

## After 75 Years of Magic: Disney Answers Its Critics, Rewrites African American History, and Cashes In on Its Racist Past

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**Abstract** This paper explores representations of the historical intersection of race and gender in Disney’s *The Princess and the Frog* and black women in animated film in the USA. It examines how Disney and Pixar studio executives and animators attempted to use *The Princess and the Frog* to respond to its critics’ claims about the perpetuation of sexism and racism in its animated features. It has three major sections which explore how: (1) Disney attempted to answer criticism about the absence of African Americans and mothers in its films, the presence of physically over-sexualized and emotionally prince-dependent maidens in distress; (2) representations of animated black women in the history of film and Disney’s rewriting or sanitizing of African American history and denial of its and our nation’s racist past; and (3) Disney’s attempt to cash in on this denial of its racist past and its use of *The Princess and the Frog* as reconciliation.

**Keywords** African American women · Animation · History · Racism · Disney

### Introduction

In March 2007, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar films confirmed that its animation studios had started production on its animated musical fairytale—“The Frog Princess.” This announcement to Disney shareholders was unique in that one of the title characters, Maddy, was drawn as an African American girl living in New Orleans, Louisiana in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> Originally, Maddy was to be a chambermaid, and cultural critics were quick to pounce on the phonetic similarities between—Maddy and—mammy. Maddy’s occupation smacked of the ubiquitous mammy, the happy

<sup>1</sup>“Disney First: Black Princess in Animated Film,” MSNBC.com, March 12, 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17524865/>; accessed 7 January 2010.

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servant stereotype that dominated film and later television through most of the twentieth century. The result is a New Orleans waitress who becomes a princess, restaurant owner, and chef named Tiana. Two-dimensional, hand-drawn animated cels of the Princess cooking, cleaning, and serving food could be saved and remain in the film, and the storyline could be reworked to salvage Disney's image in the eyes of critics and many African American parents who had longed for the day that a Disney animated feature would include non-stereotypical African Americans and were ready to spend their money on *The Prince and the Frog* and Tiana merchandise. The revised *The Princess and the Frog* marked one of the ways Disney answered its critics and cashed in on its racist past.

This paper explores representations of the historical intersection of race and gender in Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* and black women in animated film in the USA during the course of the last 100 years. It examines how Disney and Pixar studio executives and animators attempted to use *The Princess and the Frog* to respond to its critics' claims about the perpetuation of sexism and racism in its animated features.<sup>2</sup> While some critics and audiences may argue that Disney made good on eliminating the most overt representations of sexism and racism in *The Princess and the Frog*, others may argue that the company likewise failed to counter Michael Wallace and Henry Giroux's (1999) claim that Disney films and theme parks render history as a Norman Rockwell painting where "there are no strikes; no history of labor unrest; no history of attacks on immigrants; no history of slavery and segregation; no Red scare; no McCarthyism; no atomic bomb" (p. 42). Histories that explore the limits of racism and sexism that whites would have placed on Tiana and her parents' employment opportunities are "carefully programmed out and replaced by Disney's America as a place where people can celebrate America, her people, struggles, victories, courage, setbacks, diversity, heroism, dynamism pluralism, inventiveness, playfulness, compassion, righteousness, tolerance" (p. 41).

This essay is divided into three major sections exploring: (1) Disney attempts to answer criticism about the absence of African Americans in its films, the absence of mothers in previous films, and the presence of physically over-sexualized and emotionally prince-dependent maidens in distress; (2) representations of animated black women in the history of film and Disney's rewriting or sanitizing of African American history and denial of its and our nation's racist past; and (3) Disney's attempt to cash in on this denial of its racist past and its use of *The Princess and the Frog* as reconciliation.

Critics of Disney films have pointed to the company's and the animation industries' long history of presenting non-whites as racial stereotypes and women of all colors as helpless, sexual objects. The disfiguring images of African, Latino, Asian, and Native Americans (ALANAs) are harmful in that they influence how both people who are racial insiders and outsiders perceive, relate to, and come to understand themselves, these groups, and individuals who personally identify as such. The employment, social, educational, and political opportunities open to

<sup>2</sup> Caroline White, "Why the Princess and the Frog is Making History While Looking to the Past," The [London] *Times* Online, [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/film/article6979255.ecc](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/article6979255.ecc), accessed January 7, 2010.

ALANAs are limited by the ways whites' see ALANAs and the possibilities of what opportunities ALANAs pursue may be limited by how they see themselves.

Defenders of Disney films argue that the company's use of women of all colors and ALANA men reflects its dedication to racial equality and inclusiveness, but the mere presence of any group or person does not mean that a group or person participates equally, enjoys the same privileges, or exercise the same degree of power. The presence of ALANAs in disfiguring roles is as damaging as the complete absence of ALANAs or the portrayal of ALANAs by whites in makeup, costumes, and using exaggerated racial speech or dialects.

### Answering Its Critics

Princess Tiana is Disney's most firm answer to its critics for the absence of non-white characters in its line of princesses. It took 56 years for Disney to create a film that featured a darker skinned hero and heroine. In 1992, Disney's *Aladdin* featured the middle-eastern Princess Jasmine as reportedly its first non-white princess. The film was criticized by Arab Americans including the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee for its inaccuracies, rewriting of history and offensive songs. One particular criticism involved the representation of the main characters, mainly that both Aladdin and Jasmine appeared lighter-skinned, were drawn with Anglo features, and spoke with anglicized accents.<sup>3</sup> Jasmine was voiced by a non-middle-eastern actress, Linda Larkin. In 1995 Disney released *Pocahontas*, where the title character was drawn as Native American and voiced by Irene Bedard, who is Inupiat Inuit and Metis.<sup>4</sup> A year earlier, the *Lion King*'s use of Madge Sinclair as Sarabi, Niketa Calame as young Nala, and Whoopi Goldberg as Shinzi, though perhaps unprecedented, fall in a different category, as they voiced animal characters in the east African savannah, not people. In 1998, Disney hired Cantonese-American actress Ming-Na Wen to provide the voice of *Mulan*, preceding Tiana, voiced by African American actress Anika Noni Rose who appeared in *The Princess and the Frog* in 2009. In these new representations, Asians and Asian Americans are no longer constrained to being represented as cunning Siamese cats voiced by white actors as in *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), Native Americans are not limited to roles as savages or as whites in Native American ceremonial dress playing Indian as in *Peter Pan* (1953), and African Americans seem no longer restricted to voicing work as jive-talking crows, apes, animals, or mummies in Disney features such as *Dumbo* (1941), *The Jungle Book* (1967) or *The Three Kittens* shorts. While pro-Disney critics like Douglas Brode applaud Disney's efforts to be inclusive of voice actors or actresses of color since Jack Baskett appeared as Uncle Remus in Disney's *Song of the South* (1946), the examples he offers and the animated characters in *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), and *The Prince and the Frog* (2009) remain stereotypically

<sup>3</sup> Marvin Wingfield and Bushra Karaman, "Arab Stereotypes and American Educators," <http://www.adc.org/index.php?id=283>, accessed 26 December 2009; *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Dir. Sut Jhally, DVD. Media Education Foundation, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> "Irene Bedard," *People Magazine*, 43, 18 (May 8, 1996), 102.

problematic, evoke race and gender essentialism, and distort the socio-political history related to these stories (Giroux 1999, pp. 98–106).

According to film and media scholar Amy M. Davis (2007), Disney animated features cast three types of heroines: the Princess, who is motherless and royalty by birth through her father or marriage to a prince; the Good Daughter, a young woman who out of loyalty to her good but naïve father, finds herself in a potentially threatening situation and must use all her personal resources to survive; and the Tough Gal, who is strong, brash, confident, has to overcome disadvantages, but “leave(s) audiences in no doubt that far from needing (or even wanting) a man, these are women who can—and do—take care of themselves” (pp. 176, 190, 207). Tiana is a synthesis of all these types: (1) her royalty eventually comes from marriage to Prince Naveen, but she becomes fatherless rather than motherless; (2) she is loyal to her mother and her father’s dream of restaurant ownership and she survives the threat of Dr. Facilier and being trapped in a frog’s body for the rest of her life; and (3) it is obvious that she can take care of herself, although she buys a restaurant and marries Prince Naveen at the movie’s end.

While Davis accurately argues that the wicked witch or evil queen is a dying breed, she fails to account for the later replacement of this character by the evil male magician, such as Jafar and Dr. Facilier,<sup>5</sup> and the fairy godmother or magical godmother figure as embodied in Mama Odie (voiced by African American actress Jenifer Lewis). The idea of the magical godmother is not new and its earliest existence in Disney films is represented by the fairy godmother in *Cinderella* (1950). In *Pocahontas* this magical woman appears in the form of a tree—Mother Willow. In *The Princess and the Frog* Mama Odie is a blind, 197-year-old hoodoo or conjure woman who lives in the Louisiana bayou with her pet snake, Juju. She draws upon West African conjure and African American gospel tradition and audiences quickly notice the colorful bottles hanging from her bottle tree/house. In all these films, fairy godmothers are older and plumper or drawn in a way where their visible age and shape signify their life experience and wisdom. While evil witches and warlocks in Disney films lend themselves to interpretations of the evils of witchcraft and Satanism in Judeo-Christian societies and imagination, the fairy godmothers, medicine woman, or conjure woman in Disney films represent the powerful and positive attributes of magical thinking and prayer where prayer is answered and wishes and dreams come true.

Disney animators offer safe-guards against criticisms of its racial, historical and cultural disconnect from African American history through the presence of Africanisms (Holloway 1990, pp. ix–xv) and verbal and visual references to African American expressive culture. Bottle trees were a common site in the southern portion of the USA in African American communities. Cobalt or multi-colored bottles were hanged on trees to reflect the sun’s light and were believed to attract, capture, and contain evil spirits. The Juju and the bottle tree served to protect West Africans from the Gold Coast and the Kongo, respectively, from evil spirits (Thompson 1995, pp. 54–55; Hoover 2000, p. 739). From the 1600s to the 1800s, enslaved West Africans brought these religious symbols and concepts with them across the Atlantic and

<sup>5</sup> One of Disney’s few African American animators, Bruce W. Smith, was the supervising animator of Dr. Facilier and created *BeBe Kids* and the *Proud Family*.

incorporated them with forms of Catholic and Protestant Christianity as practiced in the USA. According to Robert Farris Thompson (1984) the earliest record of a bottle tree is in 1776 in the Kongo and less than 20 years later in the Americas (pp. 142–145). Similarly, Mama Odie is a Louisiana Voodoo/Voudou priestess or queen who wears a white gele and white dress. The snake and dress were symbols adopted by later generations of Voudou priestesses. Voudou came to Louisiana by way of enslaved Africans from Benin and Haiti while the Louisiana territory was still a French colony and melds West African conjure, ancestor worship, Catholicism, Haitian Vodun, and was popularized in New Orleans in during the nineteenth century by Marie Laveau and her daughter Marie Laveau II. Priestesses and Voudou Queens like Laveau captured the imaginations of New Orleans residents and tourists. One of the most famously recorded accounts of Laveau's legacy was completed in the 1930s and appeared in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935, 1990, pp. 191–197). The animation in the "Almost There" sequence in the film, where Tiana imagines herself as a glamorous 1920s restaurant owner, reference the drawings of Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas. Douglas' work appeared within or on the covers of the National Association for the Colored People's official organ, *The Crisis*, the National Urban League's *Opportunity Magazine*, Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, and on the walls of the 135th Street Branch of the New York City Library. Tiana's outfit and mannerisms in the same sequence mirror Josephine Baker, whose career as a dancer and performer moved from St. Louis to Harlem during the Renaissance and later France, where she relocated like a later generation of African American expatriates. Even the masks, fetishes, and shadows that aide Dr. Facilier and appear in the "Friends on the Other Side" and final confrontation scene resemble Winold Reiss' illustrations of afra-art-deco masks and photos of Baoule, Bushongo, Yabouba masks and statues from Benin, Dahomey, the Ivory Coast and Niger that appear in Alain Locke's edited *The New Negro: An Interpretation* published in 1925 (Locke 1925, pp. 3, 19, 53, 54, 56, 244, 255–260).

Other pre-emptive actions Disney and Pixar executives took to forestall criticisms about potential racist representations in the film was consultation with Oprah Winfrey and unspecified members of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). The NAACP has a long history of campaigns that sought to halt the showing or distribution of racist film, including D.W. Griffith's film, *A Birth of a Nation* (1915), which became a cinematic classic adapted from Thomas Dixon's *The Klansman*. Throughout the years, the NAACP continued the fight against re-releases of *A Birth of a Nation* and expanded its focus to include the representations and rights of blacks in dramatic theater film, and on radio and television (Archer 1973, 194). Among its major targets in the 1940s were *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* (1941), *Coal Black and the Sebben Dwarfs* (1943), and Disney's combination live-action/animated *Song of the South* (1946), (Sampson 1998, pp. 164 and 205; Lehman 2007, pp. 79–80, 89–90, 92–94, and 99–100).

Since the 1991 release of *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney could lay claim to the idea that its heroines were conceptualized as more outspoken, educated, well-read, and independent than its previous princesses and heroines; however critics continued to lambast its animated women characters as needing to be rescued, passive victims of abuse, and sexualized eye candy. For all Belle's independence and intelligence, Ariel's boldness, Pocahontas' selflessness, Jasmine's wit and Mulan's warrior-like fighting

ability, cultural critics and psychologists such as Carolyn Newberger, in *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (2001), and Kellie Bean (2003) argue that these characters are “strategies of seduction dressed in feminists’ clothes and reinforce limited constructs of gender.” The authors also see these representations as sexist, and even dangerous, for in the case of Belle, her efforts to find the Beast’s humanity despite his emotional and verbal abuse subliminally teaches young girls to accept abusive treatment to gain a boy’s approval (pp. 54–59).<sup>6</sup> In *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*, Disney critics like Gail Dines contend that Ariel gives up her voice to be with the prince, turning her body into his reward; Pocahontas forsakes her people to leave with John Smith, Mulan has to become a man rather than exist as a strong woman and when she is a woman is subjected to Grandmother Fa’s constant encouragement to get a man. Disney animators seem to respond to these critics in *The Princess and the Frog* by having Tiana immediately declare that her ambition to own a restaurant supersedes any other, and she seems neither interested in marrying a prince, going out on a date, nor hanging out with friends. Unlike previous Disney heroines or princesses, she does not sacrifice her dream, her culture, or her voice for a male suitor.

In *The Princess and the Frog*, Charlotte “Lottie” La Bouff (voiced by European American actress Jennifer Cody) represents Disney’s acknowledgement of its prince-doting, slightly sexualized, single-parented, animated women characters. She is Disney’s self-deprecating presentation of womanhood juxtaposed to the more modest, self-reliant Tiana. From the opening scene when Charlotte and Tiana are playing together as children and Eudora (voiced by Oprah Winfrey) reads *The Frog Prince* to the girls, the audience learns that Charlotte is prince-obsessed. While we hear Tiana declare: “There is no way in this whole wide world I would ever, ever, ever...I mean never kiss a frog,” even if he’s a prince; Charlotte can think of nothing better and would do anything, including “kiss 100 frogs” if it means life happily ever after as a princess with her prince. Years later, at the La Bouff’s masquerade ball, when Charlotte freshens up and Tiana changes into an evening gown that includes tiara, Charlotte’s desperation to woo Prince Naveen (voiced by Brazilian actor Bruno Campos) is most evident as she humorously over-applies her makeup and adjusts her ball gown to emphasize her cleavage. The once desperate-to-the-point-of-comedic little girl in an oversized pink princess gown has become an equally desperate and comedic adult in pink costume ball gown complete with a faux beauty mark.

A number of studies have criticized Disney’s animated films for following a narrative formula where the fathers are overbearing, patriarchal, and oppressive, step-mothers are abusive, and the mothers are absent (Sharp 2002, p. 18; Axelrod 2003, pp. 30–34). Because one of the supporting characters, Charlotte La Bouff has no mother and an over-doting father, *The Princess and the Frog* defies Disney’s standard narrative pitfalls. At the movie’s beginning, at least, Tiana has an intact nuclear family with a mother and father. In the same opening scene, after Eudora leaves a job for the evening, she and Tiana return home and in a rare instance in Disney animated features, we see a two-parent, heterosexual, African American family where the mother, Eudora and the father, James (voiced by Terrence

<sup>6</sup> *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*, Dir. Chyng Feng Sun and Miguel Picker, DVD. Media Education Foundation, 2001; Bean (2003).

Howard), discourage their daughter from entertaining the thought of dreams that may be too lofty for a working-class, African American girl in early twentieth-century New Orleans. They both emphasize the need for hard work, while James and Tiana dream of owning their own restaurant. When Tiana grows up, we learn indirectly that it is James, not Eudora who Disney sacrifices on its altar of slain parental figures. The presence of James' picture in a World War I military uniform and accompanying medal on the older Tiana's chest of drawers' top, suggests that James was killed honorably in the war. James had encouraged Tiana's masterful cooking ability and Eudora cautiously encouraged her daughter's entrepreneurial ambitions. All this unfolds before the film's title appears on the screen. Consequently, it becomes clear from the very beginning that neither parent wholly stands as a roadblock to Tiana's dream or goals.

In Tiana, Disney also created a character that has very little interest in waiting for her prince to come, in fact for much of the film Tiana is more interested in buying an old saw mill and owning her own restaurant much to her mother's dismay. Tiana's father stressed her need for emotional and financial independence, while the older African American women in the film, Eudora and Mama Odie, express their desire to have grandchildren and to see Tiana and Naveen marry respectively. Indeed, the only reason Tiana first kisses Prince Naveen the frog is that he lies about his wealth. Tiana hoped that if she kissed Naveen and broke the curse, he would give her the money to open her own restaurant. Love or finding a prince to emotionally rescue her is the last thing on Tiana's mind. Although critics might make a strong argument that Tiana needs a financial knight in shining armor rather than a love interest or a man to rescue her from a stereotypical paternal or maternal-by-marriage tyrant, Naveen's proposed wealth will technically complement and add to the money Tiana already saved, not completely rescue a financially destitute working-class black woman. In the end, Tiana (like Mulan) proves to be strong and independent, but ironically, her strength and independence are not complete without a man, for in the end, she marries Prince Naveen and opens her restaurant "Tiana's Palace" because Naveen, along with Louis the alligator (voiced by African American actor Michael-Leon Wooley), persuade the Fenner Brothers to finally sell the mill to Tiana.

Despite the many ways Disney attempts to answer its critics, potentially controversial, and perhaps teachable historical moments are carefully avoided by Disney and Pixar writers of *The Princess and the Frog*, audiences are wholly left to their own knowledge about New Orleans during the Jim Crow era to imagine how employment opportunities for Tiana and her parents were influenced by race, class, and gender. Cultural studies critic Henry Giroux (1999, p. 68) contends that such renderings of history "are not merely an edited, sanitary, nostalgic view of history, free from poverty, class difference, and urban decay," they shape public memory in ways that benefit corporate interests, present US history as innocent and not a "historically specific politically constructed "landscape of power" (p. 109). When the film opens circa 1912, Eudora is employed as a dressmaker for upper middle-class and wealthy whites like the La Bouffis; she appears to remain thus employed for the movie's entirety. Though one of the *Times-Picayune* headlines reads "Wilson elected," only few audience members would know or understand that Woodrow Wilson, despite initial support from W.E.B. Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter, advocated for racially segregated offices, lunchrooms and restrooms in federal buildings, including

the US Treasury and the Post Office Department (now the US Postal Services) during his presidency. Wilson also demoted and refused to rehire and reappoint federal African American employees. Wilson's tenure proved to be a nightmare of sorts for African Americans (Du Bois 1973; Lunardini 1979; O'Reilly 1997).<sup>7</sup>

In New Orleans between 1910 and 1930, initially white women dominated nonfactory dressmaking and seamstress work. Black women made up 8% of 944 dressmakers in New Orleans in 1910, but by 1920 and 1930 black women were 44% to 45% of women in this field. In the period the movie opens, Eudora would have been one of 77 if not "the finest seamstress in New Orleans."<sup>8</sup> As for Tiana, throughout the South, approximately, 7,300 black women worked as waitresses in 1920, and by 1930, even with the depression on the horizon, that number increased to nearly 8,000 (Cobble 1991, 210). In 1920s and 1930s New Orleans, black women worked as 32% to 33% and 23% of waitresses in Jim Crow New Orleans. For the historical period covered in *The Princess and the Frog*, the majority of black women would not have been maids, dressmakers, or waitresses, but laundresses (US Census Bureau 1920, pp. 1156–1157; US Census Bureau 1930, pp. 629–630).<sup>9</sup>

Outside of becoming a frog and remaining a frog for 57 of the film's 97 minutes, only the Fenner Brothers and an unknown prospective male buyer offer any opposition to Tiana buying the old sugar mill which she hopes to convert to a restaurant. While catering the La Bouff's masquerade ball for Prince Naveen, the beignet-loving realtors, the Fenner Brothers inform Tiana that her dreams of purchasing the sugar mill have been dashed by an unknown male buyer who has offered to pay entirely in cash. The exchange between Tiana and the Fenner Brothers marks one of the few times that gender and possibly race could be barriers to Tiana's aspirations, "A little woman of your background would have had her hands full trying to run a big business like that," remarks one of the Fenders. The US Census for 1920 and 1930 offers useful information about the prospects of African Americans, especially an African American woman opening a restaurant, café, or lunch room in New Orleans during this era. In 1920, African American men owned 32 of the 416 restaurants, cafes, and lunchrooms in New Orleans, and none were owned by African American women. In the context of *The Princess and the Frog*, Duke's Café and Cal's Café would have possibly been counted among those owned by African American men, although the film did not make clear if Buford owned Duke's or if he was merely a nay-saying cook. Ten years later, African American men owned 70 of the 739 restaurants, cafes, and lunchrooms owned by men and African American women owned 53 of the 147 owned by women.<sup>10</sup> These numbers demonstrate that

<sup>7</sup> We can approximate the date of the opening scene because a white male passenger on the street car that Eudora and Tiana ride home from the LaBouff's is reading a newspaper with the headline "Wilson Elected." A reference to Woodrow Wilson's election on November 5, 1912. Du Bois (1973, pp. 453–459); Lunardini (1979, pp 244–264); O'Reilly (1997, pp. 117–119).

<sup>8</sup> *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Population, Vol. IV, Occupation Statistics* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1914, p. 570).

<sup>9</sup> *Fourteenth Census of the US, 1920, Population, Vol. IV, Occupations* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1923, pp. 1156 and 1157); *Fifteenth Census of the US, 1930, Population, Vol. IV, Occupations, by State* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1933, pp. 629 and 630).

<sup>10</sup> *Fourteenth Census of the USA (1920, pp. 1156 and 1157); Fifteenth Census of the USA (1930, pp. 629 and 630).*



while it would not have been impossible for an African American woman like Tiana to own a restaurant in 1920s New Orleans, it certainly was not typical or common “for a little woman of [her] background” to own this type of business.

Another missed teachable moment arises as Eudora and Tiana, and later just Tiana, ride street cars from St. Charles Avenue in the Garden District to their segregated neighborhood in the Ninth Ward and from their neighborhood to the French Quarter. Although Eudora and Tiana ride in the back of the street car, behind one white man, a passenger of undetectable racial origins, and a black woman, there are no clear indicators that these Jim Crow laws existed on New Orleans street cars in 1912 or later. New Orleans seemed well ahead of its time when it desegregated its street cars after black protest in 1867, but by 1902 the state reversed course and street car companies re-segregated its cars and required “a portable screen” to separate whites and blacks. Street car companies enforced this law until 1958 (Fischer 1960, pp. 232–233).

Although an animated film, Disney animators could have included some historical indicators that racism and discrimination was a part of people’s everyday experiences in 1910s and 1920s New Orleans. One of the few animated films to stand up to this challenge was the FOX/CBS video production—*Our Friend, Martin* (1998). A synthesis of the non-fictional life of Martin Luther King, Jr. and fictional time-traveling characters Miles and Randy, *Our Friend, Martin* blends live-action historical footage and animation. It creatively and seamlessly cuts between real and animated scenes of Birmingham’s Project C campaign and Eugene “Bull” Connor’s use of police dogs and fire hoses against teenage and young protesters in 1963. In another scene in *Our Friend, Martin*, Miles and Randy meet up with a 15-year-old Martin King, who’s returning by train to Atlanta from working on a Simsbury, Connecticut tobacco farm where he worked in 1944. As the train crosses the Mason-Dixon desegregated seating becomes segregated and a Pullman porter sections off the “colored section” of the train car with a curtain. Scenes, particularly one where there is a portable screen could have easily been included in the *Princess and the Frog* to more accurately reflect New Orleans in the Jim Crow era.

Perhaps the least explored indictment of the *Princess and the Frog* is one rooted in the history of race, African Americans, animated film and jazz in the 1930s and 1940s. The earliest ragtime and jazz playing frog appeared in the *Flip the Frog* series (1930 to 1933) by Ub Iwerks. While Iwerk’s films contained racist caricatures and Flip occasionally played ragtime music, the transformation of real-life musicians such as Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Thomas “Fats” Waller, and Louis Armstrong into animated frogs with exaggerated racist mannerisms and facial features were largely a creation of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios (MGM) between 1936 and 1942 and included *The Old Mill Pond* (1936), *Little Ol’ Bosko and the Pirates* (1937) *Little Ol’ Bosko and the Cannibals* (1937), *Swing Wedding* (1937) *Little Ol’ Bosko in Baghdad* (1938), and *Hot Frogs* (1942) (Sampson 1998, pp. 221, 231 and 235). In addition to Hattie McDaniel, Ethel Waters and Billie Holiday were among the few black women caricatured in animated features during this era, although Ethel Waters became the only one of these to appear as a frog in *The Old Mill Pond*.<sup>11</sup> Jazz

<sup>11</sup> “The Old Mill Pond,” viewed on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0My-Ved3LbE>, accessed 7 January 2010; Sampson (1998, pp. 17 and 193).

and ragtime were so seamlessly a part of animation from the 1920s through the 1950s, it would be nearly impossible to enumerate all the animated films that used it. These films' use of frogs, jazz, ragtime, and blues in the bayous and swamps of the South make them the forefathers and mothers of the *Princess and the Frog*. Tiana's foremothers in animated film and television, however, perpetuated the worst of black and African American stereotypes before 1969.

## History of Animated Black Women

### Mammies, Maids, Aunties, Washerwomen, and Savages, 1916–1960

Uninformed or less critical consumers of Disney films and products may lack understanding about why the Company discarded its original idea of Maddy the maid for Tiana the waitresses, but a summary of historical representations of black women in animated film clarifies the reason for this early criticism. It was this connection between the maid and the stereotypical mammy, that perpetuated the notion that black women could not be trained in skilled occupations, were not intelligent enough to do anything beside low-skill and menial domestic work, and that black people enjoyed jobs in which their primary duty was to serve white people, that drew the earliest critiques of the *Princess and the Frog*.

Representations of black women in animated film followed the same racist formula developed for black men, which included an intersection of prescribed gender roles and exaggerated racial and cultural caricatures. From 1916 to 1941, representations of black women in animated film were limited to the ever-present and almost synonymous mammy, maid, auntie, washerwoman, pickaninny, or savage. By the end of the first Great Migration and the beginning of the second, exploitation in black urban populations gave birth to a new black female stereotype—the urban Jezebel. The mammy, maid, and the washerwoman were the most potentially relevant and damaging to the *Princess and the Frog*. Stereotypically racist and sexist images of black women in animated film are as old as animated film itself; perhaps the only degree of historical accuracy in these representations is that whites enforced a doubled-edged form of gender and race oppression that limited many black women's occupational choices to domestic or service work. Such stereotypes also dehumanize black women and many whites misconstrued black women workers' resistance to racism, sexism, poor employment conditions, low pay, no privacy, and abusive employers as truisms upon which the myths of lazy, dirty, shiftless, sexually available black women were based. Stereotypes of black women in animated and live-action film reflected and exaggerated the prescriptions of race and gender.

As early as 1916, the *Sammy Johns* series (1916 to 1917), created by Pat Sullivan and animated by Otto Mesmer, the character of Sammy's mother, "Big Mammy," was written as a domineering black washer woman who often physically reprimands Sammy, demands that he does his chores, get a job, and stop asking her for money. In one of the earlier episodes she also refused to give Sammy any pancakes, which propels the storyline and Sammy's need for the ability to magically create pancakes. Big Mammy was not the only character depicted as black in

Universal Pictures' *Sammy Johnsin* series. In "Sammy Johnsin Gets a Job," the stereotypically always sleeping and lazy Sammy, is stranded on an island where he encounters a coconut-eating black native girl. The black native girl simultaneously becomes Sammy's love interest, the butt of his jokes, and replaceable by a female baboon all in the same animated short. The depictions of black women in the *Sammy Johnsin* series were always (with only one exception) washerwomen or native savages. The exception can be found in "Sammy Johnsin's Love Affair" (1916) where animators included the character of a black woman who was neither washerwoman or savage, but she also refused Sammy's persistent offers for romance and finally chose another suitor (Sampson 1998, pp. 7–11).

Hugh Harman and Rudolph Ising followed a similar formula with Warner Brothers and/or MGM's the *Bosko the Talk-Ink Kid* and the *Little Ol' Bosko* series (1929 to 1938). Bosko appeared in every short and was often joined by his dog, Bruno; his mother, "Mammy" or his girlfriend, Honey. Honey appears to have been the first animated black woman character with an actual name and his Mammy was voiced by African American actress Lillian Randolph, who later also provided the voice for "Mammy Two Shoes" in the *Tom & Jerry* series (Sampson 1998, pp. 11–27). Animator's lifted its rendering of Bosko's mammy, who appeared in *Little Ol' Bosko and the Cannibals* (1937) and *Little Ol' Bosko in Baghdad* (1938), directly from Disney's Mammy Two Shoes and later used it for *Tom & Jerry*.

Disney's Mammy Two Shoes is a much less well-known character than *Tom & Jerry's* Mammy Two Shoes, but Joseph Hanna and William Barbera's animation team was certainly influenced by this Disney original. As a part of the "Silly Symphonies" shorts, Disney's Mammy Two Shoes appeared in three short films: *Three Orphan Kittens* (1935), *More Kittens* (1936), and *Pantry Pirate* (1940). In *Three Orphan Kittens*, the character wears a blue dress with white fringe, a white and red plaid apron, colored tights and purple and brown boots. Mammy was also a secondary character and was the object of fear for the kittens or Pluto. The character was allotted only a few lines, one of which was the exclamation "Hallelullia" to symbolize her delight in cooking and cleaning for her white employers. The kittens or Pluto view Mammy as their nemesis and she remains determined not to let the animals untidy her employers' home. Only the white female child of her employers' saves the kittens from their chilly fate. Audiences never saw Mammy's face although her dark brown hands clearly marked her as being of African descent.<sup>12</sup> Scholars suggest that Disney's use of Mammy Two Shoes was sparked by the popularity of Hattie McDaniel's character in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), but the fact remains that white men and women in blackface and Black women had previously portrayed black maids and servants in live-action film features and shorts since the 1890s. Also, two of Disney's three shorts appeared before 1939.

Mammy Two Shoes also is the name historians of animation have given to the black maid that appeared in at least 16 of the 114 short episodes of the *Tom & Jerry*

<sup>12</sup> "Silly Symphony Cartoons-*Three Orphan Kittens* (October 26, 1935)," viewed on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RuDcggp3Xk>, accessed 7 January 2010; "Silly Symphony Cartoons-*More Kittens* (December 19, 1936)," viewed on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIRoOaPvPSo&feature=related>, accessed 7 January 2010; Patrick Malone, "The Encyclopedia of Animated Disney Shorts," <http://www.disneyshorts.org/characters/m/mammytwoshoes.html>, accessed 7 January 2010.

series created by Rudolph Ising, William Hanna and Joseph Barbera for MGM. The series was produced from 1940 to 1958. MGM's Mammy Two Shoes wore a white apron, usually a green or blue uniform dress, yellow or yellow and red tights, and house slippers. Her domineering treatment of Tom, Jerry, and Butch the bulldog resembles caricatures of the emasculating black matriarch which were both a part of any stereotypical mammy's repertoire or embodied in the stereotype of Sapphire. Mammy Two Shoes appeared in some 20 episodes of *Tom & Jerry*. The Mammy was so ubiquitous by the 1940s that one would be hard pressed to find any other image or representation of black women in animated or live-action film of the World War II era. Whether it was mammy in the *Little Black Sambo* (1935), Disney or MGM's Mammy Two Shoes, or Merrie Melodie's *September in the Rain* featuring Aunt Emma and Rastus, a parody of Rastus, and Aunt Jemima from the Cream of Wheat and Aunt Jemima pancake boxes respectively, this caricature monopolized cinematic representations of black women from the 1930s through the 1950s. Two other series with prominent mammy characters regularly produced by Paramount Pictures were the *Jasper* stories (1942–1947) and *Little Lulu* (1944–1948). The mammy character in *Jasper* was called Mammy and the equivalent character in *Little Lulu* was named "Mandy," (Sampson 1998, pp. 30–71) so it should come as no surprise that critics opposed "Maddy" as Tiana's initial name when developing *The Princess and the Frog*.

While Mammy Two Shoes made a number of appearances in MGM's *Tom & Jerry* cartoons, a new black female caricature, the Jezebel, began to appear in films such as *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* (1941) and Warner Brothers' all-black racist adaptation of *Snow White, Coal Black and the Sebben Dwarfs* (1943). In contrast to a rotund and asexual mammy, the Jezebel in both of these films, a precursor to *A Cabin in the Sky*'s Georgia Brown (played by Lena Horne in 1943) in *Scrub Me Mama* and in the form of So White in *Coal Black*, wore short shorts, high-heeled shoes, and a tight tee-shirt to accentuate her body and sexuality. She tended to be more modern, more associated with the city (rather than the country or plantation), and her hyper-sexuality demanded the attention of the stereotypically lazy, buffon-like black male caricatures.

Protests from African Americans and specifically the NAACP helped to break the long cycle of mammies, female pickaninnies, topsides, and maids in live-action and animated Hollywood films, but not everyone opposed every single racist caricature or limited roles in Hollywood for African American men and women. Just as Hattie McDaniel is rumored to have remarked, "I'd rather play a maid and make \$700 a week than be one for \$7," Lillian Randolph, who voiced *Little Ol Bosko*'s mammy and *Tom & Jerry*'s Mammy Two shoes similarly responded to criticism of the roles she played, "I am very proud that I can play a stereotyped role. When you take that away from me you take away my birthright."<sup>13</sup> Randolph was not just thinking about her own pocket. She observed that the elimination of black roles in Hollywood, even if stereotypical, would put a number of black actors, actresses, and workers behind the scenes out of work.

<sup>13</sup> Randolph quoted in Lehman (2007, p. 99).

### Friends and Sidekicks: The Civil Rights and Black Power Era, 1969–1979

The Civil Rights, Black Power, and Women's Liberation era in film and television had a counterpart in animated film that broke significant ground for black men and white women, but not for black women. African American men and white women characters in animated series had title characters including *The Harlem Globetrotters* (1970 to 1972), the *Jackson Five* (1971 to 1973), *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* (1973 to 1984) and *Josie and the Pussy Cats*, and *Sabrina and the Groovy Goolies* (1970 to 1971) (Lenburg, "Josie and the Pussy Cats", p. 134). There were no animated African American girls or black women who had their own animated show or were a show's title character in this 10-year period as all the characters of black girls were friends of main characters, members of an interracial group or sidekicks of title characters as was the case with Valarie Smith on *Josie and the Pussy Cats* (September, 1970 to January, 1971), Lieutenant Nyota Uhura on *Star Trek* (1973–1975) the animated series, Astrea in *The Space Sentinels* (1977–1978), Venus in *Rickety Rocket* (1978–1981), Christy "Microwoman" Cross on *Super Stretch and Microwoman* (1978–1980) and Dee-Dee on *Captain Caveman and the Teen Angels* (1977–1980) (Lenburg, "Star Trek", p. 171; Lenburg 1981; Grossman 1988, pp. 365 and 409).<sup>14</sup>

### The Year of the Black Princess: 2007

The roles played by African American women in animation have changed very little in the last 41 years. They remain friends, sisters, and sidekicks of title characters. Animated cartoons on the small screen, like certain films on the silver screen, have developed into nothing more than television versions of buddy films. Instead of the white cop with the less lawful sidekick or the Asian crime fighter with a comedic black sidekick, black women found themselves voicing characters or appearing as animated black women characters who are secondary members of a series' cast. Over 20 animated series between 1981 and 2007 had secondary black girl or black women characters. Only one, *Hey Monie*, a two-episode animated sitcom that premiered on BET (Black Entertainment Television) in 2003 had an African American female title character.

Five months after Disney announced that it would make *The Princess and the Frog*, animations first black princess, Princess Pea, appeared as a member of a quartet of superheroes on the PBS series *Super Why* (2007-Present). Princess Pea, along with her super-powered-alter-ego Princess Presto, is a bi-racial member of the *Super Why* quartet and was conceived as a black princess long before Tiana. At first glance, viewers might wonder why Princess Presto is drawn with a dark skin and bright green eyes, until episode #116 when we discover that Princess Pea's parents are the princess and prince from the story *The Princess and the Pea*—her mother is black with brown eyes, her father is White with green eyes. The show, of course, is named for the White male character Whyatt Beanstalk or Super Why. The other members of the quartet include Pig or Alpha Pig and Little Red Riding

<sup>14</sup> "Cyberchase, "[http://pbskids.org/cyberchase/meet\\_jackie.html](http://pbskids.org/cyberchase/meet_jackie.html), accessed 9 January 2010.

Hood or Wonder Red, a White female character. Each of the Super Readers has a super power; for example, Princess Presto has special spelling power which contributes to the revealing of the mystery word at the end of the episodes.

One of the most interesting commonalities between Tiana and Princess Pea is that Tiana's marriage is interracial and Princess Pea is the product of an interracial marriage between a white prince and a black princess. Some critics quickly pointed out that Tiana had no black prince and that this jaded the positive impact *The Princess and the Frog* would have on African American girls. Others argue that a racial double standard exists between the media's representations of white women, who are able to pine for and marry a white prince, while Tiana must fend for herself and marry a racially ambiguous prince. While such double-standards are deeply rooted in intersections of race, class, and gender, and critics must be careful not to fall the trap of suggesting that Disney equally objectify African American women or represent women of any color as helplessly passive and in need of a male rescuer. Perhaps the most interesting similarity between Tiana and Princess Pea's mother is that the roles are slightly reversed and both women are pursued by men. Both *Super Why* and *The Princess and the Frog* seemly turn race and gender on their heads through the presence of black princesses and through a narrative where white or lighter-skin men seek out these darker-skin women rather than vice versa. The audience must not forget that *The Princess and the Frog* presents a number of marital possibilities for black women—James and Eudora, Tiana and Naveen, and possibly Georgia or Violet to Sammy.

### Disney and Black Women

Tiana is Disney's first animated Black Princess, but she's not Disney's first Black Princess or its first animated Black woman character. In at least three Walt Disney films in the 1930s, racist representations of topsy dolls who cried for their mammy, enslaved black women, and a bust of Venus painted like a mammy appeared alongside Mickey Mouse in *Midnight in a Toy Shop* (1930), *Mickey in Arabia* (1932), and *Mickey's Nightmare* (1932). Mammy Two Shoes, discussed above, was one of the earliest representations of black women to regularly appear in Disney films from 1935 to 1941. Also, in the Pastoral Symphony portion of *Fantasia* (1940), Disney animators included a number of centaurettes—one's upper half (torso and head) was a black woman, her bottom half was a donkey and the other two's upper halves were black women and their bottom halves were zebras. While critics and censors in the 1940s paid most attention to the partial nudity of the white and black female centaurs, few paid attention to Sunflower, the half black girl/half donkey that was drawn to resemble a stereotypical pickaninny and was the servant of one of the white women centaurs. Also unnoticed went the less racially stereotypical but highly and problematically sexualized Dionysian maid servants (Brode 2006, 48; Sampson 1998, 173). Hattie McDaniel, known for her much more infamous and Oscar award winning performance in *Gone with the Wind* (1933) as Mammy, appeared as an Aunt Jemima-like cook, Aunt Tempy, in Disney's *Song of the South* in 1946 (Sampson 1998, 57). Interestingly, the pro-Disney critic Douglas Brode

(2006) suggests that Disney tries to “undermine” the general concept of mammy as asexual, by having her flirt periodically with the Bassett’s character Uncle Remus (pp. 57–58) (Sampson 1998).

In 1993, Disney made a controversial move by having a number of Black women and men voice characters in *The Lion King*, an animated film set in the African Savannah. Among the women, best known were Madge Sinclair, who voiced Simba’s mother Sarabi, and Niketa Calame and Whoopi Goldberg, who provided the voices for young Nala the lioness and Shenzi the Hyena, respectively. The film became controversial because Disney’s Africa in *The Lion King* had no Black people (in fact it had no people at all). A few years later in 1997, African American women played and soulfully if not stereotypically sang the role of the muses in its 1997 release of *Hercules*. The most recent addition to Disney’s line-up of African American women characters appear in Bruce W. Smith’s *Proud Family* (2001 to 2005). Four of the six characters including the main character Penny Proud are women. Not surprisingly the lone black family to have a show on the Disney channel was created by one of the studios few African American animators. Outside of the *Proud Family* and the recent addition of Iridessa to the family of fairies in *Tinker Bell* (2008) Disney’s representations of African American women as mummies, maids, animals, or entertainers further exposed the extent to which roles for African American women in Hollywood were limited, even in animated film. Disney can only make a slightly better case for itself in the area of live-action film and television.

Although Disney’s live-action film and television shows made specifically for the Disney Channel fall outside the focus of this study, Disney has a much better record when it comes to addressing the history of race, racism, and representations of African American women on the small screen. Every year from 1998 to 2000, Walt Disney Pictures released three made-for-television movies—two based on memoirs by African American women, Ruby Bridges and Sheyann Webb, who were children actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement and one by African American anti-Apartheid activist Piper Dellums—daughter of former member of the US House of Representatives Ron Dellums. *Ruby Bridges* (1998) and *Selma, Lord, Selma* (1999) explore Bridges desegregation of public schools in New Orleans in 1960 and the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, Bloody Sunday, and subsequent Selma to Montgomery March in 1965. *The Color of Friendship* (2000) was loosely based on a short-story—“Simunye”—written by Piper Dellums about her experience with having a white South African exchange student stay with her family during the height of the Apartheid era. A small number of African American women such as Raven Symone and T’Keyah Crystal Keymah appeared in *That’s so Raven* (2003–2007) one of a handful of television shows starring an African American girl or woman in the title role in the last 40 years. Also, as mentioned earlier, Disney’s first black princess was not animated, but rather appeared in a live-action film. In 1997, Walt Disney Pictures produced Rogers and Hammerstein’s *Cinderella the Musical*, with singer Brandy Norwood as Cinderella, Whitney Houston as her Fairy Godmother, and Whoopi Goldberg as the Queen. The prince in this revised and updated version was not Black, but Latino and was played by Paolo Montalban, son of famed-actor Ricardo Montalban. Some critics contend that this film laid the ground work for a black princess and a racially ambiguous prince in *The Princess and the Frog*.

## Cashing In on Its Racist Past

With the inclusion of a two-parent household, a present mother, an interracial romance, and at the film's end an African American Princess, Disney makes a clear effort to answer its critics with the *Princess and the Frog*. Neither Walt Disney Pictures' animators nor its or Pixar's executives, however, ever openly acknowledged Disney's or animated film's racist past. Instead Disney presented itself as a racially neutral colorblind corporation with no intention of making a political statement—yet breaking racial barriers with the introduction of its first African American princess. The Walt Disney Corporation is such large and powerful multimedia conglomerate that all it had to do was issue a press release noting its next princess would be African American and its media subsidiaries such as ABC, the Disney Channel, and other media outlets provided hundreds of hours of free, pre-release advertising for the movie.

Disney attempted to first cash in on its racist past with the announcement to shareholders that it planned to release its next princess feature film with Princess Maddy, 2 years and 9 months before the film's release. Occasional leaks about script revisions to the press, reactions by hundreds of bloggers, and false leaks about who would voice the film's characters amounted to a barrage of free publicity for Disney and its first black princess. National Public Radio bloggers and roundtables, such as the Mocha Moms on "Tell Me More" started 2 weeks after the initial announcement.<sup>15</sup> While the more historically aware bloggers like Kim McLarin (2007) dug up examples from Disney's racist past and others revisited the documentary *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (2001) and Henry Giroux's (1999) *The Mouse the Roared*, Disney released one its first *Princess and the Frog* trailers which reads, "After 75 years of Magic...Walt Disney Pictures...Brings a Classic Tale...to Life."<sup>16</sup> Interspersed with drawings of Aladdin, the Little Mermaid, and Rafiki and Simba, the announcer tells audiences that this will be a twist on the story of the Princess and the Frog with focus on what happens after "the most magical kiss the world has ever known."

Disney and Pixar's use of this trailer is the closest its come to making a statement about the 75-year absence of an African American princess or title character in its animated film. Despite announcements about Tiana being African American at the 2007 shareholders meeting and the note about Tiana's race in an official Walt Disney Corporation new release dated March 08, 2007, Kathy Franklin, Disney's Vice President of for Global Studio Franchise Development, maintains that Disney was neither trying to make a social statement nor did it "make a conscious decision to say we need an African American princess" (Jones 2009). Disney also suggests, but fails to note that despite returning to a tradition of 2D animation, the racist characters associated with the studios past is not a tradition in which it should express any pride. Tiana's transformation into a frog is not the only twist in the retelling of this

<sup>15</sup> "Mocha Moms: What on the Table?" *Tell Me More*, May 22, 2007, National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10320397>, accessed 9 January 2010; McLarin (2007), National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10320400>, accessed 9 January 2010.

<sup>16</sup> "The Prince and the Frog Trailer," <http://vids.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=vids.individual&videoid=57254348>, accessed 9 January 2010.



story, by failing to admit the role they've played in the distortion or absence of African American characters in Disney feature films, the real twist to this tale created by Disney executives is that its trailer might more honestly claim, "After 75 years of magic...Walt Disney Pictures...Answers Its Critics, Rewrites African American History and Cashes In on its Racist Past."

Because the Walt Disney Corporation is compartmentalized into a number of subdivisions, Walt Disney Pictures news releases are not available to the public and are only accessible to journalists or employees of media organizations upon the approval of executives at Walt Disney Pictures. The Walt Disney Corporation, which oversees all the company's subdivisions, makes its news releases public, but only the original 2007 release exclusively announced *The Princess and the Frog* and the main character's race. Without access to the Disney archives or Walt Disney Pictures' new releases we can only speculate what discussions animators and executives had about its past film's representations of black people, women, or how it was going to address or not address racism and sexism in 1920s New Orleans.

Although the film performed poorly at the box office in the USA, grossing \$104 million by April 2010, Disney recognizes that African Americans have a wealth of purchasing power into which the *Princess and the Frog* could tap. A Target Market News Report (2004) noted that they had an estimated \$679 billion in purchasing power as of 2002. African Americans spend \$2.7 billion on entertainment, \$6 billion on media, and \$2.3 billion on Toys, Games, and Pets. Furthermore, *USA Today* reporter Charisse Jones and other media outlets have pushed the release as a historical event in the post-Obama election era (2009). Hoping Oprah Winfrey's star power would boost approval and support of the film, Disney and Pixar executives asked her to screen scenes and convinced her to play the role of Tiana's mother. Did Disney secretly hope that Oprah could do for Disney what she did for books with her reading club? For some, Oprah's presence in the film and Anika Noni Rose's affirmation that she would not have agreed to do an offensive film casts Disney in a positive light, and many African American parents, especially mothers with daughters, expressed joy that at last Disney realized that African Americans were one of its primary audiences and consumers. Others remarked that despite Tiana's interracial marriage, this was a princess that affirmed their beauty or that looked like them or their daughters (Robertson 2010, pp. 90–93). In southern California, stories of mothers' planning Tiana parties, fathers spending \$90 each of faux princess dresses, for their 4 year-old daughters, accompanied other reports of long lines at Disney stores in parts of the country. In Washington, DC there was a run on Tiana dolls and getting them online seemed nearly as impossible.<sup>17</sup> A few mothers in this report noted that black dolls were not readily available when they were children and noted the influence an African American princess doll would have on their daughters' self-esteem.<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly in the Target Market News Report (2004) the Washington, DC-Baltimore metropolitan area and Los Angeles ranked in the top

<sup>17</sup> Raz (2009), National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=121690377>, accessed 9 January 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Bates (2009), National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120633599>, accessed 9 January 2010.

five black metropolitan areas in the USA and California, Maryland and Virginia ranked in the top ten for black buying power.

Henry Giroux (1999) argues that despite all the messages about race, gender, innocence, and democracy that Disney markets, the corporation's ultimate goal is to transform children and their families "from a democracy of citizens to a democracy of consumers" (p. 162). In the end, the *Princess and the Frog* will be a financial success, not so much because of the movie, or because it won over African American audiences, but because as Giroux reminds us that Disney controls "ABC, numerous TV and cable stations, five motion picture studios, 466 Disney Stores, multimedia companies, and two major publishing houses" (p. 156). Disney sold over 50,000 Princess Tiana dolls in addition to Tiana shirts, pajamas, blankets, books, and hairbrushes by Thanksgiving 2009 (Raz 2009). Disney's first quarter revenues for 2010 were \$9.74 billion and its second quarter revenues were \$8.6 billion. Disney can, without admitting or explicitly expressing it, repackage *The Princess and the Frog* and its merchandise and consumer goods as part of a set of historical bookends in our effort to challenge racism in the USA with the inauguration of Barak Obama in January 2009 and the release of *The Princess and the Frog* in December 2009. For some of us, however, Disney has at best a mixed record on race and gender and it is our job to keep asking questions, hold Disney accountable, and not suspend "our critical judgment" of children's film.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Buying Power stats—African American Market Data," [www.dsiblackpages.com/.../African%20American%20-%20Buying%20Power%5B1%5D.pdf](http://www.dsiblackpages.com/.../African%20American%20-%20Buying%20Power%5B1%5D.pdf), accessed June 17, 2010; "Despite Black Princess, Disney Has a Mixed Record on Race," *All Things Considered*, 1 January 2010, National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122152254>, accessed 9 January 2010; Giroux (1999), p. 90.

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