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Trapped in the Mouse House: How Disney has Portrayed Racism and Sexism in its Princess Films

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the history of one of the most popular entertainment companies in the world, Disney. Through the discussion of multiple princess films, from the beginning of Disney to the more current films, I analyze the ongoing racism and sexism that is presented in these timeless Disney films. I will discuss the implications that this racism and sexism has on the children who view these films and what responsibility Disney has as a worldwide company in terms of what it displays to its audience.

Keywords

Disney, Racism, Gender, Princesses

Disciplines

Africana Studies | American Film Studies | Film and Media Studies | Race and Ethnicity

Comments

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Trapped in the Mouse House

How Disney has Portrayed Racism and Sexism in its Princess Films

Disney is one of the most powerful companies in the entertainment industry and has the ability to mesmerize viewers with its timeless stories. Since its beginning in 1923, the company has grown to be worth over \$110 billion (Dennison, 2018). Disney has an international customer base which engages with its content and products—new films, characters and merchandise as well as classics which are periodically released from the Disney vault. Customers pour money into the company to enjoy a piece of Disney magic that is marketed as “innocent, wholesome family fun” (Cappiccie, Chadha, Lin, & Snyder, 2012, p. 57); however, what consumers fail to see is the Disney behind the marketing campaigns and iconic films. Disney is not as progressive as their image lets on. In fact, if we look into the meaning behind the stories and characters we love, we recognize that gender stereotyping and racism is prevalent in Disney’s films.

Disney embodies gender stereotypes and racism in a way that is not apparent to the average viewer and certainly not to children who make up a large portion of their market. Disney is a significant influencer and we need to look at the implications that the use of stereotypes and racist depictions have on the generations of individuals who watch these films and are absorbed in the related merchandising. Many articles have been written about the racism and gender perspectives that are represented in the movies about Disney princesses. While Disney’s animation, special effects and story lines have evolved during the company’s 100-year history, the princesses are still largely depicted in strictly feminine roles and there are many racial references in these films.

Through an analysis of princess films, I explain how Disney has made some progress in addressing gender and racial stereotypes but has failed to successfully eliminate these barriers

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and positively portray gender equality and racial diversity. In building my argument, I give background on the eras of the Disney enterprise and what princess films were produced during each timeframe. I give examples of how multiple princess films depict gender and racial stereotypes and discuss implications of this reality and the effect these stereotypes have on children who watch these films and read these stories, especially girls (specifically Black girls because of the intersectionality they face). I also talk about the social responsibility that Disney has to its consumers and conclude by discussing limitations of my research-- raising some questions and offering some solutions to this important issue.

Disney's stories can be analyzed by splitting the film releases into different eras. The Classic Era (beginning 1937) was Disney's golden age, which included the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*. The success of this era led to Disney becoming noteworthy in the film and animation industry. However, following the deaths of both Walt and Roy Disney, the company struggled and "faced increased amounts of debt" (May 2011, p. 2). Disney's popularity and revenue declined until Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg, took over leadership. The Renaissance Era (1980s-1990s) "represented a revitalization of Disney with the release of 12 films with leading female roles" (May, 2011, p. 2) including: *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas*. These films show Disney's moderate progress to remain current with the waves of feminism; however, the "portrayal of gender roles does not appear to have greatly changed since the death of Walt Disney" (Wiersma 2000, p. 104). The next era, often called the Post-Renaissance Era, includes *The Princess and the Frog*, Disney's first film to feature a Black princess.

Disney has always been led by White men and the princess movies have been produced by White men. This provides a rationale for why every princess movie includes some form of

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gender and racial stereotyping and why “seven of the eleven official Disney Princesses are white” (Cordwell, 2016, p. 15); and, those that are not have been adopted from fairytales that depict women through racist European views. White, male control contributes to the fact that “the stereotypical personality of the princesses did not change until the end of the 20th century, during the third wave of feminism” (Trulson, 2017) even though the feminist movement had been underway long before this time. As Ostman (1996) and America’s Sorcerer (1998) note, “Disney held strong beliefs informed by the Protestant, white Anglo-Saxon values” (as cited in Wiersma, 2000, p.30). Disney had what Watts (1997) describes as a “very old-fashioned view of women” (as cited in Wiersma, 2000, p. 30), which is that a woman’s place is in the home. In creating the early princess movies, Disney Americanized European fairytales “so they reflected mainstream values such as the Protestant work ethic” (Wormer & Juby, 2016, pp. 583-4).

In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Snow White sings, gently picks flowers and takes care of animals. All these roles support the stereotype that women are expected to be serene and caring (Gamboa, Habagat, Kionisala, & Salera, 2014, p. 72). In addition, Snow White waits to be rescued and needs a man to live happily ever after. This portrayal “undermines a woman’s ability to take care of herself” (Gamboa et al., 2014, p. 73). As Sommers-Flanagan et al. (1993) note, while “the dwarfs depend on Snow White for her ability to cook, clean and keep house, she depends on the dwarfs to keep her safe” (as cited in Matyas, 2010, p. 28), supporting a stereotype of men as heroic protectors and women as delicate and fragile.

In *Cinderella* (1950), stereotypes are reinforced as Cinderella is assigned to keep the house tidy and complete chores (Gamboa et al., 2015, p. 76). She remains innocent, kind and gentle despite her poor treatment, interacts with animals and looks for the goodness in everyone (Gamboa et al., 2014, p. 79). The third princess movie from the Classic Era, *Sleeping Beauty*

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(1959), also upholds feminine norms. Similar to Cinderella, Aurora takes care of the household and cares for others. Three fairies bestow gifts on Aurora which emphasize feminine ideals- beauty, the ability to sing and the capability of sleeping until she receives true love's kiss (Gamboa et al., 2014, p. 81-2). The homogeneity in the presentation of these female characters and the paradigm of white femininity isn't surprising as these films were created during a time when "the housewife was common place" (Higgs, 2016, p. 64). Disney's depiction of females as young and delicate, wearing gowns, being admired for their beauty and as damsels-in-distress waiting for a heroic knight to rescue them (Lewis, 2016, p. 24), reinforces society's long-held views of women.

These classic princesses were created before second wave feminism and they all depict women similarly in terms of roles and quality of life (Lin, 2015), demonstrating Disney's lack of progress in advancing the role of its female leads. Representing women this way sends a message that they "are meek, submissive, overly emotional, and reliant on men" (Matyas, 2010, p. 10) and that "they only find true happiness, stability, and health upon finding their true love" (Davis, 2014, Page 49). Even the names of these princesses show how women were thought of. The words snow and white represent something pure and innocent; 'Cinderella' references ash, which is something that can easily blow away; and, Aurora, renamed 'Briar Rose,' represents a flower, which has only temporary beauty (Higgs, 2016, p. 64).

In 1989, after several years without introducing princesses, Disney released its new generation of films, which coincided with the third wave of feminism. Third wave feminists criticized the second wave for "ignoring issues specific to different races, classes and orientations" and favored adopting multiple perspectives on what it means to be feminine and beautiful (Ebersol, 2014). The new princesses, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine and Pocahontas reflect

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society's evolving beliefs about women: how they should behave and how they are treated (Ebersol, 2014). These princesses are "more diverse in appearance than their classic sisters" (Hill, 2010, p. 84). Although these Renaissance films are more sophisticated in production and introduce more diversity, as Gutierrez (2000) notes, Disney continues to play "a substantial role in reaffirming, even constructing, an uneven social hierarchy that privileges the status quo and subjugates marginal populations" (as cited in Wormer & Juby, 2016, p. 583-4).

In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle is positioned as an intellectual, young woman; however, this potential is challenged by Gaston who says, "how can you read this, there's no pictures. It's not right for a woman to read" (Wiersma, 2000, p. 87). In addition, Belle is incredibly loyal and tries to "find the Beast's humanity, despite his emotional and verbal abuse" (Breux, 2010, p. 403) towards her. This teaches girls that it is ok to be in an abusive and degrading relationship and that they should accept this kind of treatment if they want to secure a man's affection. Belle's ambitions takes a back seat to the needs of a man-she willingly imprisons herself to save her father and compromises finding a worldly life to help the Beast reverse a curse.

In *The Little Mermaid*, we see a physical advancement in the maturity of the princesses. Ariel dresses in a revealing way-showing her stomach and wearing a bikini (Barber, 2015, p. 15). She demonstrates independence by defying her father's orders and going off on her own to find a way to get legs. Ariel's curiosity and drive to explore the human world shows how Disney is giving more independence to the princesses. However, Ariel is still naïve, as she believes Ursula's evil plans and relinquishes her voice for love. The film "also falls back on the princess-needs-prince plot so familiar during the first wave of feminism" (Garabedian, 2014-15, p. 23).

In *Aladdin*, Jasmine embodies attributes of a modern woman-she wants to be independent and leave the castle and does not want her father to select her suitor. However, this film further

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represents female dependence on males, as “the Sultan wants to make sure Jasmine is ‘taken care of, provided for’” (Wiserma, 200, p. 85) by a man. In addition, Aladdin sees Jasmine as a trophy, wanting to be with her because of her beauty. Aladdin also lies to Jasmine for most of the film, pretending to be a prince. In the end, when she finds out who he really is, Jasmine forgives Aladdin for lying to her (Redden, 2018). This furthers the idea that women should accept relationships that take advantage of their vulnerability.

Pocahontas is another protagonist exhibiting an independence and self-sufficiency not seen in earlier princesses. Her father thinks that, “she needs a husband to be safe from harm” (Wiserma, 2000, p. 85), but Pocahontas wants to follow another path. Despite her resilience, Pocahontas ultimately gives up romance to fulfill a motherly duty to her people (Cordwell, 2016, p. 12). While this decision seems feminist-like and progressive, as Vint (2007) points out, it perpetuates the idea that women can’t have it all-being free denies Pocahontas a chance for “marriage and motherhood” (as cited in Matyas, 2010, p. 36).

Similar to how second wave feminists resisted oppression and third wave feminists promoted more equality, diversity and individuality, these Renaissance princesses began to challenge the status quo in order to achieve their individual goals. In these princesses, we see how Disney began to give female protagonists more strength, independence and a desire to break out of conventional female roles; however, they do not emerge with personas that fully challenge female stereotypes.

In addition to gender stereotypes, the princess culture perpetuates racial stereotypes. Disney did not introduce racially diverse princesses until the Renaissance Era. Over the evolution of the princess franchise, White princesses are portrayed as more feminine compared to princesses of color (May, 2011, p. 12-13) and “the ethnic princesses receive praise for being

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hardworking, dedicated, and courageous” (Hill, 2010, p. 89) and for exhibiting more “masculine behaviors than white princesses” (May, 2011, p. 17). The classic White princesses wear gowns which highlight feminine features such as their breasts and tiny waists. On the contrary, racially and ethnically diverse princesses are displayed in more stereotypical manners, such as Pocahontas who is seen as rougher and less feminine (stereotypes of Native Americans).

The Renaissance Era films may have introduced racially diverse princesses, but they also opened the door to plots which included racial conflicts. One example is *Aladdin*, which drew criticism from Arab Americans who felt the film was inaccurate and unflattering for the culture (Breux, 2010, p. 400). *Aladdin* portrayed Arabs “as dirty, cheap, and thieving” (Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, & Tanner, 2004, p. 32), aggressive and poor. In addition, “Aladdin and Jasmine appeared lighter-skinned, were drawn with Anglo features, and spoke with anglicized accents” (Breux, 2010, p. 400).

The most significant shift in how Disney represents race was the introduction of Tiana, the first African American princess and leading character in *The Princess and the Frog*. Prior to this film, most racial tropes depicted in Disney movies were a mammy, jezebel or strong black woman, which was mostly in the form of a villain (e.g. Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*). Disney claims to be a “racially neutral colorblind corporation” (Breux, 2010, p. 413); however, the company had yet to incorporate a princess of color, and according to Barnes (2009), this film was Disney’s way “to vanquish once and for all the charges of racism that linger from the past” (as cited in Wormer & Juby, 2016, p. 589).

Tiana’s character still embodies traditional female gender roles-she is a waitress who, “like her mother, made a career from traditionally feminine labor” (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011, p. 564). When comparing Tiana to other Disney representations of Black

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girls and women, we see progress towards racial equity; however, Disney still characterizes the “Black servant, presenting Tiana (and her mother) within that same narrow scope of historical representations of Black womanhood” (Callen, 2012, p. 23). Disney also demonstrates the Brazilian idea that everyone has “one foot in the kitchen” (Redden, 2018). This implies that Tiana, who is of African descent, is related to past slaves and that it is her responsibility to do chores in the house.

Tiana demonstrates independence since her ultimate goal is not to find marriage or love (Cordwell, 2016, p. 14), but to open her own restaurant. Unfortunately, Tiana is unable to achieve her goal of purchasing restaurant space because, “a little woman of [her] background” would not be able to handle a business” (Terry, 2010, p. 477). The fact that Tiana is denied a chance to purchase her dream restaurant space could be attributed to a limitation of her race. However, Disney positions this obstacle as a gender barrier, since she is ultimately able to purchase the space when she has the support of a male.

Releasing the first African American princess has not come without criticism from those who feel that Disney missed an opportunity to eliminate the racial divide, since Tiana spends much of the movie as non-human. Unlike her beautiful White predecessors, Tiana is portrayed as a frog, an amphibian that is not considered “cute or relatable” (Dundes & Streiff, 2016, p. 9). Tiana’s relationship with the prince was also not charming like that of her earlier counterparts who were treated as the object of desire by their handsome, wealthy prince. In addition, Tiana and Prince Naveen are not of the same race, making them one of Disney’s only biracial couples. While most other princesses end up getting married and living in a palace, “it is no coincidence that the...biracial couple...[does not] walk off into the fairytale sunset as husband and wife” (Guizerix, 2013, p. 35). Instead, Tiana and Prince Naveen settle in New Orleans and run a

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restaurant. The film is also critiqued for Tiana's hair not being more "Afrocentric" (Lester, 2010, p. 298); and, according to Badeau and Graff (2010) for her skin being "too light" to be representative of an African American princess (as cited in Lester, 2010, p. 299). Tiana is also portrayed with larger lips than other princesses (a stereotypical feature of Black women that is used to classify them as less attractive).

Under the premise of ensuring racial sensitivity, Disney engaged consultants to help develop Tiana's character. Disney worked with African American influencers such as Oprah Winfrey and representatives from the NAACP before releasing *The Princess and the Frog* (Callen, 2012, p. 68). However, the premise of the film remained mostly the same after the consultants (Callen, 2012, p. 69), with the exception of Tiana's name, which changed from Maddy to Tiana (because Maddy sounded like "Mammy", a trope depicting Black women as maternal and nurturing) (Wanzo, 2011, p. 4). While hiring race consultants may help legitimize the film, it doesn't eliminate racial constructs.

While Disney films appeal to a broad audience, the primary target for the princess franchise is young girls. Disney gives us timeless stories and has the power to influence and educate young girls; and, as Giroux and Pollock (2010) note, Disney has "an enormous stake in the cultural capital of the nation—our children" (as cited in Wormer & Juby, 2016, p. 583). Consequently, Disney movies both reflect and produce our modern culture (Griffin, Harding, & Learmonth, 2017, p. 874). For years, America's younger generations have used their favorite princesses as role models for what to believe and how to act, "ultimately learning social cues as they imitate their favorite animated movies" (Garabedian, 2014-15, p. 23). Sociologists say that "individuals learn roles by watching others and through outside experiences that show how an individual does particular tasks" (May, 2011, p. 6). That being said, children (and adults) believe

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what they see in these Disney films and Disney controls the depiction of fairy tales in our society. Disney's depictions of these timeless fairy tales are versions of the original stories that over emphasize gender stereotypes and racial biases (Lester, 2010, p. 295).

Throughout the films in the princess franchise, girls are shown traditional female roles and behaviors that constrict freedom for women. Unfortunately, "girls use these visual and mediated illustrations of 'princess-ness' to understand their place in the world" (Hill, 2010, p. 84). Being represented in a particular manner or failing to be represented in these stories makes children feel a low sense of self-worth, especially if they can't identify with the characters. Research finds that "Disney [has] had harmful effects on others by not allowing a variation of racial representatives in films" (May, 2011, p. 6). When Black children are not portrayed in these famous stories, it makes them question their place in history wondering, "what do these fairy tales tell me about me and about others? If I am not in what does this mean?" (Hurley, 2005, p. 228). Prior to the introduction of Tiana, the race message was clear: "princesses are white, and if you are not white, then you cannot be a real princess" (Hill, 2010, p. 84). However, in terms of race, Blackness is not universal and Tiana can't be expected to represent all Black girls.

It is difficult to escape Disney's influence on society. Under the Disney business model, any culture or message can be sold if it is mass-produced and marketed properly. Since "the films Walt Disney produces are specifically targeted at young impressionable children, it is important that we continue to deconstruct the messages" (Matyas, 2010, p. 42) and "question the values that Disney teaches and hold it accountable for the ways it attempts to shape children's identities" (Wormer & Juby, 2016, p. 579). 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.

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“It is up to Disney writers and animators to instill positive, progressive concepts to keep children from reverting back to more traditional gender roles” (Garabedian, 2014-15, p. 25). While “Disney has begun to address this through its contemporary Disney Princess films,... [they] will have to do more than introduce several diverse princesses to compensate for fifty years of reinforcing cultural hegemony” (Guizerix, 2013, p. 52). Just because we have an African American princess doesn’t mean efforts towards racial equality have been sufficient. Blackness is not universal (Redden, 2018). There are many different kinds/ethnicities/cultures of African American-- just having Tiana, Jasmine, or Pocahontas isn’t enough to represent a whole race of individuals. We consider Disney princess films to be sacred but that doesn’t mean they are appropriate or correct-- not all media representation is good representation. We can’t just be satisfied that Disney introduces a princess of diversity. We need to challenge Disney to make sure this representation is accurate and culturally sensitive.

Mark Twain said that “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” In the case of Disney, we see that tales are as old as time. As our society has progressed, the princess movies have continued to portray very similar ideals. They have “rhymed.” In order to stop this cycle of racism and sexism, we can look to Audre Lorde, who offers a powerful explanation. Audre Lorde suggests that “a master’s tools will not dismantle master’s house.” This means that using systems of White male dominance and patriarchy to try and break racist and stereotypes won’t work. We can’t count on Disney (the master), which is built upon White male dominance, to break these stereotypes. Instead, we need to create new systems, or companies, to challenge Disney to improve its representation of females and different races.

As in all research, there are limitations to this study which could be considered in future analysis of gender and racial stereotypes within film and entertainment. First, this study only

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looks at the Disney franchise and its portrayal of gender and racial stereotypes. Disney is not the only company struggling to integrate race and gender into its films, and an analysis of other companies may indicate a greater prevalence of these barriers in the entertainment industry. Second, only movies featuring a Disney princess were considered. A critical review of other Disney films, such as movies with animals (*Zootopia* and *The Lion King*), could make the Disney issue more extreme as could a review of Disney's other franchises (Marvel, Pixar) and how they do or don't portray gender and racial stereotypes. Third, this paper focuses on female and racial stereotypes, but what about males?

Regardless of these limitations, one could argue that racism and sexism are embedded in Disney culture. There are ways these issues can be addressed. Disney can listen to race consultants and use the feedback to improve future films. They can also engage consultants to ensure they adequately incorporate gender equality and demonstrate a more progressive feminist perspective. Disney can also expand their corporate staff, animators and writers to include younger, more progressive thought leaders. Will Disney use their influence to bring about change? Only time will tell.

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