

Blackness, Bayous and Gumbo: Encoding and Decoding Race in a Colorblind World

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Set in 1920s New Orleans, Disney's 2009 *The Princess and the Frog* release marks both the studio's return to hand-drawn animation and the arrival of their first Black princess in a feature-length film. Subject to criticism and speculation from the start, the much-anticipated project can be seen to both address and to erase race in its depiction of a black heroine and an ambiguously "brown" prince, not to mention the cast of swamp dwelling creatures, the choice of New Orleans as the setting, and the über-villain voodoo practicing Dr. Facilier. However, it is both too simplistic and too essentializing to read this film as yet another racist Disney production designed to further extend its \$4 billion a year Princess line through the promotion of Princess Tiana products.¹ Instead, this film represents a complex moment in a culture steeped in political correctness and an adherence to the politics of colorblindness.

What this essay will do then is attempt to analyze the ways in which Disney and its audiences negotiate the complexities inherent within the readings of this film by drawing, in part, upon the theories of encoding and decoding as articulated by Stuart Hall in his seminal 1973 study.² It is possible to extend his analysis of production and reception, a central ideological argument in the field of cultural studies that focuses on audience reception, as a means to examine this film. Hall argues that "the 'object' of production practices and structures in [film] is the production of a message: that is, a sign-vehicle, or rather sign-vehicles of a specific kind organized, like any other form of communication or language, through the operation of codes, within the syntagmatic chains of a discourse."³ Thus while the creators of the message "encode" a particular

ideology or reading into a text, an ideology that serves to reify the discourse of the hegemonic culture, there is a moment, the moment of “decoding,” that enables an alternate reading (either negotiated or oppositional) in opposition to the dominant reading embedded within the discourse of the text. Dominant readings and readers fully share in the ideological codes of the text; negotiated readings and readers partly share the text’s code but have some questions or reservations, while oppositional or counter-hegemonic readings and readers understand the intended or dominant reading but reject it.⁴

The dominant message encoded within this 21st century text is one of colorblindness, meaning that while Princess Tiana is clearly black, that is not the point of the text—she is simply a princess who “happens” to have black skin but is not representational of blackness or racially-prescribed tropes. Color-blind racism denies difference based on skin color by simply refusing to see color; therefore, Tiana is “just a princess,” not a *black* princess. The rhetoric of color-blind racism enables an adherence to dominant ideologies and institutional practices by negating difference. Jeff Kurtti, author of *The Art of the Princess and the Frog*, articulates that desire to not “see” Tiana’s blackness: she “stands apart from other Disney princesses not simply because of her race, but also because of her drive. ‘It’s ultimately more about *who* she is than *what* she is” [my emphasis].⁵ While Kurtti’s “who” signifies Tiana’s drive and work ethic, it fails to also signify her color, clearly intrinsic to both “who” and “what” she is; his insistence that her drive displaces her race underscores the pernicious threat of viewing the world through a color-blind lens.

And yet, race was clearly foremost in Disney’s mind with this project in that it both demonstrates their more recent intent to diversify their offerings and it responds to a recognizable paucity of black representation. Thus, Tiana must be black in the same way that Mulan was Chinese, Jasmine was Arabic, and Pocahontas was Native American. But, and herein lies the paradoxical nature of their project, she must also be simply another princess, albeit a more modern one, in a long line of Disney princesses. Audiences must simultaneously “see” her blackness and also overlook it in favor of her character and her desire to access the American dream. Disney’s ability to both market her as their first black princess, and thus appeal to blacks and liberal whites, and use her as a means to engage a colorblind response to the film appeals to a wide-ranging audience and invites any number of complex readings of the film.

Recognizing the polemic nature of race and racial representation in American culture, Disney consulted representatives from the NAACP and Oprah during the production of the film and, in response to negative feedback, changed both the original name Maddy to Tiana and her employment from maid to waitress.⁶ John Lasseter, Disney’s chief creative officer, claims “we didn’t want to do anything that might hurt anybody so we worked with a lot of African American leaders.”⁷ Even *Ebony*’s review of the film reifies this dominant colorblind reading through its claim that “the fact that both char-

acters [Tiana and Naveen] are frogs underscores the post racial, why-can't-we-get-along attitude that everyone, no matter what color, is exactly the same underneath—that is green and slimy.”⁸ Film critic Roger Ebert adroitly exonerates Disney's racist past with his suggestion that *The Princess and the Frog* could have utilized the “innocent” song “Zip-a-dee Doo-Dah” while also celebrating the decision on the part of Disney to erase race in this text, recognizing tellingly that audiences don't want to see it:

It is notable that this is Disney's first animated feature since *Song of the South* (1946) to feature African American characters, and if the studio really never is going to release that film on DVD, which seems more innocent by the day, perhaps they could have lifted “Zip-a-dee Doo-Dah” from it and plugged that song in here. Though the principal characters are all black (other than the rich man Big Daddy and the Prince, who is of undetermined ethnicity), race is not an issue because Disney adroitly sidesteps all the realities of being a poor girl in New Orleans in the early 1920s. Just as well, I suppose.⁹

Clearly the colorblind audience flocked to the film, resulting in a \$25 million opening weekend in December 2009, and amassing \$267,045,765 domestically as of the 28th of May 2011.¹⁰ Interestingly, while *CNN.com* ran the headline “*Princess and the Frog* No. 1 at box office,” *The New York Times* headline the following day claimed that “Disney's ‘*Princess*’ Displays Limited Box Office Magic.”¹¹ Did the more liberal *New York Times* imagine its readers flocking to the film as a means to demonstrate their liberalism and racial tolerance? As Angharad N. Valdivia so adroitly recognizes, “to be sure, Disney does not pursue new representational strategies unless it is certain that profits will increase without alienating the bulk of its audience.”¹² If that audience exists in a colorblind world, then Disney's representational strategy must work to reify that adherence to what Eduardo Bonilla-Silvi refers to as the “central ideology of the post civil rights era”—that of color blind racism.¹³ The ideology of color-blind racism,

which acquired cohesiveness and dominance in the late 1960s, explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics ... it seems like “racism lite.” Color-blind racism otherizes softly ... [and] serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era. And the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards.¹⁴

Thus Big Daddy La Bouff's mansion in the Garden Section of New Orleans is juxtaposed against the Ninth Ward shotgun style home of Tiana and her parents without questioning or problematizing the socio-economic disparity or difference encoded within the streetcar journey between the two.¹⁵ Moreover, Tiana's Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches transformation in the film is read as

indicative of an America where racism and racially coded stereotypes and glass ceilings are no more, at least in 1920s New Orleans. Look, says the dominant discourse, here is the story of a successful black girl/woman who, through hard work and perseverance, now has access to the American Dream; doesn't that construction of blackness suggest that America is now color-blind and magnanimously equal? Tiana didn't need affirmative action to succeed, just a good work ethic; such a portrayal of blackness appeals to all viewers—no one is alienated or threatened by Tiana or her gumbo restaurant. Writing for *The New York Times*, Manohla Dargis argues that “though the theme [of hard work] certainly serves the story—like her father, Tiana yearns to open a restaurant—it also displaces race, which the film, given the commercial stakes, cannot engage.”¹⁶ And her success re-affirms the dominant ideological tenets of hard work and capitalism, reifying their integral positioning in dominant American ideology while at the same time further marginalizing race and its role in that ideology.

The film is based upon the classic Grimm brothers fairy tale *The Frog Prince*, in which the main character, a prince, is turned into a frog and can only be returned to human form through the kiss of a beautiful princess. E.D. Baker re-wrote the story in the 2002 *The Frog Princess* to incorporate a more developed female character and it is this version that the Disney film loosely mimics. The film opens with a brief glimpse of Tiana as a child who, when she wishes upon a star, is reminded by her father that stars don't bring wishes, hard work does. Fast-forward to Tiana as a young woman working two jobs in order to save the down payment on the restaurant she dreams of opening. Juxtaposed against her work ethic is the prince of the tale, Prince Naveen, who arrives in New Orleans after being disinherited by his parents because of his absent work ethic. Quickly meeting up with Dr. Facilier, the Shadow Man, Naveen is turned into a frog, and his manservant is transformed into a replicant of Naveen who, Facilier hopes, will marry the wealthy Charlotte La Bouff thus giving Facilier access to her father's wealth. Naveen mistakes Tiana for a princess at the La Bouff masquerade ball, convinces her to kiss him, and, instead of him regaining his body, turns her into a frog as well. The bulk of the story details their journey to the bayou-dwelling Mama Odie, who, they believe, can turn them both back into people again.

The opening scene of the film works to situate the audience in the realm of fairy tales, princesses and the dreams of little girls. Charlotte's room, in the La Bouff mansion, serves as an homage to previous Disney princesses: there is a child-size carriage similar to that of Cinderella; an enormous, elaborate canopy bed echoing Sleeping Beauty; dolls and crowns, tea parties and dresses by the dozen. Moreover, this scene provides a clever inter-textual reference to the overarching storyline in that Tiana's mother Eudora, as voiced by Oprah, is telling young Tiana and Charlotte the story of *The Frog Prince*.¹⁷ Audiences see the leather-bound text with the title embossed in gold; this serves to remind

viewers that this is not Disney's original story but is instead a re-telling of a classic fairytale, albeit with a twist, that is, a black princess. What is intriguing about this scene is the oppositional reactions the two young girls have to the traditional fairy tale: young Charlotte, with her blond hair, wealthy father, absent mother and palatial home, embraces the tale, exclaiming "I would kiss a hundred frogs if it meant I could marry a prince and be a princess." Tiana, set up as the antithesis of Charlotte in so many ways, responds that "there is no way in this whole wide world I would ever, ever, ever, I mean never, kiss a frog!" On one hand, Charlotte is the classic Disney princess in a slightly less waif-like form, waiting for her prince to come, but, she brings a level of complexity to that princess role. Audiences recognize traditional Disney princess tropes in her character and locale, but, as an adult, her somewhat mercenary approach to finding her prince adds a level of irony to her desires; at the ball, she describes her carefully orchestrated conquest of Prince Naveen as going "back into the fray." The illustrations in the book from which Eudora is reading depict the more traditional/classic Disney couple: she is blond and he is white, a evocation echoed later in the film when Dr. Facilier shows Prince Naveen the marriage card from the tarot deck—that card places Charlotte and her father in the roles of eligible princess and King. Through such juxtapositions and illustrations, audiences are reminded again and again that this text, this princess, is something new and that Disney is working to de-stabilize or at least question their own princess status quo.

The opening images also work to locate the film historically, first in 1912, and then 1920s New Orleans both by having Eudora working for Big Daddy La Bouff as a seamstress and then showing the black mother and daughter sitting in the back of the streetcar when they leave. This "princess" lives in a shotgun style home in the Ninth Ward, where the neighborhood comes together over gumbo and hush puppies and where her father instills his work ethic in his young daughter. The coherent and loving family unit enables a point of identification for the audience—there are no wicked stepmothers here—and the eventual requisite dead parent is explained through a brief shot of a framed picture of Tiana's father in uniform, a medal hanging over one corner of the frame. In this way, patriotism and sacrifice subtly enter the ideological discourse of the film, again providing a point of connection or alignment for the audience. Grown-up Tiana works two jobs in order to amass the down payment needed for the abandoned building she has chosen for her restaurant. Duke's Café, her day job, is in the French Quarter; here audiences see a multicultural clientele although Tiana and the cook are black. The cook, presumably a business owner himself, undermines her dream when he tells her "you got about as much chance of getting that restaurant as I do of winning the Kentucky Derby." Whether his comments are grounded in race or gender is unclear; however, similar comments voiced by the white realtors, the Fenner Brothers, call to mind both: after telling her that another bid on the building

has superseded hers, they tell her “a little woman of your background would’ve had her hands full ... you’re better off where you’re at.” Whether such statements are grounded in sexism or racism, Tiana’s desires to prove her naysayers wrong *do* work to provide a positive role model for many girls, not just black, and again appeal to a wide audience. However, the conflation of racism and sexism in a sense works again to erase race, to appeal to a colorblind reading since both black and white men make similar, deprecating comments.

With the release of the DVD version of the film comes access to the deleted scenes, the first of which—“Advice from Mama”—reiterates Tiana’s desire to be her own person, to place hard work over romance. Although only in storyboard format, the scene locates Tiana in the Horatio Algiers ideology, not the traditional princess role. Her mother, while using Tiana as a dress dummy as she works on Charlotte’s elaborate princess dress for the upcoming ball, deprecates Tiana’s “all work and no romance” lifestyle. In response, Tiana declares “Mama, I don’t need a prince to sweep me off my feet and take me away to fairy tale land. I’m making my own fairy tales.” Tiana promises her mother that she won’t have to make any dresses once she opens her restaurant; in reply, her mother tells her that she has one more dress she wants to make: Tiana’s wedding dress. This scene was dropped from the final version of the movie because the producers felt the restaurant scene and Tiana’s first song “Almost There,” a song about overcoming trials and tribulations through hard work, made such declarations “superfluous.”¹⁸

While her mother’s desires clearly locate Tiana in the more traditional princess role, that of romance and marriage, the language of the movie marks a strong contrast to the rhetorical conventions of previous fairy tale films. In a 2003 study, sociologists Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz analyze the discourse practices of traditional fairy tales,¹⁹ focusing on reprints and retellings of the classic Grimm brothers stories, including Disney’s.²⁰ Their study concluded that

Messages concerning feminine beauty pervade these fairy tales. Although the tales are not devoid of references to men’s beauty, or handsomeness, it is women’s beauty that is emphasized in terms of number of references to beauty, the ways it is portrayed, and the role feminine beauty plays in moving the story along.²¹

However, *The Princess and the Frog* is almost entirely devoid of references to Tiana’s physical attributes; with the exception of one comment by Charlotte after she has dressed Tiana in one of her many princess gowns—describing her as “prettier than a magnolia in May”—there are no other discursive markers of feminine beauty until the penultimate scene, the wedding scene in the swamp, when Mama Odie refers to the now-human again Tiana as Prince Naveen’s “lovely bride.” Instead, the text references Tiana’s work ethic, often as a negative attribute: her friends complain that “all you ever do is work;” her

mother says it is a “shame you’re working so hard;” Tiana herself acknowledges she “doesn’t have time for dancing;” and, Naveen refers to her as a “stick in the mud.” Indeed, the only time the audience hears Tiana refer to her physical self is immediately after she has transformed into a frog; she looks at herself in the mirror and laments “I’m green and I’m slimy.” In contrast, Naveen frequently makes reference to his physical attributes, reminding Tiana that he is “charming and handsome” at one point, and then again when he informs Louis, who at this point has only seen Naveen as frog, that he is “unbelievably handsome.” While a feminist reading of this absence of beauty references would suggest a positive and progressive shift, thus providing little girls with a role model more concerned with material success than physical beauty, the absence becomes more complex when race is introduced.

Although Directors John Musker and Ron Clements describe the film as “a kind of gumbo as well, mixing ingredients of the traditional Disney fairy tale with the rich fabric” of New Orleans,²² those traditional elements do not incorporate race, or at least a way to talk about race in a culture steeped in colorblind racism. Jeff Kurtti’s *The Art of The Princess and the Frog* is an amalgamation of quotations, storyboard sketches and explanations detailing the evolution of each character in the film. The artists and animators responsible for what audiences eventually see in the movie provide commentary and insights about the process. Thus, Charlotte is described as “Daddy’s Little Princess,” his “blonde, blue-eyed dear one.”²³ Color styling supervisor Maria Gonzales effuses: “I love Charlotte. She’s just got a lot of character to her—and the *look* that we’ve been able to get. We kind of went over the top when she’s in her princess dress ... and that’s intentional. We just wanted her to *glow*”²⁴ [original emphasis].

Frog Naveen is described as “pretty good-looking for a frog” while Prince Naveen is said to have “an irresistible charm and *joie de vivre*” in a “handsome and suave” physicality.²⁵ Even Ray, the Cajun firefly, is described in terms of the physical: a “lumpy, gap-toothed, goofy-looking little guy.”²⁶ The rhetoric used to describe Tiana is fascinating in its avoidance of all things physical: moreover, she is described only in relation to other Disney “maidens”—in a 279 word “introduction” to Tiana in Kurtti’s book, a mere seventy-seven words apply directly to Tiana, and of those words, the only adjectives are “vulnerable, interesting, and sympathetic.”²⁷ When my class of university students was asked to describe a typical Disney princess, their list of adjectives included blond, beautiful, elegant, wealthy, stupid, busty, light-skinned, of European descent, having a “normal” American look. If this is their collective experience of Disney princesses, a fairly representative experience for contemporary Disney audiences, where in that rhetoric can Tiana be inscribed? Why can’t Disney’s discursive practices articulate black beauty and the black body? No mention is made of her appearance in Kurtti’s book; unlike Charlotte, whose hair and eyes are described, or Naveen or Ray, both of whom are grounded in physical

rhetoric, Tiana seems to exist in a world where her corporeality and her race are non-existent.

Many critics have pointed to the fact that Tiana in human form actually takes up very little screen time; the more prevalent image of Tiana and Naveen is as frogs.²⁸ In fact, human Tiana is only on the screen for the first twenty-nine minutes; frog Tiana takes up the next fifty-nine minutes, leaving only the final three and a half minutes for Tiana and Naveen to reappear in human form: “They say it ain’t easy bein’ green, but it’s certainly a hell of a lot easier than being black.”²⁹ The black female body evokes socially and historically constructed tropes of black women as either mammies or hyper-sexualized figures, tropes with which Disney cannot engage without seeming to participate in the dominant ideology that “others” difference as a means to reify the hegemonic culture.³⁰ Negotiating among these tropes explains Disney’s studious avoidance of any rhetoric of the body and demonstrates once again their adherence to the politics of colorblindness. The most overt illustration of Disney’s desires to encode a colorblind ideology in the film can be found in Mama Odie’s song “Dig a Little Deeper:” Tiana and Naveen, and by extension the audience, are told that it doesn’t matter what you look like or what you are. Once again, race, and physiognomy, don’t matter; Tiana’s blackness and Naveen’s brownness are effectively erased, allowing the audience to focus instead on other aspects of the film such as her dream of the restaurant.

While Disney no doubt encoded a message of color-blindness for an audience willing to embrace the notion, oppositional readings abound in the decoding process, which is itself informed by a multiplicity of lenses and ideologies including race, class, sex, sexual orientation, age, and politics. Decoding is an active process, more an act of communication than of simple reception,³¹ and so, the decoding of this film entails a moment of engagement and critical analysis for those who read the film through an oppositional perspective. One such oppositional reading comes from Scott Foundas, film editor and critic for *LA Weekly*, writing for the *Village Voice*: in his article “Disney’s *Princess and the Frog* Can’t Escape the Ghetto,” Foundas criticizes the lack of historical specificity or contextualization in the film. He refers to the anti-miscegenation laws of 1920s Louisiana as well as the film’s failure to acknowledge just exactly what period of the Jazz Age it reflects, asking whether it is “before or after the Mississippi River flood of 1927 that burst Louisiana’s infamous levees and stranded hundreds of thousands of blacks in refuge camps?”³² While no one expects a children’s film to address such issues as miscegenation, his reading of the film stands in stark contrast to the message of the film that evokes a colorblind reading. This criticism, and his evocation of the obvious parallels to the devastation wreaked both by Katrina and the lackadaisical response to the crisis, can be read as a direct reply to those who want to read the film and Disney’s choice to locate it in New Orleans as a sign of New Orleans’ rebirth. This is made evident in the lyrics of the film’s opening song in the lines that refer to

the dreams of both rich and poor people, dreams that reach fruition in New Orleans. Anika Noni Rose, the voice of Tiana, explains the choice of New Orleans as the perfect setting because of the devastation: “Where else do [African-American] children need to see themselves as progressive and strong and having the ability to make their dreams come true?”³³ Sergio A. Mims, writing for *EbonyJet*, seemingly in response to oppositional readings such as Foundas, extols his readers to “remember, however, that we’re talking about a Disney cartoon aimed at children, not a Michael Moore documentary or a Spike Lee film. What Disney cartoon [he asks], or live action film for that matter, has ever dealt with real social or political concerns?”³⁴ An oppositional reading would respond with the question why not then locate the film in contemporary America, in the age of Obamerica,³⁵ moving it out of the “big house” of Charlotte’s father Eli “Big Daddy” La Bouff, and away from the age of Jim Crow laws that place Tiana and her mother literally at the back of the streetcar? Disney’s 2007 Cinderella story *Enchanted*, with its white princess played by Amy Adams, takes place in 21st century New York City; the classic yet contemporary Cinderella story, a mix of animation and live action, appealed to audiences who made it number one at the box office its opening weekend and ultimately earning over \$340 million worldwide.³⁶

In film and television studies, representation is defined as being either mimetic or simulacral, the former referring to representations that reflect a cultural or social reality (i.e., life as it is) and the latter referring to representations that create an inaccurate portrayal that can be seen to effect change or improve conditions but can also be seen as having the ability to displace the actual reality. While it is true that Tiana as an aspiring and ultimately actual business owner does reflect the social reality of black entrepreneurs and a black middle class, her character’s success becomes more complex and potentially problematic when read as one point on a spectrum of black depictions that also includes *The Blind Side* and *Precious*, both also released in 2009.³⁷ This is not to suggest that her capitalistic aspirations are in any way problematic or inaccurate; rather, when viewed through the lens of a color-blind ideology, her success works to further disenfranchise other minorities who have yet to attain that success because that ideology posits that hard work allows everyone to access the American Dream while ignoring social, economic, educational, or political inequities that might actually limit that access. So, according to a color-blind ideology, race has nothing to do with success or failure; those who fail to succeed do so at the level of the individual, thus exonerating the hegemonic culture. The happy Disney ending of *The Princess and the Frog* is thus both mimetic and simulacral: Tiana represents middle-class black America while also suggesting that this is a universally attainable position. In the end, Tiana and Naveen defeat the villain, return to human form, marry and open her restaurant. How is that anything but a positive message? But, is she too Black or not Black enough?

The Princess and the Frog was one of five films nominated in the animation category at the 82nd Annual Academy Awards, while two other “race” films also received nominations this year: *The Blind Side* and *Precious*, both of which garnered Oscars for either the lead or supporting female. However, what is intriguing is not the nomination for *The Princess and the Frog* itself but the mode of its introduction to the Oscars’ vast viewing audience. While each of the other four films in the animation category had its respective lead character appear in a brief monologue, the producers of the Academy Awards chose to have Prince Naveen and the jazz-playing alligator Louis be the spokespeople for the film. So, while audiences were either introduced to or reminded of Mr. Fox from the film *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (voiced by George Clooney), the eponymous *Coraline* (with the voice talents of Dakota Fanning), the curmudgeonly Carl Fredricksen and his talking dog Dug from *Up* (voiced by Ed Asner and Robert Peterson), and the fairy Aisling from *The Secret of Kells* (voiced by Christen Mooney), Princess Tiana was visibly absent and silenced, replaced instead by the frog form of Naveen and the minstrel-like Louis (voiced by Brazilian Bruno Campos and Michael-Leon Wooley), who “inadvertently” sits on Naveen, thus providing comedic relief while erasing the racialized aspect of the film. Given the money and time invested in the creation of this film, and Disney’s desire to “get it right,” Tiana’s absence becomes even more complex.

Clearly aware of the body of criticism addressing Disney’s reliance on racial tropes and racist representations in both classic Disney films and more recent attempts to create films that incorporate diversity (see Giroux et al), the producers of this film sought to create a new heroine, one who does not embody either literally or figuratively the previous princesses of color. In a study of Disney’s previous multi-cultural princesses, Pocahontas (1995), Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1985), Esmeralda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), and Jasmine from *Aladdin* (1993), Celeste Lacroix points out that “there appears here ... to be an increasing focus on the body in the characters of color. Whereas the costuming of these characters reflects stereotypical images of each woman’s ethnicity, the overall effect, taken with the increasing voluptuousness of the characters, works to ... [associate] the women of color with the exotic and the sexual.”³⁸ Lacroix’s reading of these princesses foregrounds the problems and criticisms leveled against Disney’s earlier women of color; their bodies, costumes, hair, and facial features are indicative of difference and Otherness. Princess Tiana marks a break from this normalizing sense of whiteness in that she is the embodiment of both intellect and a conservative physicality, as made evident in both bodies—waitress and frog. Never does Tiana appear in midriff baring or off-the-shoulder clothing, nor is her physicality displayed through the cliff diving of Pocahontas or the gypsy dancing of Esmeralda. She is neither exoticized nor overtly sexualized; instead, she is, according to Manohla Dargis, “something of a drudge and a bore [who doesn’t] have

time for dancing.”³⁹ However, the *New Republic’s* advance for the film claims that “Disney gets it right—Black American-ness has rarely been captured in animation in worthy fashion ... this [publicity] still reveals one of the deftest, most soulfully accurate renditions of a Black American in the history of animation.”⁴⁰ *Essence* magazine’s Demetria Lucas happily proclaimed “Disney’s much-anticipated *The Princess and the Frog* is finally here and our Black Princess doesn’t disappoint—in fact, she exceeds our expectation.”⁴¹

Classic Disney clearly imagined an audience that was white and that shared the ideologies of the hegemonic culture; *Jungle Book*, *The Lion King*, *Song of the South*, and *Aladdin*, for example, all illustrate Disney’s recognition of the social and racial positioning of its audience, a positioning that would recognize tropes of blackness or racial representation but that would not problematize the use of those tropes in any way. However, more recent Disney films and television shows have attempted to widen that audience base, but in such a way as to not alienate the core audience that is white. Juxtaposing readings such as Dargis and the *New Republic’s*, a “drudge and a bore” versus “soulfully accurate,” underscores the complexity of Disney’s project to incorporate diversity in twenty-first century America. If, as Robert Gooding-Williams argues, “American culture lives and breathes by racial representations, relentlessly relying on them to make sense of American history, society, and politics,”⁴² then Disney is not going to seriously challenge those tropes of blackness, regardless of their recognition that “every little girl, no matter her color, represents a new marketing opportunity.”⁴³ And yet, consumers are buying into Princess Tiana in record numbers; Disney launched its line of movie-related products months before the actual debut of the film in theatres and these items have been “fly[ing] off the shelves.”⁴⁴ According to *Variety’s* Marc Graser, *The Princess and the Frog* merchandise, including Princess Tiana dresses and bedding, is “outselling other Disney-branded items ... more than 45,000 [Princess Tiana] character dolls have sold in less than a month.”⁴⁵

Cultural critic David Roediger uses the term “racial inbetweenness” to describe the collapsing of racial categories that both embraced recent European immigrants as “white” and kept them separate because of their perceived and constructed differences.⁴⁶ Such inbetweenness creates a racial middleground, a portrayal of color that is “safe and sanitized”—these racial representations thus both appeal to a minority audience while at the same time retain a white viewership that is able to identify with the middleground these characters occupy. This inclusivity or middleground status appeals to a larger viewership; rather than creating a culturally or country-specific character and therefore demographic, Disney conflates cultures and customs in such a way as to demonstrate a commitment to diversity without loss of viewers. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Prince Naveen occupies this middleground position. He is from the fictional country of Maldonia, is voiced by Brazilian actor Bruno Campos, and is “not Black, but he’s not White either.”⁴⁷ Indeed, Disney’s John Lasseter

refers to the “wavy-haired, tan-skinned prince as a ‘person of color’”⁴⁸ in a way that both locates Naveen outside racial discourses of black and white and works to exclude race through his very depiction as a racialized character.⁴⁹

Despite Disney’s intent to redress a wrong, namely the absence of black princesses, theories of encoding and decoding illustrate the malleability of the message on the part of the viewer whose perspective is either one of negotiated or oppositional meaning: “in many ways [the film is] a can’t win situation. An African American lead character will be seen by some as an extension of Obama-style progress, and by others as catering to a racial targeting strategy that is no longer relevant because of Obama. For some it will be too Black, for others not Black enough.”⁵⁰ It is this very question of blackness, whether too much or not enough, that locates this film in this complex cultural moment. While race does resonate in the film, it is sublimated, not foregrounded; adherents of a politics of colorblindness would argue that this sublimation is good, that culturally, we are in a moment “beyond” race, but it is this very sense of being “beyond” race that is so problematic. With a black man in the White House and a black princess on the silver [read white] screen, viewers might be lulled (or led) into an inflated sense of black progress; indeed, the 2010 *Pew Report* finds that “economic measures have shown that black households, after steady income gains in previous decades, have lost ground to whites after 2000.”

While Disney is at least addressing the need for inclusivity in its representational strategies, the complexities that surround discourses of race in this country guarantee that whatever message Disney desired to encode will be read through multiple lenses and ideological perspectives.⁵¹ In 1951, W.E.B. DuBois explained that “[p]ictures of colored people were an innovation,” ... at that time it was the rule of most white papers never to publish a picture of a colored person except as a criminal.⁵² Six decades later, in an era when audiences have a black president as a reference point, seemingly, it is a question of representation again. If in fact there has been a paucity of positive representation of blackness, then is this somewhat historically accurate portrayal a positive step? Good hair notwithstanding, in an era when animals, toys and aliens seem to be the fodder of children’s entertainment, with this film Disney is at least engaging with the complex nature of race in 21st century America.

Notes

1. Disney’s “Princess line brings in \$4 billion a year on sales of everything from *Sleeping Beauty* pajamas to Cinderella’s glass slippers,” NPR *Marketplace*, 28 October 2008.

2. Stuart Hall, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, Darnell M. Hunt, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46–59.

3. *Ibid.*, 46–47.

4. *Ibid.*, 48–49.

5. Interview with Jeff Kurtti, "Inside the Art of *The Princess and the Frog*: The Making of an American Fairy Tale," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 25, 2009.

6. Brooks Barnes, "Her Prince Has Come. Critics, Too," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2009, Fashion. Brooks refers to an Internet rumor that claimed Maddy, short for Madeline and sounding too much like Mammy, was originally cast as a "chambermaid for a white woman." Bobbi Misick discusses these changes as well in "Controversy Over *The Princess and the Frog*," *Essence*, November 30, 2009, Entertainment.

7. Caroline White, "Why *The Princess and the Frog* Is Making History While Looking to the Past," *Times Online*, January 7, 2010.

8. Sergio A. Mims, "The Princess and the Frog Review," *EbonyJet.com*, December 8, 2009, <http://www.ebonyjet.com/entertainment/movies/index.aspx?id=15520>.

9. Roger Ebert, "The Princess and the Frog," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Movie Reviews, December 9, 2009, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091209/REVIEWS/912099996/1023>

10. Box Office Mojo. *The Princess and the Frog*, February 28, 2010, <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=princessandthefrog.htm>.

11. CNN.com, December 13, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/Movies/12/13/boxoffice.ew/index.html>; *The New York Times*, December 14, 2009, Movies.

12. Angharad N. Valdivia, "Mixed Race on the Disney Channel: From *Johnny Tsunami* through *Lizzie McGuire* and Ending with *The Cheetah Girls*," in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, eds. Mary Beltrán and Camila Fojas (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 286.

13. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "The Linguistics of Color Blind Racism: How to Talk Nasty About Blacks Without Sounding 'Racist,'" *Critical Sociology* Volume 28, Issue 1-2 (2002): 42.

14. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism & Racial Inequality in Contemporary America*, 3d. ed. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010, 2-3.

15. Shotgun style homes in New Orleans (and throughout the south) were originally narrow, twelve-foot wide, one story homes built on small lots, very close to the sidewalk or street. The houses themselves had one door and window at the front and another door and window at the rear; inside, the four or five rooms ran in a straight line from the front of the house to the back with no hallways and often no indoor plumbing. They were built in large numbers to accommodate the influx of working class blacks, and the name is thought to come from the fact that a shotgun could be fired from the front door to the back although that explanation could be apocryphal.

16. Manohla Dargis, "That Old Bayou Magic: Kiss and Ribbit (and Sing)," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2009, Movies.

17. Utilizing the voice of iconic Oprah re-assures viewers that this vision of blackness is safe in the same way that she is safe and sanitized. See Janice Perry as well as Beretta E. Smith-Shomade for an analysis of Oprah as a "de-raced" figure.

18. *The Princess and the Frog*, (2009) DVD, directed by John Musker and Ron Clements (Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment Inc., 2010). Audio Commentary by Filmmakers.

19. Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz, "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales," *Gender and Society* Vol. 17, No. 5 (Oct. 2003): pp. 711-726.

20. In 1932, Walt Disney signed an exclusive publishing contract with Western Printing and Lithographing Company, the largest "lithographic company and publisher of children's books in the world" (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 715).

21. *Ibid.*, 719.

22. Jeff Kurtti, *The Art of The Princess and the Frog*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2009, 8.

23. *Ibid.*, 90.

24. *Ibid.*, 90.

25. *Ibid.*, 32, 35.

26. *Ibid.*, 130.

27. *Ibid.*, 26.

28. DeNeen L. Brown, "After Decades of Snowy Whites, Black 'Princess' a True Dream," *The Washington Post*, December 11, 2009, Style.

29. Scott Foundas, "Disney's *Princess and the Frog* Can't Escape the Ghetto," *Village Voice*, November 24, 2009.

30. Patricia Hill Collins explores this question of representation in her 2004 *Black Sexual Politics*.

31. Stuart Hall, 48–49.
32. Foundas, “Ghetto.”
33. Rachel Bertsche, “Someday My Princess Will Come,” Oprah.com, November 18, 2009.
34. Sergio A. Mims, “*The Princess and the Frog*: Review,” EbonyJet.com, December 8, 2009, <http://www.ebonyjet.com/entertainment/movies/index.aspx?id=15520>.
35. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and Racial Inequality in Contemporary America* 3rd Edition, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010, 207.
36. Box Office Mojo, *Enchanted*, March 13, 2008, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=enchanted.htm>
37. *Precious*, based on the 1996 novel *Push* by Sapphire and set in the 1980s, tells the story of overweight, illiterate, abused, HIV positive sixteen-year-old black Precious Jones, pregnant for the second time with her father’s baby. *The Blind Side* tells the real life story of black Michael Oher, a foster child without a home who is adopted by a wealthy white family. Their influence and affluence enable him to finish high school, attract the attention of college football scouts, and ultimately win a full scholarship to university, which leads to his NFL career. While clearly a rags to riches story, *The Blind Side* suggests that black success is only through white patronage and association; the other black characters in the film remain mired in lives of violence, drugs, and death. *The Blind Side* has earned more than \$200 million, and was nominated for two Academy Awards; Sandra Bullock, cast as the devout Christian mother, won an Academy Award, a Golden Globe Award, a Screen Actors Guild award and a People’s Choice award for her role.
38. Celeste Lacroix, “Images of Animated Others: The Orientalization of Disney’s Cartoon Heroines from The Little Mermaid to The Hunchback of Notre Dame,” *Popular Communications*, 2(4) (2004): 213–299.
39. Dargis, “That Old Bayou Magic.”
40. John McWhorter, “Disney Gets It Right,” *The New Republic*, June 5, 2009.
41. Demetria Lucas, “It Ain’t Easy Being Green: *Princess and the Frog*,” Essence.com, November 25, 2009, http://www.essence.com/entertainment/film/it_aint_easy_being_green_princess_and_the.php
42. Robert Gooding-Williams, *Look, A Negro: Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 7.
43. Dargis, “That Old Bayou Magic.”
44. NPR, November 24, 2009
45. Marc Graser, “Pulling Her Weight,” *Variety*, November 23–29, 2009.
46. David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
47. Adrienne Samuel Gibbs, “Disney’s Princess Tiana: A Brown-Skinned Beauty Finally Gets Her Prince,” *Ebony*, December 2009/January 2010, Features, 62. Interestingly, in addition to referring to Tiana as a “brown-skinned beauty,” Demetria Lucas points out that Naveen’s levels of melanin seemed to change and increase between early trailers and the actual release of the film (“It Ain’t Easy Being Green.”).
48. Samuel Gibbs, “Disney’s Princess Tiana.”
49. In her study of Nickelodeon, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that the “inclusion of explicitly racial images on Nickelodeon programming coincides with the exclusion of a specifically racial agenda, so that inclusion functions as a kind of exclusion” (171).
50. Eric Easter, “Disney Begins the Push on a Risky Gamble,” EbonyJet.com, May 13, 2009, <http://www.ebonyjet.com/entertainment/movies/index.aspx?id=12978>.
51. Betsy Sharkey, film critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, exemplifies the difficult nature of Disney’s project: “whether it’s a worry about offending African Americans with ‘cartoonish’ exaggerations, or a desire to make the film palatable for white audiences, or both, the animators have been very careful with their pens when it comes to drawing black characters on the page. Just about everyone here has ‘good hair,’ and Tiana could be Halle Berry’s kissing cousin.” “Our Wish Come True; ‘Princess’ Grants Us a Return to Disney’s Song-filled Fantasy,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 25 2009, Calendar.
52. Quoted in Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 232.