Kaitlynn Lee

ENGL 399W

**WDAS’s Trail of Broken Promises: A Failed Attempt to Uphold Racial Equality**

I recently stumbled on Pixar’s new trailer *Turning Red* on Facebook; the story involves a 13-year-old Chinese American girl who turns into a giant red panda any time her emotions get out of control. The comments, left by parents and teens, expressed gratitude and celebrated the increasing diversity and representation from Disney Animations. Other individuals wrote about their frustrations towards another film that utilized animal transformation to portray a person of color. A quick review of Walt Disney Animated Studio (WDAS) films that spotlight People of color (POC)[[1]](#footnote-1) shows us how the usage of animal transformation becomes harmful and dangerous. It becomes especially troubling when these narratives are stolen and shaped by the members of the dominant white society and distorted in those appropriations. The animal as an allegorical figure becomes exploited to serve as a cover for racist remarks while encouraging stereotypes.

This essay will work to uncover the dangers of racial stereotyping in today’s film industry. More specifically, I will be discussing the overuse of similar tropes that many of these films rely on for entertainment and plot. A critical analysis of WDAS films will reveal that racial stereotyping exists as an institutional structure. Through the “Magical Negro” trope, found in many Hollywood films, and what we will later define as “racialized magic,” the dominant white ideologies cannot be ignored. In contrast to WDAS’s exploitation and distortion of cultural knowledge, Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* offers an authentic and responsible use of animal transformation in his storyline.

**“Magical Negro” and the Film Industry**

Cerise Glenn and Landra Cunningham identify the characteristics of the magical Negro as a character that possesses “magical and/or spiritual gifts” used to benefit the White character. This character’s importance and presence in the film is limited to their expertise: “folk wisdom as opposed to intellectual cognition” (142). The film industry knows that their profits depend on expanding their audience. The balance between including “a large paying audience of African Americans” and audience members with “old appeals to white racism” is achieved by creating a distinct Black character: the magical Negro (Hughey 549-550). These Black roles portray “ultra-positive” characters while strenuously avoiding race and racism. Glenn and Cunningham also note that many of the roles given to Black people are service roles or involve physical labor. Matthew Hughey explores a similar line of questioning for his study; he wants to explore the two dynamics in magical Negro films: “The reproduction of violently stereotypical and racist black representations” and “the normalization of white (especially male) representations” (551). Hughey’s list of anti-Black stereotypes displayed in films also include characteristics of “folk wisdom,” “primordial magic,” and “(dis)appearing acts” (552). Hughey defines the “(dis)appearing acts” as moments when a magical Negro character appears to offer support and help, then disappears from the White characters’ lives after they’ve fulfilled their role. With a critical analysis of WDAS films, we will see how these themes are utilized to portray subtle and veiled racism.

In films like *Dumbo* (1941), *Spies in Disguise* (2019), and *Soul* (2020) viewers can observe magical Negro characters. In *Dumbo*, the group of crows is coded as African Americans, and the main crow’s scripted name is Jim Crow.[[2]](#footnote-2) Aside from the main crow, who was voiced by Cliff Edwards (a white actor), the rest of the black crows were voiced by African Americans. Disney also states that the group of crows and their song “pay homage to racist minstrel shows, where white performers with blackened faces and tattered clothing imitated and ridiculed enslaved Africans on Southern plantations.” (Disney Advisory).[[3]](#footnote-3) These crows are shown conversing using ‘Jive Talk,’ which stereotypes African American language. Fitting into the magical Negro trope, the crows offer the same kind of “folk or spiritual wisdom” that Hughey outlines. Once the crows hear about Dumbo’s dilemma, they decide to help him; the main crow goes as far as to pluck his own feather to offer Dumbo a “magic feather” (*Dumbo* 00:58:41) to help him believe in himself. While the crows seem to talk in a loud, rowdy, and unorganized manner, they’re able to come up with this solution to help Dumbo. This reflects the Magical Negro trope of using their “folk/spiritual wisdom” to help White characters.

In the next scene of *Dumbo*, the crows are all depicted as joyful and elated to help Dumbo fly as they chant: “Let’s go, Let’s go, Heave-ho, Heave-ho.” (*Dumbo* 00:59:00-00:59:06). This scene resonates with Hughey’s statement that these films portray POC as “simple and unsophisticated people that desire an uncomplicated life of servitude” (556). Hughey also writes that these racist stereotypes continue their portrayal in films with the pretense of “progressive black-white friendships” to prove that race relations are improving (544). In these films, Black people are seen as obliging and cooperative because these films want to send the message that African American characters are “welcome only if they observe certain limits imposed upon them by mainstream, normative conventions” (Hughey 544). And while we can deem the crows’ acts to be autonomous and at their volition, it still corresponds to the fact that Black people are given the limited freedom to have self-determined actions when it represents “acts of loyalty, devotion, and caring for ‘good white folk.’” (Hughey 561).

*Spies in Disguise* and *Soul* are two films that advertise the first Black male lead within the umbrella of WDAS films (produced under Blue Sky Studios and Pixar). However, both our Black leads seem to take on the role of a deuteragonist in their films. In *Spies in Disguise*, Agent Lance Sterling remains a bird for most of the film while forced to work with the scientist, Walter Beckett. Walter wishes to create nonviolent gadgets for the agency and when Lance accidentally turns into a pigeon (forcing him to work with Walter), Walter sees this moment as a victory. He says, “this is the opportunity we’ve been waiting for, there are so many gadgets I wanna test in the field” (*Spies in Disguise* 00:36:40). Throughout the film, Walter uses Lance as a part of his science experiment and notes down Lance’s behavior: “Subject appears disoriented” (*Spies in Disguise* 00:25:54-00:29:20). Walter also tries to get Lance to fly and throws him off the roof while saying, “oh, he’ll figure it out” (*Spies in Disguise* 00:59:15). While Lance couldn’t fly to save himself at that moment (other pigeons come to his rescue), towards the end of the film when Walter falls towards his death, Lance finally learns to fly. Lance’s role fits into the “magical Negro” trope of “not know[ing] how to use … [their talents and abilities] appropriately without someone to instruct them how to do so” and using their “talents and abilities” to benefit White characters (Glenn and Cunningham 150). Even after being turned back into a human, Lance selflessly chooses to turn back into a bird to save Walter’s life. The film ends with the director of the agency declaring that Walter is the future of their agency. Walter finally gets his “weird” and unconventional gadgets recognized as a legitimate way to fight off bad guys. Despite being the film’s “lead,” Lance had become Walter’s sidekick in his bird form and eventually helps Walter get the recognition he wanted.

In another scene of *Spies and Disguise*, Lance and Walter’s short dialogue further reveals Lance’s role within the “magical Negro” trope. While the two work together to stop the villain, Killain, they have this conversation:

Lance: Walter, my face can’t take any more of this.

Walter: You keep doing your thing and I’ll do mine.

Lance: Ok, well your thing seems to be a lot easier than my thing.

Walter: We have different skillsets, that’s what makes us such a great team.

Lance: Dude... (*Spies in Disguise* 01:25:38-01:25:45)

This so called “different skillset” that Walter refers to here is his ability to hack into a robot hand and Lance’s ability to fight. Walter works on his tablet to figure out a way to stop Killain, and Lance protects Walter while fighting off Killain and his army of robots. While this does not point to Lance’s use of “folk wisdom” it shows the division of labor between these two characters. It presents Lance’s expertise in physical work, while Walter displays “intellectual cognition” (Glenn and Cunningham 142).

Similarly, in *Soul*, Joe’s soul accidentally winds up at the “Great Before,” while his physical body remains in a coma. Joe tries to find a way back to his body and meets another soul, 22, who has no interest in going to Earth. He is mistakenly partnered with 22 as her mentor to help her earn her Earth badge, which would complete her preliminary steps to get to Earth. The plot takes a turn when they both stumble back to Earth, only to find out that 22 is in Joe’s body while Joe is in the body of a cat. Joe is forced to help 22 to get back his body, but when they find a way to reverse the mistake, 22 decides to stay in Joe’s body to find her passion in life. The central focus of the film is 22’s journey of finding joy and passion during her time on Earth (in Joe’s body). The film’s portrayal of Joe as a struggling black jazz musician plays a crucial part in shaping the structure of the story as well. By tethering the character, Joe, to his passions-jazz-it works to exploit the history that Black people have with music and jazz for the purpose of the story.[[4]](#footnote-4) Joe’s body helps 22 to feel emotions she’s never felt before, and we can see this as Joe’s contribution of “folk/spiritual wisdom.” By the end of this film, Joe goes back to the “Great Beyond/Before,” risking his life and career to help 22 realize her potential and desire to experience life. Not only does Joe offer continuous help and support to 22, but he is also forced to surrender his body to aid 22’s journey of self-discovery. The film carefully avoids interracial conflicts (unborn souls do not have a clear identification of gender or race) while displaying a “utopian relationship” (Glenn and Cunningham 137) between our two characters. As Hughey writes, the “films rest on friendly, helpful, bend-over-backward Black characters” with a constant desire to “assist white people to become upward mobile” (556).

In a film like *Soul*, Joe’s body and Black identity are used as contributions for 22’s journey, fulfilling the magical Negro trope. However, this trope is not limited to Black characters, and to analyze a variation of the magical Negro characterization, we turn to *Peter Pan* (1953). The film takes advantage of the Native American tribe’s identities, customs, and traditions to supply Peter Pan and the lost boys with entertainment. When the Chief’s daughter, Tiger Lily is kidnapped, Peter Pan turns it into a game. Saving Tiger Lily and rescuing Wendy and the boys (from the Chief) are contributions to build Peter Pan’s credentials. During this celebration, the Chief and his tribe members start to sing and dance around the boys. They “educate” the boys about their ways while singing, “What Made the Red Man Red.” (*Peter Pan* 00:50:15-00:52:20). This scene is meant to attest to the younger boys’ superiority (they giggle and laugh while the men speak incomprehensibly) over the older tribe members. The boys continue their celebration back home and reenact their recent encounter with the Native Americans by imitating their gestures. The desecration of the tribe’s folklore, songs, and dances lead them to become simple elements that provide texture in the plot. The boys get to enjoy their childhood fun for eternity in Neverland while repeating this pattern of taking the tribe’s culture and distorting it for their own play and pleasure. This shows that minority groups and Indigenous characters in films are also often cast in supporting roles that fit a racial stereotype.

The examples I pull from *Dumbo* and *Peter Pan* are notably outdated and even Disney recognized the racist traits from their earlier productions. They now display a statement of acknowledgement and apology before the start of these films:

This programme includes negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together.

Disney is committed to creating stories with inspirational and aspirational themes that reflect the rich diversity of the human experience around the globe.

To learn more about how stories have impacted society visit: www.Disney.com/StoriesMatter (Disney Advisory)

On their website, they list the films “receiving an advisory”[[5]](#footnote-5) and explain their negative and harmful stereotypes. Disney admits the stereotypical portrayal of the Native people in *Peter Pan.* Their website states, “It shows them speaking in an unintelligible language and repeatedly refers to them as ‘redskins,’ an offensive term … exaggerated tropes, a form of mockery and appropriation of Native peoples’ culture and imagery” (Disney Advisory). And while Disney’s statement and promise for diversity and inclusion are hopeful, it seems that they have yet to accomplish this even with their newer, recent films.

WDAS’s current production of films seem to be improving but still lack what they’ve promised; this is an example of what Hughey describes to be a demonstration “that racism has not disappeared but has changed its form.” (551). Over the past few decades, the public has grown increasingly sensitive when it came to the film industry’s blatant racist castings, roles, and plots. WDAS has also become aware of their audience’s demand for inclusion and racial equality. In their attempt to continue catering to the “broad” audience members, the previous racist remarks and stereotypes have been thoughtfully obscured. Hughey writes about the “cinematic rhetoric” that plays a part in disguising this new form of racism:

(a) numerical increases in nonwhite representations, (b) interracial cooperation, (c) the superficial empowerment of historically marginalized subjects, and (d) movies themselves as a cultural phenomenon, which audiences want to believe reflects progressive race relations within the larger society. (551)

And with a critical engagement of WDAS films throughout this essay, we will see how WDAS uses “increases in nonwhite representations” and “superficial empowerment” of marginalized communities to obscure racist representation, remarks, stereotypes, and subjugation.

**Racialized Magic**

The backlash WDAS received on older films like *Dumbo* and *Peter Pan* has required them to make a statement to address the racist stereotypes and depictions that exist in their films. When other “mainstream market forces now embrace[d] diversity both in front of (stars) and behind (directors, executive producers, writers) the camera,” WDAS has also come to realize that the claim “diversity doesn’t sell” is no longer true (Yoshinaga 200). In fact, as mentioned earlier by Hughey, with a higher demand for more films representing POC, WDAS has been busy trying to make a profit from this as well. To avoid falling behind the evolving times, WDAS also jumps onto this “millennial trend” of expanding storytelling and staff to be more inclusive and diverse (Yoshinaga 200). However, despite the major publicity flurry about their extraneous efforts to give the viewers an authentic storytelling that is not stereotyped or offensive, WDAS films still fall short of getting it right.

WDAS has reduced the racial component by simply obscuring it. They continue to display a variation of the outdated stereotypes under the guise of providing “authentic” culture, traditions, and representations. Oftentimes we see this take form as a literal magical element in the film that defines the character; however, in POC, this becomes troubling when their defining magical abilities are rooted and contingent on their race and culture. Some elements (animal transformations) take away autonomy and can be easily recognized as degrading. The magical element also strips the character of their humanity by shaping them into supernatural beings. WDAS is known for the magical element in their films, however, there is a pattern when it comes to films that feature POC. For a person of color to be represented in films, it is contingent on exploiting their heritage (or magic tied to their heritage) for the sake of the plot. Like the magical Negro characteristic, this magical element (deriving from ancestral ties) becomes a repeated characteristic in WDAS films.

Throughout this essay, we will call this a form of racialized magic. This racialized magic[[6]](#footnote-6) becomes the defining characteristic of the character. With every new film that publicizes its efforts of diversity and accomplishing racial equality, racialized magic is persistent throughout WDAS’s plotline. WDAS’s choice to portray different cultures in a stereotypical manner has led them to overuse the racialized magic element which only continues its contribution to misrepresentation. This is especially impactful because people interact and absorb a variety of information through film.

As Glenn and Cunningham writes, movies provide entertainment, but “the images and relationships between characters impact the manner in which they [the audience] perceive themselves and others. … Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values” (136). They also discuss the ways in which the media and films teach and educate people about unfamiliar cultures and traditions. In many cases, a White person who had never interacted with a Black person admitted to gathering information and knowledge about them through films (Glenn and Cunningham 137). The “utopian” and “ideal harmonious relationships” shown in films lead people to believe that this is a true depiction. This stereotype is propagated and reproduced by other screenwriters because the only knowledge they have on Black people is also obtained through “what they see or hear in other media forms” (Glenn and Cunningham 137). And while WDAS has stated that projecting stereotypes and appropriating other cultures were “wrong then and are wrong now,” (Disney Advisory) what they are continuing to produce is perhaps worse. As I will discuss later with *Moana*, WDAS hires outside consultants to provide accurate depictions of their characters of color.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, even with their increased knowledge of other cultures, they choose to prey on the audience’s lack of knowledge. The audience’s limited scope of other cultures fuels this ignorance and even applauds WDAS for cultural appropriation.

Despite the harm in reproducing these stereotypes, no drastic measures have been taken to counter this issue. The reason that these singular viewpoints continue to be produced is because, as bell hooks states:

Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight … Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture … fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the status quo (qtd. in Hughey 561)

Abdul JanMohamed also discusses the “fetishization of the other,” and explains that it is presented in a way that viewers fail to realize films are still reinforcing white supremacy: “All the evil characteristics and habits with which the colonialist endows the native are thereby not presented as the products of social and cultural difference but as characteristics inherent in the race-in the ‘blood’-of the native.” (qtd. in Hughey 561). While both hooks and JanMohamed are referring to the magical Negro trope that is so often displayed for Black characters, there are similar occurrences when it comes to the way WDAS presents their characters of color. These two statements can be applied to reveal how WDAS is insistent on producing films that feature POC through the same “fetishization" and exploitation that “maintains the status quo” (Hughey 561)

As hooks states, WDAS continues to use the “fantasies about the Other” to make a profit. It is evident that WDAS intentionally hires temporary workers to extract their culture’s folklore and stories to use as they see fit. WDAS’s public statements claim to have “accurately” portrayed the communities but there are recent productions that point to the “fetishization of the Other” with “characteristics inherent in the race” (qtd. in Hughey 561). This notion of racialized magic is also shown in *Turning Red,* as Mei is told her panda transformation is linked to her ancestors who had a “mystical connection to red pandas.” (“Turning Red | Official Trailer” 1:20). Similarly, in *Mulan*, the magical element is portrayed through ancient Chinese spirits and ancestors. Mushu, the red Chinese dragon, is also represented as a part of this magical element that derives from stereotypical Chinese culture. In *Raya and the Last Dragon*, the Dragon Sisu has magical powers; like Mushu, from *Mulan*, Sisu’s magic is related to Southeast Asian dragon myths. In *Frozen I* and *II*, the viewers come to realize that Elsa’s magic derives from her mother’s lineage. Elsa and Anna are scripted to be half-Northuldra–a tribe inspired by the Sami people (an Indigenous group). As Elsa learns more about her mysterious heritage and family history, she gains more power, and her magic gets stronger. The list of WDAS films[[8]](#footnote-8) following this pattern could easily fill up twenty pages.

Within the scope of racialized magic, WDAS embeds another layer of racist stereotypes by assigning darker-skinned characters to play the role of an antagonist. These antagonists are often associated with dark, evil, or mysterious magic. In films like *The Emperor’s New Groove* (2000) and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), Yzma is an evil sorcerer and Dr. Facilier is labeled as the Voodoo witch doctor. Jafar, from *Aladdin*, is an alchemist heavily associated with arcane lore who later becomes an evil sorcerer with the genie’s power. In all three films, these antagonists are placed in a position where they victimize their own people for their personal capital and gain with their use of dark magic. As evident in the films, these antagonists typically fail to achieve their goals. They lose their reputation, relationships, wealth, and are rejected by society. In contrast, characters with similar magical elements like Elsa[[9]](#footnote-9) and Aladdin are depicted as lighter-skinned because they are seen as “good.” Another example would be Walter, whose experimental potion changes Agent Lance into a bird. Instead of being punished or portrayed as the evil villain, Walter becomes the white protagonist hero. Under the guise of producing films that are inclusive and diverse, the racialized magic in these films works backward by overidealizing their culture and traditions by putting them on a pedestal (or rejecting them). In doing so, WDAS aligns their films to embrace and produce racial stereotypes.

*Moana* (2016) is a recent film that provides a good example of WDAS’s exploitation, as it upholds the stereotypes intentionally. We see the same racialized magic presented in *Moana;* a story based on the heritage and history of Polynesian islands. The character Maui is a demi-god and trickster based on Polynesian mythology. His transformation from animal to human form is possible because of the magical hook given to him by the gods. Moana’s special connection to water (which she communicates with and controls) is also a power essential to her character, and one that derives from her race. WDAS claims to embrace diversity in their marketing and publicity, but they have done the opposite.

Ida Yoshinaga gives extensive details surrounding the production of Moana and reveals that many of the original ideas and creations produced by the hired Indigenous Pacific Islanders have been cut. One of the many example that Yoshinaga lists is Maui’s figure; initially the demigod had been drawn to be “classically lean” only to be changed to “comically large.” Yoshinaga describes this to be a “mutation condemned by Indigenous Oceanic leaders and scholars as replicating racist tropes of obese Polynesian bodies” (190). And although Maui had meant to be seen as a “respected ancestor and spiritual protector … [Maui] grew cruder as … [he] became secularized” (190). Yoshinaga also discusses the way WDAS failed to live up to the authenticity and cultural accuracy they claimed in their publicity:

… most significant scripted ideas that survived through to the theatrical cut seem attributed to European American writers … *Moana* shares the distinctive status of a Disney animated feature that did not recognize Native, community-based, cultural writing talent at its highest employment level of screenplay and story credit, while the company crafted these films’ scripts ostensibly based on indigenous history, culture, or folklore. (Yoshinaga 198-199)

With profit in mind, WDAS “force-fit indigenous, minority, and global ties into the procrustean Hollywood three-act structure.” (Yoshinaga 195). To keep this structure, WDAS curates plots and folklore geared to Western ideologies and views. Yoshinaga also discusses the way WDAS brought in earlier magical plots from *Pocahontas* into *Moana.* The grandmother, Tala, who offers a magical pendant to Moana is far too similar to the talking Grandmother Willow tree in *Pocahontas*, who also offers Pocahontas wisdom and advice. Yoshinaga mentions that “many Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian writers, artists, scholars, and community activists have felt their communities disrespected and spiritually exploited by this transnationally produced film.” (191). The majority of the viewers in the U.S., who had little to no knowledge of Polynesian Islands, found no faults within WDAS’s new film that advertised hiring real Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians as consultants for this film.[[10]](#footnote-10) While this might seem irrelevant to the topic of racialized magic, it shows that WDAS exploits these stories to fit their own comfortable narrative. Many times, unknowingly, these films wrongfully shape our views of certain communities. While the element of folklore, magic, and mythology exists in other cultures, it’s important to question and analyze whether these depictions were portrayed accurately and respectfully.

Given the track record of WDAS, could we imagine them producing films that are culturally accurate? One way for WDAS to tackle this problem would be to start hiring more POC into their production rooms (permanent staff, rather than temporary). According to *The Hollywood Writers Report* (2014), the data shows a consistent high percentage of white members dominating television and film employment from the years 2008 to 2012 (Hunt 4, 6).[[11]](#footnote-11) Yoshinaga had also stated that there were “two separate story teams” for the creation of *Moana*. As she puts it, one team was a corporate team (“overwhelmingly white American male”) while the other were contract workers (Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian consultants) who were employed for their knowledge on Polynesian history and culture (201). Yoshinaga quotes a line by Fonoti, “[This] film that was inspired by the Pacific but not crewed predominately by Pacific people" (qtd. in Yoshinaga 202). WDAS’s choice to hire consultants were praised by most Americans but as Yoshinaga writes, they have failed to give the proper respect and compensation to the Native Pacific communities: “Disney crosses the ethical line from respectful to dishonorable. ... its practitioners steal and warp indigenous tales, tropes, and iconographies within the cultural landscape in colonialist and racist ways …” (203).[[12]](#footnote-12) WDAS would need to hire more POC into their corporate teams to uphold their promise of delivering diversity and inclusivity to their viewers.

WDAS’s incapability leaves me hoping that they would follow a more culturally sensitive and accurate model when it comes to the use of magic, myth, and transformation. Gene Luen Yang exemplifies this accurate portrayal of authentic folklore and culture in *American Born Chinese*. Yang’s background as a Chinese American writer is essential for his craft on a new modern story using three different Chinese tales and shows readers that it is possible to incorporate culture without it being passive or used as “spice.” This storyline is an interesting comparison to WDAS films because it also uses certain elements to this stereotyped magic and transformation tied to Chinese culture and myth. Through his character Chin-Kee, who transforms from a monkey to a human, Yang plays out a raw stereotype: Chin-Kee is made to be barbaric and uncivilized, and this racism ties in with the animal portrayal. The magical element of animal to human to animal transformation is used to replicate and demonstrate the literal transformation of identities. Yang uses this to represent the racial othering while rejecting the views that racial minorities are seen as primitives by beheading this character at the end. With this mythology he has built on heritage, Yang leaves his readers with a cathartic moment, unlike WDAS films that choose to keep or reinforce stereotypes. Therefore, the racialized magic that produces the stereotypical, racist, and xenophobic depictions in *American Born Chinese* differ from WDAS films because Yang uses it to reaffirm their identities and culture instead of simply showcasing it as another stereotyped version (or something to profit from).

**Animal Transformation**

Minority characters are also subjugated through animal transformation. Animals always play a supporting role in films, like *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Little Mermaid*, and more. They are depicted as second tiers to human characters and often used to fulfill the role of a helpful or comedic sidekick. The use of anthropomorphism to transform POC as something other than human is disturbingly common in WDAS films. While some may question the harm in this, this transformation from human to animal depicts a nonautonomous character and works to dehumanize them. WDAS films leave the viewers feeling unsatisfied but with no other alternatives, audience members have no other choice but to settle for this misdirected production of racial equality.

In *Spies in Disguise*, Lance is transformed into something he despises: a pigeon. At a certain point in the film (prior to his transformation), he looks at the pigeons in disgust while saying, “rats with wings” (*Spies in Disguise* 00:04:46). In his pigeon form, Lance continues to be humiliated and tormented as he is physically abused (thrown around, choked, strangled, squashed, thrown away in the garbage, etc.) countless times throughout the film. Despite this, Walter says, “there are benefits to being a pigeon … you know being a pigeon is way cooler than it seems, and if you just embrace your new form, you’ll see all the advantages” (*Spies in Disguise* 00:38:00-00:38:43). Lance is subjected to being a bird for the sake of the plot; even while saying the lines, “Lance have some dignity” (*Spies in Disguise* 00:40:50) he can’t control his bird-self as he starts to eat the garbage off the floor. In another scene we see that the villain, Killain, commits crimes by morphing his face to resemble Lance. Lance not only loses his job and reputation, but he is labeled as a traitor and targeted by the agency he had worked for. He is forced to run and hide while attempting to clear his name for crimes he did not commit. In the beginning of the film, Lance had been a cocky agent who didn’t think twice about killing a “bad guy.” Through his bird transformation, Lance is taught humility and teamwork. Killain tells Lance, “I’m taking everything from you” (*Spies in Disguise* 01:17:22) but it seems WDAS has already done this by turning our Black protagonist into a pigeon. The animal transformation renders Lance incapable of working by himself and WDAS projects an animal to take away Lance’s autonomy and creates a Black character that loses his body, identity, and dignity.

While *Turning Red* is a film that is yet to be released, the trailer reveals that Mei’s transformation is triggered by her outburst or overwhelming emotions. By dictating that Mei’s transformation be contingent on her capability of keeping her emotions in check, it sends a (perhaps unintended) message that POC should learn to be tranquil and nonaggressive. This kind of portrayal undermines the validity and right that POC have to their own voices and emotions and pushes them onto the position of quiet, cooperative subordination. If this peace is disrupted, a person of color can find themselves in Mei’s position: transformed into an animal, stripped of their autonomy. When Mei transforms into a giant red panda in the middle of her class, she sprints out of her school while shouting, “Gotta get home, gotta hide!” (“Turning Red | Teaser Trailer” 1:18). The form of cultural representation that is presented through animal transformation is shameful and embarrassing. Oftentimes when POC are transformed in WDAS films, the non-human form serves as a sort of punishment or lesson for the character. Then the question begs to be asked, “Why do POC have to be transformed into an animal to learn a lesson?” Instead of using other plots such as character development, it seems that the automatic response to creating a storyline and plot for a person of color involves animalization.

We see this pattern of turning POC into animals as a form of punishment throughout our other films as well. In *The Emperor’s New Groove*, Kuzco is turned into a llama, and remains a llama for most of the film. He goes through countless humiliating moments as an animal to learn humility, kindness, and empathy. Similarly, in *Brother Bear*, Kenai turns into a bear after killing a bear; in his bear form, Kenai forms a relationship with a cub, Koda (Kenai later learns that he had killed Koda’s mom). By the end of the film, Kenai learns to become empathetic, and his animal form gives him insight into the things he was not able to see when he was simply a human hunter. In *The Princess and the Frog,* Tiana turns into a frog because of voodoo magic. Through her animal form, Tiana learns that there is more to life than just hard work. In *Soul*, Joe is transformed out of his body, and eventually, his body is literally stolen from him by another soul, 22, while he remains stuck in a cat’s body. Joe (in his cat form) frantically runs after 22 (who is in his body) while yelling, “You come back here right now! You stole my body!” (*Soul* 01:08:19-01:08:29). Joe’s lesson in the film is learning to enjoy the little things in life. These films rid the characters of their human form and keep most of their screen time as an animal. By depicting these characters as literal animal figurations, it forms a declarative statement that enforces the acknowledgment that these characters are meant to be seen as less than their counterpart, white protagonists. It is truly ironic that films portraying POC as non-human roles (for almost the entirety of the film) can be produced as a means to represent minority groups and promote diversity.

WDAS’s usage of animal transformation goes beyond simply punishing their characters of color. The animal transformation is another way for WDAS to dehumanize POC by displaying the economic and autonomous disparity that exists between races. As stated by Jacques Derrida, man discerns what he is by stating what he is not - the animal. Derrida also writes that these animal stories “remains an anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, [and] a domestication” (37).[[13]](#footnote-13) To highlight this idea, Ajay Gehlawat describes the animal transformation as, “associated with errancy and/or foolhardiness. When (human) characters become animals, it is seen as reflecting some character flaw” (418). Gehlawat lists a few examples from other WDAS films that illustrate this idea: Pinocchio and his friends turn into donkeys and in *Beauty and the Beast*, the Beast is a literal portrayal of a ‘beast-man’ (bestial). Gehlawat questions the intentions behind the first Black Disney princess’s transformation into a frog and states that it “seems to literally conflate her with animality but also, as Tiana, her dreams of success with a lack of intelligence and reason … [it] is the representation of a black girl as an animal, or the conflation of blackness with bestiality” (418). Both Gehlawat and Derrida’s claim leads us to view WDAS’s production of *The Princess and the Frog* as a means to “dehumanize” (Gehlawat 419).

Gehlawat also notes that by transforming Tiana into a frog, the film works to obscure (or more specifically erase) her race: “its use of this strategy to simultaneously eradicate or, at the very least, minimize onscreen representations of blackness, the racial fantasy of the film seems to be of a ‘post-racial’ era, in which African Americans are present yet absent and race is implicit yet unaddressed.” (429). As Gehlawat mentions, Disney’s concern about being “racially insensitive” has left them to omit or avoid race entirely and in doing so they became “racially hypersensitive” (428). By transforming Tiana into a frog, WDAS has ultimately stripped her of her Black identity while advertising their creation of the “first African American Princess.” WDAS’s consistent use of anthropomorphism for POC hold negative connotations that continue to permeate and shape the viewers knowledge on society and other cultures.

**WDAS’s Broken Promises**

WDAS has had a long history of misrepresenting POC and exploiting their cultures for profit. And while we can recognize that WDAS has made attempts to address the need for diversity within their films, proper representation is still lacking due to the overuse of animal transformation and racialized traits that are central in many of their storylines. WDAS’s significant influence over their viewers needs to be considered when displaying certain character traits and relations. WDAS’s continued racial stereotyping, fetishizing and overidealizing in their films enforces white supremacy while creating the label of “other”, exotic, or foreign for Indigenous and other minority members. It is safe to say that WDAS is also conscious of their actions as they take drastic measures to publicly advertise their inclusion of “authentic” people to help shape their storylines for accuracy.

Since *Turning Red* is directed by Domee Shi (a Canadian-Chinese animator) I want to be hopeful that this film will be different than WDAS’s past productions. However, as Yoshinaga states, “Disney [only] seems willing to work with Americanized screenwriters of color whose cultural edges have been smoothed by a long corporate employment process.” (199). And as stated earlier, Yoshinaga also points to WDAS’s tendency to fit every story into a “three-act story structure” (195) which goes to show how much white influence, ideology, and Western colonization is embedded in every one of these films. And while many of us hope that POC could be represented as ordinary people, no different than anyone else, at this moment it seems unlikely that WDAS will uphold their promise to “create a more inclusive future together” (Disney Advisory).

Works Cited

*Aladdin*. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, Walt Disney Pictures, 1992.

Anderson, Maureen. “The White Reception of Jazz in America.” *African American Review*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2004, pp. 135-145.

*Brother Bear*. Directed by Aaron Blaise and Robert Walker, Walt Disney Pictures, 2003.

*Coco*. Directed by Adrian Molina and Lee Unkrich, Walt Disney Pictures, 2017.

Cockrell, Dale. “Jim Crow, Demon of Disorder.” *American Music*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1996, pp. 161-184.

Deo, Meera E. “Why BIPOC Fails - Virginia Law Review.” *Virginia Law Review*, Virginia Law Review Association, 6 June 2021, https://www.virginialawreview.org/articles/why-bipoc-fails/.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Edited by Marie-Luise Mallet, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008.

Disney Advisory. “Stories Matter.*” The Walt Disney Company*, 2020, https://storiesmatter.thewaltdisneycompany.com/.

*Dumbo*. Directed by Ben Sharpsteen, Walt Disney Productions, 1941.

*Encanto*. Directed by Byron Howard and Jared Bush, Walt Disney Pictures, 2021.

*Frozen*. Directed by Adam Green, Walt Disney Pictures, 2013.

*Frozen II*. Directed by Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck, Walt Disney Pictures, 2019.

Gehlawat, Ajay. “The Strange Case of “The Princess and the Frog:” Passing and the Elision of Race.” *Journal of African American Studies*, special issue of *Animated Representations of Blackness*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2010, pp. 417-431.

Glenn, Cerise, and Landra Cunningham. “The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film.” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2009, pp. 135-152.

Grady, Constance. “Why the Term ‘BIPOC’ Is so Complicated, Explained by Linguists.” *Vox*, 30 June 2020, https://www.vox.com/2020/6/30/21300294/bipoc-what-does-it-mean-critical-race-linguistics-jonathan-rosa-deandra-miles-hercules.

Harmon, Amy. “BIPOC or POC? Equity or Equality? the Debate over Language on the Left.” *The New York Times*, 1 Nov. 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/01/us/terminology-language-politics.html.

Hughey, Matthew. “Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in “Magical Negro” Films.” *Social Problems*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2009, pp. 543-577.

Kain, Erik. “'Frozen 2' Review: The 5 Biggest Problems with Disney's Disappointing Sequel.” *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 10 Dec. 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2019/12/02/the-5-biggest-problems-with-frozen-2/?sh=56d4f9723261.

Litwack, Leon F. “Jim Crow Blues.” *OAH Magazine of History*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2004, pp. 7-11, 58.

Lott, Eric. “Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy.” *Representations*, no. 39, 1992, pp. 23-50.

*Moana*. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, Walt Disney Pictures, 2016.

*Mulan*. Directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, Walt Disney Pictures, 1998.

*Peter Pan*. Directed by Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske and Wilfred Jackson, Walt Disney Productions, 1953.

*Pocahontas*. Directed by Eric Goldberg and Mike Gabriel, Walt Disney Pictures, 1995.

“Racialize, v.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2008, https://www-oed-com.queens.ezproxy.cuny.edu/view/Entry/238619?rskey=Q7MBof&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid.

“Racialized, Adj.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2008, https://www-oed-com.queens.ezproxy.cuny.edu/view/Entry/269340?rskey=Q7MBof&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid.

*Raya and the Last Dragon*. Directed by Carlos Lopez Estrada and Don Hall, Walt Disney Pictures, 2021.

*Soul*. Directed by Pete Docter and Kemp Powers, Pixar Animation Studios, 2020.

*Spies in Disguise*. Directed by Nick Bruno and Troy Quane, Blue Sky Studios, 2019.

Taylor, William. “Jazz: America’s Classical Music.” *The Black Perspective in Music*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1986, pp. 21-25.

*The Emperor’s New Groove*. Directed by Mark Dindal, Walt Disney Pictures, 2000.

*The Princess and the Frog*. Directed by John Musker and Ron Clements, Walt Disney Pictures, 2009.

“Turning Red | Official Trailer.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Pixar, 17 Nov. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdKzUbAiswE.

“Turning Red | Teaser Trailer.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Pixar, 13 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqdHP2dWQ9M.

Yang, Gene Luen. *American Born Chinese*. New York, First Second Books, 2006.

Yoshinaga, Ida. “Disney’s Moana, the Colonial Screenplay, and Indigenous Labor Extraction in Hollywood Fantasy Films.” *Narrative Culture*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 188-215.

1. The term People of color (POC) will be used throughout the essay. This term is not meant to work as an erasure of identities and cultures. When referring to a specific community, POC will not be used. The term Black, Indigenous, People of color (BIPOC) will not be used throughout this essay. For more on terminology see Harmon, “BIPOC or POC? Equity or Equality? The Debate Over Language on the Left;” Grady, “Why the term ‘BIPOC’ is so complicated, explained by linguists.” For more on why BIPOC will not be used in this paper see Deo, “Why BIPOC Fails.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Litwack explains how the term Jim Crow became popularized through a dance and song routine in the 1830s. The dance was “created by a black stableman and imitated by a white man for the amusement of white audiences” while displaying “distorted images of black life, character, and aspirations” (7). For an image reference, see Cockrell 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more information on minstrel shows, see Lott 27-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For history on jazz and Black people, see Taylor 22-24; for “The White Reception of Jazz in America”, see Anderson. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The four films addressed under Disney Advisory’s “Examples of Content Receiving Advisories” are *Dumbo, Peter Pan, The Aristocats,* and *Swiss Family Robinson*. In *The Aristocats*, they apologize for depicting the Siamese cats as a “racist caricature of East Asian peoples with exaggerated stereotypical traits such as slanted eyes and buck teeth;” and in *Swiss Family Robinson*, they admit to portraying the pirates as “a stereotypical foreign menace. Many appear in ‘yellow face’ or ‘brown face’ and are costumed in an exaggerated and inaccurate manner …” For more visit storiesmatter.thewaltdisneycompany.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of racialized is to be “affected or influenced by racism” or “categorized or divided according to race” (“Racialized, adj.”). It defines racialize as a means “to impose a racial interpretation on” (“Racialize, v.”). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This topic will be revisited further down; see page 15, footnote 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Unmentioned WDAS films relying on the “fetishization of the Other” and racialized magic include, but are not limited to, *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Brother Bear* (2003), *Coco* (2017), and *Encanto* (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In *Frozen II*, Elsa and Anna are discovered to be half Northuldra. Their Indigenous heritage is used for the plot but neither Elsa nor Anna, show any resemblance or distinguishing characteristic traits as the Northuldra clan. For more about the strangeness behind this Northuldra storyline and Elsa (and her Northuldra community) being portrayed as the “noble savage” see Kain. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See page 11, footnote 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As referenced in Yoshinaga (193), for related data, see Hunt 4, 6, especially Figures 4 and 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For more on Disney’s "informational extraction from various indigenous communities,” see Yoshinaga 202-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)