

Essay

Reel Royal Diversity? The Glass Ceiling in Disney's *Mulan* and *Princess and the Frog*

Lauren Dundes ^{1,*} and Madeline Streiff ²

¹ Department of Sociology, McDaniel College, Westminster, MD 21157, USA

² Hastings College of the Law, University of California, 200 McAllister St, San Francisco, CA 94102, USA; madeline.streiff@gmail.com

* Correspondence: ldundes@mcdaniel.edu; Tel.: +1-410-857-2534

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Abstract: Both in *Mulan* and *Princess and the Frog*, Disney eschews a traditional fairytale ending involving palatial opulence by substituting an alternative narrative for women of color. *Mulan* disguises herself as a male soldier in order to serve in her father's place. After sharing victory with male companions, she willingly returns home to domesticity and the confines imposed by her gender. *Tiana* spends two thirds of the movie as a frog, substantially limiting her on-screen time as an African American female. Like *Mulan*, she is driven to please her father. She fulfills his dream of owning a high-end restaurant, ironically named *Tiana's Palace*, the closest she comes to a royal lifestyle. Although protagonists with more realistic lives could potentially enhance viewers' connection with them and model a work ethic or commitment to home life, the standard and more financially successful Disney narrative immerses viewers in a fantasy world of endless prospects including a life of royalty. These nonwhite heroines instead display a willingness to settle for more modest aspirations in stories replete with stereotypical gender and race-bound tropes. This divergent narrative suggests that protagonists of color are not entitled to a life of leisure and privilege that white Disney princesses enjoy.

Keywords: social inequality; racism; sexism; Disney; princess; masculinity

1. Introduction

The Disney Princess franchise is a powerful force in the lives of young girls [1–6], especially girls of color seeking same-race role models in the public eye [7,8]. As a juggernaut of commercial culture [9], Disney has attempted to broaden its reach by featuring nonwhite characters. Part of its expansion has included increased racial diversity in its trademarked princess collection. Yet not all of Disney's female protagonists are technically princesses or enjoy a princess-like existence. Instead, Disney has created a distinct narrative that succeeds in moving away from previously common elements, like female passivity, that reflect male hegemony in stories featuring white characters.

In spite of creating more characters of color and winning acclaim for new protagonists that purportedly model feminism [10], Disney does not achieve racial or gender parity in its portrayal of either Asian heroine *Mulan* (1998) or African American protagonist *Tiana* in *Princess and the Frog* (2009) [11–15]. *Mulan's* heroics occur mostly during the half of the movie that she serves as a male soldier, and only with indispensable help from two male characters. At the end, she chooses to resume her prescribed female role that dictates a life of unremarkable domesticity and expected subservience. In a similar vein, *Tiana* spends two thirds of the film as a frog, watches while stereotypical voodoo spirits dispatch the black male villain, and ends the movie rejoicing in her relatively mundane aspiration of restaurant ownership. Both movies seem to tout female strength, but in the end, each depicts the heroine happily embracing tradition and reverting to ordinary gender roles. For *Mulan*

and Tiana, limitless dreams appear off limits, seemingly the domain of white princesses who harness magical power to live beyond the bounds of even the top of the social hierarchy. These portrayals of nonwhite “princesses” distance Mulan and Tiana from the usual narrative celebrating royal life, a course of action with implications for the financial success of these movies as well as the perpetuation of racial and gender stereotypes.

2. Mulan and Tiana Are Less Popular

Although alternative narratives are not inherently problematic, the comparatively lower profitability of distinct portrayals of nonwhite characters provides some insight into whether these fictional characters reflect oppression of their real-life counterparts. An examination of earnings for these two nonwhite princesses suggests a race-driven disparity in profit. *Mulan* did relatively well in U.S. theaters (\$121 million gross domestic total, all-time domestic rank: 466, and much greater foreign box office receipts of \$184 million) [16], although its success did not apply to China (where it earned less than \$2 million in its first year) [16]. In subsequent sales of merchandise, *Mulan* falls short of the most popular princesses, as discussed below.

Princess and the Frog (\$104 million gross domestic total, all-time domestic rank: 589) did not match *Mulan*’s U.S. box office revenue, even *without* taking into account inflation in the 11-year gap in the movies’ release dates [16]. Just one year after *Princess and the Frog*, the success of *Tangled* (2010, featuring Rapunzel; \$201 million gross domestic total, all-time domestic rank: 169) exceeded that of *Princess and the Frog* [16]. By comparison, *Frozen* (2013) earned a \$401 million gross domestic total and ranked 24th [16]. Although critics speculate that the word *princess* in the title deterred potential young male viewers [17], the film “never approaches the wit, cleverness, and storytelling brio of the studio’s early-1990s animation renaissance (*Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*) or pretty much anything by Pixar” [18]. As one black viewer noted, “It was not uplifting, and it did not hold a lot of the kids’ interest” [13].

Mulan and *Tiana* products also appear to drive fewer sales, including merchandise like dolls, clothing, games, home décor, and toys that, all combined, earn Disney \$5.5 billion a year and are second in profitability only to the Mickey Mouse franchise [19]. Disney princesses’ popularity is difficult to assess, but princesses of color were at the bottom of a list of princesses with the dollar amount they earned for resellers on eBay from May 2013 to April 2014. Jasmine (who is Middle Eastern) and Tiana were at the bottom of the ranking, while *Mulan* and *Pocahontas* (an American Indian) were not even listed [20]. Jasmine’s status is less relevant because *Aladdin* and even the Genie have more substantial roles. Aside from racial differences, none of these four characters have iconic dresses that reinforce their femininity. Of the four, only Tiana wears fancy dresses (in her limited time as a human), and her green swamp-style wedding gown, reminiscent of a lily pad, reminds viewers of her identity as a frog (see [21] for pictures of the Disney wedding dress collection).

Another explanation for *Mulan*’s lack of popularity is that she is not in fact a princess (nor is *Pocahontas*), despite inclusion in some Disney “Princess” merchandise sets. Yet Disney’s near-monopoly on marketing popular princesses to a mass audience allows the company to broaden the definition of princess to exceptional narratives without seeming inconsistent; royalty is conflated with dreams and heroism for nonwhite characters [22]. Tiana becomes a princess only at the end through marriage, and even then, she is only technically a princess, without any trappings of royalty. One observer noted that although *Tiana* merchandise is available, most products feature other Disney Princesses: “On recent visits to Epcot and Hollywood Studios, Belle, Ariel, Aurora, Cinderella and Snow White clothing (T-shirts, sweatshirts, and so on) was abundant; Merida and Jasmine a little less so. Tiana, nowhere” [23]. In the past 12 semesters, the first author has noted that in an introductory sociology college class of about 25 students, only the few African American students and one or two white student have seen *Princess and the Frog*. In contrast, the one or two students who have never seen the *Little Mermaid*, *Lion King*, and *Mulan* are usually international students.

A search of “Disney Princess” products from a key word search using “Disney” and “princess” on Amazon.com yielded a body of results that revealed preferences for white princesses. In the first product listed, a wooden stamp set, Mulan and Tiana were excluded. The set included a common combination of princesses sold: Ariel, Cinderella, Snow White (all three of whom got top billing on the product label), as well as Belle, Rapunzel, Aurora, and Jasmine [24]. In one of the leading products, the Disney Exclusive Princess 11-Doll Collection, only white dolls were featured on top of the product packaging: Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle; on the bottom were princesses presumably less apt to drive sales: Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, Rapunzel, and Merida (from *Brave*) (Amazon.com, 2016). An Amazon.com Disney Princess clothing best seller is a tee-shirt three-pack consisting of (1) Ariel, Belle, and Rapunzel; (2) Ariel posing with Flounder; and (3) Belle reading a book (Amazon.com 3 pack). Finally, another best seller, pajamas, included only Belle, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty (Aurora). The fact that Mulan and Tiana are characters from more recent movies does not boost their popularity. We cannot rule out the possibility that white buyers prefer to purchase white characters for no other reason than skin color. In the case of Mulan, the cultural gaffes in portraying a revered Chinese character could have deterred buyers, especially Chinese shoppers who were more apt to be aware of the way in which the story was Americanized with so-called cultural deformities (such as the dragon’s lizard-like portrayal as well as Mulan’s rebelliousness and individualism) [15]. While it is impossible to tease apart the relative impact of consumers’ connection to characters based on their race and the distinguishing elements found in *Mulan* and *Princess and the Frog*, the popularity gulf between white and nonwhite characters reveals a race-correlated princess A-list.

3. Mulan

Plot: *Mulan* is based on an ancient Chinese ballad about a young woman who disguises herself to take her father’s place in the army. Although Disney incorporates elements of this well-known story of a brave young Chinese woman who joins the army during the Sui Dynasty (589–618 A.D.) in place of her elderly father, there were many departures, such as Mulan’s dragon sidekick, Mushu (voiced by a wisecracking Eddie Murphy), and her romantic interest, her captain Li Shang, who work together to foil villain Shan Yu’s attempt to conquer China.

In the ballad, Mulan has her parents’ blessing to prepare for and join the army. She keeps her sex a secret from her fellow soldiers until after she demobilizes from the army after 12 years of service. In the Americanized version, however, Mulan defies her parents when she slips away from home, which would have caused her parents grief and hardship (especially since Disney’s version omitted an older sister and younger brother in the ballad who would have been able to support the parents). In the Disney rendition, her sex is revealed during her service, resulting in disgrace and dismissal (for further details, see [15] and the English translation of whole ballad as well as a table with a comparison of the Chinese versus Disney plots).

Disney’s appropriation of Chinese culture is a deeply flawed mimicry of a number of facets of Chinese culture. Mulan’s action in the Disney version also introduces her desire to discover her identity and self-worth, adding feminism and romance to the story [14,15]. In addition to westernized elements grafted onto the Chinese ballad, there were historical inaccuracies (like confusing Huns with Mongols) in which Asians are treated as interchangeable “Others” [14]. One of the most glaring disparities is the implication that Mulan takes her father’s place due to her love for her father rather than filial piety, reflecting a common Disney Electral theme.

3.1. Electral Theme in *Mulan*

In *Mulan*, Disney elaborates on its standard inclusion of the Electral father-daughter relationship with Mulan’s military service in her father’s stead. This altruistic act requires her to develop a male appearance and alter ego. This contrasts with characters like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* who also risks her safety in order to protect her father, but maintains her same identity and appearance. By the end, Mulan successfully finds a father substitute in Li Shang, someone who is her superior,

the commander leading her division (rather than more of an equal). Like its predecessor, Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, one of *Mulan's* most poignant scenes involves a father-daughter embrace conveying paternal acceptance and love. Mulan's father tells her, "The greatest gift and honor is having you for a daughter" (1:19:36–43).

The incorporation of the Electral theme detracts from Mulan's heroism, as it is driven by concern for her father, rather than a cause that extends beyond solicitude for a family member. Early on, we see her maternal instincts towards her father when she serves him tea, saying very protectively that he should have three cups of tea both in the morning and at night. Mulan assumes the responsibility of nurturing her father, reflecting her mother's insignificant role in the movie (evident in the final scene when her mother remains sidelined, watching silently). In the end, although Mulan has a budding romance with Shang, she returns home. Her emotional reunion with her father replaces a move to a palace or any other change reflecting upward mobility, emphasized when a flock of squawking chickens runs by her as she sits in the family's yard as the movie ends.

3.2. Inescapability of the Traditional Role

The alternative narrative not only preserves Electral components, but also perpetuates gender stereotypes, including cultural beauty standards. The desideratum of fair skin that is "paler than the moon" (48:05–08) (which contrasts with the villain's darker skin tone) is reflected in the would-be brides' application of white-face make up. Beauty is presented as the means to secure a husband to bring honor to a daughter's family, reiterated unambiguously in the movie's song, *A Girl Worth Fighting For*. Early in movie, Mulan wipes off makeup, suggesting that she rejects the traditional female role, reinforced when she becomes a soldier. Given Mulan's military experience and feistiness, viewers might hope that in the end, she will somehow escape or reject these expectations. Instead, however, after her heroic actions, she tells the Emperor that she must turn down his offer to serve China as a high-level council member, presumably to fulfill her traditional domestic role that has been portrayed as full of sexist prescriptions like beauty norms.

Furthermore, her brave deeds are mostly accomplished while acting as a male. As one critic noted, her heroism is "defined in masculinist militarist terms. In the end, Mulan is too much a pseudo or substitute man. She is standing in for the son her family does not have . . . Mulan's motivations are as a devoted family member and daughter although these are expressed in an endeavor to maintain the family's honor in a masculinist framework" [25]. In addition, after reclaiming her femininity, Mulan is more of a team member than an individual who can be singled out for recognition. As a woman, Mulan shares her glory with Shang, since it is he who saves the Emperor by temporarily defeating Shan Yu in a sword battle and pinning him (1:12:20) so that fellow soldier Chien Po can slide down a zipline to safety with the Emperor tucked under his arm.

Once outside of the masculine role, she increasingly retreats to passivity. After proving herself as a shrewd, fearless soldier, the Emperor awards her the sword of Shan Yu and his personal crest. But instead of being happy, she departs deflated because Shang has not yet clearly expressed interest in seeing her again and she is unwilling to openly express her interest. As with Ariel in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, she lacks agency as she waits for the male to act, even after all of her battlefield valor and glory.

3.3. Femininized Elements of Mulan as Soldier

Although Mulan outwits the villain, she is the only soldier who sustains a wound that viewers see. Not coincidentally, she sustains a frontal injury that visibly draws blood (59:32–35), leading to the revelation that she is a female who has appropriated a male role. Shortly thereafter, when she tells Mushu that she perhaps left home so she could see herself as "someone worthwhile" (1:02:50–3), she looks at her own reflection in her helmet, implying that she was a woman looking for worth in a man's world. She takes a male military object and turns it into an object associated with femininity, as we see with the symbol for females, the hand mirror of the goddess of love and beauty, Venus, versus the

arrow and shield of Mars, god of war. When Mulan stares into the helmet, she sadly complains, “But I was wrong. I see nothing” (1:02:54–1:03:05). Mushu then tries to cheer her up, saying, “Look at you. You look so pretty”, suggesting that now, as a female, her real power lies in beauty (1:02:39–1:03:19).

Once she has returned to her female identity, she only assists a male (Mushu) in Shan Yu’s final defeat. Just prior to Mushu’s dispatch of the villain, Mulan joins her three male companions who pass for concubines, a seduction complete with an apple, connoting the temptation of Eve. Men (or women dressed as men) have military might while women (or men dressed as women) use their sexuality to prevail. After resuming her female identity, Mulan ends her military service by embracing the Emperor, behavior that is more like that of an affectionate daughter than a war hero.

Mulan excels in military strategy rather than battle, and likewise has an adversary that is fitting for a female, Chi Fu, a cowardly, irritating council member for the Emperor who oversees military operations. He is devoid of masculinity, partly symbolized by his having only four teeth, none of which are canines that symbolize masculinity (also a theme in Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (see [26])). (Canine symbolism is also evident in the worship of the Buddha’s canine in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The tooth, Buddha’s putative sole remains, is heavily guarded in a temple adorned with large tusks, reinforcing masculinity) [27]. In contrast, villain Shan Yu’s fang-like canines (e.g., 1:12:34 and 1:12:49) match his similarly shaped fingernails (1:11:58), emphasizing the threat he poses.

Chi Fu epitomizes the vilification of asexual, effeminate, and homosexual men, a portrayal exacerbated by the stereotype of Asian men as hyposexual. He personifies the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity in which men dominate other men or conquer women. Asian males are particularly vulnerable to unflattering, effeminate portrayals that reduce them to caricatures within a fixed binary hierarchy prescribed by heterosexuality ideals and race [28,29]. At one point, Chi Fu emerges from his tent to bathe (46:00), clad in a towel from his chest to his mid thighs, like a dress, with another towel wrapped around his head. Viewers see similar symbolism in the aftermath of the battle with Shan Yu, as Chi Fu’s tattered hat limply hangs down (1:15:23–1:17:21). Chi Fu also sports only a few naked strands of facial hair on his chin while the Emperor’s long beard confers masculinity (not unlike the trophy value hunters place on the beard length of wild turkeys) [30].

Other examples of Chi Fu’s lack of virility are more overt: he denies that he ever “squeal[s] like a girl” (46:53–57) but then immediately shrieks as he is startled by an innocuous panda bear. He later cowers under a rock during a mountain battle. In the ultimate insult to his masculinity, the emperor feminizes Chi Fu by suggesting that a woman, Mulan, replace him on the council. He then faints, solidifying his status as an appropriately effeminate male for Mulan to defeat. It is acceptable for Mulan to triumph over him since he is already feminized, unlike the hyper-masculine villain, Shan Yu. Accordingly, Mulan has only a limited role in Shan Yu’s undoing: she takes away his sword and uses it to impale his cape before Mushu very dramatically impales him with a rocket. These interactions with males allow her to be heroic in a way that is compatible with being a woman, yet also result in Mushu upstaging her by delivering the fatal blow to Shan Yu.

3.4. *Mushu’s Machismo*

Mushu has the honor of taking out villain Shan Yu, part of his plan to be promoted to Guardian spirit (driven by self-promotion rather than altruism associated with females) [31]. His aspirations are played out in a way to enhance his masculinity beyond feminizing Shan Yu via impalement. Mushu also subdues Shan Yu’s falcon. In an admittedly subtle reference to the bird’s masculinity, the choice of a falcon endows the bird with a sharp, triangular “tomial” tooth on his upper beak, the means by which falcons kill (rather than with their talons like eagles and hawks) [32]. The falcon serves as an extension of Shan Yu, as when he helps restore Shan Yu’s masculinity by snatching and returning his master’s sword that Shang is about to formally present to the Emperor. Shortly after the falcon restores the sword, Mushu humiliates him by denuding him of his feathers and then rides him on his way to conquering the bird’s now-former master, Shan Yu. All of this imagery bolsters Mushu’s masculinity, in contrast to the more limited exploits of a heroine, who relies on males to achieve victory.

3.5. Return to Femininity and Gender Binarism

By the end, Mulan has relinquished her borrowed masculine role, placing her anomalous martial recognition squarely in the past as males resume their dominance (as also occurs after Ursula loses her power in *The Little Mermaid* [26]). After Mulan's exploration of gender fluidity, her embrace of conventional femininity suggests that stretching the binary classification of gender is not part of her identity, but rather in the service of altruism (more expected of women) [31] and part of an Electrical interest in protecting her father. The intersectionality of Asian culture and gender norms carries an unequivocal message: parental approval and one's rightful place in society call for traits reinforced in the movie, ranging from the matchmaking scene in which stereotypical female traits are de rigueur, to the song *A Girl Worth Fighting For*. In this song, as indicated by its title, men seek a woman who appreciates their battle machismo and "manly ways," with the emphasis on women as passive observers. Furthermore, the appreciation extends to adulation since according to the lyrics: "My girl will think I have no faults. That I'm a major find." Mulan's interjection, "Uhh, how 'bout a girl who's got a brain, who always speaks her mind?" is quickly dismissed as undesirable.

As a result, as a heroine, Mulan is allowed to experiment with gender performativity, but the stark contrast between her success as a warrior and her resumption of very circumscribed femininity treats gender fluidity as a passing stage that will not win respect in society or in one's family, constraints that can be unforgiving in the Asian community [33,34]. Mulan achieves success largely while in a stereotypically male role, but then resumes a traditionally female role that so clearly does not capture the full range of her personality and identity that include non-gender-conforming elements. There is no carryover from her heroism while passing for a male to her female role, or any explanation as to why she is suddenly complacent reclaiming that life. The disparate gendered stages of Mulan's life are not melded, preventing Mulan from stretching the conventional boundaries of masculinity and femininity.

When she is finished with her heroic, ego-oriented achievement, she renews her devotion to caring for others and avoiding the limelight, with no overlap of culturally ingrained social gender roles [35]. Only two categories exist, and Mulan belongs in the feminine sphere, without any trace of her previous experiences, however life-changing. Compelling stories usually include a character's growth, that often hinges on how their earlier experiences allow them to develop, manifested in ways such as having an epiphany, feeling empathy, gaining confidence, solidifying their identity, recognizing the importance of inner beauty, all examples of how plots depict a journey that demonstrates the ability of an individual to change. Yet Mulan's abrupt separation from her life in a masculine role and resumption of traditional femininity undermines gender as a social construction, reinforcing it as a fixed category that shackles individuals by enforcing gender binarism, a missed opportunity to counteract the stigma associated with subordinated masculinities and femininities [28].

The symbolism expressed in flowers is a clear manifestation of this pattern. When Mulan arrives back at home, her father is sitting alone on a bench, with petals from the flowering tree above him fluttering down. He holds an intact, closed blossom, a symbol of his daughter (1:19:06), who earlier wears a comb with a pure white flower in her hair that she leaves by his bedside when she sneaks off to become a soldier. It is the same bench where he sat with her earlier after a matchmaking fiasco and comments that late-blooming flowers can be the most beautiful, as he points to a flower bud that has not yet opened (13:54).

When Mulan hands her father the sword of defeated villain Shan Yu and the Emperor's personal crest, he unceremoniously lets them fall to the ground, as he cares not what she has done, but just that she has come home, her rightful place. The shift of her role from heroine back to traditional daughter and future wife is implied as she gives her father the patriarch the sword and medal, symbols of male dominance, so she can return to domesticity. Furthermore, by pushing aside and failing to recognize his daughter's possession of the enemy's sword, he reinforces the disconnect between the role of daughter and the quintessential war trophy symbolic of the unmaning of the enemy.

Mulan's father is clearly happy that his daughter is safe (manifesting his protective paternal role). Of the three family members present, none show any interest in her accomplishments. Mulan's new master status was established in the previous scene when the Emperor overlooks her accomplishments and calls her a beautiful flower that has bloomed (1:18:33–39) when he urges Shang to pursue her romantically.

Viewers know that Shang is on his way. His arrival in the middle of Mulan's reunion with her father presumably prefigures her imminent deflowering by Shang (whom the grandmother urges to "stay forever"). The message is clear: what she did when away from home is secondary. It seems to matter only that she is joyfully reunited with her father and, as consonant with resolving her Electra complex, a suitor appears, one who is sufficiently masculine to affirm her beauty and femininity. In any case, once home, she seamlessly adopts the role of woman concerned with matrimony, her recent accomplishments seemingly forgotten.

In resuming her female identity, she forgoes the status she held as a male. In other words, Mulan had to be one or the other: heroine or daughter/wife (similar to *Frozen* where one sister has romance, and the other has power but neither sister has both). Women are not allowed the complicated roles seemingly appropriate for men. When Mulan impresses others, she is usually performing a male role. Once she reclaims her female identity, she gives up glory without hesitation in order to conform to tradition. Male heroes would be emasculated by turning down a prestigious opportunity in favor of duties at home. But to be feminine, *Mulan* suggests that women are confined to the role of daughter or wife.

Mulan teaches girls what constitutes a happy ending: going home to fulfill domestic duties. The movie did not conclude with her military victory [36]. Instead, she returns home to emotionally embrace her father and then presumably secures a spouse. Early on, her father had chided her to learn her place (17:12–15). Apparently, after a period of (significant) rebellion, she has learned to do so. Her achievements, largely accomplished as a male, give way to a lifestyle that lacks the same appeal as white princesses' royal prospects. As a result, the movie has an insidious quality by packaging traditional gender roles in an illusion of female strength. In the end, Mulan neither embraces empowerment nor lives the life of a princess in any way. Finally, viewers should note that Disney chose a story for their Asian princess that is set in China where there are no interactions with white characters and thus no potential for Mulan to best white competitors or to challenge the view of Asian Americans in the US as perpetual foreigners and "unassimilable" [36].

4. Princess and the Frog

Plot: Tiana's tireless efforts to fulfill her father's dream of opening New Orleans' finest restaurant are interrupted by her unexpected transformation into a frog when she kisses the enchanted Prince Naveen. The frog couple navigates the bayou in search of the means to break the spell.

4.1. Electral Theme

As in *Mulan* and most other Disney movies with female protagonists, there is a clear Electral undercurrent. Although Tiana's mother is alive throughout the movie, her role is patently secondary to Tiana's father, despite his death. Early in the movie, Tiana helps her father prepare gumbo. After the meal, her father shares his dream to one day open his own restaurant, the finest in New Orleans. When Tiana eagerly expresses her desire to help, her father promises that they will name the restaurant Tiana's Place. After an exhausting shift as a waitress, Tiana looks at a drawing of the restaurant, then at her late father's picture and expresses that his dream is her dream and that the restaurant is a way to sustain his presence in her life: "Don't worry Daddy. We'll be there soon [emphasis added]". Her quest to please her father is transparent, as she explains to her mother when they are in an old sugar-mill building she hopes to turn into her restaurant: "I gotta make sure all Daddy's hard work means something". As with *Mulan*, the Electral father-daughter bond is manifested in the daughter's goals directly reflecting her father.

4.2. Lower Social Class

Tiana starts off disadvantaged by her social class and, although she experiences upward social mobility, her fairytale ending falls short of what viewers would expect for a conventional princess. Disney did make concessions in response to preproduction input from Oprah Winfrey and members of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) by changing the protagonist's name from Maddy (which sounded too much like mammy) to Tiana and by making her a waitress instead of a chambermaid [18]. Nevertheless, despite these changes, there are manifold reminders of Tiana's lower social class that differentiates her from other Disney princesses, especially when the intersectionality of class and race is taken into account.

Tiana's impoverished background contrasts with that of her best friend Charlotte La Bouff, whose father is New Orleans' richest and most powerful man (who dotes on his daughter to a fault, repeating the Electrical theme). One way that Disney emphasizes Tiana's family's lower status is by never mentioning their last name. In contrast, the La Bouff last name is mentioned nine times. Not only does Tiana's mother work for Charlotte's family as a seamstress, but Tiana also benefits from Charlotte who hires her to make beignets for a masquerade party where, despite their supposed friendship, she is the help. Critics have noted that Tiana and her mother are the financial beneficiaries of a relationship with rich white people who are ready to help deserving black people find success (also a theme of Hollywood's *The Blind Side* in 2009) [37]. In addition, Tiana only becomes a princess because of her marriage, reflecting that her work is not sufficient, but instead relies on tapping into the existing power structure that excludes African Americans, especially in 1920s New Orleans [12].

Even at the end, when Tiana is a princess whose master status is more restaurant owner than royalty, she serves food to Charlotte and her father in what is a supposedly triumphant moment. There is no hint of resentment that she is still serving the white family. As a result, viewers are deprived of seeing a reversal of fortune among those formerly higher on the social ladder or exploitative of the heroine. For example, Cinderella rises from servitude and attains a place in society coveted by her stepsisters who used to oppress her. Some might argue that we need to teach young girls not to resent those who are richer and more powerful and to strive for equality not superiority. Yet in this case, in the end, Charlotte and her father retain their superior social standing so that Tiana does not visibly match or upend their position at the top of the hierarchy [12]. Although it is Tiana, and not her friend Charlotte, who marries the prince, the marriage does not appear to elevate Tiana above Charlotte in status. While the La Bouffs are caricatures, they remain at the top. Furthermore, we do not see Tiana exercising authority over anyone else, and certainly not any white people. Disney was willing to endow a black woman with power, but within the existing framework of white male hegemony.

Within a fairytale setting, Tiana is not just the sole Disney princess to have a paid job, but also a job that is low in prestige. Her restaurant aspirations reflect her lower status and viewers are supposed to just accept that, for a black character, this is sufficiently impressive. "Disney's first black 'princess' lives in a world where the ceiling on black ambition is firmly set at the service industries, and Tiana and her neighbors seem downright zip-a-dee-doo-dah happy about that" [18]. The villain, Dr. Facilier, lauds her ambition, helping her picture her ideal restaurant, Tiana's Palace: "When you dream, you dream big. Look at this place! Going to be the crown jewel of the Crescent City"—meaning New Orleans. The reference to "crown jewel" connotes royalty, but her sphere as a black princess is clearly limited to having the best restaurant-nightclub in New Orleans. Its eponymous name helps link Tiana's identity to her occupation rather than royalty.

4.3. Identity Tied to Labor

Tiana's more modest ambitions are coupled with excessive industriousness: "Tiana spends an inordinate amount of time in her anthropomorphic form and, does not really move us beyond the stereotypical image of black women as invisible or as solely attached to labor" [12]. In one of the relatively few interactions that Tiana has with her father, he discourages her from simply wishing upon a star, without following up with "hard work" to make dreams come true. Although Disney's

emblematic theme of wishing upon a star originated with *Pinocchio* in 1940, for the black princess, Disney added a blatant admonition about wishing without working, even though the whole notion of “wish upon a star” implies that at least a scintilla of magic is needed, and *not* just hard work. This also raises the question of whether white characters’ commitment to a strong work ethic is considered a given.

In one of the most dramatic moments of the movie, Tiana rejects Dr. Facilier’s offer to use magic to make her restaurant dream come true. When the evil Dr. Facilier facilitates or makes things facile/fácil (easy in French and Spanish), it undermines hard work, which is seemingly the proper way to realize dreams, at least for black people. In contrast, white princesses do not balk at benefiting from magic, whether it is Cinderella accepting help from her fairy godmother or Triton giving his daughter legs to replace her mermaid tail in Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*. Instead, black people are expected to live by the credo first expressed by Tiana’s father, and stated repeatedly, including when Tiana preaches to Prince Naveen: “The only way to get what you want in this world is through hard work” (operationalized as labor). This advice, however, is most applicable to viewers with less access to education, lucrative employment, inherited wealth, and the right connections. But as an African American, Tiana is portrayed as only able to get ahead through hard work that is physical labor. This emphasis separates the sole black princess from her white counterparts.

Although Tiana has advanced significantly from harried waitress to upscale restaurant owner, we still see her serving people, a role that is uncomfortably close to being a “servant,” especially for a princess. “[D]espite her role as *patronne*, in the fantasy Tiana is stirring a pot, chopping vegetables, whipping cream and putting it on desserts, as though even in her wildest dreams it was impossible for her to abandon completely a manual, hands-on role [reinforcing] her subordinate status” as a laborer [37]. Even Prince Naveen sees her in this light, telling her, “You have had quite an influence on me”, specifically because she taught him how to mince food. As a result, Tiana keeps her occupation and social class at a comfortable level that does not challenge the position or privilege of white viewers.

Although there is some value in promoting a work ethic, a princess who chooses the everyday stresses involved in running a business may not have the same appeal as the imagined life of a real princess. Life as a princess is clearly fantasy compared to the much more mundane life of restaurant ownership, especially in a real city and not a fanciful fantasyland. Viewers have the ability to travel to New Orleans, including to the site of Tiana’s wedding in the famed St. Louis Cathedral, unlike other princesses’ fantasy worlds that are safe from such reality checks.

4.4. *The (One and Only) Black Princess as Frog*

Although Disney modified the film’s original title, *The Frog Princess* [18], the first title would have better reflected that viewers literally see Tiana mostly as a frog princess and not a princess who interacts with a frog, a portrayal that has insulted black viewers [38]. While in other Disney movies, the transformation of humans into non-humans has reflected a defect in character (e.g., *Pinocchio* and his friends who become donkeys, and the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast* [11]), Tiana’s time as a frog lacks a broader meaning. She experiences various frog-centric adventures, atypical for princesses, such as evading leeches, big fish, predatory birds, gators, and hunters seeking frog leg meat, dangers unlikely to resonate with viewers. In addition, her adventures fail to flesh out her passion for cooking or goal of business ownership that could have piqued the interest of restaurant and food aficionados. Nor do these escapades move her closer to realizing or refining her dream. In other words, the preponderance of time she spends having adventures as a frog is disconnected from her goal and how to realize it.

Aside from having its first black princess spend most of the movie as non-human, Disney also made her an amphibian. Regardless of the familiarity of the famous story about a girl kissing a frog, frogs are not animals considered to be particularly cute or relatable in their pond or swamp life, as a perusal of the selection of stuffed animals at any toy store will demonstrate. In fact, when the villain Dr. Facilier taunts Tiana, calling her “a slimy, little frog”, Tiana embraces this trait, retorting, “I’ve got news for you, Shadow Man. It’s not slime. It’s mucus!”. She then uses her tongue as a tool to snatch

and then shatter his amulet, which summons the Voodoo *loas* that drag him into the netherworld to his death. This turning point (frog tongue as tool) is anticlimactic; it is neither particularly ingenious nor is it the actual cause of the villain's defeat (that is effected by the *loas*). In other words, there is nothing especially magical about being a frog, and it is doubtful that many viewers end the movie entertaining fantasies about life as a frog. Some might counter that the fairytale notion of kissing a frog is classic. Yet there was no need to apply it to the storyline of Disney's first black princess, especially given a possible link between frogs and blackface minstrel stereotypes [39].

4.5. Ignoring Real Race Issues

The movie contains ample reminders of Tiana's low-class status, including her family's modest home and neighborhood, her mother's employment as a seamstress, and her father doing "double, sometimes triple shifts, never letting on how bone tired and beat down he really was". African Americans start lower and then hit a glass ceiling; Tiana's "Palace," upgraded from the original name Tiana's Place, is nevertheless still just an upscale restaurant and clearly not a real palace. Similarly, Dr. Facilier's honorific title actually denotes his "credential" as a witch doctor and not the type of education and prestige viewers associate with white individuals with the same title.

The movie only hints at New Orleans' racially charged history or the setting of the 1920s. Instead, "[v]iewers can revel in the fantasy of a place free of racial and class tension, where traditional dishes bring everybody together" [37]. This whitewash rankles even more given the tension and conflicts that escalated post-Katrina (the category 5 hurricane that struck in August 2005) while the movie was in the planning stages. Viewers see Tiana and her mother enter a streetcar, walk by a white man reading a newspaper with the headline "Wilson elected", and proceed to the back of the train. Woodrow Wilson sanctioned racially discriminatory federal hiring practices, segregated offices, lunchrooms, and restrooms. By referencing Wilson in the setting of a likely segregated streetcar, the film alludes to the importance of New Orleans in the separate but equal doctrine established in *Plessy v Ferguson*, 1896.

In *Plessy*, the Supreme Court confirmed Louisiana's Separate Car Act (1890) that required "equal but separate" train cars for blacks and whites (finally overturned in *Brown v Board of Education*, 1954). Homer Plessy bought a train ticket originating in New Orleans. His white phenotype (he was one-eighth black) facilitated his entry into a "whites-only" car where he informed the conductor of his heritage and refused to sit in the "blacks-only" car. Plessy's lack of success in overturning the Separate Car Act emboldened segregationists during the Jim Crow era [40]. The movie's vague reference to this landmark case with a New Orleans connection seems unduly subtle. Also, given that a justification for *Plessy* was that the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection clause did not prescribe commingling of the two races, Disney's decision to create a prince (Naveen) who is racially ambiguous seems inappropriate. It exemplifies how Disney clumsily navigates New Orleans history including anti-miscegenation laws (perhaps a reason that the couple's romance grows in the bayou and not in New Orleans) [11].

4.6. Race and Romance

In contrast to the villain, Dr. Facilier, Prince Naveen is not black (and in fact is voiced by a white, blue-eyed Brazilian). The prince's skin color is a strange orange-tinted brown (complemented by his amber eyes). One black female viewer stated the implications of the prince's skin color for black women: "You better look elsewhere because you're not going to find the prince in your own race" [37].

Oddly, while Tiana is from a real locale, her love interest is from an imaginary place, Maldonia (which is never even pictured), explaining his hard-to-place, pseudo-French accent. His indistinguishable accent circumvented the issue of whether he would use a standard English dialect or use Black Dialect, sidestepping negative associations with the latter [41]. As a result, the prince's racial ambiguity likely helped Disney avoid issues surrounding linguistic subordination [42,43]. Any advantages conferred by selecting a prince from an imaginary land, however, were outweighed by the implications of the prince's questionable character.

Prince Naveen starts off as a ne'er-do-well and playboy who is broke because he has been cut off by his family. Because of a dearth of evidence of his transformation from spoiled narcissist, however, viewers might question why hardworking and motivated Tiana falls in love with him. Indeed, even an attempt to court her in the last third of the movie is offensive: "You have had quite an influence on me, which is amazing because I have dated thousands of women and . . . [noting her reaction] No, like two, three—just other women. And anyway, listen. You could not be more different, you know? You are practically one of the guys. No, no, no. You are not a guy" (1:09:55–1:10:08).

In addition, Naveen is the only Disney prince who fails to even *try* to take on the malefactor Dr. Facilier who tricks him. In other words, he is never able to even the score (let alone establish his masculinity in the conventional way by defeating the villain). Dr. Facilier, the only actual black male featured (other than the deceased father), is a much more charismatic character than the prince, as he invokes spirit intermediary *loas* to perpetrate evil in a twisted and racist rendering of the authentic African Diaspora voodoo religion [44]. He exudes masculinity with his tall hat with a single protruding feather, long staff with a ball at the end, and a necklace with animal canine teeth (a mark of masculinity discussed earlier).

In contrast, Prince Naveen fails to possess *any* characteristic that makes him notably worthy, heroic, or memorable. Although seeing him work with his wife at Tiana's Palace at the end shows a willingness to work as a team, it also suggests reliance on his wife. While there is no rule that the husband be the primary breadwinner, his unconventional auxiliary role and lack of stellar qualities offer further evidence of the alternative narrative for princesses of color.

Interview data with black female viewers reveal anger about the seemingly lower standard for a black princess: "The Prince was rude and disrespectful to the princess the entire time. It was not an endearing, enchanting relationship like the white princess characters were privileged to in all of Disney's previous movies. He was portrayed as lazy, rude, and disrespectful to his woman—an insult to black men and black women" [13]. Finally, the fact that Tiana becomes a princess by virtue of her marriage to an inferior prince detracts from her standing.

5. Conclusions

While both Mulan and Tiana provide relief from tropes of past princesses who often passively wait for their prince to fall for or save them, their storylines differentiate them from most white princesses in ways that could help explain the movies' limited financial success and resonance. Mulan dedicates herself to military training and enjoys success on the battlefield before going home to a life of unrelated domesticity that was always attainable. While Mulan is immersed in a military environment serving as a soldier in her father's stead, she adapts to a male-dominated culture that reinforces stereotypical masculinity. She then chooses to return to a life dictated by traditional female gender roles, with no indication that she brings new insight to this lifestyle of binarism that she initially rejects so forcefully.

Tiana goes from hardworking girl, to frog, and finally to hardworking cook and restaurant owner, which is neither an ending consistent with princess fantasies nor demonstrative of personal growth or transformation. Viewers have no reason to believe that by marrying Prince Naveen and technically becoming a princess that Tiana will assume any duties, receive privileges, adulation, or power normally associated with princesses.

There is nothing royal about the movie's ending. Instead, she and Prince Naveen serve people at her restaurant, with no mention of going to his home country of Maldonia to enjoy being at the top of the social hierarchy (as royalty). In fact, viewers are never exposed in any way to this imaginary land, keeping Tiana's life anchored in a real place. It seems that Tiana is a princess in name only (which is more than Mulan can claim). She theoretically becomes a princess but without any of the appealing trappings of royalty, including the ability to command others (which would normally include subordinates). Power is especially attractive to children who often resent adults' control over them. Royalty brings influence, regardless of age, making it especially desirable for a protagonist.

Instead of allowing viewers to step into a world of utter fantasy without limits, these nonwhite heroines are firmly grounded in reality. Tiana is an American princess, even though viewers know that Americans do not have royalty. *Mulan's* setting with specific inclusions of the Great Wall of China, the Imperial City, and the Huns (however historically inconsistent) also could detract from the fantasy setting. Likewise, HBO's popular series *Game of Thrones* taps adult enjoyment of royal power, castles, and magic that also features white people (males and females, at least), vying for power. Even though the show is inspired by medieval Europe, it takes place in the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos and includes plot elements like dragons, witches and white walkers that keep the show firmly in the fantasy zone. Disney is well served by updating the standard princess narrative, full of traditional tropes that constrain girls. However, when viewers see Tiana devote herself to unglamorous work and *Mulan* choose ordinary domestic duties, we can expect them to prefer escapism and possibilities far from the exigencies of real life.

Fairytales in their most conventional form are associated more with white people because, traditionally, those enjoying power and privilege have been largely white. By connecting *Mulan* and Tiana to elements of the real world, their dreams seem to be similarly mundane as exemplified by owning a restaurant or a return to family life. *Mulan* rejects power in favor of filial piety while Tiana lives comfortably and harmoniously in a white-dominated world. It is as if for people of color, success in the real world is unlikely enough that it qualifies as a fairytale ending. These narratives contrast with white princesses who reflect that white people have already secured an advantage in the social hierarchy and seek narratives that help them to go beyond their reality, to reach for the stars, so to speak, and dream of magical power and royal status. For them, owning a restaurant or returning home to domestic responsibilities would not constitute a fairytale.

White people are encouraged to think that they have no limits while the narrative of people of color is more rooted in the real world with greater limitations. Perhaps the time has come for Disney heroines to have lives more grounded in reality, a rebuke of the princess dream that can help drive fantasies exacerbating materialism and its costs. Disney may be reluctant to disrupt the formula behind their financially successful Princess collection, but in the meantime, their marginalization of nonwhite princesses perpetuates a consumption mentality and preserves a racial hierarchy confined by gender norms.

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