Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento degli Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione culturale (LTLLM)
Classe LT-11

Tesi di Laurea

Rewriting Otherness: A Critical Analysis of Postmodern Animated Movies for Children

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Riassunto

Da sempre, condividere e raccontare storie è sempre stata una tradizione principalmente orale, per poi adattarsi alla forma scritta ed eventualmente alle versioni mediatiche moderne. Ogni storia portava con sé un bagaglio culturale che spesso e volentieri aveva uno scopo non solo d'intrattenimento, ma anche di insegnamento. La morale di una fiaba o racconto serviva a formare gli adulti di domani, che avrebbero potuto mettere in pratica quegli stessi ideali, così da essere "persone migliori". È quindi inequivocabile il fatto che l'arte di raccontare storie sia una parte fondante della natura umana, e che, soprattutto, cambia con il tempo ed è soggetta agli stessi mutamenti che condizionano la società. In particolare, negli ultimi decenni, il mondo occidentale sembra aver finalmente accolto le istanze del multiculturalismo e dell'intercultura, cioè di processi di integrazione e interscambio tra culture che sono costanti, e che, invece di essere percepito come scambi negativi, sono invece considerate come un'azione di arricchimento delle culture coinvolte. Per questo motivo, a partire dagli anni Ottanta e Novanta, all'apice del postmoderno, gli spettatori potevano notare nei prodotti mediatici una più vasta varietà di protagonisti e di etnie che popolavano lo schermo, così da mostrare al pieno la multiculturalità di quell'epoca, anche nei film dedicati ai più piccoli. Non solo, ma con l'avvento del femminismo negli stessi anni vengono coniati nuovi termini che racchiudono al pieno la complessità e multiculturalità di quel tempo. Kimberlé Crenshaw, attivista afroamericana, nomina per la prima volta un concetto che sarà essenziale per le basi del femminismo futuro: l'intersezionalità, cioè quell'insieme di sfaccettature inseparabili tra loro che descrivono un essere umano. Una persona è

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attraversata dalla sua etnia, il suo genere, la sua età, la sua classe sociale, la sua religione, e tantissime altre sfumature, che rendono impossibile descrivere tale persona con una sola di queste parole senza contare l'importanza delle altre della società di oggi. Il concetto di intersezionalità era puntato ad aiutare principalmente le donne di colore, che rischiavano di essere discriminate su due fronti: sia per la loro pelle che per il loro genere. Usando appunto questo approccio intersezionale e multiculturale, analizzerò nella mia tesi una serie di film dedicati ai bambini, partendo dal tardo novecento fino ad arrivare a produzioni più recenti, con l'intenzione di scoprire come sia rappresentato il concetto di alterità in un'epoca fermamente influenzata dall'eterogeneità della cittadinanza, e se i media mostrino tali diversità attraverso un approccio aperto o pieno di stereotipi.

Il primo capitolo esamina tre cartoni animati postmoderni che trattano del tema del colonialismo nelle proprie trame: *Pocahontas* (1995), *Spirit: Cavallo Selvaggio* (2002) e *La Strada per El Dorado* (2000), distribuiti rispettivamente da Disney per il primo film e DreamWorks per i restanti due.

Pocahontas, uscito negli anni più fiorenti di una società multiculturalista, mostra pienamente l'effetto del movimento attraverso la trama e i personaggi. Tratto dalla vera storia della principessa nativa Pocahontas, le vicende intorno alla protagonista sono però particolarmente dissimili dai reali avvenimenti storici. Durante gli sviluppi della trama, è risaputo che la Disney abbia liberamente evitato svariati consigli da parte di consulenti rappresentanti della tribù Powhatan, in favore di una trama carica di licenze creative, che, a detta dei produttori, avrebbero reso più allettante il film ai bambini. Il design di Pocahontas stessa viene realizzato prendendo i dettagli più belli di diverse etnie, quindi dimostrando senza alcun dubbio di essere una figlia del multiculturalismo, ma allo stesso tempo perdendo la sua identità indigena. Pocahontas, inoltre,

rappresenta pienamente lo stereotipo tipicamente associato a personaggi femminili nativi americani: la Principessa Indiana, con il suo fisico voluttuoso e normalmente più sessualizzata. Il protagonista maschile, il colonialista John Smith, diventa l'innamorato della principessa, rendendo la loro la prima storia d'amore interraziale della Disney. Inoltre, sia i nativi che i colonialisti sono raffigurati entrambi come estremamente chiusi di mente e intolleranti verso l'altro, posizionando la coppia principale tra due fuochi. Quello che però la Disney sembra dimenticare è che, storicamente, i nativi sono stati oppressi, forzati a convertirsi e uccisi dai colonialisti stessi, quindi mettendoli sullo stesso piano di intolleranza con gli occupanti delle loro terre, non mostra la chiara disparità tra chi sia veramente l'oppresso e chi l'oppressore, storicamente parlando. Detto questo, sono convinta che il cartone di *Pocahontas* sia estremante illusorio rispetto ai fatti realmente accaduti nella storia dei nativi americani, e anzi, sono convinta che usare un simbolo così forte come il personaggio di Pocahontas, solo per stemperarlo con stereotipi e cliché, sia addirittura offensivo.

Il secondo film, *Spirit: Cavallo Selvaggio* (2002), ha sicuramente un approccio più veritiero nel rappresentare le comunità indigene del Nord America. Il protagonista, un mustang selvaggio di nome Spirit, viene catturato da alcuni soldati americani per essere domato, e con l'aiuto di un giovane indigeno di nome Piccolo Fiume, riesce a riconquistare la libertà. Durante il film c'è una netta dissonanza tra due estremi: natura contro civilizzazione, nel quale il primo elemento è associato a concetti di purezza e bellezza, e il secondo è legato alla corruzione. Per quanto il film dimostri chiaramente alcune delle ingiustizie per mano dei colonialisti che i nativi americani hanno subito, l'unica critica che potrebbe appressarsi è forse la scelta da parte degli sceneggiatori di rimanere sul vago, forse troppo, per quanto riguarda i motivi storici legati alle violenze verso i nativi. In tutto questo, Spirit ha modo durante il film di conoscere sia una vita

da libero e selvaggio, sia da legato e usato per alimentare la macchina del progresso, sottolineando agli spettatori quanto la società "moderna" possa essere fuorviante. Un lato sicuramente ironico del film è però le origini del cavallo stesso in America: durante l'introduzione delle vicende, Spirit si narra come il vero nativo americano, presente su quella terra da sempre. In realtà, i cavalli sono stati introdotti nelle Americhe per la prima volta con i Conquistadores, cambiando sicuramente quindi lo status di Spirit come erede senza tempo dell'America che, non solo non è effettivamente un abitante storico degli Stati Uniti, ma è anche di origine spagnola, mostrando chiaramente il lascito di un approccio multiculturalista. In ogni caso, questo film sicuramente valorizza di più una verosimiglianza storica, anche se attenuata, rispetto al film di Pocahontas.

Il terzo e ultimo film affrontato nel primo capitolo, *La Strada per El Dorado* (2002) sposta la bussola più a sud, in Messico, e mostra le vicende dei due protagonisti spagnoli Miguel e Tulio. I due amici, abili truffatori e ladri, si ritrovano su una barca guidata da Hernàn Cortés verso il Nuovo Mondo, e, quando riescono a scappare, capitolano su una terra sconosciuta. Guidati da una mappa, trovano la città mitologica di El Dorado, dove tutto è fatto d'oro; e, scambiati dalla popolazione locale per delle divinità, decidono di cogliere l'occasione e rubare più oro possibile per poi tornare in Spagna. Nonostante la loro natura di ciarlatani, i due protagonisti si riscattano salvando la città dall'arrivo di Cortés, bloccando l'unica via d'ingresso per la città, e perdendo tutto l'oro accumulato. Quello che però la DreamWorks cerca di omettere, è che Miguel e Tulio sono tanto oppressori e colonizzatori quanto il Conquistador stesso, dato che ingannano la popolazione di El Dorado per tutto il film solo per alimentare la loro sete di ricchezza. Solamente perché nelle ultime scene sembrano ritrovare empatia nei confronti dei cittadini di El Dorado, questo non cancella sicuramente i loro

atteggiamenti da imbroglioni durante il resto del film. Essendo riusciti a proteggere il futuro degli aborigeni di El Dorado, il film si chiude con una nota ottimista, ma dimentica il destino che il resto del Sud America ha dovuto subire per mano dei colonizzatori. Oltre a focalizzare quasi ogni scena sui due protagonisti bianchi, i tre principali personaggi indigeni raffigurati mostrano un insieme di stereotipi deleteri normalmente associati ai latinoamericani. Inoltre, Tzekel-Kan, un sacerdote crudele che viene cacciato da El Dorado per la sua perfidia, viene poi catturato da Cortés e fatto schiavo, un'azione che sembra quasi voler giustificare il destino che avranno moltissimi indigeni, come se ogni nativo fatto schiavo nella storia del colonialismo se lo meritasse perché in fondo era crudele come Tzekel-Kan. Il film è sicuramente dilettevole, ma è importante non dimenticare quanto sia impreciso, illusorio e inesatto di veri avvenimenti storici, che rischiano di essere dimenticati in favore di film come quelli analizzati nel primo capitolo, che invece propinano una versione annacquata e *whitewashed* (in favore dei bianchi) della storia.

Il secondo capitolo ha invece il compito di riflettere sul film Disney *La Principessa e il Ranocchio* uscito nel 2009. La mia analisi prevede di investigare le circostanze sociali che hanno portato alla creazione della prima principessa afroamericana e a come la Disney abbia tentato, o affermato di tentare, di inventare un personaggio nero privo di stereotipi. La Principessa Tiana nasce principalmente perché moltissimi consumatori dei prodotti Disney lamentavano l'assenza di un protagonista afroamericano nel mondo dell'animazione, perciò hanno ideato Tiana e gli altri personaggi del film, traendo ispirazione dalla omonima fiaba dei Fratelli Grimm. La scelta di rendere Tiana una principessa può facilmente essere interpretata come una facile scelta di marketing, dato che le Principesse sono il gruppo Disney con più guadagni nella sezione merchandising, rendendo l'ingresso in questo gruppo elitario particolarmente arduo.

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Creando questo film, con la promessa di mettere a tacere ogni qualsivoglia voce sul passato ambiguo e razzista della Disney, la casa di produzione ha però deciso di amalgamare, sorprendentemente, sia stereotipi visti e rivisti sugli afroamericani, sia una sorta di daltonismo sulle questioni razziali, rendendo il cartone animato incredibilmente poco intersezionale. La storia è ambientata nella New Orleans degli anni '20, un periodo particolarmente duro in fatto di segregazione razziale, ma di cui nella pellicola non si fa mai cenno; e pone al centro della scena Tiana, una cameriera che sogna di aprire un giorno il suo ristorante. Tra jazz, paludi, la religione voodoo e simbolismi che richiamano l'Africa, questo film racchiude un agglomerato di preconcetti che fissano ancora di più la comunità nera in America al suo framework standardizzato, che sicuramente fanno parte dell'eredità afroamericana, ma contribuiscono lo stesso ai soliti preconcetti. Quando però a Tiana viene negato il ristorante per il quale ha tanto risparmiato, il motivo sembra quasi voler intendere una discriminazione di genere o se proprio di classe sociale, dato che durante il film non viene accennata minimamente la situazione degli afroamericani nel sud degli Stati Uniti, rendendo il cartone animato estremamente "daltonico". Nonostante la protagonista sia molto moderna nel non voler accasarsi per dare priorità alla sua carriera, Tiana infine ricade nell'eteronormatività e si sposa infine con il principe Naveen, un personaggio ozioso e che non desidera sistemarsi, ma che poi rivaluta i suoi ideali e impara ad essere più responsabile con l'aiuto di Tiana, la quale, a sua volta, capisce che forse voler aprire un ristorante non dovrebbe essere la sua unica priorità. Il lieto fine che celebra l'eteronormatività è sicuramente in contrasto con i cattivi del film, che non aspirano al matrimonio, ma alle loro ambizioni personali: il Dr Facilier, uno stregone nero che sogna denaro e potere, e Lawrence, l'invidioso servo bianco del principe, che brama di prendere il suo posto. Rendendo uguali le ambizioni dei due

antagonisti, la Disney ha sicuramente perso l'occasione di mettere in luce le differenze razziali nella società di oggi, dato che il Dr Facilier non è più un uomo che si vendica di una società intollerante e oppressiva, ma diviene semplicemente un uomo malvagio che vuole arricchirsi, come il servo Lawrence. Nel mondo Disney, spesso, molti personaggi non bianchi riflettono comunque ideali normalmente associati al Sogno Americano, quindi dedicato, storicamente, più ai bianchi. Per questo motivo, quando alla fine del film un personaggio di colore ricade perfettamente nella cornice dell'American Dream, si può dire che abbia ottenuto la cittadinanza bianca onoraria, e esistono vari esempi di questo tipo di fenomeno: Aladdin (*Aladdin*, 1992), che con un pizzico di magia e onestà riesce a diventare sultano e sposarsi con la principessa; Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998), che grazie al duro lavoro e la sua intelligenza riesce a salvare la Cina, ma decide comunque di tornare dalla sua famiglia; e infine Fiona (*Shrek*, 2001), che esprime la sua femminilità, normalmente associata alla "bianchezza", nel farsi salvare da Shrek e accettarsi per quello che è. Tuttavia, Tiana non riesce ad ottenere la stessa cittadinanza bianca, perché, a differenza per esempio di Mulan, che ha la possibilità di tornarsene a casa dopo le sue imprese eroiche, la nostra principessa di New Orleans finisce il film mentre serve ai tavoli le stesse persone a cui portava i piatti all'inizio della storia, negandole la possibilità di "godersi" il successo come ad altri personaggi non bianchi della Disney.

Il terzo, e ultimo, capitolo osserva le controversie che hanno seguito il film live-action *La Sirenetta*, distribuito dalla Disney nel 2023, che ha provocato diverse polemiche per la scelta dell'attrice afroamericana Halle Bailey come Ariel. I film live-action sembrano essere la scelta favorita di produzioni negli ultimi anni, dato che vanno a rielaborare cartoni già amati dal pubblico da sempre. Tuttavia, creare un live-action senza alcuna polemica sembra oramai impossibile, dato che non deve essere né troppo simile al film

originale, né troppo diverso, rendendo la creazione di questi film parecchio aleatoria. In questo caso, moltissimi haters hanno iniziato una campagna d'odio online per boicottare la pellicola perfino anni prima che fosse distribuita, nonostante il cambio di etnia di Ariel sembri più che giustificato nella trama stessa. Infatti, la storia non è più ambientata in Danimarca come la favola originale, bensì ai Caraibi. Ogni figlia di Tritone ha un'etnia diversa in base a uno dei sette mari che controlla, per cui associare un'attrice più scura di pelle a un mare come quello dei Caraibi sembra più che azzeccato. Quello che sembra toccare di più i fan esterrefatti da questo cambiamento nella trama è che, tradizionalmente, molti spettatori privilegiati associano un determinato personaggio alla loro etnia (di solito bianca), e quando non accade, percepiscono questo tipo di rivisitazioni come ingiustizie, dimenticando il monopolio che i ruoli bianchi hanno avuto nei media nella storia. Rielaborare e rivisitare storie fa parte della nostra natura umana, adattando certi concetti e morali a principi importanti nella società contemporanea. Quindi, cambiare l'etnia di un determinato personaggio sicuramente non significa cancellare la versione originale, ma piuttosto serve a rappresentare al meglio un tempo multietnico come quello dei giorni nostri. Nella storia dell'animazione e del cinema, i personaggi neri sono sempre stati tradizionalmente rilegati a ruoli stereotipati, nel caso delle donne afroamericane esisteva solo il ruolo della domestica o della Jezebel (giovane donna afroamericana lasciva), tanto che vediamo gli strascichi di questi stereotipi perfino in cartoni animati moderni, addirittura quelli senza umani, come nel caso di *Shark Tale* (2004). Il film, ambientato nell'oceano con protagonisti dei pesci, mostra chiaramente che nonostante gli animali marini non posseggano una nazionalità, sono presenti alcuni manierismi, slang e gesti solitamente associati alla comunità nera, perlopiù visti nel protagonista Oscar, doppiato dall'attore nero Will Smith. Gli squali del reef rappresentano i classici

mafiosi italiani, pertanto cartoni come questo alimentano sempre di più l'associazione di diversi cliché e preconcetti a determinate comunità, anche in un'epoca multiculturale.

Un fattore molto diffuso al giorno d'oggi nei prodotti mediatici è sicuramente il *blind-casting* (l'affidare ad attori di colore ruoli normalmente associati ai bianchi), soprattutto per sfidare le regole sociali, fare ironia sulla storia e mostrare il razzismo sistemico visto nei media nelle ultime generazioni, tuttavia un elemento che ho personalmente notato analizzando i più recenti live-action Disney con attrici nere che interpretano ruoli tradizionalmente bianchi, è che spesso e volentieri si tratta di personaggi di fantasia. Non solamente Ariel, una sirena per metà pesce e metà umana, ma nello specifico anche il personaggio di Trilli, una fatina, nel live-action *Peter Pan & Wendy* (2023) e della Fata Turchina nel film di *Pinocchio* (2022), entrambe interpretate da attrici nere. Lo strano collegamento tra attrici di colore e personaggi fantasy potrebbe facilmente essere una coincidenza, tuttavia, è sicuramente peculiare associare così spesso personaggi immaginari con donne nere, come se ci fosse un nesso tra l'elemento di finzione e il colore della pelle.

Per concludere, sono fermamente convinta che i piccoli spettatori siano i fruitori del domani, e ciò che assorbono da ogni forma di media fin dalla tenera età (per nulla un'azione passiva), andrà sicuramente a ripercuotersi negli ideali e approcci che avranno nella vita adulta. Quindi, è essenziale proporre ai bambini e alle bambine prodotti per lo più esenti da pregiudizi e stereotipi che potrebbero solamente alimentare preconcetti e intolleranze verso l'altro da sé, e che in casi di visione di film del passato come quelli proposti in questa tesi, venga almeno prima spiegata la differenza tra finzione e veridicità storica, così da iniziare i più piccoli alla maturazione

di un pensiero critico e aperto contro gli stereotipi, così da sconfiggere il razzismo sistemico purtroppo ancora presente, perfino in una società multiculturale.

Abstract

This dissertation examines the importance of representing Otherness in postmodern movies aimed at children in a multicultural time. My investigation will be focused on movies released by American film production companies, given the coeval melting pot of different cultures inhabiting the United States, and also for its prominent leverage in Western pop culture en masse. As young viewers are already considered consumers in this capitalist society, their not-at-all passive consumption of content will eventually influence their views and ideals on the world, therefore it is vital to offer children a variety of products that do not display messages of hate, harmful stereotypes, or prejudices towards different cultures. However, the main consortium of producers in the media has primarily been held by Caucasian citizens that could not effectively show any real insight when representing other communities. Although there is an ever-growing open-mindedness in the mediatic market that offers an abundance of roles to POC people, there is, however, a legacy of films and TV series that at best might be full of clichés referring to other cultures, at worst they provide detrimental stereotypes that only enhance prejudices and discriminations aimed at a certain community.

As society evolves and embraces this new wave of multiculturalism, a new term comes into play: intersectionality, i.e. any facet of a person, be it age, ethnicity, gender, or social class, that cannot be unlinked from one another and in fact describe a human being in a whole. It is through intersectionality and a critical eye that I will examine different animated movies produced in the era of Postmodernism that portray non-white

characters and how their rendering might be influenced by pre-existing preconceptions and stereotypes.

In the following chapters, my analysis dives into animated movies released by Disney and DreamWorks that fit into the time frame of Postmodernism, so that my investigation might prove to readers that although all of the movies examined narrate about non-white stories and cultural facets, generally a much more whitewashed and watered-down perspective has been favoured that, rather than teaching young viewers about non-Caucasian communities, instead appears to be erasing history inclined towards a whitewashed retelling. The resulting approach will be secured with a critical eye and an intersectional attitude to understand those narratives and non-white characters wholly, to eventually uncover the proper mindset of present-day Western society in media aimed at children, whether it embraces such multiculturalism or whether it exploits it to perpetuate stereotypes.

Introduction

When we think about children's movies, some of the first themes that come to mind might be magic, love, family values, and happiness. Usually presented in the form of cartoons with 2D or 3D animation or live-action stories, these adventures bring joy and entertainment. Not only are they entertainment stories, but they also have an educational function, including social commentary and moral choices that help children decode their world and society. Thus, oftentimes, these tales teach children ethical principles and a specific set of rules to navigate life. One particular approach to pedagogy (Demetrio, 2012) seems to suggest a deeper interrelationship between Education and Narration. Demetrio argues that while educating always means narrating, the reverse is not always true, as a story can also be just pure entertainment. Oral narration is the oldest form of storytelling and tales and fables have proven to be the preferred forms to pass values to children while providing them with fun. In such a manner, we are presented with a multitude of different versions of traditional plots that have been shared, revised, and adapted from oral transmission to books, up to today's more modern media, such as movies and TV series.

Holding this notion of storytelling in mind, it is vital to underline the fact that children's movies seem to have the same impact as written fables if not a greater one. Gökçearslan (2010) argues that children's minds understand numerous values that are presented to them from a very young age, especially more subtle concepts such as gender rules and patterns. In the words of the author, "within the first 18 months of their lives, children begin to learn the differences between the two genders by themselves" (p. 5202). These gender-specific established performances are just the tip of the iceberg

when dealing with our society nowadays, considering stereotypes, boycotting, performances, and traditions.

Nowadays, an inclination towards a more nuanced multicultural society is particularly exhibited, whose background is filled with different influences, lifestyles, and ideas of diversity that are cooking in the 'melting pot' of civilisation. Communities are now influencing each other and in this new era of globalisation, mapping the edges of a single individual seems more intricate than it was in the past. As Collins suggests, it seems impracticable to define a person using just one set of denominations, like race, gender, ability, or class. Those nuances are not mutually exclusive, instead, they are "reciprocally constructing phenomena" (Collins 2015, 2) better embraced by the concept of intersectionality. 'Intersectionality' was first coined by American critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, and it is considered an umbrella term that encapsulates a series of enquiries on how prejudices operate on different tiers of one's life. It has had roots predominantly in the Black feminist movement, which oftentimes sees women of colour equally harmed both by feminism and antiracism programs, having difficulties with whether to collocate them in a particular category or rather on more than one tier. Crenshaw (1991) explores in her intersectional manifesto, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, how the legal system contributes to the silencing of Black female voices when dealing with violence against women. As the author claims "ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups" (1242), she investigates how women of colour appear to be doubly marginalised. Over the years the concept of intersectionality has grown broadly, so much that European culture has started to consider the junction of different traits when describing someone's experience. However, as the spectrum of feature broadens, so does discrimination. In fact, nowadays forms of intolerance that

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were once ignored are now at the forefront of the social agenda, such as ableism, transphobia, homophobia, and ageism. In a multicultural time like nowadays, it is easier than it used to be for people that do not fit into the white, male, and heteronormative frame to have their own voices heard, but it is equally important to highlight the fact that an accurate and respectful representation matters.

When considering the representation of characters other than white in movies and TV series, the progress accomplished in just a few years is remarkable. However, the depiction of non-white characters often betrays a more unilateral approach without taking into consideration many intersecting factors, resulting in an imprecise narrative that at worst culminates in harmful stereotypes. Although children's movies do not show a bold attitude towards discrimination, it is vital to understand that systemic racism and damaging stereotypes have been internalized and projected unconsciously for generations and that they do not need to be openly restated to affect us.

Undoubtedly one of the most influential media companies aimed at children nowadays is The Walt Disney Company, an association founded by Walt Disney in 1923 that today possesses three main segments: Disney Entertainment, ESPN, and Disney Parks, Experiences and Products. Regarding the first section of the business, the company possesses brands such as Walt Disney Animation Studios, Pixar Animation Studios, Marvel Studios, Lucasfilm Ltd, 20th Century Studios and National Geographic, establishing their authority over children's media for the last century, counting more than hundreds of feature films between animation and live-action movies. It is natural to assume that this corporation has been influenced by worldwide events such as wars, technological evolutions, and nowadays by a globalised society. In the section called 'Social Responsibility' on their website, one can read through their pledge on creating more diverse and inclusive content, stating that "across [our] platform, [we] champion

storytelling that reflects the world around [us] and helps [us] develop meaningful relationships with [our] costumers." Also, by presenting "[a] genuine, authentic, and respectful storytelling." However, an inquiry might naturally arise: as these media companies' influence on society is considerable, one might wonder whether they are genuinely innovative or they are motivated by mere self-interest.

Having said that, this thesis will focus on the representation of otherness in children's movies, specifically in Walt Disney Animation Studios, Walt Disney Studios and DreamWorks Animation Studios. In the first chapter, I will scrutinise the representation of native people and colonialists in three different feature films: *Pocahontas* (1995), *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (2002) and *The Road to El Dorado* (2000), to unravel the dynamics between the different representations.

The second chapter will focus on Disney's first African-American princess movie, *The Princess and The Frog* (2009): I will examine Tiana's portrayal with an intersectional approach and analyse her black female predecessors in children's media.

Finally, the last chapter will concern one of Walt Disney Studios' latest live-action, *The Little Mermaid*, released in 2023, which provoked mixed reactions about the casting of Ariel, when black actress Halle Bailey was announced to be the new titular character. I will investigate Disney's choice of why changing the main character's ethnicity and other recasting decisions of some of the latest live-action movies.

As a white woman, I have not experienced any racial or xenophobic discrimination in my life, and I wish to speak of these matters in a respectful way without interceding in another person's experience. I believe that the media, especially when aimed at children, are still learning how to show different realities in a truthful and considerate way without the use of stereotypes. I believe everyone should acknowledge different

points of view in order to become more conscious individuals in a multicultural time, therefore that is the principle that inspires my analysis.

Chapter 1: Colonialist Narrative in a Multicultural Society

1.1 Pocahontas and Disney's First 'Interracial Love Story'

As mentioned in the introduction, today's Western society is firmly influenced by globalisation and a melting pot of different cultures altogether living in the same environment. In the US, this outbreak has been influenced by various movements, but most importantly it thrived in a society that founded its roots in immigration. The mingling of different communities was something already present in American history, but specifically from the 1990s this current of thought was adopted and invested in by society, specifically with the help of the media. In response to that new attitude, the media could not help but support the surging of multiculturalism. Although a turning point has been reached in representing a wider segment of the population, with a greater presence of non-white characters, their contradictory and often stereotypical portrayal cannot be ignored. It is vital to underline the fact that not only people of color were gaining more representation, but also women started to be portrayed with new shades.

To fit in in this new scene, Disney adopted this multicultural point of view that could represent a better appeal to a broader audience, made up of viewers who had found themselves fed up with narrow and traditional animation narratives. As McKenzie (2015) reveals, Disney Animation Studios turned their portrayal of the classical Disney Princess from the passive damsel-in-distress to a new heroine who was more independent and active. McKenzie analyses the shift of gender roles depiction in

Disney's princess movies, referring to this more inclusive age as "[the] rebellious and ambitious era" (2015, 14). Influenced by the third wave of the feminist movement, Disney tried to approach this new media generation by forging new heroines that showed an adamant nature and self-reliance, in this new era for the company better known as Disney Renaissance. We can see a sharp difference between earlier Disney princesses such as Snow White or Aurora and a daydreaming Ariel or a resilient Jasmine. These new leading ladies showed young and old viewers that a woman could have a louder voice in her own story, while still embracing the heteronormative reality that made Princes and Princesses happily ever after at the end. This concoction of traditional and fresher approaches will eventually lead Disney to address myths and "tale[s] as old as time" (*Beauty and the Beast* 1991), developing them with modern eyes. One of the first reinterpreted stories that have shown a more independent non-white female protagonist, and at the same time has taken inspiration from a real event, is *Pocahontas*. Released in 1995, the movie narrates the story of the real-life Powhatan princess who is known to have united Native Americans and Colonisers during the 1600s, from whose name the title of the feature film is derived. Pocahontas became the second non-white princess after Jasmine, the heroine in the movie *Aladdin* (1992). The presence of Aboriginal royalty in an animated movie initially created a great consensus among viewers, all the more since for the first time a major white company seemed to admit the wrongs of Colonialism and teach children historical events. However, Disney declared that their creative team was going in another direction with the narrative, distancing it from the alleged true story of Pocahontas. They would change some of the essential stages in her biography in order to make the movie more agreeable and light-spirited to children. However, by doing that, Disney was not only failing to acknowledge

the full destructive impact of Colonialism but they were also changing history and miseducating children on past events.

Another factor that caused critics to disapprove of this feature film, was also the little research that Disney made to make this story as reliable as possible. The company visited two descendants of the Powhatan Native Americans in the Pamunkey Indian Reservation in order to gain as many details as possible to pay justice to history. But that soon changed when one of the two interviewees, Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow-McGowan, realised that "[…] historical accuracy was not being pursued to the extent she had hoped" (Egerton, 2010) and wished that her name would not be put in the credits. Another critical response was from Chief Roy "Crazy Horse" Johnson of the Powhatan Renape Nation, who claimed that "Disney makes 'entertainment' and perpetuates a dishonest and self-serving myth at the expense of the Powhatan nation" (Golden 2006, 19). It is, however, necessary to highlight the fact that Russell Means, Native American activist and the voice of Pocahontas' father Chief Powhatan in the feature film, defended Disney's effort to admit Europe's massacre of Native Americans. That shows without a doubt the controversial response to this movie from the world and specifically from Aboriginal people.

As mentioned above, Pocahontas takes her place in a new league of Disney princesses that are described as independent, dynamic, and tough, whether by showing intelligence like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) or determination like Mulan in her homonymous movie (1998). Pocahontas shows both grace and tenacity as she tries to bridge two opposite communities through the power of the love she shares with John Smith, the English colonizer – they make the first interracial couple in Disney's history. Actually, it is likely the two had just a platonic relationship since Pocahontas was around eleven years old when she met him, while in the movie she looks approximately

eighteen years old. The Aboriginal princess was voiced by Irene Bedard, a Native American actress who was also adopted for the design of the main character, though only in part. In fact, while drafting Pocahontas' features, producers envisioned more than one ethnicity to create the 'perfect' princess. In this way, her portrait exhibits at best the multifaceted reality of a multicultural time, while at the same time erasing her actual identity as an indigenous woman, or, as Saville (2012) suggests, "Pocahontas becomes a representation of a "non-white" woman instead of the representation of an Aboriginal woman" (241).

Pocahontas' character delineates one of the two stereotypical representations of Native American women, which is The Indian Princess. The term has been used to describe female characters that are sexualised by their male, usually white, counterparts, and show great beauty and a lighter skin tone compared to other Native Americans depicted next to them. In opposition to The Indian Princess one finds the other depiction, The Squaw. In this category, female characters are usually portrayed with a darker skin tone and are usually dull, submissive, and quiet. Their bodies are less sexualised and oftentimes we cannot clearly outline their features, almost in a dehumanising way. An example we can find of these two stereotypical representations is in *Peter Pan* (1953) when the main characters visit an Indian village. On one hand, there is Tiger Lily, the object of Peter's desire that dances suggestively and kisses him multiple times, and on the other hand, all the other women in the tribe are portrayed as primitive and unattractive beings.

Pocahontas falls then in the first stereotypical depiction, as this voluptuous young woman that is immediately sexualised from the moment she meets John Smith, who lowers his gun as soon as he sees her behind a waterfall. Their first interaction sees them not understanding each other because of the language barrier, but then

Pocahontas follows her grandmother's advice and "listens with [her] heart" (*Pocahontas,* 1995), starting instantly to speak English, almost as if implying that English is "the heart's language". As they converse, Smith tries to tell her that his fellow men only want to help Natives use the land in a better way, to which Pocahontas responds with determination that "if [he] walk[s] the footsteps of a stranger […][He]'ll learn things [he] never knew, [he] never knew" (*Pocahontas*, 1995). The two bond over the song *Colours of the Wind* where John Smith seems to finally realise the importance of respecting nature and every soul on Earth, and they fall in love. Their relationship is not only rejected by Smith's crew but also by Pocahontas' father Chief Powhatan, who wished she could marry a young warrior in the tribe. Regarding the relationship with her father, Pocahontas disobeys him when he tries to marry her to Kocoum, which conveys the idea of a patriarchal society within Powhatan customs, while in reality Powhatan women were not subjugated to men's will. By going against Aboriginal customs and replacing them with Eurocentric ones, the movie implied that the latter had better rules in society than the other (Saville, 2012).

As the two lovers lie in a crossfire between the two communities, it is important to note that Disney's depiction of intolerance travelled both ways, with both colonisers and the tribe calling each other savages. This portrayal undoubtedly doesn't play in favour of Native Americans, who are depicted as racist as Eurocentric Colonialists, placing them both on the same level of close-mindedness, when in reality just one of the groups invaded the other and put them through centuries of discrimination and genocide. Amid this racial battle, we find the representatives of both parties, Pocahontas and Smith, fighting for their love. As a result, Pocahontas manages to bring peace and save John Smith from execution, but as he is injured they have to part ways for him to go

back to England and heal. Pocahontas, therefore, chooses to take care of her own tribe, leaving the role of lover for the role of mother.

It is complex to describe whether this feature film paid homage to the symbol that is Pocahontas, or if it just promotes a whitewashed version of colonisation, but nevertheless, it is evident the impact that multiculturalism had on the storytelling and reinvention of this Disney princess. Personally, I believe that *Pocahontas* might fascinate young viewers, who were not taught about her life, but without the right education about history, one could easily interpret colonialism in a misleading path that reinforces a romanticised version of conquering.

1.2 Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron and a Dubious Merging between Civilisation and Nature

The Myth of the West has always had a special appeal to the whole world, especially Americans, who created a long-term heritage that has fed the commonly shared ideas of that particular time and space. However, it is important to highlight the fact that this kind of sympathy towards the Old Wild West mythology goes beyond a simple fondness towards a barren land: it is a cornerstone of American culture that has a deep impact on the country's self-representation. The role of the cowboy was a source of adoration and devotion for the public, which found in that figure a mysterious and lone hero, who would sometimes oscillate between the good and the bad side. The cowboy was the epitome of the virile man that thrived in a wild landscape full of enemies and dangers and, as an icon, it could easily be placed on the same level as The American Dream for its importance in contemporary society. As a matter of fact, the scenery of the Wild West would emanate both an adventurous and an intimidating ambience from the general public, from the start of the real explorations to widen the frontier to its impact in today's media. Nonetheless, the unusual aspect that comes into mind, as Bruce-Novoa (2005) reports, is that both Mexico and Canada had similar expeditions throughout their own West, but out of the three, it is just the American trope that survived the trial of time.

Regarding children's movies, one feature film about the conquest of the West that comes rapidly to mind is *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, developed by DreamWorks Pictures in 2002. The movie follows Spirit, a Kiger Mustang that lives in an untouched valley with his herd but is soon captured by a group of wrangles who will try to break him and domesticate him. With the help of a Lakota young man called Little Creek, a

prisoner in the same camp, they will regain their freedom and form an unusual but tender friendship. In addition to beautiful landscapes and vivid animation, the movie also shows a more accurate version of history than *Pocahontas*, even though one can still find a vague and romantic display of colonisation.

The narrator of this story is the horse himself, voiced by Matt Damon, and as we hear from Spirit's point of view, it is instantly clear that watchers will see the tale of the West recounted by an unusual voice, the horse's. In the movie's first lines, Spirit makes us understand that he is the personification of the West and nature itself, a creature that roamed free before humans could ever touch the land and that is rooted in the landscape in a very deep way. However, one factor that needs to be underlined is that Spirit tries to pass himself as nature's timeless descendant, while in reality horses were first introduced in the Americas by Conquistadores and then specifically by Spain in the southern and western parts of the United States, known at the time as New Spain (Luis C, Bastos-Silveira C, Cothran E, Do Mar Oom M, 2006). The horse is not the real native creature of the region then, changing completely his heritage and relationship with newcomers. Undoubtedly, Spirit is part of those herds who had escaped and then through crossbreeding had become completely wild, so surely he does not personally remember a time before freedom, but this variation changes his self-appointed role as nature's protégé.

Another element that seems to connect Spirit to Spanish culture can be found in the title of the feature film, in the headline one can read "Stallion of the Cimarron", which represents the untouched territory that Spirit's herd occupies and also means untamed, according to Santamaría's *Diccionario de Mejicanismos*. The life-like landscapes vary over the course of the movie, from lush prairies to dusty deserts that all suggest a 'true' American painting, but it is important to note that the area known as Cimarron was, as

Bruce-Novoa (2005) puts it, "[a] wild, southern spur of the Santa Fe Trail between New Mexico and Missouri as surveyed by the U.S government in 1825", suggesting that the untamed region had once been governed by Mexicans, therefore placing a whole different light on the Americanism of the tale. However, as the story unfolds, the name of the valley where Spirit lives is hardly ever mentioned, which brings us to an apparent opposite, but nonetheless vital, aspect of the plot: the anonymity of the landscape.

As stated in the previous lines, the scenery around Spirit's narrative exudes in its entirety the American pride associated with the Frontier but provides viewers with an uncertain geography to associate with historical events. On one side there is a clear image of the United States, with natural views that can be easily recognised by watchers all around the world, which helps create an overall mythic landscape that is not anonymous at all (Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, Lugo-Lugo, 2010). On the other side of the coin, however, when dealing with historical events involving Native American heritage, a vague accuracy of geography might do more harm than good. The Native representation in the movie is made by Little Creek, a Lakota who will become Spirit's ally throughout the movie, but "the odd condensation of the desert and the mountains" bewilders the geographical accuracy "[…] and the very presence of a Lakota in what appears to be the desert southwest further underscore the confused spatial imagination of the film." (Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, Lugo-Lugo, 2010, 71), making it an imprecise portrayal of actual facts in favour of a generalised and romanticised view of the landscape. Another detail that might be in disfavour of the Lakota heritage is the reminiscence of tragic attacks that Natives had to endure, such as in Sand Creek or Washita. In a scene in the movie, American troops suddenly charge towards Little Creek's village and attempt to raid it, but the reasons why for this attack are never

investigated, ignoring any explanation of an actual broader conflict between Natives and Colonisers.

As viewers are introduced to the main characters of the movie, one cannot ignore a sort of triad that seems to form around three roles: Little Creek, the Colonel, and Spirit in between the two, although the horse leans far closer to his Native ally. These personalities are supported by the environment around the story, which shows two polarised opposites: nature versus civilisation. Little Creek and Spirit defend nature and freedom, while the Colonel is depicted as a sadistic man that wishes to build the railroad and connect the two coasts. The movie is filled with metaphorical distinctions between the two main groups, for example between domestication and wilderness, or between modern and primitive. Since Spirit was captured by wranglers and formed a close friendship with Little Creek, his position could be placed in the middle between the two ends, but at the end of the day, he symbolises the true wilderness that cannot be tamed. Another approach to showing this polarity is through manhood, although in a subtle manner. Even though the Colonel shows the great determination of a trained soldier in trying to tame Spirit, it is eventually the horse's authentic and primal strength that helps him break free. In a way, this movie teaches viewers to connect themselves to their more natural and uncivilised part in order to escape modern corruption and that nature is always in the right. By saying that, Little Creek and Spirit fall naturally in the virtuous status against contemporary society. In this way, the portrayal of the conflict between Colonisers and Natives is far less biased than the depiction in *Pocahontas*, as DreamWorks suggests that society takes accountability for past actions. Towards the end of the movie, as Spirit and Little Creek are escaping the Colonel and his men, they find themselves in a vulnerable position and under the aim of the soldiers. The horse and the antagonist share a long and deep glance, when eventually the Colonel

lets them go, almost by recognising Spirit's determination for his freedom, and with a sincere nod they part ways. In my opinion, the Colonel's choice of not firing the gun can be interpreted as a sort of redemption for colonisers, but I would lean more towards a sort of defeat of civilisation against nature.

Ultimately, *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* might be considered highly forgetful in regard to specific historical facts, but at the same time, it shows accountability for the decimation of Native Americans and the ruin of natural landscapes in favour of modernisation. Spirit might not be America's true timeless Native as he describes himself to be, but his story truly shows the friction between society and nature, which can also be applied nowadays when dealing with the environmental crisis.

1.3 The Road to El Dorado: Good and Bad Colonialists

The United States has always had a significant influence towards Western society that would reverberate across the whole world. Because of capitalism, the American tycoon held most of the media's products in contemporary society, giving non-American viewers a taste of the New World's ways of thinking. As a consequence, even though some media productions might not be set in the United States to satisfy a multicultural population, they are inherently showing watchers a whitewashed representation of different cultures and heritages that reveal an egocentric system within 'the land of the free'.

An example of this process can be found in movies such as *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000) by Disney and *The Road to El Dorado* (2000) by DreamWorks, both released at a time when a considerable slice of the American population was more and more made of Latinos, meaning that producers knew the impactful significance of that ethnic group in society and consumerism. By delivering the public new animated films that would involve Latinos' history and heritage, the studios were creating brand-new features aimed at this ethnicity. However, it is vital to underline the fact that by advocating for "Latinoness", the media oftentimes created products that would romanticise history and genocide, as already scrutinised in the previous paragraphs, but also would whitewash the Indigenous past in order to put forward features associated with whiteness (Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, Lugo-Lugo, 2010). Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, and Lugo-Lugo (2010) explored how "contemporary America develop[ed] and perpetuate[ed] a racist ideology" and found a variety of different stratagems when dealing with a controversial and racist topic. Some of the main tactics seem to be the promotion of white innocence that ignores racism, the romanticisation of the past, and,

as already stated, a whitewashed view of the world encouraged by stereotypes that show fear of multiculturalism.

This paragraph will focus on the feature film *The Road to El Dorado* (2000) released by DreamWorks Pictures. My analysis will focus on how Indigenous history was erased in favour of the plot that revolves around two white men, using the systemic ploys stated above. The story unfolds as viewers travel to 1500s Spain and meet Miguel and Tulio, two charismatic fraudsters who find themselves on board Hernan Cortés' ship when escaping from yet another scam gone wrong. When they manage to flee from the Conquistador's vessel, they shipwreck in a foreign land. Miguel, the more idealistic of the two friends, suggests that the landscape resembles a map that could lead to the legendary city of El Dorado. When they finally find the city of gold, they are instantly mistaken by locals for two deities and are shoved in gold and treasures. They then envision a plan to steal as much gold as possible and go back to Spain with the help of an Indigenous girl named Chel, but when the secret position of the city is revealed to Cortés, Miguel and Tulio will find a way to destroy the only entrance of the valley, losing all the gold in-between, to protect the citizens from the Conquistador.

Although the myth of the city of gold El Dorado has never been confirmed to be true, this feature film blends a fantasy tale with real-life events that took place in history, such as the character of Cortés and the colonisation of the Americas. Even though this movie is set almost entirely in the city of gold, the real focus of the plot is not on the Indigenous population of El Dorado, instead, the focal point is on Tulio and Miguel, the two white men that con the citizens and wish to steal as much gold as possible from them. Out of the two main characters it is Miguel who falls in love with the city and never wishes to leave, while Tulio is focused on creating a new life in Spain. The two men then join again forces to defend the city from Cortés and use their boat to destroy

the only passage to El Dorado, by also essentially blocking any way out for the citizens. Even though this action might seem like a way of safeguarding the Indigenous population, one cannot ignore the fact that the two main characters are also trapping the Natives forever in a secured valley, without any contact with the outside world. Ultimately, the two con artists are fundamentally perceived by watchers as heroes who made the greatest sacrifice and lost all of the gold they had saved up, overlooking the fact that they had been deceiving the same people that looked upon them as gods and trusted them, in order to obtain as many treasures as possible. In the end, Miguel and Tulio pass for selfless human beings when actually they have been nothing but the opposite throughout the course of the film, except for the last choice of losing the gold. A reason for this depiction of the two main characters might be explained as a sort of redemption arc, in which the two friends finish the movie in the same way they started it, penniless, but with a new interpretation of life and altruism. However, the actions of these two white men can only be considered as conquering a new land, as they exploit the indigenous population and still end up on the victorious side of the coin. This narrative further spreads the whitewashed view associated with colonialism, which is coated with the appealing personalities of Miguel and Tulio.

Regarding the Indigenous representation in the plot, the movie overall shows three stereotypical portrayals of Natives: the sexualised young woman, the naïve and fair chief, and finally the evil priest (Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, Lugo-Lugo, 2010).

Chel is a young Indigenous woman who detects Tulio and Miguel's plan instantly, but since she is dissatisfied with her own life in El Dorado, she makes a deal with the two tricksters in order to gain a spot on the boat back to Spain. The girl is particularly cunning and shows great wit when she trains the two men to become the perfect gods in the eyes of her people, growing a stereotypical image of the untrustworthiness of

Latinos. She is also depicted as a sexual object from the moment the two protagonists lay eyes on her, which will also be a reason for friction between the two best friends as Tulio and Chel begin a romantic relationship. Chel's character design is portrayed with full pink lips, and a curvy body with a high-wasted loincloth that highlights her hourglass figure, features she uses without hesitation or shyness to get what she wants. Chief Tannabok is the fair and gentle leader of El Dorado, as he is designed with big rounded features and a good-natured demeanour. The Chief is seen playing with the children of the city and entertaining Miguel and Tulio with feasts and banquets. At first, he might represent the stereotypical naïve Indigenous character, but as the story progresses it is made clear that he discloses Miguel and Tulio's scam, but since they are bringing a good influence to the city, he does not expose their secret. And finally, the other non-white character presented is Tzekel-Kan, the priest of El Dorado who wished for the arrival of the gods. He is portrayed as ruthless and cruel throughout the movie engaging in human sacrifices and dark magic, yearning for the people to suffer. When he is banned from the city by Tulio and Miguel for his cruelty, he is later on found by Cortés, whom he thinks is the real deity he had been waiting for. But as the two protagonists destroy the only entrance of El Dorado, Cortés feels deceived and holds Tzekel-Kan as a slave.

As already stated, although the movie is a blending of fictional and historical events, one cannot forget the fact that Cortés' quest had just started and even though El Dorado would always remain a secret to the outside world, the Conquistador's actions would spread all over the Americas, followed by other colonialists. By keeping safe the Indigenous population of the city, the movie ignores all the other tribes and villages that would be raided and massacred in the meantime. Even Tzekel-Kan's ending foreshadows what would happen to all Natives, yet for all wrong reasons, as he is taken

prisoner because he was indeed evil and 'deserved' his fate, but subtly teaching watchers that if the Indigenous populations of Mesoamerica were made into slaves, it was most probably because they were evil like Tzekel-Kan.

As Tezcatlipoca (2000) explains, a movie about the Holocaust that romanticised the intentions of a Nazi commandant in Jewish camps would be an absolute outrage. However, unexpectedly, the depiction of the conquest of the Americas is commonly accepted by society to portray in a children's movie, even though 23 million Natives were killed and the rest was forced to convert to Spanish customs.

When everything is taken into consideration, *The Road to El Dorado* (2000) might be considered an entertaining and colourful movie with two brilliant main characters, however, it is important to distance fiction from real-life events when remembering that Conquistadores led to the Indigenous genocide of millions of people. The movie highlights a whitewashed view of circumstances far less tragic than true accounts, which only educates on stereotypical portrayals of Latinos and a romanticised version of history.

Chapter 2: *The Princess and the Frog*, being 'Almost There' but not There enough

2.1 The Long-awaited African-American Princess: Backlash and Complications

Over the last century, as cinema and television products in America widened their influence and became more advanced, it became clear that their impact on contemporary lives would be enormous. New stories and narratives were explored by producers in order to bring variety and entertainment to watchers, seeking themes and characters that could be relatable to the average viewer, both in animation and with live-action feature films. However, it is impossible not to take into consideration the fact that, at the time, the vast majority of people who could afford to go to the cinema were predominantly white. More often than not, non-white citizens fell under the more poverty-stricken class, in addition to the fact that they would be discriminated against daily by the privileged fraction of society. Because of that, one cannot ignore the fact that since the dawn of cinema and television in America, and overall in the world, most of the media products that were presented were predominantly made by white people for white people, disengaging with a considerable slice of the population that was not Caucasian, rich, or privileged. As stated in the previous chapter, since the advent of multiculturalism, nowadays a larger variety of voices are being introduced in the media market, although still affected by stereotypes. Despite the fact that non-white individuals are much more represented today, the last century of limited and limiting

roles in movies and television cannot be forgotten, which is the reason why there happens to be a substantial request for non-Caucasian characters that might fight stereotypes and ultimately become positive represents of certain communities.

Specifically, until 2009, Disney had never depicted an African American Princess, which created discontent among Black parents in the US, who wished for a non-stereotypical representation of a Black character to show their children. When Disney eventually started production of *The Princess and The Frog* (2009), "consultations with Oprah Winfrey and unspecified members of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)" (Breaux, 2010) were carried out in order to bring viewers a dream-like story that could satisfy heated parents. By creating Tiana, Disney was certainly making a statement regarding the past accusations of racism in their productions, trying once and for all to end all allegations. One element that surely helped Disney's attempt to please the public was to reward the character of Tiana with the highest and most elite title in the animation world: the Disney Princess.

As Vitale (2022) claims, Disney Princesses are definitely "the company's most distinctive characters, but also the ones that sell the most merchandising". In order to be considered a Disney Princess, a character needs to meet a precise list of requirements, which happens to be particularly convenient for Tiana to be placed in such an exclusive tier. Although The Mouse House acquired other production brands such as Fox over the years, the latter's royalty, namely Anastasia (*Anastasia*, 1997)*,* does not fit the criteria to be considered a real Disney Princess (Tuttle, 2019). However, reaching that high status appears to be difficult for other royal characters already part of the company itself, since neither Anna nor Elsa (*Frozen*, 2013) are part of the official list of Disney Princesses. Box (2021) attempted to list all of the features shared by the certified royalty and found that in order to be a Disney Princess, some of the main

criteria are that a character needs to be female, human, and not introduced in the sequels. Some other key requirements are that she needs to be of royal blood, although there have been exceptions for characters such as Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998), who was not royalty but gained her title due to heroic actions. Nevertheless, the final word seems to be connected for the most part to marketing decisions, since many female heroines could potentially fit in the league but miss their spot for modest earnings in the merchandise section. On the other hand, one can find the opposite situation with Anna and Elsa (*Frozen*, 2013) which are part of an already successful franchise and "don't need the association with the other princesses to be marketable" (Box, 2021). In the history of the Princesses League, there happened to be female characters who earned the title but were later removed due to popularity increases or decreases, which implies that the crown does not last forever.

Therefore, Tiana's recognition as an official Disney Princess appears to be an evident calculated choice in order to stop any further complaints by viewers that were dissatisfied with black characters that conformed only to stereotypical roles, such as Uncle Remus in *Song of the South* (1946). Although *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) "pulled in $104 million [...] a figure many films would love to reach, yet a low total for Disney — and for animation more broadly" (Collier, 2021), suggesting that Tiana's time as a Disney Princess might be coming to an end. Personally, I believe that the backlash the Mouse House would receive if they ever did remove such a requested princess, would be enormous.

The movie developed by Walt Disney Animation Studios in 2009 takes inspiration from one of the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales named *The Frog Prince* (1812), although there have been different versions over the years that slightly change the title or the content of the tale. Disney's approach changes completely since their story is set in 1920s New

Orleans and our main character Tiana is a young black woman who works two jobs in order to save money and open her own restaurant – a dream shared with her late father – as we can see her singing the song *Almost There* when she thinks of her goal. When she caters at her white best friend Lottie's masked ball, she meets Naveen, a depleted prince who had been turned into a frog by a voodoo conman called Dr Facilier. The frog mistakes Tiana for a princess, since she is dressed up like one, and asks her to kiss him to transform him back, promising her plenty of money to open her restaurant – which he does not have. She reluctantly agrees, but since she is not a real princess the spell works oppositely and she is also turned into a frog. As they travel to the bayou to unravel the spell, Tiana and Naveen fall in love and when they seem to have lost all their hope, they decide to stay frogs together. In the end though, as they share their first kiss as husband and wife, they are inadvertently turned back into humans, since Tiana has finally become a real princess. However, she has not forgotten her dream and finally opens her restaurant with Naveen, living happily ever after in New Orleans.

The choice of the Paris of the South as the main setting of the movie might be due to the rich African-American culture that permeates the southern region of the United States, but one cannot ignore the fact that the chronological and spatial preferences could be considered ambiguous. Historically, the South has always been infamous for its rooted racism and discrimination, even after the liberation of slaves. Setting a story of an ambitious black woman in a city like New Orleans – especially in years like the Jim Crow Era – appears to be extremely out of touch for a more factual portrayal of history. Although there are some demonstrations of exceptional successful women at the time, it is important to highlight the fact that these were in fact exceptions, therefore extremely rare. Undoubtedly, the animated movie handles a handful of fantasy events, however, Disney decided to place the film in a precise moment in history, as one can

read in a newspaper at the start of the movie that President Wilson had been elected. Over his mandate, Woodrow Wilson "advocated for racially segregated offices, lunchrooms and restrooms in federal building[s] [...]" (Breaux, 2010) further demonstrating the constant discrimination against black people. Furthermore, during those years it was highly unlikely for black men to own businesses and restaurants, let alone a black woman, implying that the movie does not accurately depict history. The influence of Africanism is quite relevant as we see in Dr Facilier's shop full of tribal masks and in Mama Odie's treehouse stocked with multi-coloured bottles, used "to protect West Africans from the Gold Coast and the Kongo [...] from evil spirits" (Breaux, 2010). Another stereotypical element that can be found in the spatial setting of the movie is the connection between black people and jazz, as viewers can see in the portrayal of Louis, an alligator that plays the trumpet and wishes to become human and be famous like Louis Armstrong. This connection between black people and jazz was first introduced in animation in the early 1930s, which would perpetuate a restricted and ultimately damaging symbolism of African-Americans, constantly being associated with swamps, bayou, jazz, and nothing else.

In my opinion, there could have been simple ways in which Disney could have shown a more authentic portrayal of racism, such as depicting different seatings for white and coloured people when Tiana is on public transportation at the start of the movie. Conclusively, it seems unequivocal that Disney purposely chose a watered down version of history in order to push an apparent conscious narrative that only "perpetuate[s] the worst of black and African-American stereotypes before 1969" (Breaux, 2010).

2.2 Tiana and Other Characters' Analysis with an Intersectional Approach

The previous section of this chapter has been dedicated to the groundwork around the story of the movie itself, being inaccurate on a historical level, or generally for the pressure Disney experienced on its choice of black characters. This paragraph will focus on the analysis of some of the main characters in the movie *The Princess and The Frog* (2009), through an intersectional lens that might find a limiting description of said characters.

As inquired in the previous paragraph, the creation of Tiana rose as Disney faced backlash for its ambiguous past, however, the princess' story prompted even more repercussions on a deeper level of analysis. Although the feature film is an entertaining product that families might find delightful, it is essential to note that Tiana's background could have been depicted in a more realistic – still enjoyable – way. Tiana falls into the category of those princesses that are way more outspoken and independent than the damsels in distress found in the first years of Disney. She works two jobs to make her dream come true: opening her own restaurant, and is willing to sacrifice every ounce of free time and social relations in her life in order to turn it into reality. Although she is not the first princess not interested in love or marriage at first – see Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998) or Jasmine (*Aladdin*, 1992) – she is the first to have a dream job. Settling down is not on her plans not until she reaches her goal, a goal she preciously shared with her father since she was little. As the movie progresses, even as a frog, she is found to be extremely resourceful and cunning, making viewers – and Prince Naveen – fall in love with her strong but gentle personality. However, even

though her dream is strong and achievable through hard work, at the end of the movie she finds her happiness in her job and also her relationship with Naveen, implying that a woman cannot be entirely happy without a man by her side. Disney has always had difficulties equating power and love with other princesses, like with Elsa in *Frozen* (2013), since one side seems to cross out the other. Therefore, like every Disney Princess, Tiana finds her happy ending in heteronormativity. Our main character seems to incorporate all of the three main versions of a typical Disney heroine: the Princess, the Good Daughter and the Tough Gal (Davis, 2007). By the end of the movie, she becomes a princess when she marries Naveen, she is extremely loyal to her father's dream and willing to sacrifice her own life to open her restaurant, and she can also look out for herself and has no fear of speaking out.

Having said that, although Tiana surely gives a great example of an ambitious character to children, it is impossible not to address the elephant in the room by discussing the topic of discrimination in her own background. As the movie starts, we see a clear discrepancy between Tiana's neighbourhood and her friend Charlotte's, a white girl whose father is essentially the richest man in New Orleans. Historically, this friendship seems already unlikely due to the economic and, specifically, racial differences between the two girls, therefore Disney is already attempting to show viewers that, at the time, the colour of one's skin did not matter. When Tiana and her mother come back home, the scenery changes from opulent mansions to humble shacks and a much tighter sense of community than in the rich neighbourhood. As time passes, Tiana works in the service industry while Charlotte lives off her father's shoulders and only thinks of finding a man to marry, reaffirming the two friends' different priorities. When Tiana finally saves up enough money, she contacts the Harvey Brothers to buy an old sugar mill to renovate, but unfortunately, they decide to give the building to another man,

claiming that "for a little woman of [her] background, [she's] better off where [she's] at" (*The Princess and The Frog*, 2009). This sentence assuredly reveals rooted discriminations of some nature, whether it be a display of racism, classism, misogyny, or a combination of those, it is unknown. However, since the movie portrays a noticeable colourblind view of those specific years, it can be assumed that the colour of Tiana's skin has nothing to do with the inequity she suffers throughout the movie, since racism is not blatantly depicted. A way for the corporation to evade any criticism on the matter appears to be that the main character stays a frog for most of the movie, eclipsing any other culture that might have affected her tale. Viewers can distinctly see another attempt to hide Tiana's skin colour through the course of the movie when she meets Mama Odie, a blind old bayou witch who helps her "dig a little deeper" (*The Princess and The Frog*, 2009) in order to find her true dream, which shows Mama Odie to be not only physically blind but also metaphorically, to the discriminations that Tiana might face in her life for her appearance. Since Disney is such an important brand that has a clear influence on its customers, specifically on young viewers, its effort on portraying non-white characters, up until *The Princess and The Frog*, has been insufficient compared to the depiction of the broad variety of POC narratives in real life. As Laemle (2018) speculates, "Disney is socially responsible for setting the standards of how female characters and those with diverse backgrounds are represented in films, and they need to do their part to challenge past (and present) stereotypes".

Concerning Prince Naveen, Tiana's romantic counterpart in the feature film, one element that certainly stands out when analysing him with an intersectional approach, is that he comes from a foreign country that does not exist in real life: Maldonia. Therefore, his culture and background are completely fabricated to distance the movie's narrative even more from a plausible depiction of history. By giving Naveen no

real culture, the risk of offending the viewers with harmful stereotypes is lowered, however, it shows an apparent intent of Disney not to address unhealthy cultural patterns in favour of a sanitised and colour-blind reality, despite claiming to create an unprejudiced work of fiction. Moreover, as Hoffmann (2019) suggests that making Naveen "prince of a fictional country rather than a real one adds to the mockery of people of colour assuming positions of royalty". Naveen comes to New Orleans after his parents have decided to strip him of his riches for him to learn how to be more responsible. From the moment he lands on America's soil viewers can already get an idea of his immature personality, as he forces his valet Lawrence to carry around all his luggage while he plays the ukulele and flirts with local girls. It's his level of immaturity and ingenuity that brings Naveen and Lawrence to Dr Facilier, a voodoo sorcerer, who tricks Naveen by transforming him into a frog, and then teams up with Lawrence who had always been jealous of the Prince's life. Naveen, therefore, represents a new kind of Disney Prince that was never officially depicted, *the Player* (Hoffmann, 2019), a flirtatious young man without a job that does not believe in settling down. As Tiana and Naveen's love story develops, he learns how to be more responsible and she realises that maybe she had been too focused on her dream and had obliterated any other priority, implying that, at the end of the day, the only way for a person to be truly happy is "through renewed priorities of heterosexual commitment" (Hoffmann, 2019). Additionally, as Vargas (2019) speculates, the two main characters' love story is indeed odd when reviewing Disney's romances in the past. The tendency presented throughout Disney's history with relationships – up until 2009 at least – has shown a preference for human romances instead of animal ones, which usually imply two different approaches. In the typical human relationship, the two characters almost instantly fall in love without first getting to know each other – see *Cinderella* (1950) or

Sleeping Beauty (1959) – while in the animal case, the protagonists tend to spend some time together before engaging in a romantic affiliation as seen for example in *The Lion King* (1994) and *Lady and The Tramp* (1955). Tiana and Naveen's love shows the typical features of an animated animal relationship in the company's eyes, and, as Vargas (2019) explains "this process of Tiana's romantic story is an example of othering that she experiences because the differences of her story [that] animalize her in the eyes of Disney". Although the two characters spend more time as frogs than as humans throughout the course of the plot, that fact should not overlook entirely their real nature as humans in order to place their story on a different tier than other princesses' romances.

As for the two villains in the movie, Dr Facilier and Lawrence, the approach Disney adopted is comparatively different, since the first is a black man and the other is white. Regarding their similarities, they both share some level of campiness in their designs and features, which is a popular trope in Disney's villains. As Hoffmann (2019) suggests, their hand gestures are enunciated and Lawrence has a lisp that might "deviate from traditional masculinity". Since both villains are fuelled by power and revenge against those who wronged them, they essentially seem to serve as tools that "make heteronormativity *seem even more desirable*" (Hoffmann, 2019). By going against any heteronormative characteristic, experts have connected this kind of portrayal as a sort of queer coding, which is when "characters [...] are not *explicitly* stated as homosexual but display stereotypical behaviours and traits consistent with those of queer communities" (Kim, 2017) and that are oftentimes associated with villains in both animated and live-action productions to support traditional gender roles in heroes – see Hades in *Hercules* (1997) or Scar in *The Lion King* (1994). As for the two villains' differences, one can find their punishment at the end of the movie quite

contrasting, since Dr Facilier is literally dragged into hell by "his friends from the other side" (*The Princess and The Frog*, 2009) while Lawrence just goes to prison, which might seem like unfair discrimination towards the Black villain. Moreover, by giving them both the same type of aspiration, the movie genuinely mitigates the possibility of a Black character tired of injustice that finally uses his power to reform his reality, implying that "the narrative is not about an African American man fighting an unjust system, but rather about an evil man who wants money" (Hoffmann, 2019).

And finally, as for the other white characters present in the movie, viewers meet from the start of the plot Tiana's rich best friend Lottie and her father Eli "Big Daddy" La Bouff, who has great influence in the city and every year he is appointed as King of Mardi Gras. "Big Daddy" La Bouff seems to go against the typical depiction of the authoritative and over-oppressing parent formula and instead is portrayed as "an over-doting father" (Breaux, 2010). As already mentioned, Lottie represents the opposite of Tiana, not only for her appearance and social class but also for her ideals and priorities. From the outset, we find out that Lottie's biggest dream is to marry a prince, and throughout her scenes, she is depicted as a desperate girl and a comedic relief to favour the plot. Even at the end of the movie, as Lottie is dancing with Naveen's six-year-old brother, she claims that she "had waited this long", implying that she does not mind waiting a little more to marry him when he grows up. Therefore, it is clear that this movie does not find a steady balance between Tiana's not wanting a man but ending up needing one, and Lottie's obsession with marrying a prince and resulting as a naïve girl.

Ultimately, I believe the character study in *The Princess and The Frog* (2009) could have – quoting a song in the movie itself – "dug a little deeper" to give every role more depth, however, producers seem to have created a story that forgets real-life circumstances

in favour of a plot that eventually tastes like a consolation award for all the parents that had complained over the years.

2.3 'White Citizenship': is Tiana Able to Get It?

Since, over the years, most of the media portrayals in animated movies were usually white, it was ultimately presumed that certain features were essentially associated with a certain construction of whiteness, specifically regarding femininity. For instance, as Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, and Lugo-Lugo (2010) examined, femininity has always been correlated with ingredients such as passivity, kindness and honesty, although oftentimes those frequent features made female animated characters remarkably one-dimensional. Although this provides an example that only involves female characters, this type of blandness also reached male roles, albeit less. As expected though, as the advent of post-modernism and multiculturalism reached viewers' homes and lives, a new variety of cultural backgrounds was being represented in the media, requiring a change in the usual way of analysing individuals: by their whiteness. Since new types of humans were being depicted, and specifically female roles were being described as more assertive and independent, a reasonable and logical reaction to these innovative times – at least in my opinion – could have been to revolutionise completely the conception of whiteness and urge a more nuanced and inclusive framework in character studies. However, although female representation changed regarding ethnicity or personality, one controversial aspect that did not change was its racialisation, ergo its relation to whiteness (Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, Lugo-Lugo, 2010). In addition, this notion of whiteness (Lacroix, 2004) was also adopted with animated animal characters that were turned into anthropomorphised versions of a certain race.

Henceforward, even characters of colour are always associated to an idea of whiteness and, by the end of their movies, most of them reach a somewhat honorary U.S. citizenship that ultimately makes them white for their values and goals, usually associated with American ideals (Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, Lugo-Lugo, 2010). This White Award is usually presented to non-white female characters, but it is important to highlight the fact that in some rare instances, this kind of honorary citizenship also concerns male characters, such as in *Aladdin* (1992). The notion of whiteness (Lacroix, 2004) is a way to achieve individuality for non-white characters since those ideals are cornerstones of the American Dream, therefore historically reserved mainly for white citizens. This paragraph will focus on a list of mostly female characters that, over the course of their movies, can receive their own white citizenship award in different ways. Then I will adopt the same process to analyse Tiana's position on the matter and identify whether or not her story is suitable to obtain the racialised prize.

Starting with the only male character in the list: Aladdin from *Aladdin* (1992). Throughout the course of the movie, he is able to defeat poverty and marry Princess Jasmine, and although he is not entirely honest with her at first, he redeems himself when he gives freedom to the Genie. The whole film is quite Westernised in the eyes of the viewer, for example, the accents of the main characters do not have any Arabic lilt. Therefore it is no surprise that the main ideals and customs present in the movie are portrayed with a significant whiteness that reflects the American Dream. Aladdin is the protagonist of the typical picaresque tale, a witty boy who, thanks to magic and hard work, is able to make his dreams come true and becomes rich. Although the feature film is set in an imaginary Arabic city called Agrabah, and there are no real white characters in the story, one can easily recognise that Aladdin shares the main values of the American dream and therefore can pass off as white (Hoffmann, 2019).

Carrying on with the first female character on the list, one can find Mulan, from her homonymous movie that was released in 1998. The Chinese girl works hard in an army of men while crossdressing as one of them, and thanks to her hard work and intellect she saves China and is finally accepted as a warrior, even if she is not male. As seen with Aladdin, Mulan too shares the same values of working hard found in the essence of the American Dream, and she goes beyond by saving her country and "bringing honour to us all" (*Mulan*, 1998). She manages to receive her White Award mainly because she values her family over anything, but she proves even more to deserve the prize because, in the end, she refuses the job offered by the Emperor of China and goes back home, implying that she will later settle down with Shang, her comrade-in-arms. Therefore "her real victory was not in becoming a strong individual, winning the war and liberating China […] rather, it is in winning a prospective husband" (Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, Lugo-Lugo, 2010). As Hoffmann (2019) claims, as Mulan refuses the Emperor's offer, she displays the concept of retreatism since she has gained power over her own choices and can determine her priorities, such as going home, which only reinforces Mulan's whiteness. The concept of retreatism will later be vital in Tiana's case.

Lilo & Stitch (2002) sees Lilo, a young Hawaiian girl that, after a loss in her nuclear family, finds stability and love in her big sister Nani, her boyfriend David, and an alien chaotic creature named Stitch, forming a new Ohana. The concept of family is vital in the creation of the American Dream since Lilo can easily obtain her individuality through her own family, which is why she receives her White Citizenship (Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, Lugo-Lugo, 2010). One matter that should be stressed, though, is the fact that Lilo is already American, however, as viewers can see in the feature film, there is a sharp distinction between Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians. Lilo is

seen taking pictures of white oversized tourists, allegedly Americans, and likes to collect those photos like they are species to catalogue, further marking the distance between Hawaiians and white Americans.

Moving on to a DreamWorks production, *Shrek* (2001) is now considered a cult animated movie for its parodical approach towards classical tales and fables, and it portrays a new approach that seemingly rectifies beauty standards as the main couple is made of two 'ugly' ogres. Fiona, the princess, is first introduced to the movie as a beautiful redhead that is imprisoned in a tower, and Shrek the ogre is sent to rescue her. Fiona is a white girl, however, due to a curse, she is turned into an ogre every night, which is why she is not really considered white and is listed in the lineup of non-white characters that still receive the honorary citizenship. At the end of the movie, Fiona decides to marry Shrek and accepts herself as an ogre, "break[ing] [...] the tradition of *beautiful* princesses" (Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, Lugo-Lugo, 2010). Although she appears as a badass young woman that knows how to fight, Fiona does not stray far from the classical white princesses that need to be rescued, which is where viewers find her whiteness. As Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, Lugo-Lugo (2010) assert, "the most important lesson *Shrek* teaches, however, is that in order for love to exist and for relationships to occur, both individuals need to be at the same level: [...] a beautiful princess would fall in love with an ogre (even a kind ogre like Shrek) only if she is an ogre herself". Her need to be rescued is the main reason she passes as white, even more than her physical features.

However, is Tiana worthy of this racialised citizenship? In her movie, Tiana is indeed American and surely shares the same ambitious dreams of hog heaven, however, she is not in contention for the same White Award previously yielded to other non-white female characters. As Hoffmann (2019) suggests that even though Tiana learns a new

perspective regarding her dream and settles down to heteronormativity – an indispensable value in the American dream – her efforts to "reach whiteness" seem to be in vain when at the end of the movie she is still seen serving tables to the same white people she was waiting at the start. Undoubtedly, Tiana shows that even though she now owns a restaurant she is still humble, but by making a compromise between her humility and the power she now has, there is a threat to completely obscure the progress that she has made. She is still not seen equal as to other white characters such as Lottie or her father, which is why she is unable to escape the African American stereotypical trope of serving others. Regarding the concept of retreatism previously discussed in Mulan's section, unlike the Chinese warrior who decided to go home with her family, Tiana cannot decide to retreat her prescribed role in society, therefore it is clear "that African American women are not featured in retreatism narratives but are shown remaining in the workspace in *racially prescribed ways*" (Hoffmann, 2019). The main reason why Tiana is unable to pass as white is that, even though she has indeed achieved the American Dream, she has done so in a racially acceptable way so that she does not actually challenges white privilege (Hoffmann, 2019). Also, as Gehlawat (2010) hints, usually when a Disney character is turned into an animal is usually for their own faults, such as in *Pinocchio* (1940) or *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). However, Tiana is apparently transformed into a frog because, as Disney implies, she is too much of a hard worker, indicating that a woman's fault, especially an African American one, is to be too ambitious.

Eventually, after all is said and done, Tiana can obtain her own individuality as long as she does not really challenge society and white privilege. She is able to open her dream restaurant, but she is still serving tables like a normal waitress. And yes, she has become a princess, but by marrying a prince from a fictional country, which only

perpetuates the idea that black people can never be in positions of power. Children might surely find this movie entertaining, however, I suggest that beforehand happens a conversation about race and privilege that might help young viewers differentiate real life from a color-blind version of history that not only declares itself to be broad-minded but actually discloses racial prejudices and the presence of systemic racism within the creation of its main characters, that could have received more justice.

Chapter 3: *The Little Mermaid* (2023), Casting Controversies and Other Examples in Animation

3.1 The Little Mermaid (2023): Color-blindness or Calculated Choice for the Plot?

One of the newest and most popular forms of production we can find nowadays in Disney's studios is by far the form of live-action movies, most of the time remakes of original animated tales. In consideration of the hefty slice of adult viewers that still cherish Disney's products, the Mouse House seems to be placing most of its bets on reinventing old fables instead of new original animated material. One of the dangers that come with beloved cartoons transformed into live-action movies appears to be how faithful the result is compared to the original source, but also how innovative it is. Assuming that the live-action movie is exactly scene-by-scene accurate to the original animation – an example is *The Lion King* (2019) – the main reaction might be boredom and soullessness since it brings nothing new to the public. On the other hand, if the new adaptation presents too many changes from its beloved original cartoon – see *Mulan* (2020) – fans could reject that movie as it could distance itself too much from the iconic source and disrespect those details that viewers hold dear. Producers, therefore, walk on a very thin rope between staying faithful to the animated legacy or spacing towards new and more modern alterations, and most of the time, either way, will almost always result in boycotting and harsh criticism from lifelong fans.

In 2016, when the news of a live-action movie produced by Disney of a certain redheaded mermaid was made public, fans' reactions ranged from being ecstatic to being quite suspicious. The *Little Mermaid*, an animated movie that first came out in 1989 would be turned into the 21st live-action feature film that Disney had ever released. Directed by Rob Marshall, the newest interpretation of Ariel's story would bring quite a few changes from its original source, which was in turn inspired by Danish novelist Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* (1837). The main character Ariel is a young mermaid that wishes to live "where the people are" – ergo on the surface – (*Little Mermaid*, 1989) and she gives up her voice to a sea witch in exchange for legs. She then falls in love with a prince and they live happily ever after. Although the original tale is much darker than the first animated adaption, *The Little Mermaid* is one of the most popular cartoons in Disney's history, therefore many fans hold Ariel and her story very dear.

However, real controversies would only start after the casting of the titular character Ariel would be made public. In fact, when in 2019 Disney announced that Black actress Halle Bailey would be playing the young mermaid, most fans went berserk and immediately started boycotting the future feature film with racist remarks involving the actress and with hashtags such as #NotMyAriel all over social media. Internet trolls began a hate campaign against the live-action movie – that was yet to be released – by posting hateful and racist comments, by "sharing an edited version of the teaser, featuring a white individual instead of Halle Bailey" (Bhati, 2023) and "by creating memes ridiculing the film for casting Bailey and mocking all of its supporters" (Romano, 2022). Some of the main workhorses of the defamatory crusade seemed to be regarding the historical and scientific accuracy of the merfolk, the odds of having a Black Danish mermaid, and melanin percentage at the bottom of the ocean, which only

reinforced the irrational outrage that haters were feeling, mostly connected with the fact that white privilege seems to be attacked whenever "a person of colour is chosen for a role traditionally associated with white characters" (Bhati, 2023). However, offended fans appeared to forget that white was mostly the main ethnicity depicted for most of cinematic history, leaving little to no room for non-white characters. Romano (2022) suggests that "From a progressive standpoint, stories all could use a good shake-up by varying their points of view through casting, and pop culture is full of narratives ripe for retelling", therefore implying that these types of live-action movies should focus more on the innovative side than the reminiscent one. Although most of the comments associated with the news of the casting were derogatory and negative, Halle Bailey found a handful of allies that were thrilled about the change of air, in particular, Ariel's original voice actress Jodi Benson who promoted her successor intensively and enthusiastically (Carras, 2022). Moreover, many videos surfaced on social media of young Black girls reacting to the first trailer of the movie in a concoction of happiness, excitement, and heartwarming smiles, showing the world that the Black community was more than ecstatic about Halle's portrayal of the iconic mermaid.

Although the movie could indeed be accused of color-blind casting, which is the act of picking actors of a different ethnicity compared to the original character (Downs, 2013), it could potentially be interpreted as a political choice that only throws a bone at non-white people in order to make them content. All that remains at this point is to confirm whether Halle Bailey as Ariel was a color-blind choice to please POC communities or whether there is an actual justification as to why a story allegedly set in Denmark does not show a stereotypical Scandinavian girl playing the main character. It is indeed here that we find, in my opinion, the most substantial difference between the original animated movie and its live-action counterpart: the setting. Making it clear

that the 1989 cartoon did not establish an official location where the story would unfold, we can only assume that it is set in Denmark as Andersen's tale. However, as the live-action starts and we are introduced to King Triton and his daughters, viewers will notice that the seven young mermaids all represent one of the seven seas, that they rule, making it noticeable from the different ethnicities of the daughters. Therefore, from a narrative point of view, the fact that Triton's daughters have all different features, depending on their sea, harmonises with the choice of using a diverse batch of characters. Nonetheless, this does not yet explain how Ariel, a dark-skinned mermaid, should represent the Northern Sea if we assume that the live-action is set in the same location as its predecessors. However, it is there that viewers' assumptions fall mistaken, as the newest *Little Mermaid* is not indeed set in Denmark, instead, it seems to be located in a geographical area that resembles the Caribbean Sea, as watchers might speculate from the general landscape of Prince Eric's kingdom and the taste of West Indies that Ariel meets when she goes to the surface. Therefore, this variation of the main location not only justifies our mermaid as dark-skinned, which is a characteristic not alien to the inhabitants of those isles, but this choice also unveils one of the leading mysteries of the original animated movie: Sebastian's accent. In the 1989 feature film, Sebastian the Crab is King Triton's advisor, tasked to keep an eye on the King's most rebellious daughter Ariel, and oddly enough he has a thick Jamaican accent. Up until now, the choice of associating a Jamaican crab with an apparent Danish setting has always been puzzling to many viewers, however, now that the newest *Little Mermaid* seems to be set in the Caribbean, the charismatic crab appears to fall perfectly into place in the framework of the story. Hence, I think it is clear to say that Ariel's skin tone did not alter from the original just to please non-white communities, but it fits into

a convincing groundwork that alters just enough of the original cartoon's aesthetic without erasing the story's core.

After all is said and done, I personally believe that Halle Bailey's interpretation of Ariel is immaculate, as she perfectly shows the mermaid's curiosity and her sense of adventure in a charming way as only a Disney Princess can do. She might not be a pale Caucasian girl with hair as red as cherries, but she has encapsulated the whole essence of Ariel and what that character represents to thousands of people, young and old, without overshadowing the original mermaid.

3.2 Not Only Ariel: Female African-American Representation in the History of Animation

The significant impact that multiculturalism has had in Western society has already been made clear in the previous chapters, however, it is vital to highlight the thin line that separates good inclusive representation and a more harmful stereotypical one. Since, especially at the start of more interracial media productions, most of the positions of power were occupied by white people, it is not difficult to assume that a quite common result could be leaning towards a more negative end. That is why it is vital for any type of media production to have the opportunity to consult with a reliable representative of a particular slice of the population. In particular, Disney seems to have had its fair share of controversies regarding non-white depictions, as defined in the previous paragraphs of this dissertation. As Giroux (1999) states, Disney's goal is to transform children and their families "from a democracy of citizens to a democracy of consumers", which only fuels the attitude that many production companies have adopted towards other cultures, riding the wave of depictions that are at times rather forced and at other times even detrimental to the communities portrayed, proving once and for all the systemic racism that permeates Western society. Luckily one can say that since the bumpy start of non-white portrayals in the media, nowadays companies are much more diverse and are effectively embracing a more global and inclusive attitude towards otherness, looking back at the past and recognising what did not work and what did. An example of a multicultural media wave, yet one that was made more to please the black community by offering a faux-liberal portrayal, is Blaxploitation cinema. From the combination of the words 'Black' and 'Exploitation', those movies

were usually action films that were first seen in the 1970s in the U.S. and demonstrated the growing interest in the rights of African-Americans, who were becoming increasingly vocal about the discrimination they faced on a daily basis (Alonge, Carluccio, 2015). As Alonge and Carluccio (2015) claim, that particular production of movies was primarily made to please the Black community, by adopting slang and style that African-Americans shared, but usually presented by white directors and producers who oftentimes could not really showcase the Black experience without the use of stereotypes.

Breaux (2010) declares that over the course of African-American representation in animation, in particular for female roles, the leading depiction of the Black woman was either as a maid, a server, or a stereotypical mammy, which does not aid Tiana's cause in *The Princess and The Frog* (2009), which merely reinforces the role of the Black woman as a servant of white people. Another clichéd portrayal of African-American women was the one of Jezebel, a typical promiscuous woman, that only reinforces the double attack of racism towards women of color that were not only discriminated against for their ethnicity but also their gender. Some examples of stereotypical portrayal of Black women in the early animated production could be found in *Sammy Johnsin*, a series released in 1916 that showed Black women either as washerwomen, as seen in Sammy's mother 'Big Mammy', or as native savages easily replaceable with baboons, as seen in one of Sammy's first love interests. An evident detail that seems to stand out is surely the fact that all of these women do not actually have a real name. To meet a female character featuring an actual name, Breaux (2010) explains, will have to wait until 1929 with the *Bosko the Talk-Ink Kid* and the *Little Ol' Bosko* series. However, the most notorious Black female character one can find in early animation is probably Mammy Two Shoes, the African-American maid that appears in some episodes of *Tom*

& Jerry in the 1940s. As Breaux (2010) states, Mammy Two Shoes became the biggest depiction of a Black woman in the U.S. at the time, relegating non-white women's concept to a black emasculating matriarch or a hyper-sexual Jezebel. To have a real Black female protagonist one will have to wait until the rise of the Black feminist movement.

Regarding Disney's involvement, other than the already controversial and stereotypical *Song of the South* (1946), depicted little to no female Black characters in its productions. In *Fantasia* (1940), during the Pastoral Symphony short, animators depicted a young black centaur that

"resemble[s] a stereotypical pickaninny and was the servant of one of the white women centaurs" (Breaux, 2010). Also, another example can be found in one of Disney's most beloved classics, *The Lion King* (1994). Although the movie tells a story set in Africa and is stocked with music, languages and names of Zulu and Swahili origins, there are no actual African people in the film, which only seems to reinforce Disney's attempt not to talk about black people despite using their culture for commercial purposes. Hence it can be confidently asserted that Disney, in its history of animation, has almost always followed the path of stereotypes.

As for DreamWorks, even though it is a relatively fresh company that does not stretch so back in time like Disney, and it was also created amid the new multicultural wave, does not yet escape from the use of clichés and assumptions about other cultures in its products. A clear example is in the depiction of some of its anthropomorphised animals in DreamWorks' animated movies, such as the characters in *Shark Tale* (2004).

Shark Tale (2004) is a movie set under the sea with fish protagonists, that showcases a vast arsenal of standardised depictions of particular cultures, such as the Black community and the Italian community in the United States. The main character, a fish

named Oscar, voiced by Black actor Will Smith, exhibits the lingo, gestures, and mannerisms usually associated with the black community. There is a specific scene in which Oscar tries a complicated handshake with his manager Sykes, a puffer fish voiced by white director Martin Scorsese, and when he is not able to get it right with Oscar, the latter says: "Don't sweat it, a lot of white fish can't do it" (*Shark Tale*, 2004) suggesting that there are indeed white fish and black fish, regardless of the actual colour of the animal. The main antagonist of the movie, Don Lino, a shark and mob boss living in the reef, is voiced by Robert De Niro – an actor of Italian descent that has often played the mafia boss over his career. Don Lino represents the stereotypical depiction of an Italian mafioso even though the story involves fish that do not actually have any nationality or culture (Bloodsworth-Lugo, King, Lugo-Lugo, 2010). Although the movie can be entertaining for children, and it occasionally shows fair morals like being honest and true to oneself, it also fuels the already-found assumptions that children might have about certain ethnicities or communities, which can only be damaging.

Although it is valuable to embody every aspect of a character, including their ethnicity and possibly their culture, the pitfall is that we might give far too great an importance to those gestures that we normally associate with a particular community, only fuelling stereotypes, even when the characters depicted are animals.

3.3 Why Representation Matters: The Habit of Recasting Actors

In consideration of the already scrutinised investigation of the new era of multiculturalism that has steeped into Western society, and that has shown a more extensive array of cultures and narratives, it is time to dive into the analysis of the power of representation, and therefore misrepresentation. As we have already discussed in the previous chapters, the depiction of different communities, religions, and customs could either be a good vehicle to teach viewers about other truths, or it could display harmful stereotypes that do not help at all the culture represented, which unfortunately usually happens. As Castañeda (2018) reveals, although truthful portrayals of other non-white ethnicities could well adjust the nowadays normalised poor idea of POC communities like Latinos, it is oftentimes a more negative and clichéd depiction of said communities that leaves its mark on mainstream society. Connect those dots with political agendas and systemic racism, and the result is a shared opinion of certain ethnicities that only fuels violence and hatred. Considering it is more accessible for non-white citizens to work in the media industry, it is still strenuous for them to put their own contribution to those products, although nowadays many brands are trying to unlearn systemic racism and provide more opportunities to POC communities.

As seen with Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (2023), the habit of casting non-white actors in roles traditionally associated with whiteness is something rather emerging nowadays. Viewers could witness it in plenty of other projects in the media, not only in movies aimed at children. African-American producer and screenwriter Shonda Rhimes has left her signature in many television productions, such as *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-current) and, over the last few years, she has offered viewers the televised

adaptation of Julia Quinn's novels, *Bridgerton* (2020-current), a TV series set in Regency England. In the series, many characters that hold high-level positions in aristocracy are performed by non-white actors, such as Queen Charlotte herself, played by Guyanese actress Golda Rosheuvel. Moreover, even Broadway was affected by color-blind casting as one can see in Lin Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* (2015), a rapped musical about Alexander Hamilton's life, where most of the founding fathers and other characters are played by non-white performers. Of course, these are only some of the many examples of an increasingly widespread phenomenon that does not mean to insult history and its accuracy, yet it seems to dare a more ironic and multicultural approach that defies a colonialist legacy that producers are still adopting in the media. Although these creations still have a few negative reviews that defend historical accuracy over a modern approach, the majority of receptions seem to be positive – as long as viewers remember that those productions are fictional and do not represent non-white communities in the past. However, occasionally, the choice of color-blind casting could easily backfire, such as seen in the recent Netflix docuseries based on the life of the Egyptian pharaoh *Queen Cleopatra* (2023), where the titular character is played by Black actress Adele James. Although Cleopatra was indeed African, she descended from Greek Pharaohs, therefore allegedly she was not dark-skinned. The docuseries not only received bad reviews for its choice of its leading actress but also for its lack of historical accurateness that one would expect from a documentary. Thus, as long as producers do not sell a color-blind production as historically accurate, it is less likely that there will be any public reprisals.

Back to media productions aimed at children, representation of otherness does not only concern different ethnicities, but it could also teach young viewers about different sexualities in order to approach the concept of Other in a more intersectional way.

Although Disney has always been quite subtle in showing queer characters, some latest projects such as Pixar Sparkshots' *Out* (2020) portray LGBTQ+ stories without subtlety for the audience to enjoy. One could even argue that nowadays animated productions are not meant to indoctrinate young viewers but to show them the variety of the human experience.

Regarding Disney's history of recasting traditionally white roles in live-action feature films, however, it is vital to highlight a seemingly frequent pattern that I have noticed. So far, up to the year 2023, I have personally acknowledged that on several occasions in which Disney has cast a black woman in an originally white role, the role in question was of a fantasy character. As seen with Ariel, a sea creature half woman and half fish that does not have a nationality, viewers can find the same pattern in other live-action movies such as *Peter Pan & Wendy* (2023) and *Pinocchio* (2022). In the first case, Black American actress Yara Shahidi was given the role of Tinkerbell, Peter Pan's loyal fairy friend, originally designed as blonde and white. In the second movie, the Blue Fairy, who transforms Pinocchio into a real boy by the end of the original fable, is played by Black English actress Cynthia Erivo – who will also play the Wicked Witch of the West Elphaba in the *Wicked* movie adaptation (2024). In both examples, when a live-action movie recasts one of its characters as non-white, the designated role assigned to a POC actress always seems to fall back on the fantasy role. It could surely be just a coincidence, however, I find it odd that there appears to be a link between Black people and non-existent characters, as if – unconsciously or not – producers associate other ethnicities other than white to be non-deserving to play a real character. Nonetheless, there seems to be a breakthrough in the peculiar pattern, since Rachel Zegler, an American actress of Colombian and Polish descent has been cast as Snow White in the upcoming live-action movie (2024). The actress does not resemble the original Disney

princess, and the Internet has already made its judgment in this regard, but at least a non-white actress will play a human in a Disney movie, not to mention the importance of representing mixed characters.

When all is said and done, the bright side of this cultural retelling and color-blind casting phenomenon seems to bring to the table non-stereotypical characters that POC viewers might relate to. It is particularly unfortunate when privileged people take for granted their right to be represented in the media when on the other hand non-white communities still do not have an appropriate portrayal that does not include some sort of stereotypes. Since movies do not need to be accurate in order to be enjoyable as a form of escapism, it seems completely normal to me that non-white viewers would like to see characters like them not playing stereotypical roles, instead characters not limited by history, because ultimately everyone would like to see themselves in an impersonation that looks like them.

Conclusion

As a result of my research, I can undoubtedly confirm that media productions, specifically aimed at children, can vary from being remarkably useful to opening one's mind, and at the same time, they could provide untrue and clichéd assumptions towards a certain culture or ethnic group. Storytelling has been such a cornerstone for humanity that we are perpetually trying to find new innovative ways to recount our legacy, such as with visual media. However, as humanity evolves and brand-new societal norms and customs are brought forward, we also need to adapt old narratives with a modern eye, without losing the original message but also by making it relatable to us nowadays. It is an ever-evolving process that will hardly ever see an end, although some might be nostalgic for the original version of a story, there is no doubt that the phenomenon of retelling and reinventing has been around for hundreds – if not thousands – of years.

Since the media can disclose a time's customs and general opinions, by seeing postmodern children's movies I could determine that, specifically at the time, systemic racism is more alive than ever and still spreads hateful assumptions on our idea of Otherness. I could assert that by looking at non-white character's features, crowded with stereotypical and harmful clichés that the world could associate with a certain ethnicity or culture, and by the damaging retelling of history of cartoons set in colonialist times, as they show a whitewashed, watered down, and romanticised narrative that only invalidates Indigenous people's legacy and past. The enormous media heritage left to the younger generations can be extraordinarily favourable to teach them about different portrayals in the history of animation and how the

perception of Otherness has changed and keeps on evolving every day. However, considering that children are not passive viewers at all, instead, they tend to absorb every inch of information disclosed in a movie, it is vital to emphasise the importance of providing some background coaching to young viewers.

To conclude, I do believe that everybody dreams of recognising oneself on screen, even adults. Specifically for young children though, it is vital for them to relate to a character they see more physically close to them than with their personality, and since for almost all cinema history, non-white characters were mostly narrowed to derogatory and dehumanising roles, it is nothing but right to give viewers, especially younger ones, a fair non-stereotypical representation in the media so that they can mirror it in real life and build a society free of prejudices. Therefore, I believe that as Caucasian children had plenty of characters to relate to because of their innate privilege in representation, I do believe that non-white young viewers should have the same opportunity to recognise themselves and their culture in an animated movie.

This dissertation was intended to demonstrate the portrayal of Otherness in movies aimed at children in a multicultural age overflowed by cultures and differences, hence I can undoubtedly reaffirm that in products abundant of diversity one can also find hints of the long way to go in order to reach racial equality. Children are the future of society and, as young users, it is through the media that they are formed for tomorrow, thus, as they learn and absorb through movies and TV series, it is vital to provide them with tools that can help them develop open-mindedness and respect. In such a way, one day they might not have to unlearn systemic racism and harmful assumptions about other cultures and ethnicities as we are doing today.

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