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Disney's Quest for Success in its Racial Representation and Diversity in its Animated Human Feature Films

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*Disney's Quest for Success in its Racial Representation and Diversity in its
Animated Human Feature Films*

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

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has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction*

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Abstract

From Disney's humble beginnings to what we see now in 2020, has Disney improved its racial representation and diversity in its animated feature films throughout the years?

This analysis first covers two early examples on why *Song of the South* and Disney's classic movie *Dumbo* are considered to have or be racially problematic films/scenes. The analysis will then go into the data portion of this research analysis. The analysis will examine and collect all of Disney's animated human movies starting from 1950 to June 2020. The data collected will conclude if Disney has statistically improved the amount of nonwhite character lead animated movies produced in the last 70 years and if they have progressed in their racial representation.

To examine Disney's progression in its representation, the analysis will look at two of the latest minority lead films *Moana* and *Coco*, to examine if Disney's representation of culture in these films are mindful of who they represent. This research analysis ends with reviewing Disney's overall progression to 2020 and what can be concluded from this data collection.

Introduction

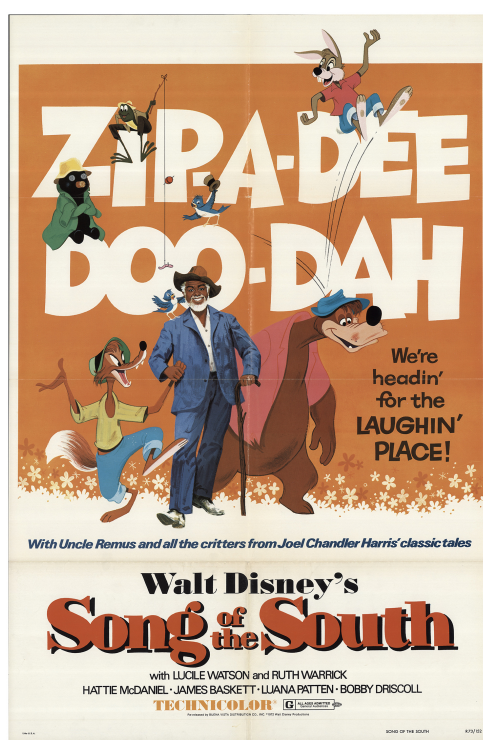
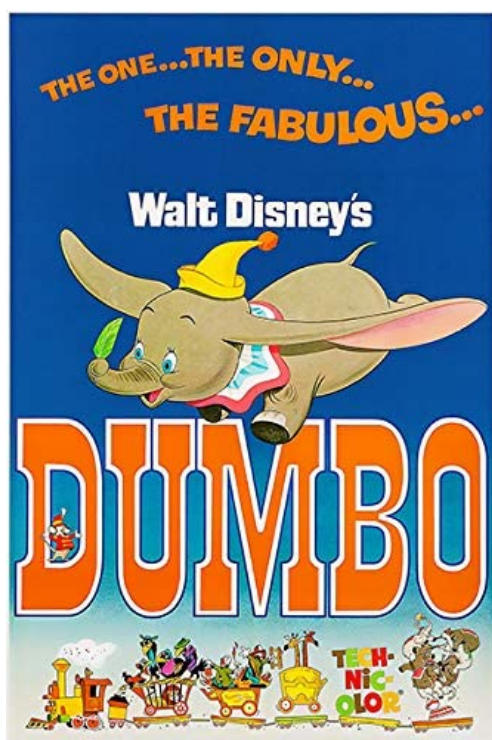
The Walt Disney Company began its legacy in 1923 (The Walt Disney Studios, n.d.). Since Disney's first animated feature film in 1937, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, there have only been a handful of feature films in which the lead was another race than white. In the beginnings of Walt Disney Productions (now known as Walt Disney Pictures), Walt Disney produced controversial films like *Song of the South* and *Dumbo*. Which are not loved by all in this day in age. Disney's depiction of post civil war African Americans has left many wondering if Disney strived to be *the happiest place on Earth* for everyone, or just a portion of the population.

The goal of this analysis is to examine The Walt Disney Studio Company's progression toward diversity and racial and ethnic representation in its animated films. Meaning, looking at Disney's steps into making movies that represent other races than white. This research will start by looking at the second half of the 20th century and end with what we see in 2020. This analysis begins by briefly looking back at two of Disney's problematic films before the 50's, *Dumbo (1941)* and *Song of the South (1946)*. Then heads into data revealing how Disney has progressed throughout the years in its animated human feature films that were released in theaters. The reason for only using films released in theaters is because of the cinema standard of being eligible for awards like the Oscars. If Disney only premiered the film on TV or home video, it will not be counted in this research.

The reason for targeting only animated feature films with human characters is because Disney's portfolio of both animated and live action should be studied and broken down in pieces to give thorough insight of each of Disney's company divisions. The specific reason for choosing animated films with humans is because the Walt Disney Company is one of the most influential companies marketed towards kids as it is on TV constantly and one of the few kid channels. Given this power, Disney has the chance to shine light on every race and how people think. Growing up watching films and shows with no one that looks like you, or have some that do look like you but is stereotypical, can be damaging to one's identity growing up. (Stangor, 2014)

PROBLEMATIC FILMS IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

To start this section, we look at two of Walt Disney's racially problematic scenes and or films. The first being *Dumbo* in 1941, and *Song of the South* in 1946.



Dumbo

The classic family film, *Dumbo*, was released in 1941. *Dumbo* is about a baby elephant in a circus who was born with large ears and gets made fun of by all the animals and humans in the circus. He later befriends a mouse who comforts Dumbo while his mom gets taken away and is separated. Dumbo is made fun of throughout the film but then befriends a group of crows and learns how to fly and lives happily ever after being the star of the circus. As innocent as the movie plot is, Disney included some questionable scenes where African Americans are portrayed in a manner that is especially stereotypical in the era. There are two instances in this film.

The most famous scene from the original movie is when Dumbo meets a group of crows. The black birds are depicted with jive-like speech patterns and jazz songs sung in harmony. The main bird of the group is named Dandy crow... but is widely known as Jim Crow. Jim Crow can be referred to from two historical ideas. In the early 1830s, a white actor, Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice rose to stardom for performing minstrel routines as the fictional “Jim Crow,” a caricature of a clumsy, dimwitted black slave.



Jim Crow is also known as the law that enforced segregation in the Southern part of the United States. (“Andrews,” 2018) *Dumbo* also engages in the vocal equivalent of blackface by voicing the character to a white actor named Cliff Edwards when the crow is portrayed with jive speech patterns and singing.

The second problematic scene in the film *Dumbo* is in the first half of the film, particularly, the roustabouts scene. Though it is not as talked about as the crow scene, it's not to be overlooked.

The scene starts with the train stopping in the middle of the night while it's heavily raining. The problematic signs of this scene begins with what the lyrics say and who is on the screen. The roustabouts and the elephants get out of the train and begin to set up the circus tent. While this is going on, the roustabouts begin to sing about working all day and night slaving until they're almost dead while other people sleep and not knowing when they get paid.



What should be noted is the roustabouts are all distinctively black colored men that have no faces. There is not a single white person as a roustabout and given when the film was released back in 1941, it seems that the way this scene was played out was intentional.

Song of the South 1946

Song of the South is a live/animation hybrid based off of the *Uncle Remus* stories authored by Joel Chandler Harris. Harris's writings were based on oral stories that slave plantation workers used to tell Harris when he was in his early teenage years. Harris was a typesetter apprentice for the Turnwold Plantation owner's local newspaper company in Georgia. Coming from a poor family and being an outcast, Harris would hang out with the plantation workers in their cabin, where he quietly listened to the stories the workers told. ("James," 2016)

The problem with this film is its post civil war depiction of slaves. Disney romanticized the post civil war slave by acting as if they were a cheerful group of people who lived the simpler life like singing, spinning tall tales, and looking after white folks' kids with no disturbances from the world. Disney's interpretation of life after slavery was far from true to how things were.

Although *Song of the South* premiered in 1946, Disney has released the film on multiple occasions after, ("Willis," 1998) But, Disney has withheld the film from the U.S. public eye since it's 1986 showing in America ("Willis," 1998). Though it was released on VCR in the U.K. in 2000 ("Willis," 1998). Did Disney actually care about the impact the film made?

Although many people today have not actually seen the film, pieces of the film are still prevalent around the world. Characters of the film can still be seen in real life and on

screen. Disney decided to include on screen cameos of Br'er Rabbit, Br'er Fox, Br'er Bear, Tar Baby, Hummingbirds and other minor animals in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, a film distributed by one of Disney's own labels *Touchstone Pictures* in 1988.

In real life, pieces of the film have been prevalent in Disney parks. Disney's *Splash Mountain* ride is based off of *Song of the South* at Disney Parks in California, Florida, and Japan. But, as of June 25th 2020, due to backlash of the ride in 2020 (from the Black Lives Matter movement across America), Disney has decided to re-theme the ride to *Princess and the Frog* in Florida and California. Tokyo Disneyland is still in discussion. ("WDW," n.d.)

DATA COLLECTION OF DISNEY'S NON WHITE LEAD ANIMATED FEATURE FILMS

This research analysis conducted a study over all of the Walt Disney Companies animated films with a world wide theater release in which the main characters are human or are first introduced as human.

Methodology

The methodologies used to conduct this research is based on what was produced or released under The Walt Disney Studios name at the time of its worldwide box office release from 1950-2020 (up until June). This includes all studios owned by Disney such as Walt Disney Animation Studios, Disney MovieToons, and Walt Disney Television Animation. One notable company included in this research is Pixar Animation Studios. Disney was involved in releasing all Pixar films and then later purchased the studio in 2006. The films included in this research are limited only to movies that contain the word *Disney* or the *Disney* logo on each film's poster, and as stated above, produced or released by Disney with a worldwide box office release. So this does not include *Touchstone Pictures*, *Who framed Roger Rabbit* because it does not contain the words *Disney* on the poster.

The data below was gathered and collected from *Disney Wiki Fandom*, and *Wikipedia's lists: Disney's Theatrical Animated Films*, and *Walt Disney Studios Animation Studios Films*.

DATA

The data collected below in Figure 1 contains all theater released feature films with humans or introduced as human at the beginning of the film in the Mid 20th century (1950-2000). Figure 2 represents the total number of films released with humans or introduced as humans in the 21st Century up to July 2020. Figure 3 contains a list of all

of the nonwhite lead films concluded in this study. Figure 4 represents a comparison of the total number of these films compared to the amount with nonwhite leads.

FIGURE 1: *Second Half of the 20th Century Disney Animated Films Released in World Wide theaters that are*

Produced or Released by Disney or Pixar that contain human leads or are introduced as human

Film	Premiered	Studio
Cinderella	1950	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Alice in Wonderland	1951	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Peter Pan	1953	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Sleeping Beauty	1959	Walt Disney Animation Studios
The Sword in the Stone	1963	Walt Disney Animation Studios
The Jungle Book	1967	Walt Disney Animation Studios
The Black Cauldron	1985	Walt Disney Animation Studios
The Little Mermaid	1989	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Beauty and the Beast	1991	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Aladdin	1992	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Pocahontas	1995	Walt Disney Animation Studios
The Hunchback of Notre Dame	1996	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Hercules	1997	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Mulan	1998	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Doug's 1st Movie	1999	Walt Disney Television Animation
Tarzan	1999	Walt Disney Animation Studios
The Emperor's New Groove	2000	Walt Disney Animation Studios

Total:

17

FIGURE 2: 21st Century (2001-July 2020) Disney Animated Films with Human Characters Released in World Wide*Theaters*

Recess: School's Out	2001	Walt Disney Television Animation
Atlantis: The Lost Empire	2001	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Return to Never Land	2002	Disney MovieToons
Lilo & Stitch	2002	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Treasure Planet	2002	Walt Disney Animation Studios
The Jungle Book 2	2003	Disney MovieToons
Brother Bear	2003	Walt Disney Animation Studios
The Incredibles	2004	Pixar Animation Studios
Meet the Robinsons	2007	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Up	2009	Pixar Animation Studios
A Christmas Carol[R]	2009	ImageMovers Digital[st 5]
The Princess and the Frog	2009	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Tangled	2010	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Mars Needs Moms[R]	2011	ImageMovers Digital[st 5]
Brave	2012	Pixar Animation Studios
Wreck-It Ralph	2012	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Frozen	2013	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Big Hero 6	2014	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Moana	2016	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Coco	2017	Pixar Animation Studios
Incredibles 2	2018	Pixar Animation Studios
Ralph Breaks the Internet	2018	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Frozen II	2019	Walt Disney Animation Studios

Total

23

Figure 3: *List of all Human Animated Films with a Non-White Lead and World Wide Release*

The Jungle Book	1967	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Aladdin	1992	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Pocahontas	1995	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Mulan	1998	Walt Disney Animation Studios
The Emperor's New Groove	2000	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Lilo & Stitch	2002	Walt Disney Animation Studios
The Jungle Book 2	2003	Disney MovieToons
Brother Bear	2003	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Up	2009	Pixar Animation Studios
The Princess and the Frog	2009	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Big Hero 6	2014	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Moana	2016	Walt Disney Animation Studios
Coco	2017	Pixar Animation Studios

Total Number of Nonwhite Human Lead Animated Films: 13

Toal in the Mid 20th: 5

Total in the 21st Century: 8

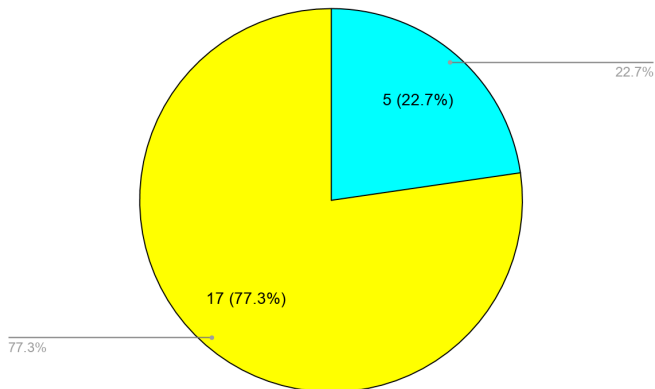
Total Number of Human Lead Animated Films: 40

Total in the Mid 20th: 17

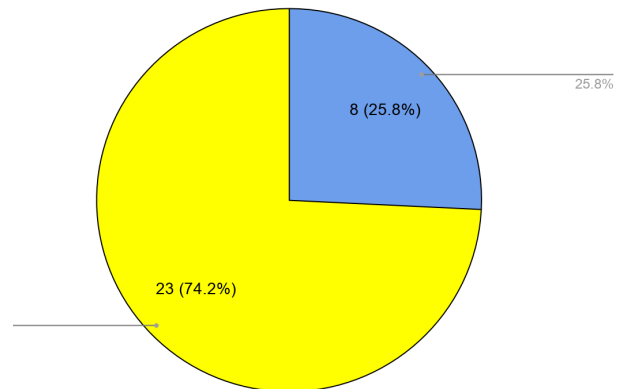
Total in the 21st: 23

FIGURE 4: Comparison of Disney's Animated Human Character Films to the Total Number of Films with Non-White Leads

Second Half 20th Century (1950-2000)



21st Century (2001-2020)



Findings

This research found that The Walt Disney Company produced/released 40 animated feature length films with human leads in the past 70 years (1950-2020), and 13 of the 40 films contain storylines with nonwhite characters as leads. Percentage wise, 32% of these films contained a nonwhite lead.

From the second half of the 20th century (1950 to 2000), Disney produced 17 animated feature length films with human leads, and 5 out of 17 films contain storylines with non white leads. An important finding found in the 20th century is that Disney took an 18 year break from making animated human movies from 1967 to 1985. This could possibly be because of what was going on in politics during the break such as the civil rights movement, gay rights movement, the Vietnam War, the cuban missile crisis,

womens voting rights, etc... Though there was an 18 year gap, 29% of the films in the second half of the 20th century contained nonwhite leads.

From 2001 to June 2020, Disney produced 23 animated feature films with human leads. 8 out of 23 contained nonwhite leads. Percentage wise, 35% of them had nonwhite leads in the 19 years.

Though some of the movies have sparked controversy over their representation of race in each film, Disney has statistically improved and continued down the road to more diverse movies in the past few years. Although the movies themselves can be questionable about their representation of race and ethnicity. Down below are examples of two of the latest movies from the past few years that show the good and bad of Disney's representation.

Moana

In one of the latest minority films, *Moana (2016)*, is a film about an island chief's daughter's quest to find Maui, a mythical demigod, to help restore the heart of the island that Maui stole from and to save the rest of the islands they love from dying. Moana's journey leads her into discovering more about her ancestors' past and how she will lead when she becomes Chief. This is the second film based on characters who are Pacific islanders.

As much love this film has received across the United States, many have voiced their concern for how Maui was portrayed. Maui is based on a demigod, and the Oceanic people already have an image of who he is. Disney recreating an overweight version of him left many angry. Vincent Diaz, who currently teaches and researches in comparative Native Studies in the Department of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota, stated that their depiction of Maui, depicts him as overweight and immature. Who does things for his pride, and to gain appraisal from the people. Instead, Pacific Islanders see Maui as a legendary hero, who had helped bring sustenance to all of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia. (“Diaz,” 2016)

Disney didn't help its case by selling “Maui costumes” at Disney stores. This made natives even angrier as Disney costumed up the cultural markings on Maui's body to be worn as a costume. Some say the costume earned “international condemnation.” (*Disney pulls offensive “Moana” Halloween costume.* 2016) Marama Fox, a co-leader of New Zealand's indigenous Maori Party and a member of New Zealand's parliament, said the costume was a case of cultural misappropriation and an example of a company trying to profit off of another culture's intellectual property. In a statement, Disney apologized and pulled the costume from its stores. (*Disney pulls offensive “Moana” Halloween costume.* 2016)

Coco

In 2017, Disney ended their animated year with Coco. A Disney Pixar film about a boy's forbidden love for music that captured the heart of many viewers. Carlos Aguilar, a Mexican film critic, has seen it three times, twice in English and once in Spanish. "My family back in Mexico City was shocked and moved by how truthfully the film captured traditions and Mexican idiosyncrasies," he said. "They couldn't believe that an American studio had made the film, as it felt like an authentically Mexican work of art." ("Coco' a 'salve for the soul."(n.d.))

The film takes place in Santa Cecilia, Mexico, on Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). The film's main character is a young boy named Miguel who dreams of becoming a famous musician like his idol, Ernesto de la Cruz. Unfortunately, his family has banned all music from their lives and Miguel finds himself in the land of the dead and uncovers the truth about his family's hate for music and much more about his ancestry.

"It's unbelievable what this film has meant to so many Mexican Americans," said Alanna Ubach, who voiced the character of Mamá Imelda, Miguel's great-great-grandmother. "People forget what a rich, sophisticated culture the Mexican culture is. It's not just about tacos and sugar skulls." ("Coco' a 'salve for the soul."(n.d.)) Disney has received praise for its detail of food even in the film, tamales. In one scene,

the family is seen gathered together while the family makes tamales, a famous Hispanic delicacy.

Even though *Coco* has gained a lot of praise, it's only one of a few films Disney has produced that has gained many appraisals from the people it's representing. Not only does *Coco* provide much-needed cultural validation in this day and age, but it could also help bridge and minimize prejudices, much the same way positive depictions of the LGBT community have changed attitudes on a widespread basis ("*Coco*' a 'salve for the soul.'"(n.d.)).

Conclusion

Is Disney's Quest for success towards diversity and racial representation on the right track?

Because of the fact that Disney movies are targeted to a diverse young audience, Disney should feel a sense of responsibility to accurately portray race in a positive manner. As the years have progressed, Disney's stereotyping portrayals have decreased due to trying to be politically correct, but, the results of those movies that negatively depict race in the past can still be seen and remain popular in our daily lives today.

Though, Disney has progressed in becoming a more inclusive animated movie making company. Since 1950, Disney has only produced 13 animated films with races other than white as leads that are human as of June 2020. Though each film may have it's own set of problems, and the amount of films doesn't seem like a lot, Disney has

taken steps in the right direction toward inclusivity in the past few years. 32% of Disney's human animated films contain nonwhite leads. Notable milestones seen today in the 21st century are: Disney's first Pacific Islander movie (Hawaiian) in 2002, *Lilo and Stitch*, and Disney's first African American princess in 2009, in *Princess and the Frog* and then three more ethnically diverse films 2014-2017.

To make matters right with the past, instead of erasing its problematic films from the public eye, Disney has recognized its wrongdoings and added disclaimers on certain films they consider to contain “outdated cultural depictions” on its Disney Plus streaming service. The movies that include the warning are *Lady and the Tramp*, *Dumbo*, *Peter Pan*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Aristocats*, *The Three Caballeros*, and *Saludos Amigos*. It is important to take note that *Song of the South* has not been in the public eye since its release on VHS in 2000 in the United Kingdom, and its 40th anniversary showing in the U.S. in 1986. (“Retro Media Library,” 2014) In 2011, Disney chief executive, Bob Iger, spoke on why this film has not been in the public eye since. Iger stated the film “wouldn’t necessarily sit right or feel right to a number of people today” (“Bakare, 2019”). When it will or if the film will be released will be a question for the future. Disney has also been mindful of its past mistakes when making live-action films that contain racially problematic scenes like *Dumbo’s* live-action film in 2019 where they took out the crows and roustabouts scene (“Andrews, 2019”).

Though Disney has increased the number of nonwhite leads in its animated feature-length films, Disney needs to continue to improve on getting its racial representation on screen right and off-screen representation as well. The world is at a

turning point in time. Having the ability to have a voice online on social media has shed some light on the rights and wrongs in the world. People have been more comfortable speaking their opinion when they see they are not the only ones who think a certain way. However, since the people leading the entertainment industry are still predominantly white, the changes cannot start until the problem within the industry is fixed (Möttus, 2014). The first step to inclusion on the screen will have to be getting different races and ethnicities at the table.

As the world keeps changing, Disney is sure to continue improving its racial representation and diversity.

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