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Villainy and Characters of Color in Canonized Disney Cinema

Disney has been known to publish material that is offensive to some people. The material in question has been deemed as racist to some. This begs the question: what is racism? Racism is a form of oppression. Oppression, according to Rita Hardiman, Bailey Jackson, and Pat Griffin, is a system that gives all the social power to members of privileged groups, who can be described as agents, and disadvantages marginalized groups, also known as targets (26-27). In the system of oppression known as racism, the privileged group is white people while the disadvantaged group is people of color (29). Given this context, racism can be defined as the system of oppression that privileges and overvalues white people, and disadvantages and undervalues people of color. Racism and other forms of oppression are perpetuated in a cycle called the cycle of oppression. This cycle is what keeps agents in power and targets a disadvantaged group. Disney's portrayal of villains as people of color is racist because it tells viewers that people of color are evil, villainous, and dangerous, all of which are violent ideologies that perpetuate the cycle of oppression that keeps racism in operation.

Lady and the Tramp is a significant Disney film that has antagonistic characters who are depicted as people of color. The two notable characters in the film are the Siamese cats, Si and Am. These characters are some of the first Asian, or Asian coded characters to appear in a Disney film. They are not human but are coded as Asian. This is evident by their facial features

that contain slanted eyes, and their thick accents that mimic eastern Asian accents. The Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp* are evil, mischievous, and destructive. Si and Am tug on a tablecloth that has a fishbowl on top of it. Their goal is to knock the fish bowl down. When Lady tries to stop them by tugging on the other end of the cloth, Si and Am let go, which in turn, knocks the bowl down on Lady's side of the table. They also get into the bird's cage and cause a bunch of destruction. When their owner comes down to see the destruction, Si and Am play the part of the victim leaving Lady to blame, even though she is trying to stop them. Chyng Feng Sun in the documentary *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* says this about the Si and Am:

Disney has very, very few Asian or Asian American characters in their children's films. And that's probably why the Siamese Cats really stand out for me. If you look at those cats very carefully, they clearly have those stereotypical Asian features: they have slanted eyes, buckteeth, and very heavy accents. They are also depicted as sinister, cunning and manipulative. (*Mickey Mouse Monopoly*)

This is racist because the Asian characters in this film are out to get Lady, a feminine looking dog with European looking features who is the real victim, perpetuating ideologies that paint people of color in a negative light.

The Lion King is another Disney film that depicts animals who are coded as people of color. Scar, the main antagonist of *The Lion King* offers a significant contrast to the film's protagonist, Simba, and his father, Mufasa. To start, Scar is a power hungry and manipulative character. He resents Mufasa for being king, as he wishes that title upon himself. This causes him to use the plentiful power that he already has by just being a lion to go rogue and conspire to rid both Mufasa and Simba with the help of his hyena goons so he will be the King. He is able to

murder Mufasa and manipulates Simba into thinking that he is responsible for his father's death. This is in stark contrast to Simba and Mufasa who wish only to use their power for the good of the land. The visual representation of Scar contrasts with that of Mufasa and Simba as well. Scar is significantly darker in tone than the two protagonists. Scar's mane is colored black while Mufasa and Simba have a much lighter red hue to their own manes. Scar's fur is more of a tint compared to the other's coat, giving him a darker complexion. This gives Scar the appearance of a person of color as opposed to Simba who appears to have features associated with being white.

Scar is not the only character in *The Lion King* who is coded as a person of color. The hyenas, voiced by Whoopi Goldberg, Cheech Marin, and Jim Cummings, are Scar's goons. The hyenas in the film are greedy as they wish to be on the top of the food chain, so they assist Scar in his evil conquests. The Hyenas in the film have stereotypical inner-city black accents. Jacqueline Maloney in the documentary *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* describes her experience with a white friend whose son associated the black children with the hyenas.

... [S]he had been coming back from shopping and that her son said, 'Mommy, Mommy, the hyenas, the hyenas,' and she looked up and she said there was a group of black children on the carousel and playing. And she said but when you had your back turned to them, they did, they sounded just like, the sound, the voicing, the laughing of the hyenas. And she could not move her son away from the attachment of the sound to the image of hyenas in *The Lion King*. And she said, and further, he had made the association that they were bad. (*Mickey Mouse Monopoly*)

The white child in this instance was able to make a connection between the black children playing at a shopping center and the semi-antagonists of *The Lion King*. He not only did that but made the connection that the black children were bad or villainous. This is evidence that Disney's coding the hyenas as black, whether intentional or not, is having an effect on audiences--that audiences are internalizing the ideologies set forth by Disney.

Like *The Lion King*, *The Little Mermaid* has both an antagonist and semi-antagonists who are coded as people of color. In the 1989 film, Ariel, the main protagonist who lives in the body of a mermaid, sets off on an adventure to find her one true love, Prince Eric. However, there is one problem: Prince Eric is a human who lives on land, and Ariel is a sea-dwelling fish. Ariel gets into an argument with her father, King Triton, because King Triton does not want Ariel to marry a man. Two eels, Flotsam and Jetsam overhear this exchange and manipulate Ariel by using her emotional state to convince her to see the sea witch, Ursula. Flotsam and Jetsam are portrayed in a sinister fashion. These eels are a hue of dark green, giving them a dark appearance when juxtaposed against Ariel, who is white and fair skinned. The eels take Ariel to the main antagonist of the film, Ursula. Ursula is a morbidly obese squid who is dark purple and black in color. She is the one who convinces Ariel to give up her voice in a pact she states she can be human for three days unless she kisses her true love. However, Ursula plans to hinder Ariel's kiss with Prince Eric so the deal will fall through and Ariel will remain a voiceless mermaid. This implies that the wretched antagonist of this film is an obese woman of color.

The 1992 film *Aladdin* offers a plot made up entirely of people of color, however, the film is racist in of itself. In the original release of *Aladdin*, the opening credits roll and the song "Arabian Nights" plays. The lyrics went as followed until they were altered at a later date by

Disney: “I come from a land of a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ear if they do not like your face, it’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home” (*Mickey Mouse Monopoly*). This song sets up the theme for the people who live in the fictional land of Agrabah, a population made up of Arab individuals. These lyrics alone are racist as they imply Arabs are brutal and ruthless; that they are all villainous or evil in some way. The racist implications continue on throughout the film. All of the characters in *Aladdin* are Arab, so differences between good and evil are split between factors such as animation and skin color. Jasmine and Aladdin, the protagonists of the films are animated with rather western European looking features. Princess Jasmine has a straight nose, toned down facial features, and fairer skin compared to some of the antagonists in the film. For example, when a Jasmine threatens takes an apple from a street vendor’s produce cart to feed a hungry child, the street vendor becomes enraged and threatens to sever her hand from her body using a sharp knife. The street vendor in question has facial features that appear to be much more middle eastern than Jasmine’s. He has a very large curved nose and angular facial features that are exaggerated. The same features are seen on the principal villain of the film *Aladdin*. Jafar, the vizier to the Sultan of Agrabah, is portrayed in the same fashion as the street vendor, with a big nose, and dark skin. According to Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock, authors of *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, racism in the film *Aladdin* does not stop at the negative imagery of Arabs but continues into racially coded language like the Hyenas in *The Lion King* (109). They both say: “*Aladdin* clearly portrays the ‘bad’ Arabs with thick, foreign accents, while the anglicized Jasmine and Aladdin speak in standard American English” (109-110). This further proves the point of people of color being depicted as villains is racist. The message behind “bad” Arabs

having thick accents is that people who sound and look like they do are bad and potentially dangerous.

The four aforementioned films are not the only works of Disney cinema that contain people of color as villains, but only a few select examples of the trope taking place. According to the Article “Images of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films” published in the *Journal of Family Feminist Therapy*, representation of target races, ethnicities, and cultures in Disney cinema is lacking. The same claim can be said about the representation of target races, ethnicities, and cultures in the media in general. Towbin et al. cites a thematic analysis done on 26 popular Disney animated films. When analyzing the representations of culture in the Disney cinema, five themes emerged, including the negative representation of systematically non-dominant cultures, which tend to be made up of people of color, and the valorization of western and Christian culture. Overall, the results of Towbin’s et al. analysis show this:

Disney films were also replete with negative and stereotypic images of marginalized racial groups. Characters of color were also portrayed as villainous or scary in many movies... Even 40 years after the [original] production of *Jungle [Book]*, [*The Lion King’s*] portrayal of the hyenas mimics stereotypes of inner-city minorities; they are portrayed as sinister and thieving. (Towbin et al. 36)

The theme of systematically non-dominant cultures being stereotyped as villainous, evil, and dangerous is prevalent throughout Disney. This has been occurring since the beginning and is still happening today.

According to Kassia E. Kulaszewicz, the media has a profound impact on how viewers perceive the world around them and influence their views with pervasive messages contributing to their own beliefs (6). Media companies, including the Disney corporation, influence people's perceptions of the world around them with the ideologies in their content. Kulaszewicz continues her argument by running an analysis of the use of the word "black" or the phrase "African American" versus the use of the word "white" as a racial descriptor. She found that racial descriptors for black people were used more than 300 percent than those for white people (31). In some specific media outlets, such as the New York Times, black racial descriptors were used 1600 percent more of the time than those for whites (32). Kulaszewicz proceeds by claiming the use of the word black more so than the use of the word white as a racial descriptor becomes a stereotypical microaggression--one that influences the way viewers perceive the world around them (37-38). She continues: "If black men are portrayed as criminal and violent regularly, in both visual and written media, on several occasions daily, what happens to peoples [sic] beliefs? People start to be conditioned to think black men are violent and criminal" (37). The same concept that Kulaszewicz uses can be applied to Disney cinema. There is an overwhelming theme of characters of color as villains in the films *The Little Mermaid*, *The Lion King*, *Aladdin*, and *Lady and the Tramp*, and this theme is not limited to the four-mentioned works in the canon of Disney cinema. Putting people of color in the role of the antagonist will have the same effects as it does to put black men as the face of criminality on the news. If all viewers see in Disney films is people of color or

non-human characters coded as people of color as evil, mischievous, and manipulative villains, then general audiences will associate those qualities with people of color.

Implications that Disney is portraying villains as people of color begs the question: what does this mean? It means that Disney as an institution is perpetuating the cycle of oppression. The cycle of oppression can be split into three separate parts: the institutional level, the ideological level, and the individual level. Institutions bombard people with ideologies, which take on the form of widespread and sanctioned beliefs, values, and stereotypes. When people are bombarded with ideologies, they learn to accept them as truth--they internalize the ideologies. The people go back to the institution they work at and then spread the ideologies that they learned through the power of institution, which makes the cycle start all over again (Hardiman et al. 27-28). In the case of Disney perpetuating this cycle, Disney can be seen as an institution. They publish films like *Lady and the Tramp*, *The Lion King*, *Aladdin*, and *The Little Mermaid*, which contain images of villainous animals coded as people of color, and actual people of color who have exaggerated features and are villains or evil and sinister. When Disney as an institution publishes films like this, audiences view them immediately as well as long after they come out. Audiences learn to internalize ideologies that say people of color are evil, villainous, and dangerous. Once these pervasive messages are internalized, the people who watch these Disney films take the messages hidden in the film that they learned to the institutions that they work and go to school at and collaborate with individuals who internalize the same ideologies from Disney and elsewhere. Then these people who control the institutions, such as Disney and the media in general, as well as all the other institutions, put those ideologies back out into the world. This makes the cycle of oppression go around once again, giving white people agency and taking

power away from people of color, keeping the system of oppression known as racism in operation.

It could be said that characters such as Scar and Ursula were not made to represent people of color at all, but their darker hue than the protagonist of the film is perhaps representative of their dark intentions. This interpretation is contradicted by the fact that Disney codes many of their other villains as people of color through cues other than darker complexion. The hyenas have inner-city accents that are stereotypical of black people, and the Siamese cats have stereotypical Asian accents, slanted eyes, and buck teeth. Given this evidence, Ursula and Scar can be read as characters of color in their respective films. These are not the only characters of color to be put in the role of the villain in all of Disney cinema, or in the media in general for that matter. However, Disney is one powerful company that does perpetuate racism in the cycle of oppression.

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