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## Disney Minority Heroines: A Rhetorical Analysis of Race, Gender, and American Politics

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**DISNEY MINORITY HEROINES: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF  
RACE, GENDER, AND AMERICAN POLITICS**

by

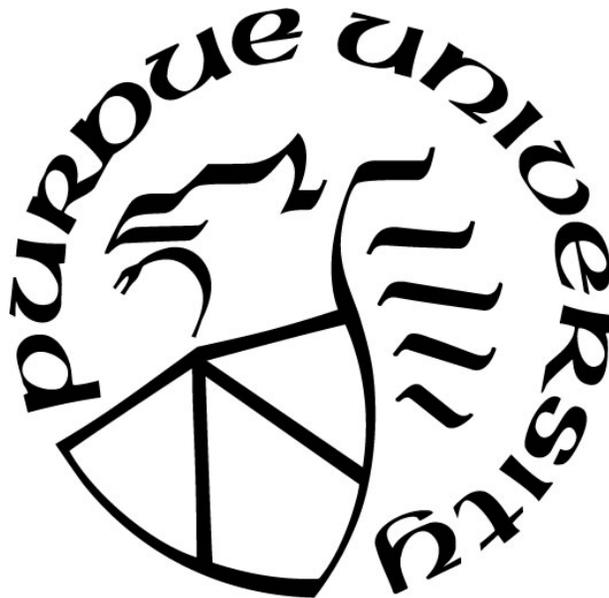
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**A Thesis**

*Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University*

*In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of*

**Master of Arts**



Department of English

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*I would like to dedicate this thesis to all of my fellow Disney movie-goers and to the future minority heroines produced by The Walt Disney Company. I also want to thank my Mom (Toni), Dad (Artie), and brother (Julian) for their consistent love, support, and prayers!*

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## ABSTRACT

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Title: Disney Minority Heroines: A Rhetorical Analysis of Race, Gender, and American Politics

Committee Chair: Dr. Samantha Blackmon

The Walt Disney Corporation has provided family-centered entertainment, for decades, in the form of animated films, beginning with the adaptation of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Since then, and succeeding the death of its patriarch in 1966, the Disney Corporation has upheld the legacy of producing films that continue to captivate children through historical, cultural, and rhetorical approaches. However, as generations have passed, Disney heroines have changed and so has their strategies for accomplishing their goals. For decades, Disney has produced similar plot stories using the same character profiles as well: a girl, more often than not living a life of servitude or oppression, has a spontaneous encounter with a boy, usually a prince and the sole heir to a kingdom, who provides her with access towards “easy street”, come together to overpower an evil queen, stepmother, or witch with the help of her fairy godmothers and/or animal-friends, and then live “happily ever after”. However, as we’ve seen in the most recent Disney films *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Moana* (2016), the plot-lines have changed and the characterizations of the heroines have changed. Disney’s first animated film featured a young, Caucasian princess and in 1995, nearly sixty years later, Disney finally produced its first minority princess, Pocahontas, who was Native American. Three years later, in 1998, animators announced the release of a film that would feature a second minority princess, Mulan, being of Chinese-Asian ethnicity. There were mixed reviews of both films, *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*, with conflicting feelings about the historical inaccuracy and mixed moral messages. Although Disney has successfully given a

platform to these empowered heroines, the expense of such advancements resulted in racial and gender stereotyping. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the racial and gender issues in two modern Disney princess films, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Moana* (2016), and how these films are problematic when read with a contemporary lens. The contemporary reading of the films will discuss issues such as racial and gender privilege in the films as well as in 21st century America.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCING THE MAGICAL WORLD OF DISNEY

### 1.1 Introduction

The “Magical World of Disney” has maintained a reputation of selling family and individual values through historical, cultural and rhetorical approaches. For decades, Disney has produced stories with similar plotlines, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), using the same character profiles: a ‘damsel in distress,’ more often than not living a life of servitude or oppression, having a spontaneous encounter with a rebellious knave, who turns out to be a prince of a nearby kingdom and who can provide her access to wealth and comfortable living through superficial love as a foundation of marriage. Most are familiar with these princesses— Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*)— and may recall what they had in common. They were all beautiful, graceful, had special connections with animals/nature, were talented singers and were white.

However, in the last decade, Disney has progressed by producing heroines of color who are more self-sufficient, than their predecessors, and whose aspirations exceed matrimony. Unfortunately, the characterizations of the latest heroines don’t escape gender and racial stereotypes. As generations have passed, what it means to be a woman, specifically a Disney heroine of color, has changed and so has her strategies for accomplishing her goals. Nonetheless, this thesis will attempt to provide insight as to how these empowered and self-sufficient heroines’ characterizations remain problematic in the 21st century. The next section, on the origins of the project, will provide context into why I chose to write about Disney and the two heroines I will be discussing in this thesis. Next, I will transition into how traditional and classical popular culture media served as a source of influence during my adolescence stage. I will then state my thesis hypothesis and the methods in which I will present my argument.

#### 1.1.1 Project Origins

My parents have, undoubtedly, been two of the most influential people in my life: they have taught me the importance of respecting others, respecting myself, and how vital Christian faith, diligence, and intentionality are in having success in life. My parents were both raised in homes where their fathers were the main ‘breadwinners’ of the family. Although both of my grandmothers had experience in homemaking skills, such as sewing, cleaning, and cooking, both of my grandmothers sought for opportunities that would give them self-fulfillment and purpose. Tobi Lorraine

(maternal grandmother) operated a legally approved daycare in her own home, while Clara Dean (paternal grandmother) worked part-time as a primary school bus driver. I'm able to trace several generations of strong and independent women, in my family, whom have sacrificed their own aspirations for the improvement of their families. I've always questioned how our society managed to pass down these traditional ideals over the generations and what I deduced was family values and religious affiliation have played a role in this generational teaching but, also, so has the creation of popular culture media.

As a young adult, I am now able to make the distinction between the unrealistic expectations and standards of Disney (beauty standards, intellectual awareness, etc.) and the realities of our 21st century American society; and I'm able to analyze Disney films with a 'rhetorical, contemporary lens'. The two concepts I'll be exploring in this thesis are race and gender and how Disney portrayed both in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Moana* (2016). To clarify, I don't hate the Disney Corporation. On the contrary, even to this day, I remain a faithful fan of the franchise. However, as a Black woman who grew up watching Disney films and who is currently living in a 'non-post racial', 'post racial' America, by conducting a contemporary reading of *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Moana* (2016), I've concluded that some of the racial and gender issues in these films are the same issues that remain relevant in our nation's society. The next section will describe my argument, the project methodology, and project limitations.

### 1.1.2 Methodology

My argument for this thesis is that by 'reading' Disney films with a contemporary lens, not only are audiences about to identify misrepresentations of minority characters in Disney but they'll also notice a reinforcement of gender privilege. One question that might initially arise is: why is this a problem seeing as how Disney films are non-fictional? Well, this remains a problem because after centuries of activism for racial equality and women's rights, women are still portrayed as inferior in children's media (Disney). The term 'inferior' in this case is being used to suggest that that women are subjected to positions of servitude or inferiority in comparison to their male counterparts or other prominent female characters in the films.

The remainder of this introduction chapter will discuss a rhetorical history of Disney and a literature review on the concepts being analyzed in the succeeding chapters. Chapter two focuses on *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and chapter three will be on *Moana* (2016). This project will

discuss several character profiles, in the respective chapters and how they are portrayed. I chose these heroines for three specific reasons: 1) these are the two most recent heroines of color to be produced in a Disney animated film in the last decade; 2) race and gender are two concepts that are demonstrated in the films and are also relevant to our contemporary society; and 3) analyzing these films with the knowledge of American current events can be useful in determining how best to resolve social injustice.

Within each chapter, I will begin by giving a film synopsis followed by how the film was received by audiences. Next, I will discuss the way I have decided to read each film: in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), I suggest that there are different levels of racial privilege; and in *Moana* (2016), I discuss how the characters approach sexual assault in the film. The section that precedes, the contemporary analysis, is a discussion on how the racial and gender issues in each Disney film can also be seen in two social justice movements today: the #BlackLivesMatter and “me too.” movements. The chapter will then conclude with the brief application of co-cultural communication or rhetorical listening as a method of finding resolution and prevention of future incidents in regard to both social movements. The fourth chapter is a conclusion chapter and will include a summary of the objectives of this thesis and a thorough discussion of co-cultural communication and rhetorical listening.

There are two limitations of this project that require acknowledgement: 1) although I was able to find sources on Disney scholarship, race and gender in Disney scholarship, and race and gender scholarship in entertainment media in general, because *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Moana* (2016) are newer films there is limited scholarship on the films individually; and 2) because this thesis is discussing current events in American society, the future of these social movements and the relevance of this discussion is unpredictable.

## 1.2 The Rhetorical History of Disney

Before Walt Disney began producing full-length animated films in 1937, his passion for cartoons produced, who most acknowledge as the mascot of Walt Disney Animation in 1928, Mickey Mouse. The development of the famous cartoon put Walt Disney on the map as a cartoonist, a film producer, a director of cartoons and animated films, and as a creator of a chain of national and international theme parks (Lambert 62). Although American, he gained inspiration from German, French, and Scandinavian music and tradition (Allan 168).

Prior to his first sketches of Mickey, Walt had extensive experience in working in advertising and art studios around Kansas City during his teenage years (Lambert 62-64). During his time spent in Kansas City, Walt met a cartoonist and illustrationist who would eventually become his business partner and the co-owner of their 'animation studio, Laugh-O-gram Films,' Ub Iwerks (64). The men went on to hire more artists to assist in, what would be, a successful series of short cartoons called *Alice Comedies* in 1923; the series featured a young girl who transported herself in a 'world of cartoon characters' (Lambert 64). Walt and his friend, Iwerks, moved to California in 1924 where Disney, along with the help of Iwerks, began writing scripts, animating and producing more cartoons and shorts; Iwerks took some of the pressure off of Disney who became free to devote himself only writing stories and directing (64). Disney was a smart businessman and artist in that he researched different types of artistic techniques and gained inspiration for his cartoons and animations by visiting various artist studios around the world.

From the mid-1930s, Walt Disney gathered all the information he could on European artists whose style could be relevant to his projects. And when his own skills were no longer sufficient, he had the intelligence to hire artists whose knowledge was far wider than his own, and who were for the most part immigrants from Europe...after this phase of assimilating processes (throughout his life, Disney remained interested in technological innovation), he grasped the importance of European literature and children's stories as inspiration for his shorts. (Girveau 18-20)

As one might expect, Walt discovered that the foundation for a successful animation company was by mimicking folklore that was used by artists in Europe (Smith 38). According to Smith, in relation to the animation of his company, Walt was nothing shy of a perfectionist, never being completely satisfied with what he or his team produced and he hoped that technological advancements would improve the animations (40). Nevertheless, despite his personal thoughts on the aesthetics of his animation, millions of children and adults make up Disney's audience, a mass audience whose happiness was always at the forefront of his imagination (Allan 168).

### 1.2.1 Walt Disney's Princesses

The personal and professional life of Walt Disney is interesting to say the least but I must admit that I'm a bit biased in that my experience with Disney meant watching his animated films of the 1930s, mostly films that had a female protagonist. Disney began working on his first animated film (feature-length) in 1934, with a remake of Brothers Grimm's tale entitled *Snow White and the*

*Seven Dwarfs* (Lambert 71). Because the film was his biggest gamble, Disney made sure to supervise the entire production project; thus, isolating himself as a talented storyteller who had a good eye for discovering animation artists that were the very best in their field (71). The development of the first Disney princess, set the stage for the succeeding princesses. Snow White's character, according to Allan, functioned "as a young woman enjoying a degree of premarital freedom, and she expressed courage and independence" (136). Although this belief is debatable to contemporary critics, her character may have been taboo for audiences of the 1930's.

Snow White had a unique relationship with nature: she escaped the clutches of her evil stepmother and retreated into the forest; she lived in the forest with the seven dwarves; she established relationships with the inhabitants (rabbits, birds, deer, etc.) of the forest and communicated with them through song; she was placed in a glass coffin (during her temporary coma) which was placed in the heart of the forest, therefore becoming one with nature; and the evil queen dies with the help of the dwarves, animals, and the nature of the boulders on the mountain (138). The film continues to be remembered as a film in which audience members can identify with the characters (140). The character of Snow White is the first of a generation of similar Disney princesses. The company has produced nearly a dozen Disney princesses/heroines over the course of 80 years; the years of princess/heroine production being: 1937-1959, 1989-1998, and 2009-present (Saladino 39).

Snow White was the first princess of the first generation: a generation that practiced traditional gender roles and values, embraced a passive existence, with the hopes that marriage to a prince would solve all their troubles (40). There was a 30-year period in which Disney didn't produce any princess films which is credited to Walt Disney's death (1966), the succession of a new CEO, Michael Eisner (1984) and the advancement in women's liberation movement (45). The hiatus without a Disney princess suggested to audiences that either Disney wasn't prepared to produce a liberated princess or that they struggled with producing one (46). The princesses produced in the second generation were less dependent on men to give them purpose, unlike the women of the first generation, but they weren't completely confident in the wholeness of themselves (48). I agree with Saladino when she states that the third generation is the closest Disney comes to having self-satisfied princesses/heroines that are happy with themselves, regardless, "if they end up getting a prince anyway or not" (50). For instance, Tiana is focused on her goal to finally purchase her own restaurant, and Moana seeks to bring healing and restoration

to her island. Nonetheless, Tiana and Moana's stories are unique in that Tiana is Disney's first Black heroine and *Moana* (2016) is the first Disney animated princess film in which there is no romance-angle mentioned in the film. As a "princess film fan", I applaud Disney for the recent firsts but there's more to discuss beneath the surfaces of these films.

The following literature review is the foundation of this thesis and will include topics and concepts such as: race and gender, as they apply to Disney, and rhetorical listening and co-cultural communication. The preconceived notions of the concept of privilege have most commonly been used in reference to 'white privilege,' however, privilege is applicable to socioeconomic status, education, citizenship status in addition to race and gender. These sections will discuss how race and gender have traditionally been portrayed by Disney in animated films and, in analyzing *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Moana* (2016), how we can expect to see race and gender, respectively, demonstrated in the films and the implications of Disney's creative choices. The next two sections on co-cultural communication and rhetorical listening will discuss the importance of learning how to understand commonalities and differences amongst different cultures and how cross-culture communication has the potential to be the key to our 'post-racial' society's racial and gender issues.

### 1.3 Literature Review

#### 1.3.1 Race and Disney

As previously mentioned, one of the limitations of this project is the fact that the two Disney films that I'm analyzing are fairly new and there is limited scholarship in how race is portrayed in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). However, as I will demonstrate in chapter two on the film, Disney has had a history of not representing minority characters in a positive light. This section will provide background information in how the continent of Africa, Black bodies, and Black women have been portrayed in contemporary media and begin the discussion of race in Disney. There are many misconceptions about Black people and Black culture which explains why contemporary media has continued the tradition of portraying Blacks in a stereotypical manner.

In her article on how Africa is perceived and interpreted in American popular culture, Carol Magee explains that much of the misrepresentation of Black culture is based on historical and political events such as the Civil Rights movement (12). Some of the misconceptions of Africa consist of "African people living in grass huts in the jungle as a result of their economic

underdevelopment” (Magee 12). While American culture continues to progress and embrace modernity, African culture is continued to be revered as being traditional by American culture (African customs, attire, and tribal ceremonies) (13). America’s perception of African culture is reflective of how racism is categorized in America. As Magee states, people who belong to the same race or similar ethnic group have the ability to bond over shared racial experiences and traditions, however, this system of race has reluctantly encouraged racism (20).

Disney’s depiction of ‘Africa’ at its Animal Kingdom and Epcot Park can be described as both “reductive and stereotypical” due to associating poverty and underdevelopment with Africa (104). Magee argues that Disney’s lack of representation of minority characters in its animated films is because of its desire for a white America (117). According to Magee, for decades, minorities have been blamed for socioeconomic decline of “Reagan’s white Americans” (24). However, the reality of our American history is that it was actually the minorities who’ve been disadvantaged in regard to employment and housing opportunities because of negative perceptions of race; as of 2010, white’s income exceeded that of Blacks by 35% (33). What we’ve seen in our white America is that racism still exists: Blacks frequent movie theatres 21% more than any other race but yet representation is still an issue, however, when people of color are featured on-screen, the portrayal of the Black body is often sexualized (Mask 4).

During the Jim Crow Era, race was used as a way to reinforce racial hierarchy, a hierarchy that was concluded to be biological, for the continuation of suppressing newly-freed Blacks; the racial hierarchy featured: “white males at the top, followed by white women and children, and then people of color (with Asians above Africans) who were seen to represent humankind at earlier stages of development” (Magee 40). Black bodies were inferior and were defined by whiteness in America (Harris 43). Harris’ article on the Black male body and visualization discusses how the Black male body has historically been “visualized as stereotype, allegory, and in caricature” but that the visualization of the Black male body should be focused on making sure that the Black male is actually “visible” (40).

Black males has been visualized in two ways: the first as “hypersexual but monstrous”; and the second as “erotic subject of the gaze” with the expectation that the Black male can satisfy sexual desire (42). Black women and their sexuality were deemed as exotic, thus insinuating that Black women were connected with prostitution (Magee 40). However, in our 21st century, Black women are no longer visualized as just exotic and erotic, Black female bodies have also been

portrayed as “fat mammy caricatures” which is a modern form of “blackface” (Gillispie 160-161). In her article “Who’s Behind That Fat Suit?: Momma, Madea, Rasputia and the Politics of Cross-Dressing”, Mia Mask discusses three films in which Black men portray Black women as grotesque while in “blackface”, or rather the black fat suit, and how the use of fat suits emasculate Black men (158); and Black women are portrayed as unhealthy individuals (155). Studies show that Blacks are more likely to be obese, having “51% higher prevalence of obesity” from 2006 to 2008 (155); and yet these types of films are more common and “reproduce sexist and misogynistic fat-slapstick humor” (Mask 158). Although this has become a norm in popular media, what we’ll see in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) is what Montré Missouri refers to as the “Black magic woman”.

In “Black Magic Woman and Narrative Film: Race, Sex, and Afro-Religiosity”, Missouri discusses the ways in which Black women are portrayed in contemporary society. As previously mentioned, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) superficially seems like a “step in the right direction” for Disney audiences in that Black audiences now have a princess (Missouri 168). However, the character of Tiana symbolizes one version of Missouri’s “tragic mulatto” because although Tiana is Black and from America, as a Black woman during this time she doesn’t receive the benefits of American citizenship—lack of economic opportunities (10). Missouri suggests that Tiana is the stereotypical “invisible black woman” being overshadowed by Charlotte’s whiteness and economic status in the film, while also being the “strongblackwoman” who’s expected to overcome any obstacle, including losing her father, fighting for her restaurant by working two jobs, and overcoming her adversity as a frog (169). As I will explain in chapter two, these ethics of hard work and lack of economic opportunity stem from historical events in America but have become a part of America’s perception and expectation of Black women.

### 1.3.2 Gender and Disney

Extensive research has been conducted on the ways in which gender functions in Disney and how Disney gears its films, merchandise, and meanings of gender roles towards boys and girls. Karen Wohlwend conducted a study, using three years’ worth of data, to determine how kindergarten boys interact with their peers during play with Disney princess figurines (593). The conclusion from this study was that the children’s gender expectations, expectations that arose from viewing Disney films and other forms of popular media, could be deduced from the manner in which the children played with the transmedia (598)—in one boy’s drawing of Cinderella, he

drew her wearing a dress, with long hair, and having exposed cleavage (601); one female doll was deemed as male for some of the children because she had short hair and wore overalls (602). These examples defend Nodelman's argument that, more often than not, it's girls who are stereotyped in media and literature while boys have the privilege to either submit or resist stereotypes (1). Similar to the previous discussion on race, where whiteness is viewed as the norm, in regard to gender, which is socially constructed, to be masculine and for men to demonstrate "masculine characters" is considered to be natural and the status quo (Nodelman 2).

As we've seen in classic Disney films, the princess' agency is directly associated with her kind nature and her physical attractiveness— if she had the ability to capture the male gaze, she temporarily held power over the male (7). Nodelman states that masculinity in the 21st century is almost "contradictory" because what it means to be biologically male doesn't determine what masculine traits one exhibits (10). Compared to the gender roles of the 19th century, where the man of the house was financially responsible for providing for his family, while the woman's responsibilities pertained to rearing the children and maintaining the everyday affairs of the household (cooking and cleaning), the "division of labor" in today's society varies depending on the cost of living, financial stability, and family dynamics (Davis 6-8). Nevertheless, even after decades of redefining masculinity, Jennifer Bethmann explains that men are still necessary to the success of a heroine's success in her 2017 article, entitled, "The Disney Princess Sidekicks: Men Still Necessary to the Disney Princess Narrative".

Bethmann begins her article by stating that, although Disney depicts its heroines as "not needing a man for success, nevertheless no matter how strong, spunky, or liberated the Disney Princess has become, the undercurrents of her story continue to portray the necessity of having a male figure help her achieve her dreams" (6). Bethmann, states that Moana is the only heroine so far that comes close to not needing a male sidekick but "that even Moana needed the help of Hei Hei (a deranged, mentally unstable rooster)" (11). Nevertheless, Disney felt it necessary for the heroines to need the assistance of a male sidekick(s). I would agree with Bethmann that media "plays a role in how we understand and respond to various perceptions, such as sex and gender" (6).

Based on Ratcliffe's explanation of definition of 'gender', gender is a social construct that associates a distinct set of attributes and personal traits for both male and female (9). Bethmann determines that we as individuals "constantly perform roles that our society has labelled as either

masculine or feminine behaviors” (6). In regard to Disney, I will be discussing gender privilege and how men remain superior to women in Disney’s *Moana* (2016). Disney has accomplished its goal of formulating storylines and character profiles that are reflective of conventional U.S. values which is the portrait that other countries have of U.S. culture and ideology (7). However, there are two misconceptions of Disney female characters that will be a focus in chapter three: 1) “all of Disney’s human female characters are princesses, and 2) that all of Disney’s female characters are weak, passive figures who sit around waiting to be ‘saved by the guy’” (Davis 8). In regard to our society, white male privilege has been protected throughout American history and remains an issue today as it’s used to oppress minorities and ignore non-white and non-male problems (racial profiling, sexual harassment, etc.) (Halberstam 2638). In order to understand how masculinity and male privilege are being challenging in Disney’s *Moana* (2016), it’s important to understand what behavior/traits Disney deems as either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’.

Dawn England, Laura Descartes, and Melissa Collier-Meek conducted a study to determine what “characteristics were exhibited by prince and princess characters through behavior and actions” (556). Some of the characteristics deemed as “masculine” include: athletic, physically strong, leader, brave and unemotional; “feminine” characteristics were described as submissive, sensitive, physically weak, fearful, and collapses crying (559). The ladies incorporated films across the three eras of Disney: the classics (1937-1959), the films of the late 20th century (1989-1998), and the contemporary films (2009-2016), including *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) (555). The study included watching nine Disney films and coding each film based on their actions or their lines in the film. The project hypotheses were focused on traditional/modern gender roles, whether the prince or princess acted as the hero, and the development of gender roles as society continuously changes.

This study had three hypotheses: the first hypothesis considered the gender of the character, with the expectation that the prince and princess’ gender role portrayals would differ; our second hypothesis was that the princes would perform more rescues than the princesses, and the princesses would be rescued more often than the princes; the third hypothesis involved changes in the Disney Princess films over time— we expected the gender role portrayals, measured via the characters’ behavioral characteristics and the resolutions in the films, would become more egalitarian over time. (557)

The results of the study determined that the princesses exhibited “feminine” traits across the three time periods: nearly 90% of the princesses between 1937 and 1959 demonstrated feminine traits compared to Tiana who performed 53% feminine which means that she exhibited 47% masculine traits; as for Naveen, his behavior accounted for 68% of feminine traits compared to his preceding counterparts who performed less than 20% of the feminine traits (562).

The results of the study determined that the princes and princesses differed slightly in physical strength and courage; however, the princesses were rescued more often than they performed rescues and the “characters’ behavioral characteristics become more equal over time” to the point where both the prince and princesses were demonstrating feminine and masculine traits (560-562). I will briefly discuss the traits exhibited by both Moana and Maui but the greater part of the discussion will be based on how their traits factor into the mission of bringing healing to Te Fiti after she was sexually assaulted (raped of her “heart of creation”). In addition to discussing how the film executes sexual assault, how it’s justified, and the recovery process, I will compare the film to a contemporary social movement that affects the American population today— the “me too.” Movement.

### 1.3.3 Co-cultural Communication and Rhetorical Listening

As mentioned in the methods section, chapters two and three will conclude with a short application of co-cultural and/or rhetorical listening. However, the conclusion chapter will incorporate more of Krista Ratcliffe’s discussion of ‘rhetorical listening’ and Gina Bell’s exploration of Dr. Mark Orbe’s ‘co-cultural theory.’ Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as “a cross-cultural conduct signifying a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in cross-cultural exchanges” in her book, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, and Whiteness* (1).

The first two chapters introduce the concept of rhetorical listening, defining exactly how rhetoricians conduct rhetorical listening, and how rhetorical listening functions. She uses the Biblical book of Ruth, where Ruth and Naomi’s dynamic serves as an example of rhetorical listening because it demonstrates that two women from different ethnic backgrounds have the ability to establish a cross-cultural friendship despite their differences (Ratcliffe 25). She then provides three steps for listening rhetorical: 1) have an understanding of oneself and other people and intentionally listen to others for the purpose of understanding (28); 2) recognize, through accountability logic, that we live dependently upon one another despite our differences (31); and 3) address and identify both the commonalities and the differences (32).

Ratcliffe explains that gender and race must be considered within rhetorical listening because more often than not it's a cross-cultural interaction. She poses the questions of: why has it been so difficult to listen to the concerns of other people? When one feels excluded, why not try to find ways in which you can relate to others? Why not focus on what make us similar to one another and what makes us different? Bell will apply Dr. Mark Orbe's 'co-cultural theory' to two groups of people, whites and Blacks, to determine the miscommunications between both communities and how the theory can help facilitate communication between the two groups.

Bell explains that the only way Blacks and whites can find common ground in their communication is by: "1) becoming culturally competent communicators, 2) developing intercultural sensitivity, 3 having 'the talk' about race and racism, and 4) ditching the colorblind ideology" (117). As we'll see in the sections on the two social movements related to race and gender, listening intentionally and working together to understand the other group's perspective is vital in initiating change. Magee may have stated it best in that the first step in solving racism in America is by addressing our society's history with racial issues, how we as citizens can help contribute to change and acknowledging the role politics play in racism in America (20).

## CHAPTER 2. THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG: WHITE PRIVILEGE, RACIAL AMBIGUITY, AND BLACK SERVITUDE

### 2.1 Introduction

It's safe to say that many people would agree that acquiring success sometimes requires being open to change and working against the status quo. For example, the best way for a kid to learn how to ride a bike is by taking off the training wheels. Our country took off its training wheels with the election of its first Black president, Barack Obama, in 2008. A year after Obama was elected, our country experienced another "first" with Walt Disney Studios' release of the first Black<sup>1</sup> princess, Tiana, in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). The connection between America's first Black president and the first Black Disney princess was significant in our society's growth of racial inclusion and multiculturalism—which is defined as "a political and philosophical disposition that accords serious considerations for to minority groups based on culture, ethnicity, or religion" (Dimova-Cookson 1). The objective of this chapter is to analysis how the Disney film, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), navigates through racial privilege, racial ambiguity, and socioeconomic issues.

For centuries, race and our society's approach to racial inclusion has been problematic, from: the arrival of the first documented Black slaves, as indentured servants, in the 16th century (Schneider and Schneider 49); to the number increase of slaves in the United States "from 75,000 in 1725 to over 4 million in 1860" as a result of the international slave trade (50); to President Lincoln's 1862 military tactic of threatening the Confederates with the emancipation of their slaves during the Civil War (Zinn 191); to the establishment of Black Codes (1865) by Confederates, thus the re-establishment of legal oppression towards Blacks following the end of the Civil War (Schneider and Schneider 350). The purpose of English colonists' enslavement of Blacks wasn't just assistance of the development of the uncultivated North America (49); but despite the debate over whether or not to end slavery, slavery served a purpose "for maintaining racial hierarchy" and "establish another system of forced labor" (Alexander 27-28). Our American society hasn't evolved beyond the "white and Black issue" as one might hope:

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<sup>1</sup> Some theorists may use the term "African-American", however, I will be using the term "Black" unless I am quoting a source. The term "Black" is pertaining to "African-Americans" throughout this thesis.

multiracial primary elections weren't ruled unconstitutional until 1944; public transportation didn't become integrated until 1946; and "the Civil Rights Act which formally dismantled the Jim Crow system of discrimination in public accommodations, employment, voting, education, and federally financed activities" wasn't legally passed until 1964 which was only 54 years ago (36-38).

Moffitt and Harris described *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) as a story that not only made history because Disney finally had a Black princess but also gave a retelling of American history (57). After watching the film, I was excited that Black girls finally had representation in a Disney princess film which was unavailable to me during my "Disney princess phase". However, the more I thought about the film's story plot and the more I researched Black representation in entertainment media the more infuriated I became. As I will describe in this chapter, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) is a "Disney-fied" retelling of the Jim Crow South featuring a modern twist on the Grimm Brothers' *The Frog Prince* (Neal 60).

In *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), Tiana learns that sometimes in order to get one step closer to your dreams, you might have to take risks. Tiana's hard work and her risks are commendable, in the film but, Disney's modernizing of American history, in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), belittles the brave Black activists and rights leaders that risked their lives regularly in protests and marches in opposition of Jim Crow Laws (Alexander 37). Nevertheless, I believe the underlying messages in the film can still be useful in our recent shift in our political climate.

I will begin my discussion by giving a synopsis of the film, followed by how the film was received. In the next section I will demonstrate how Disney's illustration of socioeconomic status and white privilege, racial ambiguity and glamorized servitude contributes to the larger societal issue of racial equality in America. As stated in the "Introduction" chapter, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) was released nine years ago and Barack Obama's presidency ended over a year ago. However, with the election of the country's first Black president, racial prejudice<sup>2</sup> and racial stereotyping<sup>3</sup> reared their evil heads proving that our "post-racial"<sup>4</sup> society was and still remains

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<sup>2</sup> Bell states that "racial prejudice occurs when folks have an affinity for or against particular racial groups and/or individual members" which can be used to support racial inferiority (20).

<sup>3</sup> [Racial] Stereotypes are "based on mistruths or on one single experience, which are used to explain a whole set of people or circumstances" (Bell 18).

<sup>4</sup> As I will explain toward the end of this chapter, Hill's narrative on Obama and race in America dismisses the argument that Obama's presidency signifies an end to racism and racial injustice in America (39).

flawed. After the last section on servitude, there will be an in-depth discussion of the film's symbolism at the height of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The conclusion will summarize the chapter and draw a connection between the Disney films *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Moana* (2016)—where in this film, servitude functions racially, servitude is gendered in *Moana* (2016). As I will present in the following sections, the minority experience (Black and ambiguously Brown) is non-monolithic and sometimes the only path to success is by getting acquainted with nature and remembering that regardless of race, everyone is human; we learn this by the main characters' transformation as frogs.

## 2.2 Film Synopsis

Set in New Orleans, our story begins, in a 1912<sup>5</sup>, with a Black seamstress named Eudora sewing a dress for Charlotte La Bouff as she tells Charlotte and, her own daughter, Tiana the story of *The Frog Prince*. The story goes that the frog prince becomes a human prince again after being kissed by a beautiful princess. However, the two eager listeners give conflicting reactions: Charlotte is fascinated with the idea of being a princess, as one can tell from her collection of pink, princess dresses; while the idea of kissing a frog disgusts Tiana, who states that she “would never ever kiss a frog”. Upon the arrival of Charlotte's wealthy father, “Big Daddy” La Bouff, Eudora and, her daughter, Tiana leave the extravagant, La Bouff mansion and head home to the low-income, bungalow community occupied by a majority of Black people. When they reach home, Tiana attempts to impress her father, who shares a dream of transforming an old sugar mill into their own restaurant, with her batch of gumbo. The small family reflects on the power of the ‘magical,’ evening star that is seen from the window in Tiana's bedroom. Tiana's father informs her that: “fairy tales can come true, and that wishing on stars is fine but that the star can only take her part of the way; the rest of it must come from her through her persistence and hard work”. Tiana keeps this in mind but it doesn't prevent her from wishing on the evening star to grant their (Tiana's father and her) dream of owning a restaurant<sup>6</sup>.

Nearly 14 years later, a 19-year-old Tiana whose childhood dream of owning a restaurant keeps her busy working as a waitress at two different diners. At this time, Tiana's father has died

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<sup>5</sup> During the scene where Tiana and her mother are on the streetcar, an elderly, white man is reading a newspaper with the headline “WILSON ELECTED” which, if referring to President Woodrow Wilson, occurred in 1912.

<sup>6</sup> Whenever the work “restaurant” is mentioned, I'm actually referring to the old sugar mill that Tiana and her father wanted to renovate into a restaurant.

and although the details surrounding Tiana’s father’s death isn’t mentioned, it’s indicated that he died while serving in the military, possibly World War I. As Tiana is about to rest after working a night shift, the alarm clock reminds her that she must now get ready for her dayshift at Duke’s diner, where she is visited by her childhood friend, the ever-overwhelming and ever-expecting, white Charlotte and her father, “Big Daddy” La Bouff. Charlotte informs Tiana that the prince of Maldonia, Prince Naveen, is visiting New Orleans and that she plans to secure a marriage proposal from him (fulfilling her dream of becoming an actual princess), by inviting him to her annual ‘Mardi-Gras Masquerade Ball.’ Tiana suggests that the best way to win Prince Naveen’s heart “is through his stomach” and Charlotte responds by hiring Tiana to cater the event featuring her famous “man-catching beignets,” giving Tiana enough money to secure the down payment for her restaurant.

Meanwhile, in another scene, Prince Naveen arrives to New Orleans with his grumpy, yet obedient butler, Lawrence. While Prince Naveen dreams of living a carefree, music-filled life, we learn from Lawrence that the prince has been financially ‘cut-off’ from his parents due to his “leech-like tendencies” and irresponsible behavior. Lawrence mentions that Naveen doesn’t have the option to live a lavish life of playing music, the ukulele, and that his two options are either to “woo and marry a rich girl or get a job.” Naveen passively submits to the former option, choosing Charlotte La Bouff as his wife, as her father is the wealthiest man in New Orleans. Seeing his opportunity to conquer the La Bouff fortune, thus the city of New Orleans, Dr. Facilier (also known as the Shadowman<sup>8</sup>) approaches a naive, Prince Naveen and a hesitant, Lawrence with a proposition to make their dreams come true: giving Naveen “the green” he wants, Naveen thinks he is referring to money, and providing Lawrence a life where he is no longer abused and pushed around. Both men agree to the Shadowman’s deal and shake “the poor sinner’s hand”. The scene ends with the transformation of both men— Naveen transforms into a green frog and Lawrence transforms into a disguised Prince Naveen.

Back at the La Bouff mansion, Charlotte is becoming antsy at Prince Naveen’s tardiness to her party and Tiana reassures her that there is still time for him to show up. An unapologetic Naveen arrives and woos Charlotte as they perform a solo dance on the dance floor. Tiana is approached at the ball by her realtors, the Fenner Brothers, who inform her that she will lose the space for her restaurant to a higher bidder unless she is able to present a higher bid in two days.

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<sup>8</sup> I refer to Dr. Facilier as “the Shadowman” for the remainder of this chapter.

Tiana, having ruined her masquerade costume out of frustration, is loaned one of Charlotte's princess dresses and wishes on the evening star for a way to secure the old sugar mill for her restaurant. Suddenly a frog appears, and Tiana sarcastically asks the frog if "he wants a kiss," reminiscing on the story her mother told Charlotte and her as children. Becoming frightened after the frog verbally accepts her proposition of a kiss, Tiana tries to squish the frog until he informs her that he is actually the real Prince Naveen—the prince dancing with Charlotte is the disguised Lawrence. Believing that Tiana is a princess, Naveen formulates the idea, based on his understanding of *The Frog Prince*, that one kiss from Tiana will make him human again and in exchange for her help, he will help her get her restaurant. Tiana desperately agrees but the kiss backfires and instead Tiana is transformed into a frog like Naveen. The two frogs escape the clutches of the party-goers and end up in the New Orleans bayou. Realizing that the frog Naveen has escaped, Lawrence becomes worried about pretending to be Naveen. The Shadowman reassures him that their plot for the disguised Lawrence to marry Charlotte, kill her father, and claim his fortune, will work as long as they have the Prince's blood in the talisman that Lawrence is wearing.

While navigating through the New Orleans bayou, Tiana and Naveen, now frogs, face several obstacles: hungry alligators, fierce frog hunters, and evil spirits sent by the Shadowman to kidnap Naveen. However, with the help of a friendly, trumpet-playing alligator named Louis and a brave, Cajun firefly named Ray, the frogs arrive to the house of the blind, voodoo queen Mama Odie who is said to be able to break the spell. Mama Odie teaches the group that "if you dig a little deeper and find out who you are, you will also find out what you need." She helps Naveen realize that money isn't the key to happiness regardless of what money can buy. For Tiana, Mama Odie states that Tiana is a lot like her father but that she really needs "to dig deeper" in order to find out what she needs. The frogs insist to Mama Odie that what they need is to be human again, and although reluctant, Mama Odie shows them how they can be human through her caldron (actually bathtub) of magical gumbo. Mama Odie tells them that the only way that they can become human again is if Naveen were to kiss a princess: Charlotte, the De facto princess of New Orleans, must kiss Naveen by midnight while she's still the princess of Mardi-Gras. The group (Tiana, Naveen, Louis, and Ray) set out to reach Charlotte before midnight, not realizing that the Shadowman has organized for Charlotte to marry a disguised Lawrence on the Mardi-Gras parade float just before midnight.

While on the boat ride to the Mardi-Gras parade, Naveen realizes that what he needs in his life is purpose and love. He realizes that he has fallen in love with Tiana and is willing to get multiple jobs to help her fulfill her dream. However, before he can propose, Tiana informs him that what she needs to do is work harder to find a way to get her restaurant, not just for her but also for her father. Naveen changes his mind on proposing to her because he thinks that all she cares about is opening up her restaurant. A saddened Naveen is then captured by the Shadowman's dark spirits—who need more of Naveen's blood to power Lawrence's shape-shifting talisman. Ray, who knew about Naveen's plan to propose, unintentionally tells Tiana and the two of them go after Naveen who they think went to the parade alone to break the spell (Louis stays behind on the boat and is living out his dream of playing his trumpet with other musicians). Upon arriving to the parade, Tiana and Ray see a human Naveen about to marry Charlotte on the Mardi-Gras parade float and Tiana hops away to a nearby cemetery thinking she's lost the opportunity of genuine love. Ray disrupts the 'parade float wedding' and discovers that the human Naveen about to marry Charlotte is actually a disguised Lawrence. Ray rescues the real Naveen, from a locked box, steals the talisman from Lawrence and races to find Tiana and tell her what has happened. Ray gives the talisman to Tiana, who hops as far as she can away from the Shadowman's dark spirits while Ray stays behind to fight the spirits before being crushed by the Shadowman.

Realizing that Tiana could destroy the talisman at any second, thus destroying him, the Shadowman uses magic to show Tiana what her life could be like if she gives him back the talisman—disguised Lawrence would marry Charlotte, then the money he gets will be given to Tiana for her restaurant. Tiana realizes that the restaurant might be what she wants, but isn't necessarily what she needs, what she needs is love. Tiana destroys the talisman and the Shadowman is dragged to "the other side" by the evil spirits who he can no longer repay. Frog Naveen reaches a confused Charlotte, who has just discovered that she was about to marry a disguised and non-regal Lawrence, and explains that he is actually the real Naveen whom she must kiss before midnight in order for them to be human again. A hesitant Charlotte realizes that Naveen and Tiana love each other despite being frogs and agrees to kiss Naveen to break the spell. Unfortunately, the clock strikes midnight before Charlotte can kiss him but Tiana and Naveen agree to stay together as frogs.

Realizing that Ray was being chased, Louis goes after Ray but discovers that he has been crushed by the Shadowman. Louis takes a dying Ray to Tiana and Naveen who they discover are still frogs. Tiana and Naveen explain that they are remaining frogs but that they are staying together as a couple. Ray signals his approval of the relationship and peacefully dies, joining his beloved Evangeline, the evening star, in the sky. After Tiana, Naveen, and Louis lay Ray to rest on the bayou, Tiana and Naveen get married by Mama Odie. As they seal their marriage with a kiss, the two frogs transform back into humans. Naveen concludes that once Tiana married him, kissing him broke the spell because she's now a princess. The two decide to get married in front of their friends and family in a human ceremony, and Naveen's parents are overjoyed that their son has married someone he truly loves. With the money she had saved plus the persuasion of their 'intimidating,' alligator friend, Louis, Tiana and Naveen are given the keys to the old sugar-mill and the two begin transforming it into "Tiana's Palace," in which Louis becomes a member of the restaurant's house band<sup>10</sup>. The film concludes with "Big Daddy" La Bouff, Charlotte La Bouff, Tiana's mother, and Naveen's parents celebrating the opening of the couple's new restaurant, as "people of all walks of life" stand in line waiting to try Tiana's food.

### 2.3 Reception of the Film

The film received mixed reviews from audiences who were happy that Disney had finally developed a Black princess character but equally disappointed that she was a frog the majority of the film which was perceived as "very insulting" by Black mothers who viewed the film with their daughters (Moffitt and Harris 65)<sup>11</sup>. Sarita Gregory argues that although Disney is finally providing representation of Blacks in animated film, the film does so by attempting to reaffirm audiences that Blacks are humane— although, the transformation of Tiana and Naveen might allude to the opposite message— while "reasserting traditions of racial hierarchy" (432). Two themes that are apparent in the film are the ideas of independence and romance which are "now attached to representations of blackness", however, the normalization of whiteness— the only

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<sup>10</sup> In the song "When We're Human", Louis sings that he wants to be a human so he can play his trumpet with a human band but being human wasn't necessary for his dream to be fulfilled, he merely needed to be accepted and people's perception had to change.

<sup>11</sup> The study performed by Moffitt and Harris included inviting 80 participants (both young girls and their mothers) to watch a private screening of *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Of the 30 mothers in attendance, 11 remained to participate in the focus groups.

two white people in the film are also the richest and exercise their privilege— is something Disney deliberately chose to incorporate into the storyline (Gregory 433).

By making Tiana a frog for the majority of the film, her voice as a Black woman was silenced and her black body was made inferior compared to Charlotte's body (Missouri 65); and Disney alienated her from the Black cultural ritual of dancing and didn't distinguish manual labor from Tiana's Black-ness (Gregory 433). The former (silence of minority voice) is exactly what Neal argues in her thesis on the ways in which ethnic minorities are portrayed across Disney's production of films. Neal begins her argument by explaining how the concept of "multiculturalism" has yet to accurately reflect America's opinion of diverse cultures, despite the fact that what it means to be "American" consistently changes as a result of economic and population growth (vi). Brode states that "multiculturalism" functions "based on the maintenance of any one group's beloved background simultaneously asserting that all lingering value distinctions as to worth based on race, gender, or other arbitrary, outmoded, intolerable standards, must be eliminated" (2). For the purpose of this thesis, I will be using two principles of multiculturalism, presented by Imbert, which states: "multiculturalism is the recognition of ethnic and cultural diversity and the recognition of the equality and dignity of all cultures that live side by side in the country" (23).

As we see in the film, there is a mixture of ethnicities and cultures— white, Black, and ambiguously Brown. Neal states that the concept of multiculturalism "was intended to be inclusive, but rather became divisive as the 'worthwhile contributions' were relegated to be differences that created distances between ethnic groups as well as the mitigating factor that created the term 'un-American'" (vi). According to Gregory, Disney contradicts itself by conveying the message to [white] audiences that "we've reached a point in our society where we should move beyond something as superficial as race" but also, "don't worry because social reality won't change too much" (439). Nevertheless, the purpose of this thesis isn't to change the perception of what it means to be American, but rather discuss the ways in which Disney, one of the largest and most powerful 'teaching machines' portrays its first Black princess and her racially ambiguous, prince.

The setting and time period of this film is relevant to the plot because Blacks in the 1920s were legally obligated to adhere to the Jim Crow Laws, Blacks had "separate restrooms, jails, cemeteries, were not allowed to live in white neighborhoods, and weren't allowed to legally

marry a white person” (“Jim Crow Laws”). The story *The Frog Prince* serves as the inspiration behind the film but Disney’s take on the film includes a Black, female protagonist and a plot twist in which by kissing the frog, the ‘princess’ becomes a frog herself (Neal 60). Tiana’s character is unique in that her dreams don’t consist of falling in love and being rescued by a prince but rather being her own boss and managing her own restaurant (60). In her comparison of Tiana with other Disney princesses, Neal states that “Tiana is different”: this difference isn’t just because she is Disney’s first black female protagonist but also she is a physical manifestation of racial stereotypes produced by Western culture (62). While the majority of the princesses or heroines are white, with the exception of Pocahontas, Mulan, Jasmine (*Aladdin* (1992)), and Esmeralda (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996)), and considered “virtuous” (62).

Tiana’s character is victim to physical exhaustion working two jobs and yet she still has to kiss a frog to achieve her dream. When questioning black mothers about their feelings about the film and their perceptions of beauty standards, many mothers were upset at Disney’s “negation of the Black (female) body” and didn’t understand why the Black Disney princess was a frog for most of the movie while the preceding white princesses were human (except Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*) (Moffitt and Harris 65). By making the two main character frogs the majority of the film, Disney designated both Tiana and Naveen as members of the “Other” category; with their only hope of being human again, is to accept their inferiority and operating within that inferiority (Neal 64). Based on Gehlawat’s concept of ‘greenface’, that it’s possible that Disney made Tiana a frog for the majority of the film because the corporation “had not embraced the idea of a Black princess, in turn, conflated her with animality” (Moffitt and Harris 65).

Being human is a status that previously has not often been extended to Black characters in many Disney films...The singing crows and faceless circus hands in *Dumbo*...the entire animal cast of *The Lion King*...Although many of the characters in *The Little Mermaid* were also not human, the Jamaican accented Sebastian is not even part human. (Neal 64)

The lack of courtesy that Neal mentions further supports her argument that Disney has repeatedly found ways to “marginalize, stereotype, and dehumanize” its Black characters; audiences receive a glimpse of this marginalization in the film’s opening scene (63). Eudora, Tiana’s mother, is a Black seamstress who sews princess dresses for a rich, white girl named Charlotte. Eudora’s

occupation as a seamstress during the time period of the film is an accurate reflection of the type of work Black women performed during the Jim Crow Era according to Tera Hunter.

Hunter states that Black women during this time period occupied domestic labor positions “as an invisible workforce in the private sphere” (viii). Therefore, Disney’s decision of making both Eudora and Tiana domestic laborers only reinforces the idea that whiteness is necessary to the Black fairy tale (Gregory 433). When we first meet Charlotte, she is wearing a pink, princess ball-gown made with excessive layers of material, has a large crown on her head and is surrounded by several stuffed animals and toys. In the same opening scene, Tiana is wearing a simple, green dress and a small crown. Compared to Charlotte, who lives in the biggest mansion on the block, Eudora and Tiana board a local streetcar, where they sit in the back of the bus, which “drops them off in the less opulent section of town”, where the majority of residents are black and live in row of small-sized bungalows (Gehlawat 420).

Tiana’s Black-ness is evident in her complexion, where she sat on the streetcar<sup>12</sup>, and through her manual labor, however, the ethnicity of her romantic interest, Naveen, raises question due to his fictional home county. Naveen’s ethnicity is ambiguous: he isn’t Black but he’s definitely not White however, he has a brown complexion; “his name translates as “new” in Hindi and his mother is noted as wearing ‘Indian attire’ at their wedding but he’s fluent in French and his accent hints to European origins” (Gehlawat 423-424). This ambiguity can be interpreted as problematic in that it sends a message to young viewers that real romance can only happen if you look outside of your own race (Moffitt and Harris 66). Neal questions whether Disney was trying to convey the message that Black men might not be available for a strong, Black female because he himself [the Black male] is an “emasculated ‘other’ male” (67).

Whether or not Disney intended to convey such messages several of the 11 participants of Moffitt and Harris’ study felt that becoming a princess is unattainable to Black girls because for decades Disney only produced princesses that were “young, fair, rich white” (68). Moffitt and Harris’ study on the film’s reception provided four concluding arguments: “1) film as negation; 2) princess as unattainable; 3) beauty as Internal; and 4) work as virtuous<sup>13</sup>” (56). Many of the

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<sup>12</sup> During this time, public transportation (streetcars) remained segregated which is why audiences may notice that Tiana and her mother are sitting in the back of the streetcar while a white man sits upfront (Gregory 440).

<sup>13</sup> Some of the questions presented to focus group participants included: “how do you define a princess?”; “how do you describe yourself physically?”; “how did you come to understand beauty?” and “what were your thoughts on the film?”

mothers felt that Charlotte, Tiana's friend, was the real princess of the film. Guerrero's discussion on whitewashing would suggest "that the use of Charlotte as the princess trope while hiding Tiana's Black body in the form of a frog appeals to target audiences without alienating dominant group audience members who are most comfortable with the notion of a white princess" (Moffitt and Harris 66). This idea isn't surprising since black bodies in cinema have always been positioned "for the pleasure of white viewers", frequently denying "the black female body in order to reinforce white supremacy" as we see in Charlotte being the De facto princess of New Orleans and the Mardi Gras princess (Dunn 17-18).

Black women in cinema have been portrayed negatively on the movie screen, fueling stereotypes of Black women as "overbearing, homely, and the erotic sensual temptress" (146). When asked about their perceptions of beauty, many of the Black mothers equated beauty with "hair texture, complexion, and body type", their interpretation of beauty being influenced by Disney's white princesses; one mother stated that she didn't consider herself to be "Disney princess" beautiful, but she also she didn't consider herself to be ugly either (Moffitt and Harris 69). In comparing Tiana to the white princesses (Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty) Gehlawat states that what makes Tiana unlike any Disney princess we've seen before is that she is savvy, in saving time and working multiple jobs, but that she is committed to improving her economic status (427).

Cinderella's manual labor was out of loyalty to her deceased father's wife and her stepsisters. Snow White cooked and cleaned for the dwarfs but in exchange for them hiding her from her evil stepmother (427). Tiana, however, never felt that the key to her success was by allowing a prince to "rescue" her until she was in a position where she was about to lose the old sugar mill to a higher bidder. *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) is also the first film in which we see the different levels of racial privilege being exercised. According to Moffitt and Harris, Tiana chose to work as hard as she did, she made the conscious decision to work hard so she could open her restaurant sooner rather than later (71). In reality, Tiana is serving Charlotte, a white, southern woman, who expects to receive everything that her white privilege will allow her to obtain; thus "confirming stereotypes of White women in the South living lives of leisure while Black women work to provide that life for them" (71). Tiana's belief in hard work was influenced by her ethnic background, as we see in the conversation with her father, but as a result, she exhibits independence and strong-will which can be positive attributes (Lacroix 223).

However, the issue with this hard work performed by Tiana is that it places her in a position of servitude to rich, white people who benefit from her talents and kind nature.

Some mothers of Moffitt and Harris' study appreciated that girls of color had a humble Black princess to emulate, who believed in earning what you want in life but others wished that Tiana had belonged to the "middle-class" or maybe had the desire to receive a college education (71). However, with Tiana being the first Black princess, and her character not being based on a historical figure of ancient legend, living in 20th century America, Disney's portrayal of race and class reflected the lives of many Blacks of the South during that time— their job opportunities being limited to domestic "cooks, maids, child-nurses, laundresses, and as other specialized servants" (Hunter viii).

#### 2.4 Contemporary Reading: *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and Racial Privilege

The larger discussion on racial privilege, as seen in the film, can be broken down into three separate discussions: the idolization of socioeconomic status and white privilege, the politics of racial ambiguity, and the justification of glamorized Black servitude. The privilege that each individual has is directly influenced by their race and/or their citizenship status. I will dissect these concepts by conducting a character analysis on Charlotte La Bouff, Prince Naveen, and Tiana. Following the three profiles will be a discussion of how issues of race and co-cultural miscommunication contributed to the growth of the #BlackLivesMatter movement; and how co-cultural communication can be beneficial in the future.

##### 2.4.1 Socioeconomic Status and White Privilege

Charlotte La Bouff's character is the epitome of white privilege, as well as entitlement, in this film. Bell describes "white privilege" as the ability for whites to "opt-out" of conversations about the factors race and racism in America (3); and white people are afforded the privilege of not acknowledging that they have white privilege. White privilege is often interpreted as "having an unearned advantage" because you're white but another aspect of white privilege is that someone who is white won't experience racial challenges that people of color encounter regularly (22-23). White privilege means that your career, education, and economic opportunities aren't impacted because of their race (Andersen 26). I would agree that Kimmel stated it best when he explains that the feelings of being entitled to something stems from one's privilege (24). He argues that white American men are one of the most angriest groups of people but not because of suffering

from a specific form of oppression— like slavery or discrimination— but rather because “others” (people of color and women) are the reason being their lack of total control, they feel they’re entitled to, in politics, job opportunities, and their dominance over women (255). Kimmel explains that white American men “are the most privileged people on earth” and yet many men are angry but the progress of women and people of color in the country, because it affects them (7).

This entitlement and privilege isn’t reserved for just white men; women and people of color also feel a sense of entitlement but more often than not their feelings of entitlement spark from their lack of privilege and obstacles positioned from obtaining certain rights (we’ve seen this in our American history with Blacks and women fighting for integration and the right to vote, respectively) (Kimmel 62). As we see in the film, Charlotte is New Orleans royalty, being the daughter of the richest man in the vibrant city. She has unlimited access to funds and if she were to marry a wealthy man her financial situation would only increase. However, Charlotte’s objective in the film is to obtain the one thing that money can’t buy her which is the title of princess. The character of Charlotte La Bouff is interesting because her socioeconomic status is one of the central element to the film in four ways: Naveen wants her money to fund his lifestyle; Tiana needs a human Naveen to marry Charlotte so she can get a portion of Charlotte’s money to fund her restaurant; Lawrence, ‘blackfaced’ as Naveen, wants Charlotte’s money in order to fulfill his dream of a life without being a servant; and the Shadowman wants a disguised Lawrence to marry Charlotte so he can kill her father and claim a share of the money that Lawrence will have access to and control New Orleans.

Andersen states that the rationalization behind race being socially constructed is that “whiteness has constructed ‘others’ while also constructing itself” (26). The self-improvement and self-fulfillment in the film revolves around each characters relationship with Charlotte and how her wealth can impact them. As mentioned in Moffitt and Harris, viewers felt that Charlotte’s position of Mardi-Gras princess, thus her ability to break the spell, had less to do with her dad’s influence in the city but rather the fact that she was the only white, female character in the film (66). The fact that Charlotte is one of the only two characters in the film, is the only one of the three main characters with financial security and financial freedom, and the only one who can break the spell, is not a coincidence. Charlotte is a rich, white women in the South who recognizes her white privilege and exercises it frequently, her whiteness symbolizes

the norm of America (Andersen 25). Magee defines whiteness as “the standard against which all other identities are engaged, processed, judged, and valued” (32). Charlotte expects Eudora to make as many princess dresses as her heart desires, at the beginning of the film. She expects her dad’s money to help her achieve her goals— her masquerade ball, having Naveen as a guest in their home, hiring Tiana to cater the ball. Charlotte’s entitlement emerges from: those around her not showing resistance to her requests; her privilege as being both white and rich, and the notion that because she has everything she could possibly want, she feels entitled for her lifestyle to be maintained (Kimmel 24). The only instance in which Charlotte experiences any type of rejection or disappointment is when she confides in Tiana about Naveen’s tardiness to her ball and in frustration says “It’s not fair, my prince is never coming! I never get anything I wish for!” These very lines allow Charlotte to be the victim of injustice and doesn’t hold her accountable for the fact that her white privilege is the motive behind all of the manipulation and deception that Naveen and Tiana encounter in the film (Gallagher 146).

When Charlotte hires Tiana to cater the event, she doesn’t give Tiana the option to decline the offer but instead throws money at her. Charlotte has the ability to loan Tiana the money for her restaurant but never offers despite that Tiana and her mother, Eudora, have worked for the La Bouff’s for several years and consider each other friends. Instead she hires Tiana because her manual labor is beneficial to Charlotte in her quest to become a princess. Charlotte and Tiana’s dynamic is an example of what Charles Gallagher refers to as having the “white ethnic card” mindset: the belief that if their [white’s] ancestors could overcome the obstacles and oppression they endured in America as immigrants then so could Blacks; and that one’s socioeconomic position and available opportunities are not because of race but that one’s lack of “self-improvement and hard work” is why they haven’t been able to achieve “the American Dream” (146). Tiana’s hard work is evident to audiences but what the “white ethnic card” doesn’t factor is that historically, Blacks were not legally allowed to overcome these obstacles because of slavery and Jim Crow Laws. However, it wouldn’t be a Disney film if the characters didn’t learn about what’s really important and correct their previous behavior. At the end of the film, Charlotte realizes that Tiana and Naveen are actually in love with one another, while Charlotte was willing to marry Naveen for the title of “princess”. Charlotte’s epiphany is Disney’s attempts to convey that genuine love outweighs racial and economic status indifference— a lesson that our society is still learning.

### 2.4.2 Racial Ambiguity

Disney's approach to portraying a potential interracial relationship in the film is interesting. In *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), we don't know much about Naveen except that he is a prince from a fictional kingdom called Maldonia and that he arrives to New Orleans broke and in search of financial security, intending to find a rich wife. Naveen has a love for jazz which could be the reason why he chose New Orleans (the birthplace of jazz, as he states) to meet a rich woman to marry—the only rich woman available being white. A conflicting element of Naveen's character is not just his ambiguous race but the details regarding his trip to New Orleans. Surely he must have had some provisions to get to New Orleans but there's no explanation as to whether Lawrence is being paid to escort Naveen or if he's just loyal to the royal family. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of Naveen's character takes precedence over this inquiry. However, racial ambiguity in the film does have the potential to position an 'other' with a form of privilege (Missouri 20). One burning question I have for Disney animators, regarding Naveen's character, is: why did Disney opt to create an ethnicity/place of origin for this Disney prince instead of just making him Black like Tiana?

As previously mentioned, Naveen isn't white, Indian, European, or black but he's fluent in English and French, [making him ambiguously Brown] (Gehlawat 423). Naveen's character is what Missouri would describe as the 'tragic [Brown] mulatto': Naveen isn't Black, so he can't to be subjected to black oppression (this is also due to his citizenship and regal status) but his complexion isn't close to being a white pigment (6). What audiences know for sure is that Naveen is not American which works in his favor for many instances in the film, but Disney appropriates this lack of citizenship and potential problematic miscegenation by only having Charlotte and Naveen interact when Lawrence is in 'blackface' or when Naveen was a frog (Gregory 437). Naveen's Brown-ness and foreign status makes him acceptable as the object of the white Charlotte's gaze. Disney's use of racial inversion between the trading of Naveen and Lawrence's, his butler, bodies "[temporarily] gives Naveen a non-fictional race by having a "blackface" Lawrence portray a racially ambiguous Naveen with a British colonial accent" (436). Nevertheless, the interracial marriage is avoided by Disney partnering the 'other' Naveen with the Black Tiana. Similar to his ability of occupying the space of 'foreign other', Naveen has the option to act as a New Orleans commoner, a privilege allotted to him by his regal and foreign status. When he arrives to New Orleans, he is wearing his formal prince attire and his crown but

seconds later he switches clothes, grabs his ukulele and joins the crowds of music lovers and dancers demonstrating his ability to act as a normal citizen of New Orleans. As a foreign, Brown “mulatto” Naveen has the ability to embrace both the rich and prestige culture of Charlotte’s and the common and modest culture exhibited by Tiana (Missouri 6). Although Naveen doesn’t have the same privilege as Charlotte, because of his Brown-ness and lack of American citizenship, Naveen still has a level of privilege that Tiana doesn’t have but she ultimately benefits from after her marriage to Naveen.

Disney’s Naveen is similar to Shakespeare’s Othello in that they both navigate cross-culturally; they are racially ambiguous, as foreign residents they are eroticized, and they are can occupy the positions of foreigners and residents of their respective countries (Bartels 178). However, unlike Othello, Naveen is familiar with the New Orleans culture: he also knows the story of *The Frog Prince*; he knows how to play the ukulele; and knows how to dance like a citizen from New Orleans. What’s interesting is that minus his ability to cook, Naveen seems to be more embraced in the New Orleans culture than Tiana who was born in Louisiana. The character of Naveen symbolizes multiracial residents, citizens, and immigrants of the United States and how the discussion of race remains relevant in 2018.

#### 2.4.3 Glamorized Servitude

As readers already know, Tiana spends the majority of the film as a frog but regardless, her character is complex (both in human form and animal form). As explained by Missouri, the film is problematic because it insinuated that “young, poor black women: should be capable of achieving the “American Dream” and that there are few social or economic obstacles impeding black women’s upward mobility” (169). At the beginning of the film, Tiana’s personality is very strong even as a young girl (around age 5). The idea of kissing a frog disgusts her nor is she interested in becoming a princess. Tiana redefines what it means to live “happily ever after” by dreaming of owning a restaurant. An admirable trait about Tiana is that, Tiana’s character is mature for a five-year-old: she already shows promise as a gifted chef with a delicate palate, a trade passed down to her by her father. Tiana maintains the same determination operate her own restaurant offer her dad’s passing and relies on her waitressing tips from her two jobs for her “restaurant fund”. Tiana’s strong work ethic, compared to Charlotte’s leisurely life and fragile femininity, is due to her Blackness which can be traced back to antebellum slavery (Missouri

172). However, Tiana is so focused on working hard that she is characterized as ‘other’ by other members of the Black community.

When asked to join her friends for dancing, Tiana politely declines and tells them that she is planning on working more hours that night. Gregory states that although Disney was able to demonstrate the strong work ethic of black people, it failed in capturing how people relieve themselves of work in black culture (446). Dancing wasn’t merely seemed as a form of exercise but was a social and unified ritual of the black community; dancing was symbolic of entertainment, freedom, and an expression of culture that can be “traced back to slavery days” (446). As a frog, Tiana still wants to open a restaurant but she also learns how to adapt to a new environment, and who she is as a person, and what she needs.

Superficially, this is in fact a story about a girl who dreams of owning a restaurant and works hard to get it while falling in love with a prince during their anthropomorphization as frogs. However, under the surface, this is a story about a Black girl named Tiana who operates in glamorized servitude for a rich, white girl named Charlotte. Tiana’s life consists of serving others through her skills and manual labor which is justified by the money she receives in waitressing tips and what Charlotte pays her to cater her party. Tiana never stops working in the films, even as a frog she cooks for herself, Naveen, Louis and Ray. She was frequently reminded of how ludicrous it was to save for a restaurant, being a woman from “her particular background” as stated by the real estate agents, the Fenner Brothers (Gregory 443). However, it’s not just these white individuals who think that she is incapable of getting her restaurant: her friends (who are black) don’t understand why she works so hard and even Buford, the black chef at Duke’s, tells her that “she will never get enough money for the down payment”.

One aspect of the film that audience might overlook, Tiana primarily earns her money as a waitress but she’s also an exceptional cook— she makes great beignets and flavorful gumbo. Tiana, regardless of her enjoyment in cooking which is culturally constructed, she is being oppressed by whites and Blacks alike, in order to keep her in a position of servitude. Gregory states that Disney’s main goal was to showcase “the humanity of blacks by placing white characters in the minstrel role, but that rather than having them portray blackness, the caricature whiteness” (440). Basically what Disney did was portray whites (such as Lawrence and the frog hunters) as grotesque and bad people, instead of elevating Blacks and the ambiguously Brown Naveen into the roles of both human and detachment from servitude. Disney’s portrayal of Tiana

and her mother attaches positive character attribute, “honesty, hard-working, spirited, and humble”, to their Black-ness (441). Although screenwriter Ron Edwards goes on the record as to saying the “story wasn’t intended to teach people about racism”, maybe he should have kept that in mind before he decided to retell American history and beautify racism that occurred during the time period in the film (Gregory 443-444). Shaw states that Black women, living in the Jim Crow Era, experienced racism and sexism hardships in their pursuit of financial and economic success; these women were taught that the key to their success rested in “working hard and preparing for, and expecting, success” (13).

Tiana and Charlotte’s dynamic is portrayed by Disney as a friendship but the racial and socioeconomic status of both women solidifies Tiana’s servitude to Charlotte’s whiteness— she needs Charlotte’s money from the catering job for her restaurant down payment. If the two ladies were really friends, why didn’t Charlotte just loan Tiana the money to purchase the old sugar mill? One of my hypotheses is that Charlotte wouldn’t offer because Tiana’s progress would make her unavailable to serve Charlotte anymore. Another possibility is that this obstacle was purposely incorporated by Disney to reflect that “Tiana’s desire to own and operate a restaurant represented a degree of success that was inappropriate for Blacks during the 1920s” (Gregory 443). Tiana’s only option for self-improvement is by kissing a frog who promises to give her the money she needs to present a higher bid to the realtors. Although it was actually the influence of Louis the Alligator that guaranteed Tiana the old sugar mill at the end of the film, Tiana still wasn’t able to achieve her goal without the help of a man or a male-gendered amphibian species. Gregory states that Disney’s depiction of Tiana as a frog helped her understand “walking in the other person’s shoes” (439); but I would argue that it was Charlotte who needed to learn what it’s like to be a marginalized Black women in 20th century America, subjected to servitude.

Although this film was just another fairy tale and fantasy for Disney, the non-fictional, historical background of the film remains relevant in our racially discriminating, “post-racial” society. The concept of “post-racial” insinuates that racism and racial inequality are issues of the past and that our society has reached a point where race isn’t a factor and “we don’t see race, only human” (Hill 44). However, as we see in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and in current events, race is still a factor, racial prejudice is “alive and well”, and the majority and minority conflicting views on racial issues contributes to the larger discussion of co-cultural miscommunication. Within this section, I conducted a character analysis of the three main

characters of Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). I argued that the film reflected three main concepts that remain problematic in our current American society: white privilege, racial ambiguity, and glamorized servitude. The next section will continue the discussion on race but in a larger context— race issues in America.

## 2.5 Contemporary Social Issue: #BlackLivesMatter, Racial Profiling and Miscommunication

According to a poll<sup>15</sup> conducted by *THE NBC NEWS*, 64 percent of the survey participants voted that racism is still an issue in 2018 (Arenge et. al, “Poll 64 percent”). When asked about racial treatment while in a public place 40 percent of the votes stated that Blacks are treated unfairly more often than whites of Hispanics. Although these statistics represent the opinions of less than 7,000 people, you need only to turn on your television or laptop, or read the newspaper to know that racism and racial profiling are running rampant. Racism in America has existed for centuries, but what's unique about the fight for racial equality today is that modern technology and social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat) has been a key component in documenting situations of injustice, sharing that information virally, and organizing campaigns and protesting in opposition of injustice. The #BlackLivesMatter movement hasn't not only gained international recognition through the internet and social media but it has also received praise and backlash for its participants' (some of which whom practice militancy) formation of regular protests that have often turned violent.

#BlackLivesMatter was a created in 2013 by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi as a response to George Zimmerman being found “not guilty” of fatally shooting Trayvon Martin in 2012 (“HERSTORY”, [blacklivesmatter.com](http://blacklivesmatter.com)). The organization website states that the “Black-centered political project” is necessary in our society “where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (“HERSTORY”, [blacklivesmatter.com](http://blacklivesmatter.com)). Bloom breaks down the tragic event of February 26, 2012 into two phases. The first phase is the description of Trayvon Martin talking on his cell phone on as his way back home, carrying a package of candy and a beverage he purchased from a convenience store (Bloom 49). As Trayvon is continuing his walk home, a George Zimmerman perceives Trayvon's behavior as “suspicious” and begins to follow Trayvon as he calls the police. Bloom explains that even after

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<sup>15</sup> The poll was created on “Survey Monkey”, had over 6,000 adult participants, and was made available from May 14th to May 21st.

the dispatcher informs Zimmerman that it's not necessary for him to continue to pursue Trayvon, Zimmerman doesn't listen. Both Trayvon and Zimmerman become aware of each other at this point— Trayvon perceiving Zimmerman as “a creepy stalker” and Zimmerman perceiving Trayvon as “a criminal” (50). Although Zimmerman's actions of profiling, reporting, and pursuing Trayvon were “disturbing”, because he had no evidence that Trayvon had committed any crime or was planning on committing a crime, legally Zimmerman acted within his own rights (50). The second phase, when the physical altercation began, resulted in Zimmerman firing a single fatal shot, afraid that Trayvon would kill him (51).

Forensic Criminologist, Dr. Ron Martinelli argues against Bloom by stating that Zimmerman did stop his pursuit of Trayvon after the dispatcher said it wasn't necessary (15). According to Martinelli states that there are four things about the case that can be proven: Zimmerman stopped his pursuit of Trayvon once police requested he do so; Trayvon was the one who initiated the actual confrontation and assaulted Zimmerman; Trayvon couldn't have been that worried about Zimmerman's actions since he didn't run away once he noticed he was being followed; and if Trayvon felt he was being stalked he should have called police (16). Regardless, what the world say was a young, Black man who was unharmed pursued by an armed white man simply on the basis that he “looked suspicious”.

Martinelli states that Trayvon wasn't racially profiled but merely that Zimmerman found his behavior suspicious (13). Regardless of my personal opinion, I would argue that although Zimmerman didn't verbally profile Trayvon, on the recording, that Zimmerman did base Trayvon's actions as suspicious because he was black. Trayvon wasn't peeping through windows or jiggling door handles or trying to break-in mailboxes; he was merely walking, at night, while Black and because Zimmerman didn't recognize him, he was “suspicious”. Apparently, the timing of Trayvon's trip to and from the grocery store was problematic for Zimmerman, as well as the jurors. Martinelli questions why Trayvon took nearly 30 minutes to walk not even a mile back home and if he was lost or something why we didn't walk near street lights (13-14). Correct me if I'm wrong, but since when are people not allowed to walk leisurely? If Trayvon was on the phone, what's wrong with him walking slowly while on the phone or just walking around his new neighborhood? Had Trayvon been white, would he had still chosen to pursue him?

Martinelli argues and sides with the forensic evidence but Bloom caters to the debate on whether or not this was racial profiling or actually just a man defending himself (73). Based on

one of Zimmerman's Black neighborhoods, Zimmerman may not have racially profiled because he himself was racist but rather because the men who were burglarizing the neighborhood were also Black, however, this defends the argument that associated Black teen with robbery is still profiling (78). The night after Zimmerman was found "not guilty" prosecutor Angela Corey stated that "the case was never about race but Trayvon was profiled" (91). How Trayvon was profiled but not racially profiled is beyond my understanding similar to how our society is "post-racial" yet racism still exists. The following incidents will prove this very point that we have yet to reach "post-racial" and it's not just paranoid white men like Zimmerman that are racially profiling Blacks in America.

I am personally a fan of Starbucks and most of my friends on Purdue's campus love Starbucks because of its diverse selection of beverages, sandwiches, and sweet treats. However, an incident this past April revealed that maybe Starbucks needed a lesson in embracing diverse groups of people. On April 12th in Philadelphia, two Black men named Donte Robinson and Rashon Nelson arrived at their locale Starbucks and sat down at an available table (Hanna et. al). The two men were waiting for a third person to arrive for a business meeting and after not making a purchase and forbidden from using the restaurant's restroom, the manager called police who arrested the two men for trespassing (Hanna et. al). The men were later released (they weren't charged), given monetary compensation for the incident, and Starbucks' CEO Kevin Johnson announced a closure of 8,000 of its stores across the nation for a day of "racial bias education" which occurred on May 29th; this education promoted the concept of "color braveness" where racial and ethnic diversity should be "seen and respected for what it is rather pretending that ignoring race is beneficial" (Bartirromo, "New Starbucks Training"). Similar to how Disney ignored Naveen's race by making him ambiguously Brown, biracial and multiracial identities still remain "problematic" in our society as Lindsay Gottlieb experienced on May 27th.

Gottlieb, a women's college basketball coach, took to social media to describe her recent experience of having to prove that her child, who's biracial, was actually hers at a Southwest Airlines terminal (Bartirromo, "College Coach"). The airline personnel stated that the discrepancy was due to the difference of last names between Gottlieb and the child but Gottlieb believes "it's because he has a different skin color". Gottlieb presented the child's passport but airline officials asked for additional evidence such as the child's birth certificate but also "evidence" of maternity from Facebook pictures (Bartirromo, "College Coach"). Southwest

responded by working with Gottlieb to determine all of the details behind the incident and her interaction with the intrusive employee. What's unique about this situation is not just that Facebook pictures can now be used as solid evidence of maternity/paternity, apparently, but how Gottlieb responded to the incident, she said: "I do feel like as a white female, with a position of privilege, and a platform where someone is going to listen, it is my responsibility to say... 'This isn't ok'. And maybe somewhere down the line that helps my son, who is biracial and will be for his entire life" (Bartirromo, "College Coach"). Our American society might have less racial issues if there were more "Lindsay Gottlieb's" living in it; if white privilege was acknowledged and utilized to help marginalized minorities. I agree with Gottlieb because being white comes with a privilege and a platform that has the ability to create change. Unfortunately, some of our American celebrities use their platform as a way to exercise their "racist freedom of speech" but as we've seen in Roseanne Barr, some actions result in consequences.

Roseanne Barr should've taken notes when Paula Deen lost her contract with the Food Network after she admitted to using racist language ("the n-word") back in 2013 (Dart, "Paula Deen Let Go"). On May 29th, the television sitcom "Roseanne", which was planning on being rebooted by ABC, was cancelled after the show's star called, a Black woman, Valerie Jarrett, a former White House administrator, "a combination of the Muslim Brotherhood and the 'Planet of the Apes'" ("Roseanne Barr", *CBS News*). Although this isn't supposedly the first time that Barr has made racial comments about Black women, this comment cost her show. Barr's comments, whom ABC Entertainment president, Channing Dungey, a Black woman, referred to as "abhorrent, repugnant, and inconsistent with the network's values", outweighed her apologies and put hundreds of people out of work ("Roseanne Barr", *CBS News*).

The racial incidents go on and on, there are more names and more situations, like Trayvon Martin's, that can be added to the list; and the honest to God truth is that it's not just Black people, Hispanics and Asians have also been victim to racial discrimination. However, one question that arises from these three incidents is "why do whites feel that it's acceptable to do what they did in each individual case?" However, the better question is what can we do as American citizens to stop racial injustice whenever possible? The answer begins with the conscious decision to communication and the desire to listen to the other person's, or a group of people's, point of view. David Beard suggests that when it comes to listening ethically, we often choose one or a combination of five decisions: "we have the choice to listen individually,

selectively, to not listen, to listen together or to listen to each other” (7). Nevertheless, what are we listening for (9)? We can start from the beginning with the individual’s perspective, what their concerns are, and how we can be of assistance. We as a society must listen rhetorically. Paula Tompkins defines rhetorical listening as “a communication practice for stimulating moral sensitivity that encourages communicators to recognize the existence of seen and unseen ‘others’ and to give weight to their humanity and interest to thrive” (69). An ideal society would be when we hold the best interests of our neighbor— whether Black, white, Hispanic, or Asian— above our own racial prejudices.

## CHAPTER 3. MOANA: SEXUAL ASSAULT, HEALING, AND MALE PRIVILEGE

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter revealed how socioeconomic status, race, and servitude functioned in Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) but also how white privilege is exercised in many racial incidents in the United States. However, our society doesn't just have racial issues, gender issues remain problematic as well. Whereas Black men and women have been victims of many forms of racial oppression, women in general have also been classed as inferior compared to men. Disney's film *Moana* (2016) made its mark as the first Disney princess film in which there was no inclusion of a romantic angle, however, some of the scenes from the film are problematic in how females are treated. The objective of this chapter is to discuss how gender functions in this latest Disney film, how Maui's assault of the island goddess, Te Fiti and Moana's role in promoting healing serve as a contemporary reading of the rape and sexual assault culture in American society. This chapter is structured similarly to the previous chapter; I will begin with a synopsis of the film followed by how the film was received by audiences. I will then conduct a profile analysis for Te Fiti, Moana, and Maui to demonstrate that this isn't just a film about self-discovery and restoring life to one's community. Finally, I will give examples of how Maui and Moana's dynamic relates to several American males views on sexual assault.

### 3.2 Film Synopsis

The film begins with the legend of the mother island goddess<sup>16</sup>, Te Fiti, being told by the 'village crazy lady,' the village chief's mother. Te Fiti gave the gift of islands to the world that was once only oceans, her power originating from her heart that had the power to create life. Her abilities made her vulnerable to those who desired to have the power themselves. As time passed, many attempted to steal the heart, and one day someone was successful; the thief's name was Maui, a demigod who had the ability to shapeshift into multiple animals with a magical fish-hook given to him by the gods. Attempting to escape with the heart, Maui was stopped by an evil, lava

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<sup>16</sup> Te Fiti is a goddess who also transforms into a physical island. When Moana and Maui mention restoring the heart, they are referring to the physical island not the actual human-form goddess.

monster named Te Kā, who guarded the island of Te Fiti. Te Kā struck Maui into the sky, leaving his magical fish-hook and the heart of Te Fiti to the fate of the dark oceans. A thousand years later, people are still looking for the Te Fiti's heart. After the village crazy lady finishes telling the story, the group of small village children begin to cry and panic all except Moana (the chief's daughter), who's interest in her grandmother's story makes her more curious about the ocean and the treasure it holds. The young Moana quietly leaves her father and grandmother, who start arguing about the legitimacy of the village legend, and escapes to the beach to play in the ocean.

As little Moana heads to the seas, she saves a baby turtle from being attacked by a group of hungry seagulls and helps it get back to the ocean. The mystic ocean then gives Moana a seashell, the heart of Te Fiti, and chooses her to help restore the heart of Te Fiti to the island goddess. Moana's father retrieves her from the beach and she accidentally drops the heart back into the ocean. Moana's father tells her that no one is allowed to go into the ocean, especially beyond the barrier reef and that she must focus now on becoming the next chief of the village. As she grows older and demonstrates her ability to handle chief-like responsibilities, a teenage Moana feels more connected now with the sea, having forgotten that the sea chose a young Moana, to restore the heart of Te Fiti. Moana's island, Motunui, is facing a blight amongst the fishing grounds and coconut trees and, unbeknownst to Moana, the island is slowly dying. Moana suggests uprooting the unhealthy trees, planting new coconut trees, and going beyond the reef in search of more fish but her father forbids the last suggestion, and states that the answer is not beyond the dangerous reef. Moana realizes that she must at least try and nearly drowns after attempting to sail beyond the reef.

After she shipwrecks, Moana's grandmother (the village crazy lady), teaches her an important lesson in discovering 'who she is' and 'where she comes from.' Moana learns that her people were voyagers but stopped once the heart of Te Fiti was stolen by Maui, the sea because too dangerous to venture beyond the reef. Once Maui stole the heart of Te Fiti, he triggered a curse that plagued the islands of their resources which is why Moana's island is dying— as more islands are established, the curse eventually destroys them. Her grandmother tells her that the only way to save the island is by finding Maui, delivering him to the island of Te Fiti, and him restoring the heart which Moana is then given by her grandmother, who was there the day the ocean chose Moana. In a last ditch effort to make her father understand, Moana approaches

the council with her plan to save the island. Once again, her father forbids the idea and upon the encouragement of her grandmother, whom has fallen fatally ill<sup>17</sup>, Moana leaves in pursuit of Maui. Moana's mother silently helps her pack for the journey, giving Moana her apprehensive but understanding approval.

Moana struggles with sailing the boat<sup>18</sup> of her ancestors, having no knowledge of how to way find, and asks the mystic ocean for help. Moana's voyage becomes even more complicated when she discovers that the village's idiotic rooster, Hei Hei, has boarded her boat and tries to jump overboard every opportunity he gets. However, against these odds, Moana is able to cross over the barrier reef. In response to asking the ocean for help, Moana gets caught in a strong thunderstorm, and the boat is washed up on the island that is inhabited by Maui, the demigod. Confusing Moana to be a crazed fan, he thanks her for thanking him for all he's given humans (coconut trees, power to create life itself, tides, fire, and wind) and then steals her boat. The ocean and Maui's sentiment tattoo, which holds him accountable ridicules Maui for leaving Moana stranded on the island. Moana is then restored to her stolen boat by the mystic ocean.

The pair set out to retrieve Maui's hook but not before being attacked by coconut pirates who attempt to steal the heart of Te Fiti. After defeating the pirates and retrieving the heart, Maui (become paralyzed by a blow dart) teaches Moana the basics of wayfinding and the next morning they reach the 'Realm of Monsters' where his hook is being held captive by a giant, materialistic crab named Tamatoa<sup>19</sup>. Moana acts as live bait while Maui retrieves the hook but he realizes that he's forgotten how to control his ability to shapeshift. Moana using a fake heart of Te Fiti, tricks the crab and they escape unharmed. An insecure Maui informs Moana that he was thrown into the sea by his mortal parents and that the gods found him and gave him his demigod abilities. Every tattoo that he has appeared after he earned them for completing some task. Moana reassures Maui that he can get his powers under control but he must be willing to practice and not give up. He agrees to practice his shapeshifting while teaching Moana how to way find. Their first attempt to defeat Te Kā fails and Maui's fish-hook is cracked<sup>20</sup>. Frustrated that Moana

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<sup>17</sup> It's indicated that Moana's grandmother knew that she was dying in that she was struggling with her breathing and she mentioned that when she dies she wants to "come back" as a stingray.

<sup>18</sup> Throughout the film, there are many phrases used including "canoe" and "boat" but "boat" was used most often.

<sup>19</sup> Tamatoa is a scavenging crab who's attracted to gold, shiny objects, and "one-of-a-kind" items.

<sup>20</sup> The plan was for Maui to shapeshift and restore the heart, leaving Moana to wait until he got back. Moana tries to get Maui through the barrier islands another way but Maui tells her it won't work and he was right. Te Kā cracks Maui's hook and damages the boat.

didn't follow his orders to turn back, and knowing that one more crack in his hook would result in losing his powers for good, Maui leaves Moana and tells her that the ocean made a mistake in choosing her to help restore the heart. Moana, sad and now alone, cries and tells the ocean to pick someone else to restore the heart— the ocean nonchalantly complies.

Suddenly, the spirit of Moana's grandmother appears and forces her to remember who she is and where her people came from. Moana realizes that she alone must complete the mission and fixes the damaged boat before heading to defeat Te Kā. Maui reappears to help her and they reverse tactics— Maui will distract Te Kā and give Moana an opening for her to restore the heart. As she reaches Te Fiti to restore the heart, Moana finds that the island has disappeared. Moana then discovers that when Maui stole the heart, Te Fiti transformed into Te Kā. Moana commands the ocean to let Te Kā pass and before Te Kā can destroy Moana, Moana tells Te Kā that this monster “isn't who she really is” and restores Te Kā's heart. The goddess Te Fiti is re-born; she restores the life of all the islands and gives Maui a new fish-hook<sup>21</sup> after he apologizes, before reforming into the island Te Fiti. Maui earns a new tattoo for helping Moana and the two part ways. Moana sails back home in a new boat<sup>22</sup> from Te Fiti and leads her people on their first voyage beyond the reef. The film ends with a shapeshifted Maui reconnected with Moana while on the voyage.

### 3.3 Reception of the Film

As described by James Mottram in his article on the reception of *Moana* (2016) similar to *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), the film was another “first” for Disney in that it was the first Disney animated film to be inspired by Polynesian culture (Mottram, “Reception for *Moana*”). Around 2011, Walt Disney directors began research for the next animated film and learned about the legend of Maui, a Polynesian demigod (Mottram, “Reception for *Moana*”). The directors were aware of the importance of collecting as much research as possible and began making trips to several Polynesian countries— specifically Tahiti and Fiji (Mottram, “Reception for *Moana*”). The film proved success bringing in more than \$400 million American dollars from the box offices and receiving many positive reviews (Mottram, “Reception for *Moana*”). Directors Musker and Clements felt that the trip to Polynesia was important in order to capture the

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<sup>21</sup> Maui's hook received another crack from Te Kā, this one destroying it in half.

<sup>22</sup> In the second attempt to defeat Te Kā, Moana's boat is destroyed into pieces.

authenticity of the culture and landscapes of the islands for the film while also avoiding as many stereotypes as possible. Musker stated, “There were cultural sensitivity questions [to consider] such as what was the village life like, how was the town set up? It’s not a documentary— and yet [we wanted to] acknowledge the truth of all the cultural issues and find a way to make those work together” (Mottram, “Reception for *Moana*”). The directors were careful to incorporate many aspects of Polynesian culture in the film— such as the connection that the Polynesian have with the water and the rope techniques used by Fijian fishermen. Nevertheless, the directors’ careful approach toward authenticity didn’t stop critics from giving negative feedback of the appearance of Maui prior to the release of the film.

According to the *New York Post*, despite the directors’ attempt to showcase Polynesian culture in a positive light, the portrayal of the demigod, Maui was offensive to the Polynesian in that Maui’s size but good nature was a reflection of Polynesia’s high obesity rates (“Why *Moana*”). One producer of the film, Osnat Shurer, comments that Maui is someone different for everyone— some idolize him “as a Superman, to others he’s a trickster” but in every account provided by islanders, Maui was described as being “larger than life” so it made sense to make design him as very muscular and strong (“Why *Moana*”, *New York Post*). One critic, Jenny Salesa, a member of Parliament from New Zealand, compared the appearance of Maui to that of a “half pig, half hippo” (Mottram, “Reception for *Moana*”). However, producers of the film defended their depiction of Maui by stating that several years were devoted to researching the demigod legend across many different villages and through the filmmakers’ research, they reaffirmed that the film’s portrayal of Maui merely reflects the “different impressions” that Pacific Islanders have of him, thus making the demigod Maui non-monolithic (“Why *Moana*”, *New York Post*). While there was some opposition to Maui’s physical appearance, others commend the film for its musical selections and anti-princess characterization of Moana.

Sara Stewart begins her article, “*Moana* Has Some of Disney’s Best Music Ever”, by stating that although Disney’s most recent female heroine has “royal lineage” she shouldn’t be referred to as “a princess” in any context. Stewart is intentional to comment the feminist banter between Moana and Maui when they first meet (“*Moana* Has”). Maui’s categorization of Moana as a princess is met with the clarification that “she is NOT a princess, she is the daughter of the chief” (Stewart, “*Moana* Has”). This clarification may seem insignificant to most viewers, but as Stewart points out “for little girls seeing themselves in a Disney heroine, words matter” (Stewart,

“*Moana* Has”). If words matter than lyrics must also matter as Stewart reflects on the musically selections of the film. The music of the film, although not as hypnotic as the film *Frozen*’s “Let It Go” as explained by Stewart, brought the story to life thanks to the musical stylings of *Hamilton* composer Lin-Manuel Miranda and the vocals of Jemaine Clement and native Samoan singers (Stewart, “*Moana* Has”). The most notable song from the film “How Far I’ll Go” is considered a “weak spot” for Stewart in that its repetitiveness weakens the integrity of the song. However, the song serves as an anthem in self-discovery and facing adversity which Moana encounters many times in the film.

As explained by Olivia Truffaut-Wong, in her article “What Does *Moana* Mean?” the name “Moana” translates for ocean or sea in Polynesian languages which is both ironic and symbolic of Moana’s time spent on the water in the film. The ocean in the film isn’t meant to provide as a barrier for Moana to overcome, although she does, but is a character itself in the film in that it guides her in the mission to restore the stolen heart of Te Fiti (Truffaut-Wong, “What Does *Moana* Mean?”). Truffaut-Wong states that audiences should “make no mistake, Moana might receive help from the ocean, but she’s a woman on a mission with or without boosts from her namesake”. Truffaut-Wong also agrees with Stewart that Moana is a Disney heroine, not a princess. She states that in spite of her young age, she is aware of her responsibility and prepared to lead her village as their next leader and that “no sweet prince or charming pauper is required” (“What Does *Moana* Mean?”). As mentioned previously, audiences may notice that *Moana* (2016) is the first Disney princess film where there’s no romantic angle introduced or discussion of marriage.

Alli Joseph explains that it’s easy to understand why many viewers loved the film so much: the film is revolutionizing in its positive representation of indigenous people and “she [Moana] doesn’t need a man...isn’t looking for one; she sails her own boat” (“*Moana*...Indigenous People Weigh In”). Joseph states that the representation of Pacific Islanders is important and that *Moana* (2016) has given many people of color a heroine that they can relate to culturally and ethically. A member of the Shinnecock Indian tribe, Nathaniel Dennis, stated that she became very emotional watching the film because the film stays true to many culturally beliefs such as “not forgetting who you are, where you come from, keeping with your traditions, and respecting the power of all our elements” (Joseph, “*Moana*...Indigenous People Weigh In”).

Joseph goes on the record by explaining that despite directors' efforts, that there lacked adequate consultation with islanders about their culture and that Disney purposely distorted the morals and traditions of Pacific Islanders for their own monetary gain. Kelsey Leonard, a Native American scholar and member of the Shinnecock tribe, stated that audiences should take the film's portrayal of indigenous people "with a grain of salt" because the film's script was written by a non-Pacific Islander. She continues by explaining that "if you do not know the oral history, are not from the islands, don't understand the diverse languages and groups of people then it would be unwise to declare the film an accurate portrayal" (Joseph, "*Moana...Indigenous People Weigh In*"). Disney also made mistakes in producing and selling Maui-inspired costumes which allowed children to temporarily have the skin tone and tattoos of the famous demigod, what most critics believed was another version of "blackface". However, Disney learned from this faux pas through public apology and removing the costume from the shelves (Joseph, "*Moana...Indigenous People Weigh In*").

According to Grandinetti, for Disney it's not about getting the culture 100% accurate, the fact that there is the opportunity to showcase cultural authenticity is what's important because that's good marketing ("*Moana Might Be Great*"). The year that *Moana* (2016) was released Disney had its grand-opening of the Aulani Resort in Oahu, Hawaii, ensuring that Hawaiian culture is the theme of the resort but that every measure was taken to respect "Hawaiian culture and tradition" (Grandinetti, "*Moana Might Be Great*"). The problem with this increase in tourism to Hawaii, says Grandinetti, is that the development of the resort "operates in direct opposition to the morals of *Moana*, whose people and island are facing the threat of ecological destruction". Grandinetti describes this economic expansion of Disney's as one component of its "carbon-intensive global tourism empire" which is contributing to Earth's environmental crisis ("*Moana Might Be Great*"). Results from a 2010 survey, orchestrated by Hawaii's tourism officials showed that "60% of native Hawaiian respondents felt that the tourism industry is detrimental to the survival of Hawaiian culture" (Grandinetti, "*Moana Might Be Great*"). In her explanation of the negative impact on Hawaiian culture, Grandinetti elaborates that:

Indeed, today (2017), guests of Aulani and other Ko Olina resorts are directed to human-made lagoons blasted out of living reefs that once fed generations of Kanaka Maoli families. They lounge by the pool, drinking mai tais served by the descendants of Maui, whom – they may be unaware – is not a creation of the Disney imagineers, but a revered

ancestor of many Kanaka Maoli. And all the while, just a short drive down the coast, a homeless encampment of more than 200 people, most native Hawaiian, continues to grow. (“*Moana* Might Be Great”)

Musker and Clements were determined to ensure that *Moana* (2016) wouldn’t cause historical and cultural offense, like the predecessor film *Pocahontas*, and thus enlisted the input of several of the film’s cast members, the majority of them being of Pacific Islander descent (Mottram, “Reception for *Moana*”). Dennis comments that no film is perfect and critics are always going to find something wrong with films that are historically and culturally rooted in other cultures but that regardless her daughter “left feeling empowered as she quoted lines from the movie...if nothing else, it was an indigenous woman determined to bring healing back to her people” (Joseph, “*Moana*...Indigenous People Weigh In”). The empowerment that Dennis is referring to is the very reason why *Moana* (2016) is so important for the society we are living in today, a society where women are rediscovering their voices and speaking out against injustices, elements that contribute to the foundation for this chapter.

### 3.4 Traditional Reading: Disney’s First Princesses and Women’s Rights

Disney has produced many strong and independent female protagonists throughout the last 25 years, however, regardless of the Disney princess’/heroines’ courage (like *Mulan*) or strong will (as seen in *Pocahontas*), the female heroine has yet to escape the necessity of the male sidekick (Bethmann 6). *Moana* may be the first Disney heroine to not engage in a romantic relationship, however, according to Bethmann, *Moana* (2016) still falls short in that a male sidekick is needed for the success of the heroine. As audiences many have already discovered, social media is one of the leading forces in the reaffirmation of gender stereotypes (6). Bethmann uses the term “gender” to reflect how individuals’ characteristics are established through their cultural backgrounds and interpersonal connections. She explains that the gender roles performed by individuals are constructed by society’s perception of what it means to be male and female—thus creating a binary gender normative. The Disney films featuring Disney heroines are usually “emotionally (romantically) connected to the prominent male character who ends up being the hero in the film” (7). The gender, therefore gender roles, of these characters are solidified through their body languages and the lines they recite in the film. Despite the various personality

complexes of what it means to be feminine in these films, the heroines are placed in patriarchal societies.

Bethmann explains that Disney's two contemporary, minority heroines (Tiana and Moana) represent new themes of self-sufficiency and self-fulfillment that we didn't see in with Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty (8). However, a commonality between Moana and Tiana is not just their oppression in the film but also that they still had to rely on someone else for their own success. The role of the male sidekick is usually to offer "support, comic relief, and even rescue the heroine" (8). As I will describe in the character analysis section, Maui provides all of these elements for Moana although his status as a demigod originally intended for Maui to be the hero, with Moana as his sidekick. However, the filmmakers stayed true to Walt Disney's characterization towards women— "emphasizing strength of character in pursuit of excellence" (Brode 168).

There has been a major shift in the role of the Disney princess from the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to the most-recent Disney heroine release of *Moana* (2016). In *Multiculturalism in Disney: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment*, Douglas Brode analyses the ways in which racial implications and gender characteristics have been executed by Disney filmmakers across various films and shorts produced by the Walt Disney Company. Beginning his discussion by responding to a racial concern, arising from a decision made by Disney, and criticism of the 1988 animated film *Oliver & Company*, Brode suggests that the very message of the film is one of the very problems that the late 20th century had yet to overcome. While critics like Marisa Penalta showed hostility to the film's use of dogs to portray people— she felt that "the Latino" represented in the film (as a Chihuahua dog) was stereotypical and racially insensitive— Brode defends Disney's choice by explaining that "all of the human characters in the film were recast as a specific dog breed", therefore, it's hard to argue that Latinos were specifically being "singled out" (3). One might agree that this decision to cast the Latino character as a Chihuahua dog was in poor taste, however, the larger lesson of the film is that our society is composed of several different groups of people who have different cultural backgrounds and traditions and if we want our society to run like a "well-oiled machine", we must acknowledge our society's diversity and accept the commonalities and differences (Brode 3).

The Disney Company has produced decades of animated films, some of which have been very successful, and with its popularity, Disney has reinforced what characteristics/traits are male and female and storylines in which women are often in a position of oppression or servitude (England et al 556). However, the oppression or servitude of Disney's princesses was nothing compared to the fight for women's rights— for the princesses, marriage seemed to be an escape from their problems.

The 1920s were revolutionary in our American history for many reasons, one being it marked the end of the first wave of feminism. Dicker's definition<sup>25</sup> of "feminism" states that "is the belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes as well as the movement organized around this belief" (4). However, Barbara Smith's definition of the term fills in the gaps by stating that "feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women — as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women" (Dicker 7). Prior to the 1920s, specifically during the 1830s and 1840s, there was an expectation that a just woman would oblige to "the four tenets<sup>26</sup>": "piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness" (21-22). Whereas the early Disney princess films portrayed marriage as the only chance of happiness, woman in the 19th and early 20th centuries knew that marriage was anything but "happily ever after". Once a woman was married, she virtually had no legal right to make any decisions concerning her wellbeing or that of her future children (22). Women were the "property" of their husbands in that they had to "take their husband's last name, they were no longer able to own property, have to relinquish their wages over to their husband" (22); and in the larger picture, women (married or single) didn't have the legal right to vote, and their access to higher education and employment opportunities was limited (30).

Beginning in the mid-19th century (1860s and 1870s) more colleges were admitting women for the upcoming academic semesters (43). The fight for women's right (especially suffrage) which began in the 1850s finally, after years of protest, saw success in 1918 when the House of Representatives passed the "Anthony Amendment", finally pointing women in the right

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<sup>25</sup> Dicker's definition originated from the American Heritage Dictionary.

<sup>26</sup> The concept of "the four tenets" was developed by a historian named Barbara Wetter. The woman who practiced each tenet was consider a just and proper woman.

direction to gain voting rights<sup>27</sup> (54). This new-found freedom of women, however, only applied to their rights to vote and employment opportunities; the 1920s was still oppressive towards women in terms of societal beauty standards (Brode 172). According to Brode, during this time in American history “women were not free not to be sexy”, they were subject to beauty standards created by men but upheld by the majority (172). In regards to Snow White, in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), one feminist commented in a 1968 pamphlet that concept of beauty is something that no woman can escape from and that every woman is expected to “take seriously” as we see in the evil Queen’s importance in being the “fairest (most beautiful) of them all” (172). Nevertheless, true beauty, according to Disney’s doctrine, can be found in a person’s heart and character because the physical appearance of a person can only be judged individually (173).

The character of Snow White exemplifies beauty but she isn’t the fairest because of her appearance but because of how she positively impacted the lives of the dwarfs. Prior to her arrival, the dwarfs lived in a filthy home (the inside of the house was dirty with unmade beds and filled with dirty laundry) and they practiced unsanitary habits (such as eating with unclean hands after working in the diamond mines all day). Walt Disney would agree that if we saw our world like that of Snow White’s then “the world qualifies as a mess until a right-minded woman takes charge” (175). Though she does cook and clean for the dwarfs, she does so in exchange for her stay there which is her suggestion, she is not in a position of servitude to the dwarfs (177). However, Snow White’s oppression is similar to that of Cinderella’s— the famous scenario of stepmother who’s envious of her stepdaughter. Cinderella<sup>28</sup> is forced into servitude by her stepmother and stepsisters who frequently take advantage of her and are threatened by her beauty and kind nature. As we discussed in the previous chapter, Tiana was in a position of servitude that was racially charged by Charlotte’s whiteness. What we see in *Moana* (2016), is not gender servitude but gender oppression: yes Moana and Maui do challenge traditional gender roles in many ways but Moana is placed in an inferior position for the majority of the film. What I am arguing is that Moana is the victim of Maui’s gender privilege because she is a woman but also because he is a demigod.

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<sup>27</sup> Women legally had the right to vote beginning in 1920 when the Senate passed the Amendment, a year and a half later after the House of Representatives passed it.

<sup>28</sup> *Cinderella* was released in 1950 by Walt Disney Studios. It tells the story of a young woman who is mistreated by her stepmother and stepsisters and is forced to serve them hand-and-foot. In disguise, with the help of a fairy godmother, she attends the royal ball and falls in love with the prince, unbeknownst to her.

We can't blame the Disney Company for producing princesses who aspired to get married, or fall in love, because the majority of women from the 1930s to the 1950s still practiced traditional roles as homemakers and submitting to their breadwinning husbands. We can only appreciate that the Disney Company has continued to reflect the evolutions of our society and social culture and has recently produced contemporary heroines with complex storylines that reflect how far women's rights have come since the late 19th century. In 2016, Disney released the film *Moana* (2016) which seemed to show great strides and progress for Disney. It's important that we have an understanding of the Disney princesses from the early 20th century in order to truly appreciate the types of heroines Disney is producing in our postmodern society.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned how *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) marked another first for Disney in that it finally gave viewers a Black princess. Unfortunately, many Black mothers from Moffitt and Harris' study didn't appreciate that the first Black Disney princess had to work so hard unlike Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. Tiana's goals are commendable by serving Charlotte's whiteness reinforcing racial hierarchy utilized in the 19th century. The inferiority in *Moana* (2016) is not based on Moana being Polynesian, nor is the story really about Moana's inferiority as human and female, in comparison to Maui. As I will demonstrate in the next section, a contemporary read of the film *Moana* (2016) centers on how a human girl can help restore peace and heal an assault victim, name Te Fiti.

### 3.5 Contemporary Reading: *Moana* (2016) and Sexual Assault

She was one of a kind, beautiful, and generous with a smile that can brighten the sun. She spent her life giving life to those around sourced from her heart, a priceless treasure. She guarded her heart as best she could but envy and greed can be a powerful thing. He found her, crept into the sacred space of her being, and extracted her heart with his phallic staff (Streiff and Dundes, 2). She was stripped of her dignity, robbed of her heart, and raped of her power to create life. This is not a woman that was sexually assaulted by a man in American society, though it happens more than we know, but rather the goddess Te Fiti, the mother island in the Disney film *Moana* (2016). Te Fiti was victim of sexual assault and the consequences of said assault serves as the plotline for the film. This contemporary reading of *Moana* (2016) will discuss sexual assault and gender privilege in the film and how the film can serve as a testament to the importance of

healing for sexual assault victims. I will begin by discussing the characters of Te Fiti, Moana, and Maui and how this film can help facilitate the discussion of rape culture in America.

### 3.5.1 Sexually Assaulted, Goddess

Do Rozario's article "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess" discusses the functions of the Disney princesses from the different developing eras. Had Walt Disney be alive to oversee this film, chances are that Te Kā served as the film's *femme fatale*: "a female character who wants to rule the kingdom for herself" (43). However, what we know about Te Kā is that she isn't a villainess because she wants to be one but rather her heart was taken from her. As mentioned in the film synopsis, the story begins with the reciting of the island's origin legend. The goddess Te Fiti has given birth to the surrounding islands and has the ability to create life meaning islands, foliage, flowers, animals, trees, and even humans. Strieff and Dundes argue that the "egg-shaped" heart "links sex with love for women" and that Maui's actions transformation into a hawk was metaphoric of a raptor, the Latin meaning being "rape" (2-3). Te Fiti is the epitome of a "Mother Nature's" physical appearance: she is covered in moss and wears a crown of flowers. When compared to Moana, Te Fiti has similar facial features including a round nose, full lips, arched eyebrows, long hair and big, round, green eyes. The legend continues that as soon as Maui extracted Te Fiti of her heart, that the goddess' island body begins to deteriorate: the plants die and the island is covered in dark, black ash. What Maui failed to realize was that his rape of Te Fiti's heart birthed a devilish, lava monster named Te Kā but this "monster" was merely a heartbroken and depressed Te Fiti. Strieff and Dundes suggest that Te Kā's anger about her assault was justified but that "being vengeful, hurting innocent people, and the destroying botanical life" was out of the sphere of reasonability (8). However, Griffith is able to capture the essence of Te Kā in two words: "stolen-hearted goddess" (38). For centuries, Te Fiti was "heart-stolen" and the longer she went without the heart the more islands began to die (38).

Te Kā is so many of us who experience trauma. We don't always express our pain through tears and sadness. Often, we express it through anger. We are fire and brimstone, and we lash out against those who hurt us and sometimes those who are there to help us. The abuses we suffer are never an excuse to abuse others, but sometimes we temporarily turn into lava demons. ("Moana: Healing", *The Color Carmine*)

According to Meera Senthilingam, as of 2017 65% “of all women surveyed had experienced some form of street harassment” in the United States; and it’s estimated that “one in four women will be sexually assaulted during their lifetime in North America (“Sexual Harassment”). Disney’s depiction of Te Fiti/Te Kā can be read as a contemporary representation of how many assault victims may feel before and after they are assaulted: when someone violates you in a way they take your dignity (Te Fiti’s heart) and the victim often becomes enraged towards everyone around them and begin to behave like someone they aren’t. When the heart is restored to Te Kā, by Moana, she transforms back into herself (Te Fiti) and the darkness on every island dissipates, Motuni’s resources— fish and coconut trees— are restored and the ocean is now safe for voyaging. Te Fiti’s transformation testifies that healing after sexual assault is possible and also beneficial for the victim and loved ones around the victim. The reality is, sexual assault and the rape culture is still prevalent in our society today.

According to Meera Senthilingam, as of 2017 65% “of all women surveyed had experienced some form of street harassment” in the United States; and it’s estimated that “one in four women will be sexually assaulted during their lifetime in North America (“Sexual Harassment”). Jennifer Truman and Rachel Morgan, two statisticians from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, reported that in 2015 over five million people reported an incident of rape or sexual assault; and an additional one million reported incidents of domestic violence (2). However, nearly 9.5 out of 1,000 incidents of rape or sexual assault was not reported by police. In 2016, only 22.9 percent of all rape and sexual assault incidents (323,450) were reported (Morgan and Kena, 7). The fact that a potential one million incidents of sexual assault went unreported is a sad reality in this country. As I think about my own experience speaking to victims of assault, there are many reasons why they don’t report it: they know the person and are afraid of the consequences of reporting them; they blame themselves for what happened to them, or they are worried that either no one will believe them or they don’t know how to bring up the conversation. I wouldn’t go so far as to suggest that more ‘Moanas’ would stop sexual assault but if it does happen, having some sympathize/empathize you can be a good first step in the journey to recovery

### 3.5.2 Healing Facilitator, Human Chieftess

Based on the results of the study conducted by England et al., many of the princesses including our heroine Moana, portrayed a combination of masculine and feminine traits, including:

“affectionate, assertive, fearful, athletic, being a leader, helpful, and performing a rescue” and she used many of these to facilitate peace and healing for the assaulted, Te Fiti (560). There were many occurrences in the film where Maui, and even Moana herself, questioned why the ocean chose her to help restore the heart of Te Fiti. The short answer being, because Moana is qualified to do so. The more detailed explanation, as discussed in this subsection, is that Moana proved herself to be a restorer and a healer since she was a little girl and between her kind nature and Maui’s powers, the heart was destined to be restored.

From the story Moana’s grandmother tells her at the beginning of the film, humans are indebted to a supernatural goddess and are forced by evil, supernatural beings to remain on islands rather than live their lives as voyagers. The beginning of the film, also reveals just how strong the ocean is compared to the humans— the ocean can divide itself, can carry Moana back to land, etc. Supernatural females are characterized as powerful and giving (like Te Fiti) but also frightening and enraged (Te Kā) while human females perform the stereotypical jobs like harvesting crops, sewing, and caring for the children. For Moana, her character’s story is based on “self-discovery and self-rule rather than isn’t dictated by masculine or feminine roles” (Do Rozario 51). However, Moana’s privilege as the chief’s daughter makes her a servant of her people; and although she isn’t performing traditional “women’s work” of collecting coconuts and weaving baskets, she proves herself as helpful by performing more “masculine jobs” like climbing on top of roofs to fix leaks and overseeing the fisherman’s activities. Whereas Moana’s father has traditional practices of leading the island, Moana’s character is meant to overthrow that tradition (53). Tóth describes Moana as a leader that is respected by the whole village and whose wisdom is evident in the people’s reliance on her opinion (196). One prime example is of her defense of Hei Hei, the idiotic rooster, who one villager wants to cook. Moana defends Hei Hei by saying that “we all have our talents and for some of us like Hei Hei, the talents lie beneath the surface.” Moana’s kind nature is not something she is taught by her parents but something that she learns on her own. This kind nature is the reason the ocean chose her to restore the heart, because she herself is a restorer of love and kindness.

If you recall Moana’s first interaction with the ocean, it is shortly after her grandmother tells a group of toddlers the story of how the islands were formed. Although the story ends with the fact that their island will one day be devoured by a darkness, Moana’s inquisitive nature draws her to the sea. While the toddler, Moana is playing with a seashell on the beach she notices

that a pack of birds are hovering a defenseless, baby turtle. Shielding the turtle with a palm leaf and chasing the birds away, Moana restores the baby turtle back to its home in the ocean. Once the ocean realizes that Moana also isn't afraid of the sea, it bestows her with the heart of Te Fiti with hopes that she will restore it. This isn't the first instance in which Moana restores something to its proper place: she restores the boats of her ancestors back into the water; she reunites Maui with his fishhook; she restores Maui's confidence in himself to control his powers; she is the one that restores Te Fiti/Te Kā's heart thus restoring life to her island. Though Moana's mission in the film was to restore the heart and heal Te Fiti's pain, Moana learned a lot about herself as a future leader.

She learns that even as chieftess, the decisions she makes will affect everyone but that sometimes making the best decisions won't win the approval of everyone. We see this in the scene where Moana's persistently suggests that going beyond the reef will be the key to solving the islands issues of dying coconut trees and absence of fish. She learned that as a good leader, she will have to be assertive, an example being when she recites the "I am Moana of Motunui. You will board my boat, sail across the ocean, and restore the heart of Te Fiti" mantra. If we break down those lines we see three components: ownership, authority, and bestowment. The first line is Moana taking ownership in who she is and acknowledging her origins. When she says that Maui "will board her boat and sail across the ocean" she is enacting her authority and assertiveness of the expedition. However the very last line, "restore the heart of Te Fiti", insinuates that Maui will be the hero of our story and until the end of the film Maui was the hero. However, the greatest lesson that Moana seemed to learn is that she has the strength and ability to be successful as a chieftess. Moana is a daughter, a chieftess, a restorer of healing but what she isn't is some demigod's sidekick.

Whereas Maui's method of restoring the heart included a full-on battle with Te Kā, Moana's approach was the epitome of femininity: the ability to communicate and inspire peace by reassuring Te Kā that this isn't who she is and asking her to "remember her true self" (Streiff and Dundes, 8).

It takes women to heal women, not just because of the violence men represent, but because of their failure, or inability, or refusal to see our trauma and the toll it takes on us. It takes women to heal women because women *see* women. ("Moana: Healing", *The Color Carmine*)

Maui was the perpetrator, he assaulted Te Fiti and has, unbeknownst to him, birthed Te Fiti's darkness. When the ocean chose Moana, she didn't realize that it chose her to restore the heart but thought her job was to deliver the male who assaulted Te Fiti (Tóth 196). It's natural that Te Kā would be hesitant to Moana at first but what Moana did, that Maui didn't do, was allow her to come and face her. The most memorable scenes of the film was when Moana, realizing that Te Kā was the enraged and violated Te Fiti, asked the ocean for the parting of the ocean so Te Kā could approach her (197). Te Kā could have blasted lava at Moana and retrieved her heart but what I think Te Kā wanted was for someone to understand her pain, understand that this monster isn't who she is, and to restore what's been taken from her— her peace, her dignity, and her heart (Griffith 39). Moana's character embodies strength, persistence, and is a testament that sometimes healing begins by allowing a sympathetic person facilitate the journey of healing.

### 3.5.3 Destructive, Insecure Demigod

When comparing Maui's traits to the other princes from England et al.'s study, I noticed that there were conflicting results between the attributes demonstrated by the princes in the study and those portrayed by Maui in this film<sup>29</sup>. The princes of England's et al. study "showed emotion, were affectionate, physically strong, assertive, and athletic" but they were rarely "concerned with tending to their physical appearance, ashamed, or collapsing to cry" (560). However, our first impression of Maui is that he is egotistical, judgmental, discouraging, and aggressive. Based on the legend of how the island of Motunui was formed, at the beginning of the film, viewers are persuaded to believe that Maui is a selfish demigod who although grateful in his gifts to the humans, possessing the ability to do so from the heart he stole from Te Fiti, is perceived as: "warrior, trickster, and shapeshifter". Maui's actions resulted in the curse and death of many islands across the ocean, including the slow death of Moana's island, Motunui. Maui's character is more than just a character, he represents the "hyper masculinity that [American] society rewards" (Streiff and Dundes, 2). This section will discuss Maui's obsession with his fishhook (masculinity) and the ways in which his male privilege allows him to justify his assault of Te Fiti.

The fishhook used by Maui is considered a phallic symbol of the hyper masculinity that his character exhibits in the film (3). When Maui and Moana first meet, he's very judgmental of Moana: he doesn't understand why the ocean chose her to restore the heart; and he assumes that

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<sup>29</sup> Maui is a demigod in the film but his character occupies the same space that many of the princes do.

she is just a “princess” who would be better off “kissing babies”. From the very beginning, Maui was just using Moana, by trapping her in a cave and stealing her boat, so he could reclaim his lost fishhook from a treasure, scavenging crab named Tamatoa (3). The fishhook of Maui is a prized possession by him and the crab, Tamatoa who views it as a prize despite the fact that it’s not very shiny compared to his other treasures (3). As Maui and Moana enter the cave of Tamatoa, the fishhook is positioned on Tamatoa’s shell, in an upright position with the handle exposed, similar to a depiction of the “sword in the stone”. Once Maui reclaims his hook, he “kisses it, and taunts Tamatoa with a feminizing greeting” (5). However, Maui is unable to get his shapeshifting powers under control and Tamatoa insults him for his “small size” and the fact that his weapon isn’t “hard enough” to overpower him (5). The cracking of the fishhook symbolizes the male castration because as Maui states “without his hook, he is nothing” (4). The emasculated Maui must be saved by Moana’s feminine intuition of distracting Tamatoa with a fake “heart of creation (6). Once the pair escape, an insecure Maui thanks Moana for saving his life but says that without his ability to shapeshift, they can’t defeat Te Kā. Maui’s masculinity in this film puts him in a position of authority and disregards any concept of Moana being able to solve their problems.

On five occasions, Moana had to use flattery and compliments to get Maui to comply or to encourage him to practice his shapeshifting abilities. Maui’s struggle with shapeshifting, according to Streiff and Dundes, is symbolic of “a male’s performance anxiety” which is a defining feature in what it means to be a demigod in this film (Maui’s comment of “no hook, no powers”) (4). One of the themes of this film is about learning about one’s self and overcoming the insecurities of the self. For Maui, his status as a demigod and his insecurities with not being a shapeshifter originate from being abandoned by his parents.

If not being able to save Moana from a carnivorous crab by shapeshifting wasn’t already emasculating for Maui, Tamatoa revealing that Maui tries to impress humans because his own parents didn’t want him sealed the deal. The underlying motive behind this entire story is the fact that the gods had sympathy for Maui and transformed him into a demigod after his parents threw him into the ocean. The fact that his parents didn’t want him, fueled much of his insecurities and with the ability to shapeshift, he sought out the praises and respect of the humans. When Moana reaches his island, he thinks that Moana has arrived to get the autograph of the great “Maui, shapeshifter, demigod of the wind and sea, hero of men and women”. Moana tries to explain to

him that she wasn't looking for him because she's his biggest fan but rather because she needs him to restore the heart of Te Fiti. Instead of taking her seriously, he breaks out into a song called "You're Welcome", in which he explains that humans should be thanking him for everything he has given them (the heart so they can have the power to create, the tides, the sun, coconut trees, fire, etc.). He justifies that he stole the heart of Te Fiti to give the power of creation to humans but audiences know that he stole the heart so humans would continue to love him. Maui represents those men who think the only way they can earn love and respect is by the gifts he presents, not recognizing that he hurt others along the way.

However, in the end, Maui assists Moana in restoring the heart and even after his fishhook is destroyed by Te Kā, he puts his life at risk so Moana can reach the spiral (where the heart should be positioned). Once Moana succeeds at facilitating peace and healing, Maui apologizes to Te Fiti for assaulting her and she shows her acceptance of his apology by presenting him with a new fishhook. This reinstating of masculinity (the fishhook) and the rebirth of procreation (the heart) symbolize that Moana's world has reached equilibrium while also insinuating that "while women think with their hearts, men like Maui think with their fishhooks" (9). Maui feels he's entitled to praise and respect from the humans because of the resources he gave them and the fact that he's a demigod with a big fishhook. Unfortunately, in regards to the discussion on sexual assault, there are several men in America who feel entitled to sex from women whether the woman wants it or not. Michael Kimmel discusses men's targeting of women in his book *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*.

### 3.6 Contemporary Social Issue: "me too." Movement and the Brock Turner's of America

If you visit the "me too." website, one of the first things you might notice is the white text on the black background that says "17.7 million women have reported a sexual assault since 1998" ("me too."). So many women for two decades have been disrespected, violated, and have become a statistics but thankfully for organizations like the "me too." movement, women are feeling more empowered to share their stories with the world. The goal of the movement is "to reframe and expand the global conversation around sexual violence to speak to the needs of a broader spectrum of survivors" ("me too."). With nearly 328 million, alone, living in our country today, it's necessary to have conversations about sexual violence and how to possibly prevent incidents from occurring ("U.S. and World Population Clock", *United States Census Bureau*). Although

nearly 2.79 million men (since 1998) have been victims of sexual assault, “one out of every 10 rape victims are male” (“Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics”, *Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network*). In the fight for social change, one conversation that needs to be discussed is the issue of male privilege in the United States.

Kimmel begins his chapter “Targeting Women” by giving readers the account of the horrific incident that took place on August 4, 2009 by George Sodini (169). Sodini, who had become so frustrated with the fact that he had no female companionship, let alone a regular sexual intercourse lifestyle, decided to take his anger out on a group of women during an aerobics class at his locale gym (169). His weapon of choice: a firearm; casualties: “12 women injured, five died”; and the aftermath: he then committed suicide in the same gym. Sodini’s frustration towards women in general, as Kimmel describes it, is that Sodini “felt entitled” to be adorned by women, for women to want to date him and have sex with him; he felt that his male privilege entitled him to sex (170). The most shocking revelation about this scenario is not just what Sodini did but the fact that several men agreed with him and considered him their “hero” (172). On several blogs that were created to bring awareness to “men’s rights”, some of the comments, which are very disturbing [trigger warning], included:

Finally a mass murder writes a relatively coherent manifesto. Could be better, but at least it is implied that feminism is to blame and he is taking a last stand... Women have to accept this incident as a tax on their freeloading... What amuses me is how the women of this country and the West don’t realize the role they have in creating men like Sodini... A decent looking man who earns a good living and does not abuse women DESERVES to get laid. (172)

The intent of including these abominable comments is not to offend but rather to bring awareness that, although we don’t know the men who wrote these posts, there are many men in our country who have beliefs similar to Sodini and it doesn’t matter the race, age, or socioeconomic status. Male privilege comes in many forms including the belief that men are entitled to sex.

In 2016, Brock Turner, a student of Stanford University, was found guilty of “sexually assaulting an unconscious woman” (Sanchez, “Stanford Rape Case”). What caused a national uproar was not just the case but the fact that the judge only sentenced Turner to six-months in jail and he only served half of said sentence (Koren, “Why the Stanford Judge”). When asked about his decision of the lenient sentence, Judge Persky stated that he believed Turner who stated that

the sexual act was consensual and that too long of a sentence “would have a ‘severe impact’ on Turner” (Koren, “Why the Stanford Judge”). Koren states than many believe that Turner’s “sentence” was cut short on the grounds that he is a white man and because he was an impeccable athlete at Stanford University. Turner may have gotten a light sentence because of his race, gender, and educational background but as we learned from the Bill Cosby case, you can have all of the money and prestige your heart desires but when you repeatedly assault multiple women, one of them is bound to reveal the truth and your crimes will not be swept under a rug.

Yet that was exactly what Bill Cosby tried to do— this past April, Cosby was found guilty of “drugging and sexually assaulting a woman back in 2004” (Bowley and Hurdle, “Bill Cosby Is Found”). Why wasn’t Cosby charged and tried then? According to Bowley, there was a debate on whether or not the encounter was consensual and even after Andrea Constand decides to press charges against Cosby (a year later), they ended up settling in court with Cosby paying Constand over \$3 million dollars (“Bill Cosby Criminal Case”). A whole nine years later pass, and once again another woman, Hannibal Buress, is stating that she was sexually assaulted by Bill Cosby and this time she is joined by over 40 additional women (Bowley, “Bill Cosby Criminal Case”). By the time Cosby is arrested in 2015, tried in 2017, and retried in 2018, over 50 woman had accused Cosby of sexual assault but he is only found guilty of assaulting Constand (Bowley, “Bill Cosby Criminal Case”). As the country anxiously awaits for the sentencing of “America’s Dad”, one can only question whether or not Cosby will receive a lighter sentence (he could receive a maximum 10 year sentence) because of he’s 80 years old or if the court won’t show him leniency because he admitted to the use of pills (Bowley and Hurdle, “Bill Cosby Is Found”). Both Turner and Cosby argued that their actions for which they were ultimately sentenced for were consensual, however, Kimmel would argue that these men assaulted their victims “not because their power over the women was intact and unthreatened but because they felt entitled for these women to appease their sexual desires” (183).

Interestingly enough, John Lasseter, an executive producer at Disney Animation Studios and Pixar Animation Studios, who served as executive producer of both *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Moana* (2016), has been on sabbatical since November 2011 for “missteps” towards female employees (Barnes, “Pixar Co-Founder”). These “missteps” manifested in the form of excessive grouping and hugging for which many of Lasseter’s supporters feel isn’t

plausible enough for him to lose his job. Despite his public apology, Disney is allowing Lasseter to complete the year as a company consultant but he is reportedly leaving on his own free will (Barnes, “Pixar Co-Founder”). Tompkins states that when rhetorical listening is effective those “unseen ‘others’” are given a voice to express their own interests and that through these type of intentional conversations that the majority learn how to accept that their voice isn’t the only meaningful one (70). As I’ll explain in the succeeding chapter, those “unseen ‘others’” have the opportunity to be heard due to social media and social movements like #BlackLivesMatter and “me too.” but now are allies we must be in a position to practice co-cultural communication and rhetorical listening.

## CHAPTER 4. HOW FAR SHOULD WE GO: THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AMERICA

“I have crossed the horizon to find you. I know your name. They have stolen the heart from inside you. But this does not define you. This is not who you are. You know who you are”

(*Moana (2016)* Lyrics, “I Know Who You Are”).

### 4.1 Introduction

The aforementioned lyrics are recited by Moana as she’s about to encounter the ferocious lava monster, Te Kā at the end of the “battle scene”. Moana’s preconceived notions of Te Kā produced misunderstanding of Te Kā’s character and the source of her rage. In this song, Moana is communicating with Te Kā that: she has been searching for her (“I have crossed the horizon to find you.”); she knows of Te Kā’s name and the legend of how she came into being (“I know your name.”); despite knowing the legend, she didn’t understand the severity of Te Kā’s pain (“They have stolen the heart from inside you.”); that regardless of the evil Maui did, this dark transformation of Te Kā doesn’t define who she is as a person nor are her feelings invalid (“But this does not define you.”); that healing is still possible after centuries of suffering alone, isolated, and trapped in the middle of the ocean (“This is not who you are.”); and that Te Kā knows deep inside who she is and with the restoration of her heart, she can find herself again (“You know who you are.”). Moana’s dialogue in this point in the film is a great example of what it means to execute communication— she learned a misinterpreted narrative, discovered the truth, and then through this truth she made the decision to have sympathy and demonstrate her sympathy which helped in Te Kā’s healing. This is exactly the type of communication that’s needed in developing a dialogue between dominant and co-cultural groups.

### 4.2 *The Princess and the Frog* (2009): Misconceptions and Co-cultural Communication

The initial and contemporary readings of Disney’s *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) served several purposes, the first being that the film made Disney history in having a Black woman as the main protagonist. Although the film was staged in a Jim Crow South, this was beneficial in my discussion of how the film was received by Black women in Moffitt and Harris’ study. The

study was vital in that the concerns of some members of the Black community were given a voice to express their feelings about a film that was both monumental and problematic. By conducting a contemporary reading of the film, readers were able to see how some of the concepts of the film (white privilege, racial ambiguity, and servitude) remain relevant in the larger societal problem of racial profiling, perception, and miscommunication in America. I concluded chapter two by stating how racial prejudice and racial profiling aren't just products of racism but rather they also can stem from negative perception and miscommunication that is often fueled by how minorities are portrayed in the media and American history.

Communication is a double-edged sword in that it can solve problems but not knowing how to one should execute communication can cause the problems. Christopher Lebron explains that although Blacks aren't the only marginalized group of individuals in America, Blacks "have suffered the widest, deepest, and most murderous inequality for the longest stretch of our nation's history, with the exception of Native Americans" (127-128). If this is so, then how can we expect communication to be a solution to racial profiling in America after centuries of trying to establish peace? Sirry Alang published an article in 2017 about steps Americans can take in disassembling the components of racism and ways that might help in preventing police brutality.

1) support calls for more collaboration and partnerships among communities, researchers, policymakers and law enforcement systems; 2) learn about how structural racism and white supremacy operate within institutions, policies and laws; 3) evaluate whether policies and laws have unintentional negative consequences for people of color; and evaluate whether they disproportionately benefit white people; 4) advocate for and support criminal justice reform, like the decriminalization of behaviors such as loitering and minor traffic violations and ending stop-and-frisk; 5) support movements like Black Lives Matter that raise awareness of police brutality, and help expose and dismantle structural racism; and 6) remember those who have lost their lives because of racial profiling. (Alang, "How to Dismantle")

Alang's suggestions are a great start to disassembling racism because, like mentioned, racial justice isn't just about supporting the oppressed group(s) but also learning about how white privilege and dominance have influenced racism in America ("How to Dismantle"). Another good suggestion of Alang's is evaluating one's own privilege, the opportunities available for

others and how different groups of people benefit differently from our country's laws ("How to Dismantle"). However, one thing I will argue about Alang's steps of allegiance and prevention is that everything seems very one-sided and by that I mean, there doesn't seem to be the opportunity for communication to happen between, in this case, Blacks and whites. Alexander states that regardless of how uncomfortable the conversation might be, whites need to participate in the discussion of race (238).

Lebron says that whenever we get word of an incident involving a white police officer who killed an unarmed Black person, in most cases they are male, many members of the Black community respond by belittling the criminal justice system (police) in America which is deemed "un-American" (131). I agree with the consulting knowledge of Martinelli who, in addition to his development of policing programs in the United States, states that the issue with our criminal justice system is that it's "not a police problem but a municipal government problem"(71). My opinion is that the issue is a combination of miscommunication, ignorance, and inaccurate narratives portrayed in the media (Bell xv). As demonstrated in chapter two, several racial incidents occur on an individual basis but I think this is exactly where we need to start in dismantling racism in America. In order to execute communication, one must: have background knowledge of every participant in the discussion; know the role each participant plays in the conversation, and how the conversation should be facilitated. In the discussion of racism in America, Bell's discussion on co-cultural communication provides insight into concerns that whites have about Blacks and how Blacks and whites can both contribute to the interracial conversation. Nonetheless, good communication begins knowing the role you play in the conversation.

Gina Bell begins her discussion on the difficulty of co-cultural communication by stating that one of the reasons we find communication difficult is because we don't fully comprehend the person's identity (xv). When we try to communicate without background information of who they are and how they are marginalized, we are often unaware that we might have privilege which could hinder us from being effective communicators. On the conversation of race, white people have the ability to "opt-out" of any type of conversation dealing with racism and racial prejudice because whiteness is the norm in our society (3). The intentional decision of "opting out", or averting the conversation, is the communicative practice known as "averting controversy": this practice is exhibited by an individual from the dominant group when a

“controversial” topic, such as racism, threatens to cause friction, therefore, the individual chooses to “deflect communication in another direction” (Orbe 56). However, Blacks don’t have that option and are constantly reminded of their inferiority in newspapers, on television, and in film (Bell 3). As members of the race conversation, both Blacks and whites have the ability to speak and listen to one another’s concerns and curiosities but each group plays a role.

Blacks are members of what Mark Orbe refers to as the “co-cultural group”; this term is used by Orbe to specify the marginalized groups in American society without highlighted an inferior status (2). Whites play the role of the dominant group because of whites gained control of the majority of institutions— “political, corporate, religious, and legal” (2). Our nation’s history has shown us that when one group of people dominate the aforementioned institutions, then every co-cultural group has become disempowered (Bell 45). As I stated in the previous chapters, listening to another’s perspective rhetorically acknowledges that co-cultural groups exist and that their voice is just as vital to the success of society as the dominant’s (Tompkins 61). Bell explains that when Blacks are excluded from the discussion of race relations, between Black and white communities, it becomes even difficult to determine why whites and Blacks can’t communicate (49). According to Lebron, discussions on racial prejudice occur frequently in our society but one conversation that doesn’t happen enough is how our understanding of whites’ perception of Blacks be helpful in dissolving racial prejudice (135). “How do white Americans imagine the kind of lives Blacks aspire toward and the habits they employ in their everyday dealings? Do white Americans have a decent sense of how Blacks see American society?” (136). The answer to Lebron’s questions are the same, “the perceptions that some whites have of Blacks deter them from wanting to learn more about the interests of Blacks”.

The fact of the matter is there are a nice portion of white people who are intimidated and afraid of Black people because of the perception they have (Bell 61). These perceptions include, but are not limited to, that Blacks are: “violent, criminal, deadbeat drunks, drug addicts, unable to control sexually, are financially unstable, and uneducated” (62). Nonetheless, Bell explains that just how Blacks have a voice and rely on organizations such as #BlackLivesMatter to voice their frustration, some whites also have their opinions of Black people and Black culture that are frustrating for them.

In 2016 Bell conducted a study where she interviewed 60 people to get their viewpoints on communication between Blacks and whites<sup>30</sup> and chapter seven of the book focuses on the top beliefs that white people had about the Black community<sup>31</sup> (105). The first is that many of the white participants felt “that Black people assume all white people are racist” which is part of the reason why race relations are experiencing some strife (105). Several of the interviewees gave testimonies of their personal experiences which revealed that similar to whites having negative perceptions of Black people, Black people are also guilty of stereotyping all whites as racist which caused many whites to feel uncomfortable around Blacks (106). Although usually practiced by co-cultural groups, this discomfort may cause members from the dominant group to purposely create barriers in order to avoid interactions with members of the co-cultural group, a communicative practice called “maintaining interpersonal barriers” (Orbe 57). The second belief stated by whites is that they believe we’ve passed a point where Blacks in today’s society should receive reparations from slavery (Bell 107).

The argument commonly made by whites is that “their ancestors never owned slaves” while Blacks argues that “hundreds of years’ worth of free labor, which directly benefited the ancestors of some white people today, deserves reparations” (108-109). Bell argues that despite that arguments of whites, in reality based on the history of slavery in America, Blacks are owed more than anything the United States could currently offer today (110). The third and fourth beliefs are that Black people use the fact that they are Black as a form of defense (“the race card”) and the racism in America is improving if not disappearing, respectively (110-111). I would argue that “playing the race card” is actually acceptable at times, not because it’s an excuse but depending on the situation the fact that someone is Black could be the reason behind why they aren’t included in certain conversations or they don’t have similar experiences. When Blacks “play the race card” more often than not they are doing so for personal gain or self-improvement which Orbe would refer to as “manipulating stereotypes”. Every belief that the white participants had about Blacks are stereotypes, because not all Black people have the same beliefs, and by manipulating this stereotype Blacks are able “to exploit the ignorance of dominant group members and selectively manipulate stereotypes to accomplish particular goals”

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<sup>30</sup> Of the 60 individuals that participated, 29 were white and 31 were black.

<sup>31</sup> Bell does clarify that the issues presented by whites only account for her small sample size, however, it’s safe to assume that there are many whites who share the same sentiments.

(Orbe 65). The last belief that I'll discuss is the fact that there are some whites who genuinely believe that racism is disappearing in America.

The reason this is so problematic is that the whites who participated in this study are basing this on the notion that in their individual experiences they see racism as almost irrelevant but this goes back to white privilege (Bell 112-113). Whites are the only individuals of the dominant group, and because they make up the majority of the nation's population white people will never have to experience racism in America (113). "Strategic distancing" is the practice of a co-cultural group member assimilating in society in order to not be perceived as "a typical minority" (Orbe 75). However, from the perspective of the dominant group, I would argue that any one dominant group individual who truly believes that racism is getting better (for Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians) in our current society, is simply using "strategic distancing" to distance their race from the fact that racism is still a problem in America. So with so many negative perceptions of Blacks and the misconceptions that whites have about Blacks, where do we go from here?

Bell concludes her book, and subsequently this section, by admitting that there is no simple solution to repairing the race relations between Blacks and whites but that we can start by communicating (117). We know that communication is key but what does it mean to communicate effectively? We have to be knowledgeable co-cultural communicators, meaning that we have to be able to recognize the issues in the communication between Blacks and whites and facilitating communication in an environment where neither group feels personally attacked (118). As we saw from the previous examples, many of the assumptions that whites have of Blacks is due to the negative perceptions created from negative portrayals of Blacks in media. Blacks and whites have the ability to transform these negative perceptions, both groups must: "dispel negative stereotypes", prepare to "educate the other group", and be willing to receive that education of the other's culture (Orbe 64, 73). Next, we have to realize that because racism still exists in America, we have to be able to intellectually discuss racial problems in America (Bell 121).

Co-cultural groups (Brown and Black people) are victims of "over-policing" and misuse of surveillance and sometimes in order to move forward, we have to reflect on the history of our society (Lebron 133). A prime reason that Black and white communication has been unsuccessful is because, regardless of the discussions we've had about racism, not everyone is

educating about the country's history of racism and race relations; therefore, there needs to be an incorporation of real American history (African, Chinese, Native American) in the school curriculum (Bell 121-122). Lastly, in order to improve race relations between Blacks and whites, we must abandon the concept of "colorblindness" and realize that it's doing more harm than good (123). Prior to popular belief, acknowledge someone's race doesn't make that person racist but rather using a person's race as a method of oppression or discrimination is when a Black person will label you as racist (123). Alexander explains that being "colorblind" to race doesn't solve any of the issues Blacks face in America, if anything it's a privileged decision that affords whites the ability to ignore "the existence of racial caste in America" (241). We can't pretend that a racial hierarchy doesn't still exist in America, no more than we can ignore the fact that many sexual assault incidents continue to go unreported in our country.

#### 4.3 Moana (2016): Addressing Sexual Assault and Being Allies That Listen

Prior to researching for this project, I was one of many Disney movie-goers that watched *Moana* (2016) several times and missed the underlying message of the film. Yes, *Moana* (2016) tells the story of a young woman who risks her life for the sake of her island, and really all mankind, and restores Te Fiti's heart. However, the contemporary message of this film is that we shouldn't accept others' perception of things as our own perceptions. Moana's perception of Te Kā was negative but Moana isn't to blame for being misinformed, her ancestors passed down the legend from one generation to the next. What's interesting about the legend of the goddess Te Fiti's undoing is that in the story Moana's grandmother tells, the only two beings present were Te Fiti herself, and Maui. Maui sexually assaulted Te Fiti and no one was around to witness what happened or communicate the truth. Te Kā was left alone, unable to tell her story, and unfortunately, many assault's like Te Fiti's go unreported and unresolved for. Patrick deHahn, a staff reporter for *USA Today*, published an article that revealed that in 2015 a majority of the colleges in the United States (89%) reported that there were no rape cases on their campuses for the year ("Study: 89%"). As deHahn points out, sexual assaults happen but whether or not the victim reports the incident is another story.

The *Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network* (RAINN) reports that nearly two of every three sexual assaults go unreported and only about 20% of college females, in the United States, report when they have been sexually assaulted ("Criminal Justice System: Statistics"). We know

from our American history, that sexual assault was the foundation of population growth during slavery: Black women were frequently raped and “breed like cattle” to produce more farm hands for plantation owners (Bell 109). Although we have moved beyond racial slavery in America, the new form of slavery in our society is human trafficking. The National Human Trafficking Hotline reported that in 2017, of the 8,524 human trafficking incidents that were reported, sex trafficking accounted for over 6,000 of these cases (“Hotline Statistics”). What we have to keep in mind that this is just a sample of all of the sex trafficking incidents in America, the statistics don’t account for the cases that go undiscovered or discovered but unreported. The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention believes that every member of society has the ability to prevent sexual violence in America and it starts with “STOP SV” (“Sexual Violence: Prevention”).

Having conversations about sexual assault is drastically different than conversations on racism in American; where it may be feasible to conduct a study with 10 Blacks and 10 whites and have them discuss their concerns and issues with the opposing community, we can’t expect that many victims of sexual assault will want to address their perpetrators. Therefore, conversations about sexual assault must be approached with sensitivity and sympathy for victims but also with knowledge of how you can help victims and prevent future incidents. The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention developed a strategy to prevent sexual violence, the acronym being “S.T.O.P. S.V” (“Sexual Violence: Prevention”, *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*). The first strategy involves changing the way our society views sexual violence; we must “promote Social norms that protect against violence” (“Sexual Violence: Prevention”, *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*). We must learn what it means to be an ally and execute practices that show that violence, especially sexual violence, will not be tolerated nor go unpunished. Secondly, we have to learn about how components of sexual violence and Teach interpersonal skills such as “safe dating and intimate relationships” (“Sexual Violence: Prevention”, *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*).

Sexual assaults occur both randomly but they also occur between domestic partners. Once we have promoted positive attitudes and practices and learned interpersonal skills, we have to create and utilize **O**pportunities to support victims of sexual violence (“Sexual Violence: Prevention”, *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*). One way to accomplish this would be to creating programs where people can learn about sexual violence or talk about their experiences of being sexually assaulted in a safe-space. Formulating these opportunities will

require creating environments in which people feel that they are **protected** from potential dangers, examples would include: “improve monitoring in schools and establishing workplace policies” (“Sexual Violence: Prevention”, *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*). The last strategy that is suggesting by the CDC is to making sure that Supporting Victims is made a top priority. We can support victims through educating others about support and prevention but the survivors of assault need access to resources such as emotional healing centers and treatment (“Sexual Violence: Prevention”, *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*). The strategies suggested by the CDC details the role that an ally should have in supporting sexual assault survivors and preventing future incidents but what allies need to know is how to communicate.

The CDC’s strategies involve communication but in order to be effective communicators, it’s important to, once again, know the context of the conversation and whom you converse with. Whereas discussion of race relations requires both listening and speaking in order to hear the Other’s perspective and sharing your own perspective, practicing rhetorical listening in conversations on sexual violence will be more beneficial in supporting victims of assault. Krista Ratcliffe explains that similar to how American society deems many behaviors and traits as either feminine or masculine, communication is also gendered; in conversation, men are usually the main speakers with women being on the receiving end as listeners (21). In this discussion on sexual assault against women, Orbe explains that, similar to Blacks being a co-cultural group, women are what he calls a “muted group”. For centuries, Blacks and women have always fought for equal rights compared to the dominant group which are the “European American, able-bodied, heterosexual males” (Orbe 21). Women are “muted” by men in our society and regardless of race, women as still “marginalized as second-class citizens” (22). Nonetheless, women who have experienced sexual assault are the co-culturally, muted group while those who haven’t experienced sexual assault make up the dominant group. Effective rhetorical listening will consist of the following procedures: “1) the promotion of an understanding of self and other; 2) the proceeding of an accountability logic; and 3) the locating of identifications across commonalities and differences” (Ratcliffe 26).

When we’re teaching sexual assault awareness to others, it makes sense that we feel that what we’re saying is the most important thing that needs to be heard. Ratcliffe suggests, on the other hand, that when we’re in a position of have difficult conversations we have to reign in the “desire to be heard” and refocus our mindset to a desire to hear what the other people have to say

(29). According to Orbe, women often feel obligated to “develop a positive face”; a communicative action that allows dominant group members (men) to drive the conversation while responding with positive facial expressions (67). This practice is problematic for two reasons: the first being that, men’s domination of conversation isn’t confronted but they are encouraged to continue demonstrating the behavior; and secondly, women’s perspective is thus muted. Ratcliffe states that what it means to understand isn’t just about listening to what the person is saying but actual listening intentionally to what the speaker is trying to convey (28).

Communicating self is important because it normalizes the idea that co-cultural groups have a voice that deserves to be heard (Orbe 72); the other side of this argument though is that dominant group listeners need to remember that we have to allow the co-cultural group to educate us if we are going to be beneficial to the fight for justice. Dominant group listeners need to remember that no sexual assault incident is the same and that it’s about the individual and what their needs are, and that we must be accountable in that individuals are in different stages of healing. This accountability means that although we all come from different backgrounds and have different experiences, we all have the ability to positively impact the lives of other people (whether co-cultural or dominant groups) (Ratcliffe 31). This accountability must also be taken into consideration when we attempt to establish trust and connection with individuals. Having an understanding on the commonalities and differences that you share with others can definitely prove beneficial in established those safe-spaces of conversation and finding common ground (Ratcliffe 32). For allies, it’s important to find ways to connect with victims of assault, however, you should avoid the differences you might have (58). It might be easier for a sexual assault victim to have conversations with someone who has experienced something different but that’s not the case for every person. So, as a member of the dominant (non-assaulted) group where do we begin in helping victims? The answer is the same in regard to the issue of race relations, we must first recognize our position.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

Racial injustice and sexual assault are two issues in America that didn’t just appear overnight; the current predicament is the result of century’s worth of oppression, misconception, and the normalization of white privilege and male privilege. As I attempted to demonstrate in my contemporary readings of *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Moana* (2016), issues of race

and sexual violence have become so normalized in our society that many people tend to overlook when racial discrimination or sexual violence are incorporated in entertainment, like Disney films. The main objective of this thesis was to demonstrate how what we see in film merely reflects what is occurring in our society and that it's our responsibility to correct these issues when we can. The moment that we're able to turn an incident of racial discrimination into a "teachable moment" of the importance of unified diversity, is the day we have become proficient co-cultural communicators (Orbe 73). The moment we show support for victims of sexual assault but understanding that our roles as listeners are more important than being heard, is the day we have put Ratcliffe's concept of rhetorical listening into action. Nonetheless, the moment when we recognize the issues, increase the visibility of the severity of the issues, and take a stand against racial and gender injustice, is the day that, when we place our right hand over our heart, we pledge our allegiance to securing justice for all in America (78).

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