

# Contemporary Portrayals of Race in Disney Animated Movies

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Sveučilišni diplomski studij  
Anglistika; smjer: znanstveni

**Leona Krznar**

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Contemporary Portrayals of Race in Disney Animated Movies

Diplomski rad

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Zadar, 2024.



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Zadar, 12. ožujka 2024.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

For a century, Disney has been providing audiences with magical stories and beloved characters, making people dream and wonder while being immersed in fairy tales. But beneath it all, there is a complex topic that is going to be the main theme of this master's thesis, and that is the question of race and racial stereotypes that have been and still may be portrayed in Disney movies. Since Disney films have a great impact on generations of viewers and help them shape their perceptions of race, culture, and diversity, they are of great importance. It is not only a question of entertainment but also of portraying societal values and ideals. Therefore, this thesis shall examine Disney's representation of such a complex topic as race.

This work focuses on the most successful eras in the cinematic history of Disney movies, specifically the Renaissance period and the Revival era. The aim of this paper is to analyze the representation of race in Disney movies and the possible changes in the representation and discourse regarding racial and ethnic differences throughout various movies from the so-called Renaissance period up until the Revival era, to discuss whether racial inclusivity became more prominent in Disney movies. In the first section of the paper, information about the studio's history will be provided and in the second section concepts and terms such as representation, imagology, culture, identity, race and ethnicity will be explained. The third part of the paper focuses on the analysis in which six Disney movies chosen as representatives of specific production eras, the Renaissance and the Revival eras, will be analyzed regarding the representation of race. The movies analyzed are *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Moana* (2016), *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) and *Encanto* (2021). The first two movies are part of the Revival period of Disney production and the others were produced in the Renaissance era.

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Walt Disney Studio was founded in 1923 by Walter Disney and his brother Roy, four years after the character Mickey Mouse was born. What is important to note is that Disney's journey began during the times of social and cultural change in the United States, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which was characterized by questions of racial inequality, ethnicity, and social problems. First it is important to mention the historical background of Disney moviemaking to be able to discuss the difference of racial portrayals now and then.

In 1937, the first Disney animated feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was made. The era was marked as Disney's Golden Age era when several successful adaptations were produced, such as *Dumbo*, *Bambi*, and *Pinocchio*. This era also marked a tumultuous period in American history that shaped the socio-cultural landscape (Wasko 39-40). Firstly, there was the Great Depression period which lasted from 1929 to 1939, a time when economic depression left millions of people unemployed and in turn, they tried to escape from poverty through entertainment which included movies. Therefore, both Hollywood and Disney played a significant role in helping people deal with the hardships. The 1930s not only marked Disney's Golden Age, but of all Hollywood. During those times many of the glamorous, famous films were made and major film studios started to emerge. It can be concluded that many movies of that time had a profound influence on society, their norms, which included race, since movies provided an escape from reality. Secondly, 1930s were not only marked by tough economic situation in the States, but also by racial segregation and discrimination because of disruption of the myth about American Dream. Now Caucasian people that used to be a part of the upper class found themselves on the same economic level as African Americans which caused dissatisfaction. Jim Crow laws<sup>1</sup>, which were introduced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, further enforced racial segregation and the mainstream media was overflowed with content based on stereotypes about African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and other minority groups (Wasko 41-43). Additionally, dwarfs in the famous animation *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* embodied racial stereotypes in their speech patterns and behaviors.

Disney almost bankrupted in 1941 which led them to filming propagandistic short films and feature films, one of which was *Song of the South*. *Song of the South* was made in 1946, during the War time era of production, and represents one of the most infamous examples of racial insensitivity in the studio's history. The story revolves around utopian post-slavery America where there is no racism, everybody is happy and live in unity and it was seen as culturally insensitive, because not only were African Americans depicted through stereotypes, their history, struggles, and racists past of the whole nation were somewhat ignored (Wasko 45-47). While the next, almost, two decades of Disney's production were considered as improvement from the previous period, change is not instant. This period is known as Disney's Silver Age and movies which left an impact considering the topic of race were *Lady and the*

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Crow was a term used in 19<sup>th</sup> century to refer to African Americans. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Jim Crow laws were introduced as a list of rules limiting the freedom of African Americans by separating them from Caucasian people in every aspect of life, oppressing them even after the abolition of slavery in 1865. For further information read *The Jim Crow Laws and Racism in United States History*.

*Tramp*, specifically the characters of the Siamese cats which portray negative stereotypes about East Asians and *The Jungle Book* in which monkeys are portraying African Americans (Wasko 51). The Bronze era, which lasted from 1970 to 1988, was not considered to be a period of success. The Disney company mostly focused on improving theme parks and building resorts, struggling with the movie production and technological development since Walt Disney's death in 1966. The most memorable movies from that period are *The Aristocrats*, *Robin Hood*, *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*. However, after the last movie of the period, *Oliver and Company*, was considered a failure, new era of Disney production began (Wasko 55).

The Disney Renaissance marked the beginning of decades of success for Disney which continued to this day. Starting in 1989 with the movie *The Little Mermaid*, the success of Disney in the beginning of the 1990s was unmatched by others. The era was marked by movies such as *Beauty and the Beast*, which was a huge success, *Aladdin*, which will be analyzed in this thesis for its stereotypical portrayal of race, *The Lion King*, a successful movie which was criticized for its stereotypical representation of race through animals. In spite of that, Disney's popularity began to drop with the emergence of new studios. For instance, Pixar and DreamWorks who used new technologies in their production and managed to overtake Disney with the release of *Toy Story* and *The Rugrats Movie*. Thus, *Pocahontas* was overlooked for disfiguring American history. The last fruitful movies of the Renaissance period are *Mulan*, who was praised for being progressive but criticized for westernizing Chinese culture, and *Tarzan* (Wasko 228-229). The next period again marked a difficult time for the studio.

From 1999 until 2008, Disney entered the Post Renaissance era known for its variety of genres and films. Some of the movies released during the era were *The Emperor's New Groove*, *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, *Lilo and Stitch*, *Brother Bear*. Apart from *Lilo and Stitch*, in which Polynesian culture was represented, the movies were not gaining attention as they were during Disney's previous era, hence the studio faced possible bankruptcy. In 2006 Disney acquired Pixar and the situation was beginning to improve (Wasko 79). The last, and the most successful era of Disney's filmmaking is called the Revival era starting from 2009 up to now. By returning to making classic fairy tale musicals they released *The Princess and the Frog*, which featured the first African American princess. The movie was released the year of Barack Obama becoming a president, giving hope to minorities for better treatment. *The Princess and the Frog* was successful but faced criticism as shall be seen in the analysis of the movie. Every movie after was considered triumphant such as *Tangled*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Frozen*. Since the continuous work of movements as Black Lives Matter which advocated for racial equality, Disney also



became more inclusive, portraying different races and focusing on empowering women in movies as *Big Hero 6*, *Moana*, *Encanto* and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Wasko 230).

As some of the Disney's past productions were mentioned, one must have in mind the historical context. While there is no doubt the problem of race and racial stereotypes were present in the movies, they were also products of their time, meaning they reflected the norms and attitudes of the society of the specific time period, which has to be kept in mind analyzing the evolution of Disney's approach to race.

Throughout the paper we shall delve deeper into the filmography and explore how the studio adapted to the everchanging social landscape and whether it made efforts to challenge or perpetuate the racial norms of its era. Therefore, insight shall be gained into the studio's journey toward more inclusive storytelling. Before that, theoretical framework of the thesis shall be provided in more detail.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this chapter, the theory and definitions of concepts and terms relevant to this study, such as representation, imagology, culture, identity, race, and ethnicity, will be provided in detail.

#### **3.1. Representation and imagology**

First, the concept of culture shall be explained. It is not an easy task since this concept is multifaceted and has been extensively discussed across various fields of study. In his book, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall mentions that:

Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of things- novels and paintings or TV programs and comics - as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings – the 'giving and taking of meaning' - between the members of a society or group (2).

He explores the concept of representation in culture, emphasizing the importance of shared meanings and language in producing and exchanging meaning within a culture. According to Hall, representation involves using language to produce meaning about the world for others to understand (17). Representation encompasses the use of signs and symbols to communicate ideas and emotions, shaping cultural identities and governing social conduct, language is simply one of the tools that allow the circulation of meaning within a culture through shared codes and active participation in the dialogue of representation (Hall 16). The second tool, or type of

representation is connected to “a set of concepts or mental representations which we carry around in our head” (Hall 17). What it refers to are the mental images of different abstract concepts, such as love, fear, hate, or actual material concepts which can be seen or touched, such as flowers, cups, money. Every person has these concepts stored in their mind which helps them connect. This similar view of the world is what makes people seemingly belong to the same culture. However, all concepts and ideas must be shared through some medium and that medium is a language. One could say representation serves as the link between concepts in our minds and language, enabling us to refer to both real and imaginary worlds. Seen as this process is not fixed, as meanings change across cultures and time periods, it requires translation due to cultural relativism (Hall 61). Therefore, one can conclude that representation, among other practices, creates culture.

What is more, the concept of “Othering”, in other words stereotyping, is also important for the thesis. Hall poses a great question of why does difference matter. The premise of his answer is that difference matters because it is essential to meaning and representation, as it is necessary for the construction of meaning through a dialogue with the “Other” (Hall 236). The marking of racial and ethnic difference makes the basis of the symbolic order which people call culture, and it is fundamental to cultural meaning. Furthermore, difference is powerful and captivating at same time exactly for the reason it is taboo, forbidden, and threatening to cultural order (Hall 236). But how is difference connected to stereotyping? One could say that without stereotypes there would be no representation of racial difference. According to Hall, stereotyping marks a process where a person is simplified to their most recognized characteristics which are then overstated and made permanent (258). In his words “stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’” (Hall 258). Furthermore, it maintains social order by classifying people into categories of what is acceptable and unacceptable, of those who belong and those who do not are labeled as “Other” (Hall 258). This fascination with “otherness” is linked with questions of power, since some people may or may not be accepted, and is often intertwined with other dimensions such as sexuality, gender, class (259).

Another study that deals with the analysis of stereotypes, in other words with constructed representations of groups or nations in literature, is imagology. Leerssen says that “the tendency to attribute specific characteristics or even characters to different societies, races or ‘nations’ is very old and very widespread” (Beller and Leerssen 17). Diversity is ubiquitous, when people encounter someone or something that is different it is automatically “Othered”, and media is one of the most popular outlets that provides people with images of diversity, as

well as forms worldviews and representations of others and themselves. Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen published the book *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: A Critical Survey* which contains various articles on this topic, which is why their work will be utilized to help determine stereotypical representations of other nations and ethnicities.

### **3.2. Concepts of race and ethnicity**

Even though many are familiar with the concepts of race, ethnicity, minority, multiculturalism, they will be discussed in depth in this chapter to avoid confusion.

Race is one of the most controversial, complex, and dynamic topics in social and political spheres around the world. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries many people perceived others thought what Michael Omi and Howard Winant referred to as “racial commonsense”, meaning that people’s race, culture, identity can be determined only by looking at another person, which is how division of people based on their physical traits started (60). Since then, researchers tried to classify people into categories of races and by the early twentieth century division into three main groups, Caucasian, Ethiopian and Mongolian, was accepted (Garcia 5). Thankfully, they realized this classification disregarded many people from other places and today race is no longer seen as biological concept. Today, race is a socio-historical concept and, as Omi and Winant concluded, racial labels vary around the globe based on the social attitudes and cultural believes of people (61). Garcia gives a definition of race as a “social construction that defines groups of humans based on arbitrary physical and/or biological traits that are believed to distinguish them from other humans” (16).

With the term race, comes an overlapping concept of ethnicity, or an ethnic group. Opposed to race which refers to the outside, an ethnic group asserts identity based on cultural factors, such as specific language, religion, dress codes and customs (Garcia 16). Therefore, ethnicity marks the degree of identification with a specific ethnic group and is highly variable. What is more, some people consider ethnicity as a key part of their identity while others show pride only symbolically since they can be encountered with discrimination and prejudice (Garcia 18). As well as race, the concept of ethnicity is socially constructed which occurred at specific moment in time for a specific reason, be it colonization or migration, and it is everchanging. The greatest trait of the United States is precisely this ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, but the treatment of minority groups is frowned upon since some people consider minorities should be able to freely express their ethnicity and cultural heritage while others

believe they should adapt to the majority. To deal with this issue and promote national unity three social philosophies have been developed (Garcia 19). First, assimilation which advocates for minorities to adapt to the mainstream society by abandoning their native culture so there could be unity among nations (Garcia 19). Another view is that of multiculturalism which says that cultural diversity is positive since it enriches a society, and differences should be encouraged. And third view is amalgamation, that is a society where all social and cultural barriers fade over time and minorities do not have to adjust to a majority, but they exchange each other's culture (Garcia 19). It is complicated to determine which of these philosophies prevails across the world, what is certain is that diversity is omnipresent and through this research paper it shall be shown whether Disney managed to portray different races and ethnicities in a better light.

### **3.3. The Concept of Identity**

As well as the previous concepts, the concept of identity is a complex topic. The main question one poses when considering identity is "who am I?" and the answer to this question varies from person to person according to factors of how one defines oneself, what is one's position in a group or how others categorize them, but one defines their identity in relation to the world around them. Many researchers offer their view on the notion of identity and many of them rely on the thought of theorist Erik Erikson. He was the one who recognized how important is cultural, social, and historical context for forming identity and wrote:

We deal with a process "located" in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture [...]. In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them (Erikson 22).

Tatum considers that, in this view, formation of identity takes place during adolescence since people can then reflect on the past, present and future selves and further develop themselves seeing as the concept of identity is also fluid (1). Oyserman and Oliver refer to this process as a self-concept (128).

Goffman differentiates three types of identity, those being personal, social and ego identity (qtd. in Lawler 8). However, for Lawler, society is the main factor for developing identity through the mutual interaction of a person and their surrounding environment together with social relations of the particular society (2). She avoids identifying in single categories,

since they intermingle (Lawler 7). According to Oyserman and Oliver, social identities include the fact that one is a member of a certain group, what the group values are, and what are the groups boundaries, in other words how do outsiders view the group (129). Connected to the social identity are racial and ethnic identities, moreover all of them draw on social interaction in the process of forming them.

Educator and psychologist, Beverly Daniel Tatum talks about aspects of identity which first gains attention. She gives an example of a question she poses to her students, to finish the sentence “I am...”. The conclusion she reaches is that they use many adjectives to describe themselves, but when considering racial or ethnic groups only minorities mention their distinctive groups and she says that dominant groups take that part of their identity for granted because dominant culture takes it for granted as well (2). So, what it all comes down to is dominance and power, and the dominant group determines the way subordinate group functions.

#### **4. REPRESENTATION OF RACE IN DISNEY ANIMATION**

Now that the theoretical framework has been established, the main part of the thesis will be presented. In this chapter, several animated Disney movies from two different eras of production will be analyzed by focusing on the representation of race. The purpose of the analysis is to see whether some changes occurred regarding the depiction of race in Disney movies.

##### **4.1. Aladdin (1992)**

The first movie being analyzed is *Aladdin* from the Renaissance period when more diverse characters began to appear. The plot is set in the fictional city of Agrabah revolving around Arabic culture. Issues considering the representation of race can be detected in the 1992 movie *Aladdin*.

Upon researching the representation of race in the movie, one does not have to search far. Right in the introductory part of the film, the lyrics of the original opening song say: “Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place/ Where the caravan camels roam/ Where they cut off your ear/ If they don’t like your face/ It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.” Naturally, many Arabs were offended by the lyrics, since they suggest that Arabs are violent people from a strange land, and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee prompted Disney to remove the song, but they only adjusted the lyrics by changing to “Where it’s flat and immense/ and the

heat is intense” and the adjective barbaric was kept (Giroux 2010). As was mentioned in the previous chapter, representation is about producing and exchanging meaning through various media, mainly language. Here the main media of representation is animation and one can see the use of such adjectives is an example of stereotypical representation of Arabs and their culture. This is problematic since it can lead children, who are impressionable members of the culture, to believe this image of Arabic culture as barbaric to be true, therefore they can feel ashamed to the point of suppressing their own identity.

This depiction of Agrabah, the fictional city where the story takes place, as barbaric is an example of what scholar Edward Said called Orientalism. During European colonization, Europeans encountered the lesser developed countries of the East and considered the newfound cultures and civilizations very exotic, hence the creation of Orientalism which meant the study of Orientals or “exotic” people (Said 9). Said argued that with these presumptions Europeans divided the world into two parts, the Orient, or the uncivilized East and the Occident, or the civilized West (Said 10). This generalization created a certain image of Arabs and Islamic countries, and it infused a bias in the European attitude, which is prevalent today, that the Orient is dignified, pre-modern, sensuous, suave, and ruthless (Beller and Leerssen 95). Jack G. Shaheen in his book *The TV Arab* analyzed how Arabs are represented in the media and concludes that they are either bombers or oil sheiks and women are either belly dancers or completely covered non-speaking. He commented *Aladdin* does not differ from the stereotypical portrayal of Arabic culture since Arabia is depicted as a savage land (Scheinin). Although the men in *Aladdin* are not portrayed as stereotypical characters Shaheen listed, most of them, mainly merchants, are portrayed as barbarians or Jafar as a mystical man hungry for power which is why he wants to marry Princess Jasmine.

In *Aladdin*, many elements of Middle Eastern and South Asian culture were blended and became what the West would call “the Orient”. As previously mentioned, the city of Agrabah is located near the river Jordan, as the opening song suggests it is Arabia, and the city consists of almost only the palace and the marketplace. Additionally, the fusion of elements, such as belly dancers and veiled women, mixing Indian culture considering that the Sultan’s palace resembles the Taj Mahal, or the tiger’s name Rajah, which means prince in Hindi, camels, pyramids, and desert mark the Western image of “the Orient”. By doing so, these symbols no longer represent their distinctive cultures, but are merged into a representation of the “Orient” marking all of them as “the Other” rather than recognizing their differences (Addison 7).

Furthermore, since ethnic groups form their identity on cultural factors, in this case, many might find themselves offended or not being able to identify due to the mixing of cultural elements.

Moreover, many Arab stereotypes can be detected in the representation of characters that show Western supremacy over the Eastern “Other”. Two protagonists, Aladdin and Jasmine are portrayed with a lighter skin tone than the other characters, with more Western facial features and American accents which makes the audience relate the “good” characters with these features (Addison 9). One can argue that skin tone has nothing to do with Westernization since there are various hues and tones of skin from light to dark, however, the difference between characters is evident in the use of language. Also, Aladdin is the only character without a beard enhancing his Americanized looks. Sultan is not Westernized, but he does not fall into the category of a stereotypical Arab. He possesses a British accent, a beard and wears a big turban but he is portrayed as a short, silly, naive old man who wants what is best for his daughter, not to mention he has white hair and beard, and wears white clothes as if to further enhance the difference between him and Jafar.

On the other hand, other male characters are opposites of Aladdin with bushy beards, big noses, a mean look, no sympathy for the poor, brutal and aggressive. For example, the unsympathetic depiction of merchants threatening to cut off Jasmine’s hand because she gave a hungry boy an apple, or the guards chasing Aladdin through the city because he was hungry and stole a loaf of bread. Additionally, the main antagonist, Jafar, here represents the “bad” Arab with his beard, darker skin tone, turban, British accent, and power-hungry personality (Addison 10). Moreover, Jafar also desires to marry Princess Jasmine meaning she will stay trapped inside the palace while she wants to escape the tradition and become a sultan herself. Addison argues that Jasmine is depicted as an isolated woman with Jafar being fixated on her and she is a slave to an Arab-Islamic social order which urges the viewers to save her (12). Her savior is none other than Americanized Aladdin who shows her “a whole new world”. Another argument Addison gives is that Princess Jasmine is a modern type of woman, smart and she believes in herself which is why Arab men are confused and annoyed by her and American men are attracted to her (14). Not only that, but whoever “owns” Jasmine owns the power, consequently putting Aladdin, or America, in charge of Agrabah, or Arabia since she chose him (Addison 14). This not only shows Eastern inferiority over the West but also diminishes the central feminine figure in the film.

The reactions to the 1992 version of *Aladdin* were divided. Critics loved the film, praising actor Robin Williams for his performance and the diversity of the movie since there are no white actors. However, in his 1993 online article *Angry over 'Aladdin'*, Scheinin provides commentary from people who are of Arabic or Muslim descent, and they do not agree mainly because of the portrayal of their culture and their people as stated above. Another Islamic scholar, Maher Hathout, stated his granddaughter was a fan of the film, but he was aware of Islamic stereotypes, and it being depicted as a cruel religion the whole movie (Scheinin). As Garcia mentioned, many people consider ethnicity a key part of their identity, thus it is understandable that Islamic people find themselves offended when their religion, customs and other ethnic elements are portrayed negatively and they cannot identify with what is being broadcasted.

Almost thirty years later, a live-action adaptation of the 1992 animated movie *Aladdin* was released with a few alterations. In the intro song, the lyrics were changed. The city of Agrabah is no longer called “barbaric”, but “chaotic”. The characters are still differentiated through accents, the protagonists keeping American accents and Jafar, the antagonist, keeping the British accent. Jasmine’s hand is no longer to be chopped off because she gave hungry children food, the scene was changed to the seller taking Jasmine’s bracelet for compensation. The scene with harem girls getting angry at Aladdin changed to him interrupting a school lesson and the teacher admonishing him for doing so which empowers Muslim women and changes their representation. Jasmine is more empowered in this version, and she is no longer by herself in the palace, she is with Dalia, her handmaiden. Even her clothes are less revealing and more fit for a princess in the film. Despite the changes made to the movie, members of the Islamic and Arabian cultures can still feel misrepresented and unable to identify with the movie.

#### **4.2. Pocahontas (1995)**

Two years later, in 1995 also during the Renaissance era, Disney released another movie with a diverse titular character by the name of *Pocahontas*. It was an attempt to delve into the historical narrative of Native American cultures through the lens of animation. While *Pocahontas* is celebrated for its animation, music, and efforts toward inclusivity, it has also been debated over its portrayal of Native American history and culture. This analysis aims to show racial representation in the film, as well as examine how the film navigates between historical accuracy and creativity. What is interesting is the duality of the movie: on one hand,



Disney is being praised for introducing Indigenous characters and themes; on the other, it is criticized for romanticizing history and inaccurate depiction of historical events and figures.

To fully grasp the significance of Disney's *Pocahontas* and its portrayal of racial representation, it is necessary to understand the historical context from which the story originates. Daniel K. Richter wrote about the story of the real Pocahontas, who was also known as Matoaka. She was born into the Powhatan Confederacy, what is now Virginia, in the late sixteenth century. Contrary to her depiction in the Disney movie, she was a child of about ten or eleven years old when she first encountered the English settlers and John Smith in Jamestown in 1607 (Richter 70). One might be curious as to why is this story problematic. Pocahontas' story is provided to the people through the lens of a European explorer, John Smith, and details about her life are shared from his perspective. Sāmi Ludwig in a chapter on the imagology of Native Americans comments on how Smith's description of Pocahontas became a great myth, saying: "Symbolically standing for the land, the Indian princess insinuates active choice in her preference for John Rolfe, a white husband, which translates into the right of English settlers to 'inherit' America from her father, the chief Powhatan." (qtd. in Beller and Leersson 83). Moreover, there have been many retellings of her life throughout history which might be confusing. Disney's *Pocahontas* simplifies and sanitizes these historical complexities to present a narrative that is more suitable for a broad audience, especially children. While the film attempts to celebrate the figure of Pocahontas as a peacemaker, it overlooks the broader context of colonization, cultural erasure, and the consequences of European settlement on Native Americans.

In the process of making the film, the production crew consulted specialists in Native American culture, such as historian Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow-McGowan and the voice actor Russell Means since both identified as Native Americans. However, Custalow-McGowan was saddened to find out about the changes that occurred in Pocahontas' story saying: "They really have it accurate about the heart and soul of our people, but they're not doing a film about the Powhatan Indians – they're doing a film about Pocahontas", concluding with the problem of historical inaccuracy (Rochman). None of the complaints would have arrived, if only Disney company did not mark the movie as authentic. Another problem with the movie is the use of the term "savage". Even though the term was used for both parties, Native Americans and English settlers, it is still deemed inappropriate considering its derogatory connotation. The lyrics of the song *Savages* go as follows: "What can you expect/ From filthy little heathens?/ Their whole disgusting race is like a curse/ Their skin's a hellish red/ They're only good when

dead/ They're vermin, as I said/ And worse" to which Native Americans reply with: "They're different from us/ Which means they can't be trusted/ We must sound the drums of war/ They're savages! Savages!". This way of equating the term with both English settlers and Native Americans consequently represents both parties as equally aggressive while the land they fought over was owned by Indigenous people. Moreover, the settlers knew people were living in the "new world" so it cannot be said they believed it was unoccupied territory. The term is even more derogatory when one considers Europeans referred to Native Americans as "noble savages" to oppress them, meaning they were once a great, independent culture that was now conquered by them. What is more, the lyrics of the song *Savages* describe the skin color of Native Americans as "hellish red" and call the whole race disgusting. One can argue the adjective "hellish red" insinuates the term redskins which is a derogatory term used to describe Native Americans based on their skin color, perpetuating a simplistic and racist stereotype.

Furthermore, as Glen Keane, the animator of Pocahontas, said the character of Pocahontas is not depicted as Native American but as a mix of non-white ethnicities (Edwards 152). He further explained how Pocahontas is the opposite of Ariel, yet she is also not American Indian but a part of a universal "human race" to which Edwards comments with "her long, angular facial structure, pert nose, almond-shaped eyes, and flowing waist-length hair he successfully made her visual "Other" in a movie about her" (152). Jean Gillmore, a costume designer in the movie said they researched historical documents about Native Americans and consulted specialists in the field with regards to not wanting Pocahontas' character to look stereotypically Indian with fringed dresses and feathers, her overall appearance is far from the ten, eleven-year-old girl from the history (Rebello 117). One can argue that her eroticized body and goddesslike beauty in the movie is what stopped John Smith from killing her and marked the beginning of a love story that brought peace to both worlds. In that sense, Pocahontas has more power in this movie than any other female character in Disney movies and judges the colonization of the "new world".

Just like in *Aladdin*, the Anglo-Americans are to be depicted as "good" characters. Even though Pocahontas is Native American, when she encountered John Smith, she was able to speak English with the help of Grandmother Willow, or the willow tree she frequently visited to seek guidance. This spirituality of Indigenous people could be argued as a representation of mysterious "Otherness". Also, among all the settlers John Smith is the only one with an American accent. The movie constantly reminds the viewers that settlers are Englishmen with remarks about them bringing wealth to England and the Queen. A possible reason for that is to

not offend any Anglo-Americans or accuse them of being racist. Leigh Edwards examined this Amero-centric coding of the characters while criticizing Pocahontas' and Smith's separation at the end of the film claiming that the scene encouraged attitudes against diversity to keep the harmony between two ethnicities, while in the actual story of Pocahontas, they married each other encouraging miscegenation (158).

### 4.3. The Princess and the Frog (2009)

Moving onto the more contemporary Disney movies, 2009 marked the beginning of the Revival era with the release of *The Princess and the Frog* which was warmly welcomed seeing as the main protagonist is the first African American princess by the name of Tiana. Just as *Pocahontas*, the movie is set in the United States, in this case in 1920s New Orleans, making it more susceptible to criticism from American audiences. While the film has been praised for its groundbreaking representation and challenging longstanding stereotypes, it has also faced criticism, receiving the adjective controversial for its handling of racial themes, the depiction of its characters, and the narrative choices that carry Tiana's journey.

The movie refers to the classic fairy tale *The Frog Prince* with a focus on Tiana, a young African American woman who works hard to fulfill her dream of owning a restaurant. Half an hour into the movie, the plot twists. She meets Prince Naveen of Maldonia, who Dr. Facilier turned into a frog, at a masquerade ball and he asks her to kiss him so he can be human again. After kissing him, Tiana becomes a frog and their adventure of finding themselves begins. Together they defeat the voodoo sorcerer Dr. Facilier, get their happily ever after and Tiana opens her restaurant.

As was already stated above the movie was released in 2009 which coincided with Barack Obama becoming president. Moffitt stated how the election of President Obama brought optimism to American society, especially in the aspect of race and racial progress, which is why one can imagine the elation of viewers when they saw the first African American Disney princess who not only had a brown complexion but was also very independent, with a clear goal in mind and was not looking for a prince to save her (2). Following several criticisms after the release of *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas*, the studio paid great attention to racial representation by consulting the NAACP and made the necessary changes according to their criticism regarding Tiana's name, which was changed from Maddy, and her place of employment, which was changed from chambermaid to a waitress (McCoy Gregory 442). After watching *The Princess and the Frog*, the main issue of the film is that Tiana spends most of the movie as a frog rather

than a human which elides her race giving precedence to Charlotte who many view as the real princess of *The Princess and the Frog*. The reason why many children might confuse Charlotte as the real princess lies in the fact that her father is referred to as the King of the Parade, around which the plot of the movie revolves, consequently making Charlotte the princess, as well as the fact that she dresses like one. Furthermore, at the masquerade ball organized by Charlotte's father as well, Tiana is there working while Charlotte is dressed in a princess gown awaiting her prince. Besides the fact that the first African American princess is portrayed as a frog, one can question the studio's choice of making Tiana a waitress instead of a real royalty, but then again Cinderella was not of royal descent either. Another issue raised in the movie is considering the ethnicity of Prince Naveen who many believe is not African American due to his lighter skin tone, which was further emphasized by the fact he was voiced by a Brazilian voice actor. While Disney claims that the prince is not Caucasian, some viewers are disappointed in Disney for not portraying a black couple (Lester 301). In this case, it can be argued that Disney was reluctant to provide the viewers with a powerful black couple since they are part of a minority, and the dominant group might feel threatened by the power given to the minority.

Moreover, Tiana breaks every mold that was tied to being a Disney princess up to 2009. The fact that she is so independent, not searching for a prince and working hard to achieve her dreams is commendable. However, the stereotypical depiction of African Americans as physical workers at the peak of the Jim Crow era is visible here. Unlike the white housewives, black women were majorly a part of the workforce, mainly working as maids, nannies, and cooks; they were related to struggle, work, and pain (McCoy Gregory 444). Both Tiana and her mother are in the center of the working force which is obtained from the history of Black women being subservient (Moffitt 9). Even so, they are pictured living a happy life in their small community outside of the city full of happy people cooking gumbo, on one hand being segregated from other citizens, however, they do not seem to suffer from discrimination given it is the Jim Crow era; Tiana, with her dream of becoming a restaurateur, her mother being the best seamstress of all New Orleans, them being close to Charlotte, all of which was highly unlikely considering the era. Moffitt argues this is a representation of a colorblind society that suggests race is not an issue but one should focus on their dreams (10). Supporting this statement are lyrics of the song *Dig a Little Deeper*: "Don't matter what you look like/ Don't matter what you wear, / How many rings you got on your finger/ We don't care, No!, We don't care!/ Don't matter where you come from/ Don't even matter what you are/ A dog, a pig, a cow,

a goat/ We got ‘em all in here!” By depicting a happy, united society during the 1920s in New Orleans, one can argue that Disney inadvertently diminished the suffering of African American people during that period.

Compared to the African American characters in the film, one can find caricatured representations of white characters who provide comic relief. One of those characters is Charlotte LaBouff, a rich Caucasian girl, one can think of her as the Southern belle, who was supposed to marry Prince Naveen. Moffitt argues that even though this was not supposed to be “an interracial buddy film”, it is seen as one for the reason that it is “necessary to create a space for Tiana in the sea of whiteness of Disney Princess movies” (11). McCoy Gregory argues the same thing in her article while discussing the representation of African American and Caucasian characters saying, “the film suggests that the audience is to embrace Tiana as a black princess” (438). Because Charlotte is somewhat familiar to the audience, coming from a rich background with her dream of finding her true love, her prince, while dressing in pink princess gowns all of which is exaggerated so the viewers would favor Tiana, also allows them to see how “the privileged “I” and the “oppositional Other”” functions (Moffitt 12). Another objection to be made is why Tiana is not given a decent opponent but a caricatured one. Even though African Americans in *The Princess and the Frog* are given positive characteristics the question is why they cannot be represented without being compared to or being put in opposition to Caucasian characters. Not only Charlotte, but almost all white characters in the movie are caricatured, including Charlotte’s father Eli “Big Daddy” LaBouff, the frog hunters chasing Tiana and Prince Naveen through the swamp, and the real estate agents, who even went so far as to tell Tiana to stick with she knows best when she wanted to put a deposit down for a restaurant. Because African Americans are put in opposition to parodied Caucasians instead of making them equals, it insinuates that they cannot win against white characters.

#### **4.4. Moana (2016)**

Among the diverse characters of Disney’s animated legacy, in 2016 *Moana* emerged as a vibrant addition to the Revival era movies, weaving together the rich cultural heritage of Polynesia with the universal themes of identity, adventure, and self-discovery. As Disney’s first attempt into the myths and cultures of the Pacific Islands, *Moana* represents a crucial moment in the studio’s ongoing journey towards more inclusive and authentic cultural representation. At the heart of the movie is Moana, a young Polynesian woman who embarks on an epic voyage across the ocean, challenging both the physical and societal boundaries that confine her.

Through her story, Disney attempts not only to entertain but also to pay homage to the traditions, values, and history of the Polynesian people.

As was presented in the sections above, Disney's previous attempts at racial inclusion were not regarded as successful by some critics. Therefore, when expressing their interest in creating a movie about Pacific communities, Disney established the Oceanic Story Trust which consisted of experts on Pacific Islander culture who provided critical feedback to the production team and helped in guiding the project. The members were from various parts of the Islands, and all were actively providing input. For example, Disney originally wanted to make Maui hairless which they changed at the urging of Tahitian members; members also negotiated that Moana should not be wearing a ceremonial headdress or tuiga, which Disney production mistook for a crown, for the whole duration of the movie since it is reserved for special rituals; they also consulted Samoan master tattooist considering the placement and motifs of Maui's tattoos, since tattoos are a massive part of the Pacific Islander culture (Tamaira and Fonoti 315-316). Not only that, but the Indigenous people of the Pacific Islands were wayfinders, however, they stopped with their voyages for an unknown reason. The story is also included in the film with some creative freedom since the reason for their long pause is unknown, which is how the viewers are introduced to Maui, Te Fiti and Te Ka. While many viewers praised the movie as a great depiction of the culture, it did receive its share of criticism.

As Leerssen notices, the reputation the Pacific Islands have is of a subtropical idyll with blue crystal water, white beaches and coconut trees, and this scene of a perfect paradise is present in most movies about Pacific Islands, not only Disney movies (qtd. in Beller and Leerssen 220). Criticism stems from the commercialization of the region, especially Polynesia, by creating these types of images which are present in *Moana* as well. The point was further emphasized when Disney started building resorts consequently ruining the idyll and flora and fauna. That is one way of seeing it, however, Vaimoana Tapaleao described her backyard exactly as it could be seen on screen: "The Polynesia depicted in the film is an animated yet mirror image of our backyard. The glittering see-through ocean looks like the one the village kids splash in behind my mum's family fale [house] in Savaii. ... The way the lava meets the sea [...] yeah, it is magical, but it is also our reality (qtd. in Tamaira and Fonoti 302)". Therefore, it cannot completely be argued that *Moana* was made for commercial purposes and economic gains, but one can focus on the fact it is a picture of someone's homeland and they feel a sense of belonging, the scenery is part of one's identity.

The majority of criticism also came from Indigenous Pacific anthropologists through a Facebook page *Mana Moana*, and it was also directed at the members of the Trust labeling them as “sell-outs” even before the release of the movie (Tamaira and Fonoti 317). The group of anthropologists claimed that the god Maui was represented as an obese character with a mischievous and arrogant personality as if to represent the stereotype of Pacific Islanders as obese, or the negative representation of goddess Pele, who is a part of Hawaiian heritage, as a “Lava Monster”; also the Halloween costume of Maui consisting of a colored skinned suit, grass skirt and a wig, which received the most criticisms as commodification of Pacific identity and was immediately removed from the stores and Disney issued an apology (Tamaira and Fonoti 298). Since Maui is a part of the Polynesian culture and identity as a real deity, one can understand the related criticism of Disney’s Maui. In the movie, Maui can be interpreted as a comical sidekick to Moana, like Charlotte is in *The Princess and the Frog*, which is problematic considering that this cultural misappropriation of Maui may take precedence in the Western world over the real image of the demigod. Not only that, in the beginning of the movie he is depicted negatively because the fictional island of Motonui, and its ecosystem, is dying since he stole the heart of Te Fiti. To restore the peace, Moana embarks on a journey to find Maui so they can return the heart where it belongs. During the journey Maui teaches Moana how to navigate the ship with the help of stars and ocean currents, her late grandmother reincarnates as a stingray to encourage her, also the fact that Moana is greatly connected to the ocean are all elements that can be found in Polynesian culture making this a correct representation of the ethnicity. However, Te Fiti and Te Ka are not a representation of the goddess Pele, they are fictional characters made to enhance the Disney magic. Moreover, one might notice the appearance of Kakamoras, or the coconut-like creatures that attack Moana and Maui on their voyage. This negative representation of Kakamoras, who were real creatures, might be problematic because coconut is a very important element in Polynesian culture because of its broad variety of uses. Another problem arising with the release of the movie is plastic waste related to the merchandise which is likely to finish in the ocean therefore endangering the ecosystem of the Pacific Islands.

Furthermore, one can argue that the movie presents a generalized picture of the Islands with the focus on Polynesia overshadowing Melanesia and Micronesia which can lead to identity crisis since people cannot envision themselves in the representation of Pacific Islanders as can be seen on television. However, when discussing the representation of Polynesian characters, it is difficult to identify any “Othering” or ethnic stereotyping as in *Aladdin* or

*Pocahontas*. All characters are Polynesian and there is no differentiation between Moana as a main character and princess, and other characters as is the case in *Aladdin*, therefore, there is no ground for claiming that a culture is being “Othered”. While Moana’s grandmother is portrayed as quirky and differing from other villagers, she is not portrayed stereotypically, nor does she differ in terms of skin color or the language she uses. Even the soundtrack was co-written by Opetaia Foa’i of the Polynesian group Te Vaka and sung in Samoan and Tokelauan languages. Furthermore, many women Islanders celebrate the character of Moana for giving them a voice since patriarchal hegemony is a continuous problem for Pacific women (Tamaira and Fonoti 309). *Moana*, having not only one but three strong women as characters in the movie, provides empowerment to female audiences regardless of race, but especially to Pacific women.

#### **4.5. Raya and the Last Dragon (2021)**

In 2021 Disney expanded in their diversity of characters by releasing a movie about a Southeast Asian princess Raya. Similarly when writing *Moana*, they established Southeast Asian Story Trust to provide the viewers with authentic material, and to avoid the misuse or distortion of cultural elements. However, the movie still received criticism considering the lack of Southeast Asian cast members, and for homogenizing several cultures from the Southeast Asian region.

In *Raya and the Last Dragon*, Raya’s adventure unfolds across the five diverse regions of Kumandra, a fantastical realm shaped like a dragon. Her region, Heart, is a peaceful and magical area known for its prosperity. Then there is Fang, a wealthy and formidable region encircled by water. Spine, known for its secluded nature and the local’s wariness of strangers, contrasts sharply with Talon, a vibrant hub and trading center at the meeting point of all regions. Lastly, Tail is a remote desert region gradually becoming more secluded as its water supply dwindles. Each of these regions boasts its own distinctive culture and array of mystical creatures, adding to Kumandra’s rich tapestry. Viewers notice elements of the Vietnamese, Indonesian, Singaporean, Thai, Malaysian, Cambodian and Laotian cultures by which the movie was inspired, still, there are no clear differences between the cultures. One of the writers of the film, Qui Nguyen, answered that “the easy thing we could have done was, this land in Kumandra was Thailand, this was Vietnam, this one’s Malaysia, but then it gets into a really ugly place of going, oh, well, this country is bad, and this one’s good, and our hero’s from here.” (Moon). Therefore, to avoid portraying one culture as villainous since it is the nature of the film, the decision was made to mix the elements of all cultures. While one can argue that



this decision did not satisfy the viewers' desires for representation of their culture, it can also be argued it was necessary to avoid negative representation. Director Carlos Lopez Estrada commented: "We're making a movie that is inspired by the cultures of Southeast Asia, and we want to make sure that when people from the region see this, [...], they can feel the love and respect the team had for the incredible real places that inspired us." (Nguyen). Hall says that racial and ethnic difference is essential for culture, it is important for representation and meaning (236). While differences can lead to stereotyping, one cannot claim that *Raya and the Last Dragon* is an example of stereotypization. Since the movie is a mixture of cultural elements of various Southeast Asian ethnicities, the term amalgamation can be applied here, in other words, no culture is forced to adjust to another culture, rather they make a society where they overcome cultural barriers and exchange each other's culture. The fracturing of Kumandra into distinct tribes due to mistrust mirrors real-world issues of division due to ethnic, regional, or national identities. The quest to reunite Kumandra symbolizes the potential for overcoming these divisions through understanding and trust, which is portrayed in the movie when all tribes come together after years of separation and animosity and create a unified society to fight off the evil spirit.

Despite the criticism, many viewers supported the movie and its efforts to include Southeast Asian culture in the princess realm. It features an array of Southeast Asian traditions and cultures, with meticulous attention given to aspects such as attire, martial arts, settings, and cuisine, all of which are likely to be warmly received and celebrated by many Southeast Asians. For example, all the characters are of Asian descent, and despite the slight nuances in their appearance, there is no example of "Othering". Additionally, each of the regions in Kumandra has its own clothing design. Raya can be seen wearing a traditional Cambodian costume Sampot and a traditional Indonesian and Philippine hat, one of the other tribes wears clothes with the popular Indonesian Batik technique. The architecture is also reminiscent of Southeast Asian countries with floating markets, Gadang-style houses, or Indonesian hut houses. Even the fighting style of Raya and Namaari is representational of Thailand's Muay Thai and Indonesian martial arts with the keris sword which was recognized by UNESCO as a weapon from Indonesian culture. Consequently, *Raya and the Last Dragon* can be seen as a celebration of multiculturalism, it aims to highlight the importance of unity within diversity, promoting mutual respect.

#### **4.6. Encanto (2021)**

The last film that will be a part of this study is Disney's *Encanto* from 2021 portraying a Colombian family. As with most movies that are part of the modern Disney Revival era, the reactions to *Encanto* are divided. Some viewers praise the movie for the portrayal of Colombian people and picturesque scenery while others disagree.

When thinking about Latinos in movies in general as well as in Disney movies, they are often depicted through the lens of stereotypes. There are mainly two types of representation of Latinos which are either a macho man, an example of which is the character of El Macho from the movie *Despicable Me 2*, or the bandit, which is portrayed in the character of a chihuahua named Tito from *Oliver and Company* (Peraza). Disney also frequently employs exaggerated accent to portray Latino characters, reinforcing stereotypes. Another stereotype of a Latin lover emerges in the movie *Toy Story 3* when the settings of Buzz Lightyear switch to Spanish mode and he tries to seduce Jessie (Peraza). Furthermore, as with using Asians as an umbrella term for the whole of East and Southeast Asia, people assume when one uses the word Latino, they are mostly describing Mexicans which consequently erases all other Spanish-speaking countries with their own distinct cultures. Regarding the representation of Colombians in movies, they are mostly seen as narco bosses prominent for Pablo Escobar as many movies and series were made based on his life. The movie *Encanto* completely changes that view.

As has become a common practice in recent Disney movies where the heroes are diverse characters, they established a Colombian Cultural Trust of researchers. However, here the production team also included Disney employees who are a part of Latino culture, called Familia, to provide them with ideas and feedback on the movie. The movie centers on the Madrigal family, specifically Alma Madrigal who had to leave her home due to a violent conflict. She managed to save her three children, but her husband did not survive. Overwhelmed by grief, Alma held onto a candle that was guiding her, which mysteriously gained magical powers. This candle is the source of the supernatural abilities of the family members, however, there is one granddaughter who was not bestowed the powers, and her name is Mirabel. The members of the Trust again traveled all over Colombia in search of inspiration and authentic representation and they even encouraged the writers not to shy away from the conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia since it is part of their history (Zornosa).

However, Camilo Garzón in his online article argued how Disney's Colombia represents an idealized place, that it reminds him of home but does not make him feel like he is home. As *Raya* is a mixture of Southeast Asian cultures and nations, he believes the village in *Encanto* is

a mix of various sites in Colombia instead of one. As Hall explained, representation is connected to concepts or mental images in one's head (17). When people imagine Colombia's landscape, they often picture favelas, and Pablo Escobar is usually the first association they make with its people. However, this animated film challenges the way people perceive Colombia. The fictional village where the movie is set is a mix of different cities, yet it is executed with utmost care for the culture. Cobble streets and houses painted with vibrant colors, the creators were careful even when choosing flora and fauna to be reminiscent of Colombia. Even though, some viewers and critics argue that the movie depicts a harmonious society without racism, as in *The Princess and the Frog*, which does not reflect the real experience of Colombians, others praise the range of skin tones and features reflective of Colombia's diverse population, which is most prominent in the characters of Pepa, who is a Mestizo, and Felix, who is Afro-Colombian. Characters in *Encanto* represent the ethnic complexity and richness of Colombia, moving away from the simplistic racial representations often seen in media.

On the other hand, journalist Laura Zornosa took her Colombian father, who escaped when conflicts with guerrilla groups began, to see the movie. Both were moved by the details in the movie, from the scenery, the cuisine, and the music to the fiercely protective grandmother, who Zornosa in her online article says resembles her great-grandmother. Distancing themselves from cartels, *Encanto* focuses on something more valuable for Colombians, family. Large families are typical for Colombians and in the movie, Mirabel introduces the viewers to every member of the Madrigal family without excluding anyone or portraying them stereotypically. Family relations are what particularly resonated with Colombian viewers, distinctly the feeling of not belonging to one's own family.

Disney also provided the viewers with details about Colombian culture. Regarding the cuisine, Mirabel's mother has the power to cure anyone with food and she usually prepares traditional Colombian cornmeal cake called arepa. Not only arepas appear; when the family is eating breakfast one can find a variety of tropical fruits, buñuelos or dough fritters. During the dinner, when Mirabel discovers that the family's magic is dwindling, the Madrigals enjoy Colombian soup ajiaco with a variety of side dishes. Furthermore, the family's clothing is authentic to Colombian culture as well. The women in the family are adorned in vividly colored skirts with round-necked blouses matched with alpargatas, or espadrilles, which can be seen in the opening scene when Mirabel is getting ready to leave the house. She also wears a wayuu bag typical of Colombian culture. Although the movie is not in Spanish and the main spoken

language is English, many Spanish words were infused into the language to include both English and Spanish speakers, bilingual speakers to be specific. All the abovementioned elements are authentic representations of the Colombian culture and ethnicities providing Colombians with a movie they can identify with.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Disney studio has been producing movies for a century, impacting children's and adults' perceptions of the world. The aim of the paper was to research the representation of various races, ethnicities, and cultures in Disney movies. Even though the concepts are complex and ever-changing, they all intermingle and form one's identity. Since Disney has been active for a century, the studio has seven production eras, however, the movies analyzed in the paper are from the Renaissance and Revival eras which are coincidentally the most successful ones. What marked these eras is the inclusivity of different races.

First, two movies from the Renaissance period were analyzed. The first one is *Aladdin* (1992) which was criticized for the stereotypical representation of Arabic and Islamic cultures. Even though the movie was successful, it was offensive to the members of the culture who were unable to identify with their own culture being depicted in the movie. The next analyzed movie was *Pocahontas* (1995). Although Disney wanted to be inclusive by producing a movie about Native Americans, they consequently distorted historical events by focusing on the romantic aspect of the movie, simplifying history for the sake of the younger audience.

The next four movies are all contemporary, part of the Revival era of production. *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) produced the first African American princess. In Disney movies from previous eras, there are few characters of African American descent portrayed. While *The Princess and the Frog* is somewhat problematic in terms of racial portrayal it is still more fair than previously analyzed films, seeing as there is no clear racial stereotyping present and racial minority is fairly portrayed. Still, the question is whether an African American princess was created simply for the purpose of doing so. With *Moana* (2016) the studio brings a culturally sensitive animation with the help of the Oceanic Story Trust. With this movie, Disney attempted to honor the traditions, values, and history of Polynesian people, however, some issues can still be found with the portrayal of the demigod Maui and coconut-like creatures Kakamoras. Furthermore, while one can argue *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) is not a representation of any particular Southeast Asian culture, it can also be seen as a celebration of multiculturalism. The last movie *Encanto* (2021) represents Colombian culture. Colombia has been associated

mainly with cartels and Pablo Escobar; thus, *Encanto* is a positive representation of the country focusing on family values. To portray the culture as authentically as possible, Disney established a Trust as with *Moana* and there is no “Othering” or stereotypization in the movie.

To conclude, race and identity are current and sensitive topics. Recent events and movements have encouraged society to discuss such topics and develop critical thinking to fight against stereotypes and prejudices. In examining racial representation in Disney films, it becomes clear that the company’s portrayal of diverse characters has evolved significantly over time. Historically, Disney's early works often featured characters and narratives that reinforced racial stereotypes, reflecting broader societal prejudices of their respective eras. However, in recent decades, Disney has made efforts to diversify its character roster and tell stories that resonate with a wider range of audiences.

Movies such as *Moana* (2016) and *Encanto* (2021) illustrate the studio’s commitment to more accurate and respectful representations of different cultures. They celebrate the richness of diverse traditions as well as provide leading roles for characters of various racial backgrounds, presenting the viewers with a more inclusive environment. As Hall said, racial and ethnic differences are necessary for the creation of culture, therefore they should be celebrated not used to diminish one another.

Even though there are some deviations in positive and negative sense, Disney movies have become more progressive in representing different races and ethnicities, as well as culturally sensitive. Overall, Disney’s journey towards more inclusive storytelling is ongoing. The company has shown a willingness to learn and adapt, and its recent efforts indicate a promising direction. By continuing to listen to diverse voices and prioritize authentic representation, Disney has the potential to not only entertain but also educate and inspire audiences around the world, contributing positively to the broader topic of racial diversity and inclusion in media.

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## **7. Contemporary Portrayals of Race in Disney Animated Movies: Summary and key words**

This master's thesis explores the complex topic of race and racial stereotypes in Disney movies. Given Disney's significant impact on societal values and ideals, the representation of race in the studio's films is crucial. The thesis focuses on the Renaissance and Revival eras, analyzing changes in the portrayal of racial and ethnic differences to determine if racial inclusivity has become more prominent. The paper is divided into three sections: the studio's history, an explanation of key concepts such as representation, identity, race, and ethnicity, and an analysis of six Disney movies. The movies selected from the Renaissance era include *Aladdin* (1992) and *Pocahontas* (1995), while those from the Revival era are *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Moana* (2016), *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), and *Encanto* (2021). While racist portrayals can be found in the earlier Disney animation, after receiving a great deal of criticism, the studio made significant changes in the production and writing of modern films. In examining racial representation in Disney films, the analysis showed that the company's portrayal of diverse characters has changed significantly over time, reflecting broader societal changes and increasing efforts toward inclusivity.

Key words: Disney, race, representation, change

## **8. Suvremeni prikaz rase u Disney animiranim filmovima: Sažetak i ključne riječi**

Glavna tema ovog rada je analiza reprezentacije rasa u Disney animiranim filmovima. S obzirom na velik utjecaj Disney filmova u društvu, način na koji prikazuju različite rase također je iznimno važan. Rad se fokusira na analizu filmova nastalih tijekom dva razdoblja Disneyjeve produkcije kroz pojmove reprezentacije, identiteta, rase i etniciteta, a ti su filmovi *Aladin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Vaiana: Potraga za mitskim otokom* (2016), *Raya i posljednji zmaj* (2021) i *Encanto: Naš čarobni svijet* (2021). Iako je rasizam prisutan u ranijim filmovima Disneyja, analiza navedenih filmova pokazala je napredak u prikazu različitih rasa i etniciteta u modernijim filmovima. *Vaiana: Potraga za mitskim otokom* i *Encanto: Naš čarobni svijet* filmovi su u kojima je promjena najočitija s obzirom da se fokusiraju na jednu kulturu i rasu dok su u ranijim filmovima pripadnici drugih rasa stavljeni u opoziciju s bijelom rasom, osim u *Aladinu* u kojem su glavni likovi amerikanizirani. Bez obzira na to što postoji napredak u uključivanju drugih kultura i rasa, kod filmova u kojima prikazuju različite rase Disney bi se

trebao fokusirati isključivo na te rase jer ako žele pokazati da su zaista inkluzivni nema potrebe da se različite rase uspoređuju sa Zapadom, tj. bijelom rasom.

Ključne riječi: Disney, rasa, reprezentacija, promjena