in the world, the Disney company has produced blockbuster films, including animated features that have enjoyed enduring popularity. Reflecting and shaping to some extent American popular culture and ideology, they have left vivid images in our memory. Arguably, one of Disney's most ubiquitous symbol is the beautiful white princess. The representation of race relations in Disney films has always been problematic, sometimes sparking heated debates: non-white characters were either absent or stereotypically portrayed. Nonetheless, in parallel with the advent of multiculturalism in the 1990s, a series of films have foregrounded a new approach on these portrayals, the most notable being Pocahontas (1995), Atlantis (2001), and The Princess and the Frog (2009). In this article, I will examine the evolution of the representation of race, focusing on the film texts and their historical and cultural context, production history, and critical reception. I will argue that the apparent messages of tolerance and promotion of multiculturalism were accompanied and slowly replaced by a colour-blind erasure of race.

Keywords: Disney; Race; Multiculturalism; *Pocahontas*; *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*; *The Princess and the Frog*

Introduction

The release of *Frozen* (2013), which has become the highest-grossing animated feature in history (BBC, 2014), has reaffirmed Disney's reign within American animation. Through its media machinery, economic empire and canon of films still popular with audiences, Disney has reflected and shaped to some extent American popular culture, leaving vivid images in our memory. What may come to mind is the beautiful *white* Disney princess.

The representation of race relations and minority identities has been a very sensitive issue within Disney films. The depiction of African Americans, Native Americans and Latinos has suffered in various ways ranging from mere absence to racial stereotypes. With the advent of multiculturalism in the 1990s, a new wave of films has promoted a new perspective on these portrayals.

How did Disney represent race relations within this new cultural context? To what extent do these films promote features of multiculturalism and/or colour-blind racism? In order to examine these questions, I will focus on three films which either portray American human characters, are set in the United States, or both, using them as case studies: *Pocahontas* (1995), *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). I will base my analysis on observations from the film texts, and I will also look at their production history and critical reception.

My outline will be inspired from Valdivia's theory on the history of ethnic representation in the United States. She divides it into four stages that can be summarized as follow: absence of race representation (dating back to the 18th century), adoption of stereotypes (*antebellum* and *postbellum* politics), promotion of multiculturalism (post-civil rights up to the present), and hybridity/ambiguity (Valdivia 2008: 271-273). In my first part, I will provide some historical background on Disney's representation of race relations before the 1990s. In my second part, I will focus on the notion of multiculturalism as promoted by Disney, before, in my third and final part, dealing with the concepts of hybridity in representation and colour-blind racism.

Historical Background: Disney and Race

Before the 1990s, the representation of race in Disney's animated films was limited to minor racially stereotyped characters, in the margins of the narratives. These were characterized as comic and/or dangerous, and therefore perceived as inferior, ridiculous, and inherently 'other' (Wells 1998: 217-18). For instance, in 1930s animated shorts, black people were traditionally caricatured as man-eating African natives. This is exemplified in *Trader Mickey* (1932), in which they are surrounded by skulls as decorative elements. They also communicate through grunts and babbling, wear grass skirts and nose rings, and have enormous lips and ample hips. These exaggerated physical attributes reinforced their buffoonery.[1] The approach was similar with Native Americans. In *Peter Pan* (1953) the 'Injuns' were a parody of the 'whoopin' and hollerin' Hollywood's Indians' from classic westerns (O'Connor and Rollins 2003: 4). In *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), the Siamese cats displayed features such as slit eyes and yellow-tainted skin. This portrayal was the legacy of Orientalist stereotyping, namely the archetype of the Asian people as 'inscrutable', 'villainous', and threatening to the Western order (Akita and Kenney 2013: 62).

Aladdin (1992) was a milestone. For the first time, ethnic characters where in the foreground, but the Arab leads (Aladdin and Jasmine) were strongly Americanized through their physique and accent, in contrast to the villain, 'swarthy and hook-nosed' Jafar (Breaux 2010: 400). Moreover, the representation of the Middle-East as backwards and violent was strongly criticized by a minority of viewers, including the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. For instance, the latter considered the original lyrics of the opening song 'Arabian Nights' ('Where they cut off your ear / If they don't like your face') as 'defamatory'. Even if these were ultimately altered, the line 'It's barbaric, but hey, it's home' remained.[2]

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[1] For a more detailed analysis of this animated short, see Willetts, 2013: 15-16

[2] The lyrics after alteration were: 'Where it's flat and immense / And the heat is intense'. However, both versions concluded the verse with the sentence 'It's barbaric, but hey, it's home'. See Wise, 2003: 105 and Barnes, 2009

The Advent of Multiculturalism?

Multiculturalism had established itself as a major framework for analysing intergroup relations in the United States in the early 1990s. Celebrating racial and ethnic diversity, it was a late response to the conservative race trends of the 1970-80s (Gordon and Newfield 1996: 1, 3). In mainstream cinema, minorities gained increasing visibility and more complex representations. For example, African American actors were cast in leading roles and some, such as Denzel Washington and Whoopi Goldberg, became superstar icons (Bogle 2003: 326). Revisionist westerns 'tried to correct the negative image of Native Americans that Hollywood had fostered' (Dick 2010: 138-39), an outstanding example being the Oscar-winning, critically and commercially successful film *Dances with Wolves* (1990).

This general increase of cultural sensitivity and political correctness impacted on Disney, as well as the economic context. Valdivia suggests that, given the undeniable growth in the racialized population and its disposable income, it made sense for Disney to begin including some form of representation to generate recognition and audience loyalty (Valdivia 2008: 270). As a result, it gingerly began to address issues of differences in television shows and films.

The first animated feature tackling these themes was *Pocahontas* (1995)*,* the fourth most successful feature of 1995 at the US box office (Pallant 2013: 95). Contrary to previous approaches, the production team put an emphasis on authenticity and respect regarding Native American culture and language. For example, costume designer Jean Gillmore stated that they 'collected information from historians, specialists in Native American culture', going 'beyond the fringed-dressed-with-feather-sticking-out-of-headdress Plains Indians we're familiar with from movies' (Rebello 1995: 117). They went even further with the depiction of Pocahontas. I would argue that she is portrayed as a larger than life mythic figure, a goddess in perfect harmony with nature. This is epitomized when she is first introduced: she is alone, standing still on a cliff which, like a throne, towers above a waterfall and a large forest. Seen through a low-angle shot, viewers can only gaze up at her. The camera gradually tracks forwards and circles her while, at one with the elements, she closes her eyes and lets the wind blow around her. Furthermore, she embodies the film's messages of peace and tolerance, as exemplified in her song 'Colours of the Wind'. Co-director Mike Gabriel stated that 'if this movie makes one

child begin to question anyone who teaches hatred and fosters misunderstanding, that will be a wonderful thing' (Rebello 1995: 197).

This supposedly revisionist perspective was not unanimously acclaimed by critics, often seen as merely politically correct. Indeed, Disney's blend of history, legend, entertainment values and romance modernized and oversimplified the historical event depicted. As D'Entremont points out, 'the particular cultural and historical roots' of the colonists' depiction of Native Americans as 'inferior' was replaced by a more modern notion of 'racism' 'in its most uncomplicated form', mostly focused on the villain, Ratcliffe (D'Entremont 1995: 1304). Due to Disney's historical omissions, Pocahontas' later abduction by the settlers for instance, the film only focuses on the myth of reconciliation and the romantic adventure tale, while arguably reducing the scope of colonialist violence. Moreover, the portrayal of Pocahontas and her people is reminiscent of the stereotype of the noble savage, in harmony with nature and victimised. This suggests a latent hierarchy between them and the white colonists. Indeed, Naidu Parekh stresses that, if Pocahontas 'gains the status of a subject in multicultural discourses' by confronting Smith's unconscious racism and broadening his mind, she merely is the 'reinscription of an old colonial practice': using the 'other' for 'the spiritual awakening of the European' (Naidu Parekh 2003: 168-69, 171). The native female becomes the object of the Western male fantasy. Indeed, most critics commented on her rendering as sexualized, with her voluptuous body scantily covered.[3]

Pocahontas was followed by a series of films featuring ethnic leads outside America: gypsy Esmeralda in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1996), Chinese *Mulan* (1998), etc. For scholars such as Sheng-Mei Ma, Disney's multicultural strategy remained superficial: these depictions were no longer blatantly racist, but composites based on images, stereotypes, and fantasies of the Other, such as 'Chinese looking yet American acting' Mulan (Ma, 2003: 162).

In the 2000s, Disney returned to the frontier narrative with *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001). Set in 1914 in Washington, D. C., the story revolves around researcher Milo Thatch, hired to serve as a linguist on an expedition to Atlantis. Joining a group of other

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[3] Reviewers such as Paul Rudnick characterised her as 'luscious' and 'sexual', Laura Shapiro pointed out that she looked like a 'Native American Barbie', and Sioux tribe member and literature professor Paula Gunn Allen deplored that this 'sexual stereotyping eclipses much of the power women held in native cultures'. See Ward, 2003: 36

explorers, described as 'the best of the best', he eventually reaches the city. However, he discovers a lost civilisation on the brink of collapse, while realizing that the real goal of the expedition, led by Colonel Rourke, is to steal Atlantis' treasure. Helped by other members and the Atlantian Princess Kida, he manages to defeat Rourke and save the city.

Although often overlooked by reviewers or merely considered as 'politically correct' (Plath 2013), the depiction of the multi-ethnic American crew deserves special consideration. I would argue that the production team adopted a paradoxical approach, which would define Disney's representation of race relations in the 2000s. Indeed, in interviews, the actors emphasized the film's multicultural aspect, such as Cree Summer, who voiced Kida: 'it's a big deal', 'we had never seen that before' (Turner 2012). Yet, it was dismissed as irrelevant by the filmmakers. Screenwriter Tab Murphy emphasized that they 'didn't really set out' to be 'politically correct', but 'just tried to come up with the most entertaining group of characters' they 'could think of': 'an odd assortment' which was an 'homage to all the "team" movies from the past' (West 2001). Yet, it seems surprising and even quite troubling that the filmmakers associated entertainment with ethnic characters, who apparently just happened to be, among others, an African American doctor, a Latina mechanic, an Italian demolition expert and a French geologist.

Focusing on the film text, this paradox stands out. On the one hand, for the first time in a Disney film, the characters are given a detailed background and a family name. They seem to be the harmonious product of the melting pot: for example, Dr. Sweet is the son of an African American soldier and a Native American woman. On the other hand, the film puts the emphasis on unity and team work rather than differences. In the end, the multicultural crew seems to function as a minor character bringing comic relief. The real leaders are white: Milo, the hero, and Colonel Rourke, the villain, there either to exploit or save Atlantis and its people.

Indeed, another striking aspect in the representation of ethnicity is the film's lack of development in the portrayal of native characters. If in *Pocahontas* (1995), a latent hierarchy between white colonists and Native Americans can be observed, Pocahontas remains undeniably the heroine of the film. By comparison, *Atlantis'* natives are given little to do: they must rely on Milo, the American white man, to decipher their own

ancient language and ensure their survival. Even Princess Kida becomes immobilised inside a crystal during the film's climax. Overall, the white man maintains a privileged position in the film, and ethnic characters 'seem to appear for the sake of visual diversity': race does not come up as an issue (Valdivia 2008: 282). This transitory film in Disney's history of representation of race relations, often overlooked due to its minor box-office success, brings us to its latest trend: hybridity and elision of race.

Hybridity and Elision of Race

Bonilla Silva defines 'colour-blind racism' as ignoring race and ethnic differences, which are considered to be 'no longer a central factor' in American society (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011: 190). It works to justify the contemporary racial order, while Americans remain mostly separate and unequal. Current research demonstrates its broad impact among the population and institutions. One of its central frames is 'cultural racism': 'the fact of "blaming the victim"—arguing that minorities' standing is the product of their lack of effort' (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011: 193). Bonilla Silva argues that the Obama phenomenon was compatible with colour-blind racism: Obama represented the American dream, and 'did not talk about racism', preaching unity instead (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011: 198-201).

These features can be found to some extent in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). The classic fairy-tale story of *The Frog Prince* is transposed to 1920s New Orleans. Tiana, a young hard-working and talented African American woman, has saved money all her life in order to fulfil her late father's dream: she is about to buy her own restaurant. At a masquerade ball, she meets Prince Naveen from the fictional country of Maldonia, who was turned into a frog by voodoo sorcerer Dr Facilier and begs her to kiss him in order to become human again. Then, unexpectedly, she turns into a frog herself. After numerous adventures, they manage to defeat the sorcerer, become humans again, and Tiana ends up happily married to the Prince and owner of her restaurant.

At first glance, race was foremost for the studio. The production team consulted representatives from the NAACP, and in response to negative feedback, changed the heroine's name and employment.[4] Contrary to previous princesses of colour, Tiana's

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[4] From Maddie the chambermaid to Tiana the waitress. See Turner, 2013: 84

body was not over-sexualized, like Pocahontas, or caricatured, like Mulan. For a number of critics 'the very reality of an African American princess' in the Disney pantheon, after such a dearth of fully-fledged black animated characters, was a 'moment of great celebration' (Lester 2010: 297).

Paradoxically, if Tiana was marketed as the first African American Disney princess, the film both addresses and erases blackness. Turner argues that her race is 'not the point': viewers have to overlook it in favour of her personality and achievement (Turner 2013: 84). The message seems to be: 'here is the story of a successful black woman who, through hard work', now has 'access to the American dream' (Turner 2013: 86). This colour-blind vision 'sidesteps any direct questioning of inequality or poverty', leaving whiteness un-interrogated (Blu Barnd 2013: 67-68).

This becomes even more problematic if we consider that the historical period depicted corresponds to the peak of the Jim Crow era. It is completely rewritten, 'sanitized', and 'idealized' through a nostalgic recreation of the Jazz Age (Lester 2010: 301).[5] Segregation is only subtly suggested and smoothed down. Admittedly, Tiana and her mother sit at the back of the street car, but they do not seem to suffer that much from discrimination. The African American community is actually portrayed as happy: their houses may be small but they are open, their inhabitants seem warm, friendly and share meals together. This contrasts to the closed stately homes and empty street from the white Garden District. White characters may be wealthy, but they are harmless and comic: their power is not questioned.

Even more troubling is the fact that the only character who directly expresses his discontent is the villain, Dr. Facilier ('Aren't you tired of living on the margins while all those fat cats in their fancy cars don't give you so much as a sideways glance?'). Admittedly, he shares his frustration with Naveen's white and similarly exploited servant: this maintains the rhetoric of colour-blindness, and tones down his potentially subversive voice in this sanitized picture of the Jim Crow era. Yet, at the very same time, the representation of this African American character, nicknamed 'The Shadow Man' and practicing sorcery surrounded by animated African masks, seems to draw negative connections between ethnicity and voodoo magic. Indeed, contrary to Tiana and her family, who embody American values of self-help and work ethic, Facilier is

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[5] See also Breaux, 2010: 399

portrayed as 'other', in a way which recalls *Aladdin*'s Jafar. As Lester points out, it also raises 'serious questions about Disney's construction of African American maleness': Tiana's father dies very early in the film, the other black males are 'physically challenged, illiterate and old', and Tiana's Prince is racially ambiguous (Lester 2010: 301).

The latter exemplifies hybridity in race representation. Gehlawat underlines that the studio 'has gone out of his way to keep Naveen's "roots" unclear': spokespersons said he was 'not white', he was voiced by a Brazilian actor, and came from a fictional land that bore some resemblance to India (Gehlawat 2010: 423).[6] Nevertheless, one should not forget that the latter and Tiana spend two thirds of the film as frogs. As such, the difficulties in portraying an 'interracial romance' within a 'segregated reality' is significantly reduced, as Gehlawat points out. Moreover, Turner stresses that the black body 'evokes socially and historically constructed tropes': black women are associated with the stereotype of the nurturing mammy or the hyper-sexualized jezebel, for instance (Turner 2013: 90). This might explain Disney's 'avoidance' in dealing with blackness and race more in depth, and its 'adherence to the politics of colour-blindness' (Turner 2013: 90).

Conclusion

Beyond messages of tolerance and an effort to diversify characters, which obviously contrast from its racist history of representation, Disney's depiction of race relations in the 1990s-2000s was undoubtedly ambiguous. The promotion of multiculturalism remained rather superficial, and race in itself was not overtly dealt with. Historical and racial conflicts were simplified and sanitized, when they were not erased. In the 2000s, Disney reconstructed a colour-blind world in which race not only did not matter anymore, but seemed invisible. Yet, when the white man was not privileged by the end, extreme versions of 'otherness' were still vilified. Therefore, while trying to appeal to a wide audience, the studio was not really willing to challenge the racial status quo.

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[6] Some in-depth analyses of Naveen and his parents' language and looks, as well as the etymology of 'Maldonia', lead to suppose that he possibly comes from 'Pondicherry, the French colonial outpost near the south-eastern tip of India – or rather, that "Maldonia" lies in close proximity to this site of cultural and regional influence'. Gehlawat, 2010: 423

Since *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), the character of the white Disney princess has regained much popularity. Indeed, with the success of *Tangled* (2010), Disney/Pixar's *Brave* (2012), the box office hit *Frozen* (2013), and the live-action retellings of classic Disney films *Maleficent* (2014) and *Cinderella* (2015), it seems that the studio is resetting whiteness as the norm in its fairy-tale worlds, which was deplored by a minority of critics and bloggers.[7] Even films such as *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) featured an almost entirely white cast.

However, Disney might surprise the audience in terms of diversity and multiculturalism with the forthcoming *Big Hero 6* (2014), and its next princess project, Polynesian *Moana* (2018). The former is set in San Fransokyo (a combination of San Francisco and Tokyo), and includes Asian American, African American and white protagonists (McMillan 2014). Little is known about *Moana* at the moment, but it has 'already managed to inspire its own very lively fandom' (Baker-Whitelaw 2014). Will *Big Hero 6* rely on the same colour-blind rhetoric as *The Princess and the Frog* and *Atlantis*? Will *Moana* be an answer to viewers' demands for convincing portrayals of non-white heroines?

As one of the major purveyor of entertainment in the world and a leader within animation, Disney's future animated output will undoubtedly provide much scope for further investigation and debates. Furthermore, it is through the most constructed of all moving images of race, namely in animated films, that the most telling aspects of race relations in Hollywood iconography and American popular culture can be found.

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[7] For instance, Martin (2010) pointed out that having *Tangled* 'coming on the heels of the first African American princess' was problematic: Rapunzel appeared to 'reset the standard of what princess means'. Similarly, some bloggers questioned the mere absence of 'racial diversity' in *Frozen*, considering the Scandinavian setting which offered 'a great opportunity for indigenuous representation'. See Stephanie (2013), Pless, (2013), and Smith (2014)

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