The Disney Princesses were once just a group of characters. Disney soon realized how popular they were to young girls, and they capitalized on the situation. Soon these characters came to represent so much more; they became role models and were elevated from a Disney character to a Disney Princess. From clothing to video games, the Disney Princesses are everywhere, but not all of them. You’re more likely to find Cinderella or Ariel on a piece of merchandise than Pocahontas or Mulan, and, unfortunately, this isn’t an accident. The princesses of color are often forgotten, left out, or are shoved in the back, and this may be partly due to the fact that there are only four of them out of eleven princesses. The lack of representation of women of color among the Disney Princesses and the way they’re portrayed promotes stereotypes and harmful ideologies; therefore, the Disney Princess line would benefit from including more races and ethnicities in their films and merchandise.

Criticism of Disney films is important because of the impact they have on our culture and on society; moreover, focusing on the Disney Princesses is important because they have the same impact especially on girls and women. Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, who both have Ph.D.s and teach in the Department of Critical Culture, Gender, and Race Studies at Washington University, explain how Disney films affect individuals and, therefore, society.

“…These films, [and] the corporations involved (e.g., Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks) are
‘regulating culture,’ and thus profoundly influencing ‘children’s culture and their everyday lives’...The messages embedded within these films resonate with children and are reiterated through sources, while they also resound with parents who have received the same lessons since childhood” (Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo 167). From this, we see that because these films are an integral part of many children’s lives, the concepts and ideas within the films are what shape their adulthood. Media that reaches so many people and has such a deep, long-lasting impact should be critically analyzed.

To focus on the Disney Princesses is, essentially, to focus on how women are portrayed in Disney films. There are other representations of women in Disney films that don’t feature a princess; however, these films don’t get quite the same attention and don’t evoke the same expectations from an audience. To be added to Disney’s official princess line is more of an ordeal than to simply be Disney’s next female protagonist or love interest. Kathi Maio, a freelance writer who has her M.A. in Feminist Literature and who wrote two books criticizing film, illustrates the saliency of the Disney Princesses in relation to our culture. She suggests that Disney Princesses are a reflection of what society thinks women should be and that they are “symbols of the times” (Maio). The women in these Disney films are role models for many people, especially young girls. This is a lot of weight put on these characters, but they reflect not only what young girls strive to be, but what society expects girls and women to be; this warrants a closer look at these characters. Ultimately these films communicate what society considers an ideal woman, so it’s especially important then to criticize the Disney Princesses because of the messages sent in the films.

We see not only problematic portrayals of gender in the Disney Princess line, but race as well. The Disney Princess line has a very problematic past that they’ve tried to recover from by
including more races and ethnicities in their films. Whiteness has routinely been interpreted as what is beautiful in the princess films. Dorothy L. Hurley, a professor with thirty years of experience in the field of education, points out the routine whiteness of Disney films. She emphasizes that the main characters will often have features that reflect the common characteristics of white people (225). Not only are most main characters portrayed as white, their whiteness is seen as beautiful, good, worthy of praise, and, most importantly, is made invisible to suggest its normalcy (Hurley 225). This is apparent in the way black and white are coded throughout all the films. Hurley goes into detail for each film that features a white princess and explains that in each film it is apparent that white is good and black or darker hues are bad (224). One example is the coding in *The Little Mermaid*. Ariel is white, small, and delicate. This is contrast to her antagonist, Ursula, who is black, large, and loud. Ursula’s characteristics are coded as villainous and Ariel’s as heroic or good, and, thus, whiteness is approbated and blackness is condemned in this film. Another example of this same color coding lies in *Snow White*. The entire plot of *Snow White* is based on Snow White’s beautiful, fair skin that her stepmother is jealous of. Not only is this an example of horizontal hostility where women are competing against one another, the message of the film is that whiteness is the pinnacle of beauty. Hurley explains why this kind of portrayal in Disney films is ultimately problematic. These Disney films “exaggerate the whiteness of the both primary and secondary characters, and thus subtly promote an ideology of White supremacy” (225). When Disney chooses to color code their films this way, they send a pervasive message that upholds racist ideologies.

This isn’t to say that Disney hasn’t come a long way since *Snow White*. In fact, since that first princess film in 1944, they came out with four other films that featured princesses of color. First was *Aladdin* (1992), next was *Pocahontas* (1995), then *Mulan* (1998), and finally *The
Princess and the Frog (2009). After 65 years of no representation for African-Americans in the princess line, Disney was praised for finally making a film that featured an African-American princess. Ajay Gehlewat, an Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and with a Ph.D. in Theatre & Film, expresses in his article for the Journal of African American Studies that this film was applauded and commended by critics and audiences. It was even seen as “‘an instant classic’…” (418). More important than the praise for just this film, Disney is now, unfortunately, seen as the apex of racial diversity by many (Gehlewat 418).

However, it seems as if, recently, they’ve stopped striving for the inclusivity they once did. Disney has come out with three more films since The Princess and the Frog that feature white princesses and, in fact, all white casts. Tangled (2010), Brave (2012), and Frozen (2013) have made the princess line even whiter, and this has all happened within the last three years. Disney continues to be seen as racially inclusive because four out the eleven princesses are not white.

Not only are there so few princesses of color, the princesses of color who are there are underrepresented and tokenized. Their underrepresentation is apparent in what Disney offers in their merchandise. Often you’ll see the princesses of color in the background or only one up front at a time; they often won’t even be on the merchandise. For example, in the official Disney Store there are two toys that solely feature Mulan, and one of them features Mulan’s male counterpart, Shang. This is opposed to the twenty-four toys featuring Ariel (Disney Store). The general merchandise doesn’t fare much better. There are seven items (this includes accessories, ornaments, DVDs, and costumes) that feature Mulan and seventy-one items that feature Ariel (Disney Store).

Even when the princesses of color are represented in merchandise, they’re represented in a problematic way. To make it onto Disney’s official merchandise, a princess must undergo a
redesign so she fits in with the style Disney has chosen for their princesses on their merchandise. These redesigns drastically distort what the princess actually looks like, serve to promote harmful beauty ideals, and stress traditional gender roles. For example, earlier this year, Merida (from *Brave*) underwent a redesign so she could be added to Disney’s princess line. She was made thinner, her features softer, and her bow and arrow were replaced with a fashionable belt. However, it was apparent to many that this redesign was problematic. This story was widely reported on and petitions were made and signed. Michael Cavna, a writer and nationally recognized comic artist, wrote in his article for the Washington Post that “More than 220,000 supporters have signed the Change.org petition “Say No to the Merida Makover” (Cavna). Merida is not the only princess to experience a drastic change to her look though. In fact, most of the princesses of color have undergone the same kind of changes. For example, Mulan’s facial features have been changed, her skin is lighter, and she is almost never seen in her warrior outfit (*Disney Store*). Even though the same drastic, problematic changes have taken place in Mulan’s redesign, there are no petitions and no public outcry for Mulan to be returned to her original state. This suggests that the princesses of color don’t get the same attention as the white princesses.

Of these four princesses of color, only four races or ethnicities are represented, and Disney films, in general, are lacking in racial diversity. Mulan is Chinese, Pocahontas is Native American, Tiana is African-American, and while Jasmine comes from a mythical place called Agribah, it is heavily implied through images, symbols, and language throughout the movie that she comes from somewhere in the Middle East. These are the only non-white races and ethnicities that are portrayed by the Disney Princesses. Vincent E. Faherty, who has earned his doctorate in Social Work, wrote a quantitative study for *Simile*, an academic journal that
provides scholarly research on media, that examined the race of the characters in the nineteen most popular Disney films. While this study didn’t focus solely on the Disney Princesses, the results reveal exactly how little racial representation is offered in all Disney films. “Taken together, European and European-American characters are the most dominant group, with Asian, Arabic, and American Indian characters lagging far behind. Europeans and European-Americans account for 47.6% of the depicted characters, while Asians appear at a rate of only 5.1%. Taken together, characters depicted as African-Americans, Arabic, Hispanic, or American Indian appear only 5.7% of the time” (Faherty). We can gather from this data that Disney films in general are lacking in racial diversity, and since the princesses of color are already underrepresented, a shortage of racially diverse characters in Disney films overall serves to further their underrepresentation.

Not only are the princesses of color underrepresented, the way they are already portrayed is problematic and promotes harmful ideologies and stereotypes. There are concerning depictions of the different races that are shown in these films, and one of the key problematic elements found in the films that feature princesses of color is “orientalism” (Diamond 277). Heather A. Diamond writes in the Encyclopedia of Race and Racism that orientalism is “a system of beliefs and practices through which Europeans and Americans have viewed and represented the Middle East and Asia, often in unfavorable and subordinate terms” (277). Burçak Keskin-Kozat whose article entitled “Orientalism” appears in the Encyclopedia of Politics, adds another important aspect that plays a key role in orientalism. He says that since the west views the east as an “exotic, mysterious, and dangerous space”, the west is then seen as superior and can impose its culture on the east (806). Diamond also says that a particular problem of orientalism is the sexualization of women who aren’t from the west (277). Orientalism is heavily implied in the
films that feature princesses of color and plays a key role in the stereotypes presented in the films as well. Celeste Lacroix, who has a Ph.D. in Rhetorical Studies and Media Criticism, wrote an article for the international, peer-reviewed journal, *Popular Communication*, on media and culture that analyzes the Disney Princess films and how orientalization plays a part in how they’re portrayed. Lacroix writes that Jasmine is portrayed in *Aladdin* as hypersexualized and orientalized, which contributes to the stereotype of Middle Eastern women as exotic and sexual (221). Jasmine’s skin color was not whitened, but she has features that reflect white features more than Middle Eastern facial features; Aladdin, the hero, also falls victim to having whiter facial features. This is partly because characters in the film that are presented as Middle Eastern people, complete with accented voices, are presented as villains (*Aladdin*). For example, the antagonist, Jafar and the guards of the palace are all darker skinned, have accents, and Middle Eastern facial features. This is in contrast to Jasmine and Aladdin who have American accents, lighter skin, and whiter facial features. This stereotyping of Middle Eastern people contributes to orientalism and promotes the idea that to be a Disney hero/heroine is to be associated with whiteness in some way. Jasmine’s outfit also serves to promote orientalization because it reflects westernized ideas of what women wore in harems. There is an actual depiction of a harem in the film, where we see the outfits the women are wearing, and Jasmine’s is identical, except for the head coverings the other women wear. While she may be more westernized by her lack of a traditional head covering, her outfit still orientalizes and, simultaneously, serves to over-sexualize her (Lacroix 221). This is opposed to the other white princesses who are usually dressed in a standard ball gown.

Like Jasmine, Pocahontas is orientalized in a way. The way she’s portrayed in *Pocahontas*
over-sexualizes her and, therefore, contributes to negative stereotypes about Native American women. Kent A. Ono and Derek T. Buescher, both professors with Ph.D.’s, wrote an article for the academic journal, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, that interprets Pocahontas and her portrayal in merchandise and film. They argue that Disney promoted “…a sexual and exoticizing image of Native American Women” in *Pocahontas* (26). Her costuming contributes to her sexualization because throughout the entire movie she’s seen in a short, tight dress that emphasizes her shape, and this choice was deliberate because the other characters’ costumes aren’t nearly as revealing (Lacroix 221). Comparing Pocahontas’s costume to the other white princesses’ costumes is also telling of how revealing Pocahontas’ outfit is. Another way Pocahontas was needlessly sexualized was through her body. Lacroix says “One of the most talked about elements of this characterization was a physique that reflected a body structure comparable to that of a Barbie Doll, or supermodel, that seemed wholly inconsistent with the 12-year-old girl of historical fact…” (220). Not only did they sexualize Pocahontas with her body type in comparison to the other white princesses, they effectively disregarded historical fact. Completely changing her age to make the romantic relationship between her and John Smith admissible is a complete neglect for the actual story of Pocahontas. That story obviously wouldn’t have lent itself to being a Disney film, yet Disney felt that sanitizing Native American history was acceptable anyway. In this film, a difference in skin color among the main characters is immediately acknowledged and is seen as one of the main hurdles for John Smith and Pocahontas to overcome. In the end, however, Smith and Pocahontas cannot be together because of their racial and cultural differences, and Disney manages to sneak in a subtle warning against miscegenation. Disney’s depiction of Native American culture also contributes to harmful ideologies. “The stereotype of Native Americans’ unique relationship with nature is
evident in Pocahontas’ relationship with animals, the trees, the water, and the wind” (Lacroix 220-221). This disrespects Native American culture by presenting it in a way that oversimplifies it, and thus makes their culture a stereotype.

Mulan in *Mulan*, while being orientalized at the same time, falls victim to an oversimplification of her culture as well. Marylou Matoush and Ivy Hsieh wrote an article for the academic journal, *Children's Literature in Education*, which has been a key source of scholarly articles on all aspects of children's literature for more than 40 years. They discuss how depictions of Chinese culture in western media, namely *Mulan*, affect the Chinese community. They say that Chinese culture was distorted and appropriated by Disney because Disney thrust American ideals and values onto the characters and drastically changed the actual story of Mulan (218). Disney, once again, disregarded history and had additional characters added to the story to make it a marketable, feature-length film. Mingwu Xu and Chuanmao Tian, both professors of foreign studies and languages, wrote an article for the academic journal, *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies*, a rigorously peer-reviewed journal that seeks experienced researchers. This article discusses cultural appropriation and the depiction of Chinese culture in the film *Mulan*. Xu and Tian say that orientalism occurs in this film because it “reinforces existing racial and gender ideologies by deprecating Chinese culture…” (186). This is evident in the way Mulan acts in the film. An important aspect of the original story of Mulan was her loyalty and obligation as a daughter to fight for her father. This was distorted in the Disney film, *Mulan*, by having Mulan fight for her father because she wanted to run away to find herself. Hsieh and Matoush point out that this is an important difference of culture and promotes orientalism and cultural appropriation by giving a “Eurocentric” feel to the film instead of staying true to the Chinese story and culture (219). In regards to Mulan’s costume, she is not
overly sexualized like Jasmine and Pocahontas. This is due to her having to accentuate her masculinity because she has to present herself as a man for most of the film. This also contributes to the idea that Disney over-sexualizes their heroines’ costumes. Whiteness is portrayed in this film similarly to *Aladdin*. Mulan is paler and has larger, rounder eyes than any of the other characters, going back to the idea that one must be associated with whiteness to be a heroine. This is contrast to the other characters in the film that are used as comic relief or are shown as villains, whose skin is darker and whose eyes are smaller. Orientalism is present in this choice because the more westernized character, Mulan, is portrayed as smarter or better. This is in contrast to the other characters, who are seen as nonsensical or evil.

Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog*, faces some different obstacles than the other princesses of color. Tiana, the heroine, spends most of the film as a frog (57 of the 97 minutes), and her friend, Charlotte, takes on the stereotypical princess role in this film. However Sarita Gregory, with a Ph.D. in Political Science, writes in her article for *The Journal of African American Studies* that Tiana’s spending so much time as an animal “does not really move us beyond the stereotypical image of black women as invisible or as solely attached to labor” (433). This is evident in Tiana’s sole role as Charlotte’s best friend and hard work being the most prominent character trait in Tiana. Ajay Gehlewat adds to this argument saying that what is actually being praised in this film “is the representation of a black girl as an animal” (418), which dehumanizes Tiana and contributes to the same harmful ideologies Gregory described above. Anna Wertenbruch also points out in her book, *The Representation of Blackness in Walt Disney’s “The Princess and the Frog”*, that “Disney’s attempt to create a black princess and represent New Orleans’ racial plurality through African American stereotypes and cultural clichés in a film, such as beignet and voodoo, is also problematic” (3). As discussed earlier, this
film was praised for being racially diverse and for having the first African American princess, yet the diversity presented in this film still promotes stereotypes. As discussed in Gehlewat’s article, *The Princess and the Frog* tries to elide race and portrays New Orleans in 1920 as a racial melting pot of acceptance, which is far from the truth (417). In a few scenes, racial disparity is acknowledged, but, for the most part, race is elided in a setting where it would have greatly affected Tiana. For example, at the end of the film Tiana is able to fulfill her dreams, and she builds a restaurant. This ending scene doesn’t address the harsh reality of segregation laws at that time, which would have had quite an impact on Tiana’s business. Once again, Disney disregarded historical fact to make their story work.

Disney did not have to feature its first black princess in an era where blatant racism was rampant. However, frequently, the princesses of color have to justify their existence in the film they are featured in. They cannot simply exist; they must be set in an era that highlights their culture, or their story is directly taken from historical context, as with Pocahontas and Mulan. This is opposed to the white princesses whose settings are usually not defined; they exist in fairytale worlds.

Since some of the stories of the princesses of color are based on real women, the drastically distorted depictions that Disney gives its audience disrespect that woman and her culture. Kent and Buescher point out that in its stories that feature princesses of color, Disney gives the illusion of being progressive by inundating their heroines with American ideals and values, which is why they get a lot of praise for films with racially diverse casts, but they actually are upholding oppression by appropriating the cultures they present in the films with princesses of color (35). Ashley Talley writes in her article for the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, an organization that founded Black History Month and continues to be an international
resource on black culture, that American beliefs and truths are seen as more valuable in the films that feature princesses of color. Talley expresses that in the stories with princesses of color, a common theme is the disregard for that princess’ culture and beliefs. By disregarding her culture, the princess is able to become a protagonist by favoring American culture instead of her own (Talley 223). Not only is this disrespectful to the cultures Disney has appropriated, it “works to…promote themes of colonialism and American supremacy” (Talley 223). These are subtle themes in the films, and it could be argued that Disney is just trying to make money and is selling what is popular. However, for a company with such a large influence, they have the social responsibility to make better choices in how they portray other cultures.

Disney has done this successfully in the past, and even in the problematic films with princesses of color, there are still positive elements to the films. Disney could counteract their controversial past by including more races and ethnicities in their princess films. Proper representation is important, and Disney would benefit from doing this. Hurley highlights the saliency of media in relation to children of color’s self-esteem. Disney would give children of color more representation, helping them to develop “a positive self-image”, which can be lost due to a lack of representation (Hurley 221). By giving proper recognition and including more cultures, ethnicities, and races in their films that honors them instead of appropriates them, Disney would actually earn the title of being progressive and racially diverse; their stories would be better and richer as well.

The Disney Princesses are an influential group whose stories continue to affect children across the world; therefore, it’s important for Disney to make their films racially inclusive. As discussed above, Disney’s audience had enough power to change Merida back to her original state after her controversial redesign. It’s possible for big change to take place, and if it was demanded
of them, Disney would make more of an effort to give proper representation to all races and ethnicities. Perhaps, in the near future, this kind of social change in such an impactful section of media can take place, and the princesses of color will be equally represented.

Bibliography


