

**A “Whole New World”: Race and Representation in Disney’s Live-Action Remakes of
Aladdin, The Lion King, and Mulan**

by

Amany Yehia Elmogahzy

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Communication

Auburn, Alabama
December 15, 2018

Keywords: Race, Representation, Disney, Pre-reception, Live-action

Copyright 2018 by Amany Yehia Elmogahzy

Approved by

Dr. Andrea Kelley, Chair, Assistant Professor of Media Studies
Dr. George Plasketes, Professor of Media Studies
Hollie Lavenstein, Associate Professor and Associate Director of Media Studies

Abstract

When Disney began adapting their animated classics into live-action remakes, the studio assumed that this representational shift would be a perfect fit for their audiences. However, these films, specifically quickly became contested sites of cultural discussion, with audiences demanding inclusivity and diversity in their production practices. This study examines how audience discourses are shaping public understanding of Disney's films with regard to their racial politics. In critically examining the representations and the paratexts surrounding both the animated and live-action texts of *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020), this analysis interrogates the racial ideologies which have defines Disney's representations of race historically and in contemporary contexts. Ultimately, this study evaluates to what extent the pre-reception discourse continues to influence Disney's approach to the casting of their films.

Acknowledgments

To my father, Yehia Elmogahzy, because I owe it all to you! You have been my emotional support not only throughout this process but throughout my entire life and always encouraged me even when all I wanted to do was give up. Your pride in me and my achievements has always guided my path and kept me steadfast. Serving as my example, you are the person who has fostered my interest in Academia for all these years, and will no doubt be the person who urges me forward in the future. And one day who knows maybe I will fulfill your dream of seeing me as a Ph.D. just like you!

Additionally, to my friends and family, your love and support inspires me daily and encourages me to be the best version of myself, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

I am also thankful for my committee and mentors: Andrea Kelley, George Plasketes, and Hollie Lavenstein. Without you, all none of this would have been possible. I appreciate your commitment to seeing me through to the finish line.

Finally, to Walt Disney, without whose imagination this thesis would not have been possible, and whose films have always reminded me:

“If you can dream it, you can do it. Always remember that this whole thing was started by a mouse.”

- Walt Disney

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
List of Illustrations.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	8
Mickey, the Blackface Minstrel.....	8
<i>The Song of the South</i> and Blacks in American Film.....	12
Racial Anthropomorphism.....	16
Casting Practices and Whiteness in Hollywood.....	20
Theoretical Framework and Method.....	27
Methodology.....	31
Looking Ahead: Chapter Overview.....	34
Chapter I.....	38
Multiculturalism in Disney's <i>Aladdin</i> , <i>The Lion King</i> , and <i>Mulan</i>	43
Casting.....	45
Star Power.....	49
Visual Representations and Animation Styles.....	51
Performance.....	57
Conclusion.....	67

Chapter II	69
Casting and Star Power	73
Conclusion	117
Discussion	121
Findings	122
Conclusion and Further Implications	124
References	130

List of Figures

Figure 1 - Disney’s Live-Action <i>Mulan</i> Spec Script	74
Figure 2 - 18 Million Rising organization’s response to AngryAsian.com anonymous blog post by Concerned for Mulan	79
Figure 3 - Asian Actor Harry Shum Jr. also responds to Concerned for Mulan blog	79
Figure 4 - Disney’s Live-Action <i>Mulan</i> Casting Call.....	82
Figure 5 - Twitter response criticizing <i>Mulan</i> casting call announcement.....	86
Figure 6 - Twitter response expressing dismay at excitement to <i>Mulan</i> casting call	86
Figure 7 - Twitter response noting Hollywood’s problematic representation practices.	87
Figure 8 - Disney’s Live-Action <i>Aladdin</i> Casting Call	91
Figure 9 - Twitter user suggesting Zayn Malik as possible Aladdin.	92
Figure 10 - Twitter user suggesting Avan Jogia as possible Aladdin.	93
Figure 11 - Director Lexi Alexander tweeting asking Guy Ritchie to contact her for actors.....	94
Figure 12 - Twitter user expressing dismay at <i>Aladdin</i> live-action casting.....	98
Figure 13 - Twitter user recognizes Naomi Scott as “white girl”	99
Figure 14 - Twitter user compares Naomi Scott and animated Jasmine.....	100
Figure 15 - Twitter user jests about whitewashing in live-action <i>Aladdin</i>	102
Figure 16 - Twitter user question addition of white prince to Aladdin	103
Figure 17 - Disney confirms Live-Action <i>The Lion King</i> All-Star Cast.....	109
Figure 18 - Twitter user remarks disbelief and joy at Lion King casting	112

A “WHOLE NEW WORLD”: RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN DISNEY’S LIVE ACTION REMAKES OF ALADDIN, THE LION KING, AND MULAN

Introduction

Flashback to *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) circa 2015 and a sketch opens to images of scenes from the recent live-action Disney film, *Cinderella* (2015). In the background, a voiceover announces, “Walt Disney has brought the magic back by turning your favorite animated classics into live-action hits, and in 2016 Disney brings you the biggest remake yet.... From the director of *Furious 7* comes a new Disney classic on overdrive.” The sketch then goes on to air a mock film trailer which opens to a forest where there is a hunter nailing up a “hunting season” sign, a muscle car proceeds to pull up, and out steps a muscly clad Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson smoking a cigar dressed in makeup and prosthetic ears to look like a deer. When asked who he is, The Rock proclaims, “I’m Bambi,” and proceeds to shoot the hunter. This clever role reversal of *Bambi* continues, announcing Bambi’s companions, who masterfully mirror the cast of *Furious 7* in the woodland creature roles with: Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson as Bambi, “Vin-Diesel” as Thumper, “Tyrese Gibson” as Flower, and finally “Michelle Rodriguez” as Feline in a film which the sketch has titled Disney’s *Bambi: Get Bucked*. The premise of the film is Bambi and his friends avenging his mother’s death by hunting the hunters that once hunted them.

With Disney’s acquisition of Marvel Studio, the premise of this sketch may not be too farfetched. While seemingly ridiculous, the sketch was spot on in targeting Disney’s new marketing strategy of developing live-action remakes of classic animated Disney films, some

two years before Disney had officially announced their projected line-up. Fast forward to present day 2018, the floodgates have officially opened with Disney's jampacked live-action production schedule. Having already released *Cinderella* (2015), *The Jungle Book* (2016) and *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), Disney's announced lineup of adaptations will also see *Dumbo* take flight and make its debut as the next live-action remake to roll out a release date in 2019, followed by *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019) and *Mulan* (2020). The studio also shows no signs of slowing down, but why would they? After all, remakes are what Disney does best!

It is the studio's 'circle of life' and its 'tale as old as time.' Disney is a film studio that thrives off the retellings of pre-existing entities. Whether this be a spin on an old fairytale, the recreation of a historical figure, or the reworking of a classic novel, and it should then come as no surprise that Disney is creating a not so 'whole new world' in now adapting their existing animated cannon into live-action remakes. *Entertainment Weekly* states, "Live-action remakes have been a cornerstone of Disney's film strategy since 2010's *Alice in Wonderland* starring Johnny Depp, and the studio has been steadily mining its library of animated films to huge profits ever since, but *Beauty and the Beast* — starring Emma Watson and Dan Stevens — is by far its biggest (and technically trickiest) revamp. After this success, the possibilities for the studio now seem almost limitless" (Coggan, 2017).

The announcements of these films have not only created revamped excitement in the brand but have also begun to raise critical issues and popular debates. While some of these films such as *Dumbo* have so far managed to fly under the radar, others are creating quite a frenzy by perhaps unintentionally tackling issues of representation. For example, after *Beauty and the Beast's* (2017) release, it was accused of promoting a "gay" agenda by insinuating that the character Lefou may be interested in men. This caused such an uproar that it even led a theater in

Alabama to cancel screenings as a result (Khatchatourian, 2017). Though the film experienced controversy, it was also praised for its more feminist representation. *Variety* commended Emma Watson, in her portrayal of Belle in the live-action, even proclaiming her as “Rebel Belle” recognizing the role she played in revamping the classic Disney princess stereotype. In their interview with Watson, she made it clear how she changed the character to portray more of a feminist sense of agency stating that Belle is “absolutely a Disney princess, but she’s not a passive character—she’s in charge of her own destiny” (Blasberg, 2017).

Ever since *Beauty and the Beast’s* (2017) critical reception, Disney’s fans have been quick to rush to the internet and take Disney to task for their transgressions related to casting and whitewashing in *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020). Now that Disney can no longer hide behind the pretext of animation, audiences seem determined to encourage the studio towards diversity. It is not just the Twitter-sphere that’s chirping, however. Popular media outlets, newspapers, magazines, entertainment blogs and online publications have also participated in the criticism of the media giant and its practices. No matter the critic, these films have people talking, and in some cases are even proving to be hotbeds of contention. Like the SNL sketch where Bambi flips the script making the once hunted now the hunters. Those who viewed the original animated films have too reversed roles, from once passive audiences, to now critics who are now shifting the focus back on the Studio and holding them accountable for the images they circulate.

The release of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) has in some ways served as a catalyst for these discussions, as audiences were quick to break down the film and call on representational issues regarding sexuality and gender roles. However, in the case of films such as *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020), which have yet to be released, there is no film

text in circulation for the audience to analyze. Even without a teaser trailer, reception of these projects continues to raise questions of representation, primarily surrounding the subject of race. Armed with nothing but fragments of released production intel, the viewing public (comprised of both fans and members from within the industry) has sought to challenge the animations studio, making the controversial buzz surrounding these projects that more interesting. The question then becomes, what is at stake for Disney now that their identity politics have become more publicly questioned and exposed than ever before?

It is evident that Disney is invested in the retelling of these narratives as they both pull on nostalgic heartstrings and are sure to rake in the big box office bucks. While it may be understood that appropriation of existing texts is the “Disney way,” there is more at stake in the shift from animation to live-action than just financial success. John Wills (2017) claims that “Disney Culture rests on the assimilation of other stories and ideas...that are reduced to impart traditional and progressive values” (p. 4). The question is then, what values does Disney reflect in their works? While Disney may report to reflect and appeal to their various demographics, they undoubtedly create worlds which represent a specific worldview, a worldview which has long promoted the hegemonic system of whiteness. So, while in some instances Disney may encourage progressive ideals, they still do so under the guise of white dominance which has resulted in significant racial disparities in representation. This is important because, for the millions in ticket sales, there are millions of viewers who are confronted with these portrayals on the screen and as a result asked to share in that ideological belief system.

President of Walt Disney Studios Motion Picture Production, Sean Bailey, sheds further light on this live-action phenomenon explaining that,

What Walt Disney did with all these animated classics was that he took these tales that he knew were timeless and he reinvented them...so we thought, well, we can re-approach these stories with the very best talent and the very best technology available, and we can try to make them reflect the world around us a little more (Coggan, 2017).

Appropriately, the only films that are currently eligible for re-adaptation are those films that were released over 20 years ago. Films which could be argued no longer embody this contemporary cultural moment, which is far more diverse in both audience and industry membership. The times have changed, and therefore so must the representation that accompanies it. However, even in this attempt to characterize the evolution from animation to live-action re-adaptation as a movement towards producing texts that serve contemporary audiences, the studio is failing to hit the mark. As the viewing public has already begun following the trend and critically responding, to Disney's politics of representation in their live-action remakes, they call attention to a prescient popular culture phenomenon in need of critical attention.

Some popular critics have played a role in dismissing a critique of the Disney canon as it is seen as "safe for children" and therefore have disparaged scholars for "reading too much into the film" (Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995). However, serious media scholars recognize the important cultural work that Disney does, and, with Disney's pervasive cross-generational influence, it is an inescapable force in understanding the politics which exist in the film industry. Furthermore, as the films in question are in fact remakes, it would be impossible to critically study this phenomenon in isolation. Jonathan Gray (2010) maintains that, in the case of adapted remediated texts, that "given their extended presence, any filmic or televisual text and its cultural impact, value, and meaning cannot be adequately analyzed without taking into account the film or televisual program's many proliferations" (p. 2). Thus, to critically respond to any live-action

remake, they must be studied in respect to their prior, corresponding animated text. The animated films serve as an invaluable frame of reference to better contextualize the responses to the new films, and therefore cannot be ignored. In using the existing animated films as points of comparison, not only is Disney's current cultural influence brought into question but Disney's entire historical canon. As the animated canon has engaged Disney in a long-standing history of prejudiced practices, it is also then significant to analyze what changes, if any, are being made to Disney's identity politics alongside their contemporary shift to live-action. This can be done by using the original animated films *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Mulan* (1998) and the representations they have produced as a point of reference to engage with the live-action remakes. Then one can see how Disney may be using this conversion of technology as more than just a way to rake in box office dollars, but also as a mode of production to re-imagine their original representations in a more progressive light. In doing so, Walt Disney Studios could effectively capitalize on this live-action remake trend they have conceived to also re-write the wrongs of their racist past.

For the sake of clarity and depth of engagement, this thesis will focus on representations of race in *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020), as they are the live-action remake productions most relevant to racial discourse. This will be achieved by first looking at the reception of their animated texts, and then using that as a point of reference to engage reception of or what may be better expressed as pre-reception of the live-action films.

In exploring ethnic and racial depictions in Disney films and how they have changed over time to account for shifts in cultural attitudes, a historical framework will be established. The context and significance of which will then serve as a lens in looking at the recent controversial reception surrounding these three films. This study seeks to understand what is at stake in the

representational shift from animation to live-action adaptations of Disney films. Respectively, this study asks, how have live-action adaptations foregrounded and encouraged a debate concerning questions of representation, and then how have these notions since been challenged? As Disney begins to take the animated forms of their most beloved characters and begins to hyper-realize them, the depictions and texts that are created will ultimately affect Disney's politics of identity as they are reimagined. In analyzing these texts in the context of their ideological and historical significance, one can examine the role that these live-action remakes play in current discourse and their implications in the larger cultural sites of struggle that exist today. It is this struggle and the reception of these texts that could work to exemplify that, while Disney may be attempting to make strides towards a more progressive system of representation, they are ultimately still enforcing their existing dominant ideological system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When it comes to Disney and their representations of diversity, Alan Spector (1998) posits, that though the studio's films may be exalted and often "widely acclaimed as exhibiting positive constructive social values, a critical viewing will show that they generally reflect racist stereotypes typical of the period in which they were produced" (p.39). The Walt Disney Company's racial representations have historically been riddled with overtly damaging stereotypical portrayals of racial minorities, which have since been understood as offensive and intolerable depictions of various ethnic groups. Thus, it is essential to explore the racist origins of these representations to understand better not only how they may have influenced the racial representations of the past, but how they may still be informing contemporary practices. To do so, one must assess the various modes of Disney's cultural production and review how they have shaped Disney's racial imagery by addressing: the racial representations that informed the company's early beginnings, the racialized anthropomorphism of their animated canon, and the studio's casting practices which have historically privileged whiteness in Hollywood.

Mickey, the Blackface Minstrel

Many would shudder at and choose to deny the fact that Disney's beloved trademark and mascot, Mickey Mouse, could symbolize anything other than happiness, joy and the realization of childhood dreams. However, the beloved mouse has a much darker history than the image he represents today and is, in fact, a symbol of racism and oppression. That is because of Mickey

Mouse, along with other characters like Felix the Cat and Bugs Bunny that defined the beginnings of the animation industry, and are based upon minstrel character types (Sammond, 2015). Blackface Minstrelsy was a theatrical fixture developed in the nineteenth century with the beginnings of these shows dating back to 1843 (Sammond, 2015). Minstrelsy shows were performed by white men who embodied slave caricatures and parodied blackness for the sake of entertainment. In his book *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott (2013) defines this practice as the, “explicit ‘borrowing’ of black cultural materials for white dissemination, a borrowing that ultimately depended on the material relations of slavery, the minstrel show obscured these relations by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural” (p.4). This borrowing, of course, was, in fact, theft of and appropriation of elements of slave culture only to in turn to exploit it. This was a form of entertainment that Walt Disney continued to draw up and exploit for years after its decline.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century as Minstrelsy on the stage began to diminish and decrease in popularity, animation was beginning to industrialize rapidly. With this advancement in animation, there was a need for portrayals to in some sense align with those that had previously existed and, as a result, animators shaped their notions of what blackness looked and sounded like from minstrel shows (Sammond, 2015). As these representations so strongly informed the literal or figuratively “black” characters that were created by animators, Daniel Goldmark posits that with the rise of cartoons, “minstrelsy never died—it simply changed media” (as cited in Sammond, 2015, p. 69). In their representations the earliest minstrel characters types were presented as dimwitted in nature, melding faint traces of slave culture with various clownish stage traditions such as the harlequin of commedia dell’arte, producing the devious “darky” trickster (Lott, 2013). The white men who portrayed the characters dawned

embellished blackface makeup, stressing blacks as having wide noses, large eyes, and overly lined thick lips. Sammond (2015) captures the similarities between the two mediums of stage performance and animation's portrayals by affirming,

Even in the silent era, the visual representation of blackness—whether in literal form of the racist caricature of the human form or in the oblique form of the upright animal—followed the conventions of blackface minstrelsy in the large, pale lips, wide eyes, and elastic loping movements of the minstrel (p. 70).

Similarly, he expertly points out that, Mickey and friends, “With their white gloves, wide mouths and eyes, and tricksterish behaviors” provided no exception to these practices (Sammond, 2015, p. 1). Also, just as white men embodied the minstrel form, animation was also a segregated business, with the cartoonists and voiceover work done exclusively by whites (Sammond, 2015).

Whether it be blackface minstrel shows or minstrel cartoons, these traditions played a part in setting the scene in what has become the historical displacement and oppression of blacks and racial minorities in the realm of popular mass entertainment in America. These earlier forms of appropriation have subsequently become the vehicle and driving force permitting whites to maintain forms of black ownership into the present historical moment. Rather than owning slaves, black culture has become the commodified property. In doing so,

Blackface minstrelsy's century-long commercial regulation of black cultural practices stalled the development of African-American public arts and generated an enduring narrative of racist ideology, a process by which an entire people has been made the bearer of another people's “folk” culture (Lott, 2013, pg.17).

Minstrelsy's white commodification of black bodies and later the minstrel in animated form, “permitted white performers to present their disfigured version of black culture as authentic,

stealing the rights to something that was not there's to take, and effectively becoming the sole parties to profit" (Lott, 2013). Walt Disney himself represented one of these profiteers.

Just like animation, fragments of Minstrelsy also influenced live action productions in film. "In the beginning, there was an Uncle Tom," as Donald Bogel states, and this figure added a new dimension to the motion-picture industry as he was the first black character to be introduced in an American movie; the only issue was he was not black at all (Bogle, 2001, p.3). Carrying on the stage practices of Minstrelsy, the use of black-faced white actors became common in the portrayals of negroes in early silent films. Even before the community that is Hollywood came to be, the first negro film character (and typecast) was born, and it did not take long for others to follow. Following Tom's debut, other typecasts began to emerge, and he was soon followed by the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, and the brutal black buck. "All were character types used for the same effect: to entertain by stressing Negro inferiority. Fun was poked at the American Negro by presenting him as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey" (Bogle, 2001, p.4). Bogle (2001) suggests, that while he believes these typecasts were never meant to be harmful, they became so as these frames became the gold standard in developing characters whenever blacks were depicted. Such was the case when Disney debuted their first black film leads in the film *Song of the South* (1946), where these tropes were exclusively used in defining its characters. Even now, regardless of the progress made over time in respect to racial attitudes, these tropes and others have continued to dominate black characters long after their inception, and subsequently still rear their ugly heads in popular media.

Though Minstrelsy and Blackface have since died out as a dominating art form, remnants of its past can arguably be said to have present-day consequences. Inauthenticity in the representations of racial minorities by white-dominated media systematically instituted racial

stereotypes and obstructed the visibility of black performers then and has only persisted in doing so to black and other minority actors today. With the discontinued popularity of blackface minstrelsy, Mickey too has undoubtedly come a long way from what Sammond (2015) describes as once blasting himself into blackness in order to black up to play “Topsy” and “Uncle Tom” in *Mickey’s Mellerdrammer* (1933), still he cannot escape his minstrel history (p.1). Mickey and friends may have been distanced overtime from their minstrel roots, yet they still have maintained minstrelsy as a vestigial element of who they are. Sammond (2015) posits, that as “*vestigial minstrels*, carrying the tokens of blackface minstrelsy in their bodies and behaviors yet no longer signifying as such,” they can be stripped of explicit connotations of this practice (p.3). However, no matter how obscured these conventions may become, they can never completely be erased. To be assured of this and Disney’s indebtedness to blackface minstrelsy, one need only see a clip of Mickey in his first-ever public appearance, and Disney’s first ever synchronized sound cartoon *Steamboat Willie* (1928). In the clip, Mickey is seen chugging along down the river and cheerfully whistling a catchy tune. Most Disney enthusiasts may recognize this scene as it still plays before some modern Disney films and shorts today. However, where contemporary audiences may hear the catchy tune he is whistling as “Turkey in the Straw,” in its original form it is based on the blackface minstrel song “Old Zip Coon.”

The Song of the South and Blacks in American Film

Just as “Old Zip Coon” influenced Disney’s first ever sound cartoon, it also influenced its first ever film to feature animation alongside live-action production. Yes, the chorus of which “Zip a Duden Duden Duden zip a Duden day” helped to shape the Oscar-winning title song, “Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah” of Disney’s 1946, *Song of the South*, an adaptation of Joel Chandler Harris’ Uncle Remus tales (Emerson, 1997). The release of this film, which Jason Sperb (2012)

has branded, “Disney’s most notorious film,” and its subsequent theatrical reissues serve as a strong testament to Disney’s views on the role that black representations should play in their cannon. Consequently, these stereotypes are those who have also defined the racist beginnings of black representation in Hollywood, and the film the *Song of the South* (1946) features three of them. To further realize the consequences of these black stereotypes as they relate to the Walt Disney Company and their representations of race, it is significant to outline the original “Uncle Tom” type and the tropes that specifically surfaced in *Song of the South*: Uncle Remus, Mammy, and the pickaninny.

The Tom

Premiering originally in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903), the tom represented the first of the “socially acceptable Good Negro characters” (Bogle, 2001, p.4). Bogle (2001) states, “As toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n’er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind,” they have thus cemented themselves into the hearts of white audiences and in some cases even emerged as heroes (pp.4-6). The character became so influential that the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe was adapted into film several more times. One of those adaptations, eventually, becoming the first to see an actual black man play a leading role in film. Uncle Tom epitomized the sentiment that “obeying one’s master was the answer to every black man’s problem” (Bogle, 2001, p.7).

The Coon

The tom was ultimately America’s favorite of the original black typecasts, although the coons did manage to give the tom a run for his money. The coons took on multiple forms. There

was the “pure coon,” the “pickaninny” and the “uncle Remus” (Bogle, 2001). The coons exemplified viewing “the Negro as amusement object and black buffoon,” and were seen to have “lacked the singlemindedness of tom” (Bogle, 2001, p.7). The first of the coons to surface in film, the pickaninny, was introduced in Thomas Alva Edison’s, *Ten Pickaninnies* (1904), and took the form of a negro child (Bogle, 2001). “Generally, he was a harmless, little screwball creation who eyes popped out, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting” (Bogle, 2001, p.7). In *Song of the South* (1946) the character of “Toby” embodies this stereotype, as “this character was often an impossibly dim-witted black child whose main narrative function never extended beyond being the constant butt of visual gags for the amusement of white audiences” (Sperb, 2012, p.12).

The other of the coon types to surface in *Song of the South* (1946) is the main character of the film, Uncle Remus. The uncle Remus stereotype developed much later than the other coons and did not surface until the 1930’s, though there were veiled mentions of him in the silent film era (Bogle, 2001). Uncle Remus is described as, “harmless and congenial, he is a first cousin to the tom, yet he distinguishes himself by his quaint, naïve, and comic philosophizing (Bogle, 2001, p.8). Just as the stereotype suggests, Uncle Remus shares parables about life with the white children, Sally and Johnny, who have come to live on the Georgia plantation with their mother. His kinship to the tom serves relevance as, “Remus’s mirth, like tom’s contentment and the coon’s antics, has always been used to indicate the black man’s satisfaction with the system and his place in it” (Bogle, 2001, p.8).

The Mammy

The archetype initially appeared in 1914 in the film *Coon Town Suffragettes* (Bogle, 2001). As the film title suggests, the mammy is closely associated with the coon stereotype and

often even consigned to that type. “Mammy is distinguished, however, by her sex and her fierce independence,” and “she is usually big, fat, and cantankerous” (Bogle, 2001, p.9). Hattie McDaniel perfected the headstrong mammy role in the 1930’s and even won an Academy Award for best-supporting actress in her performance in *Gone with the Wind* (1940), becoming the first ever African American to win the award. She later reprised the role for *Song of the South* (1946).

While Walt Disney Studios did not create these racist stereotypes, their role in recirculating them through *Song of the South* (1946) is revealing of the studio’s attitudes towards what the roles of blacks on film should be. To provide context, at the time of the film’s release, Sperb (2012) suggests the film was already considered racist due to the political climate at play. The stereotypes they used were always inherently racist, but Disney decided to continue to utilize them at a time when they had begun to develop as taboo. During World War II, the Office of War Information (OWI), the NAACP and Hollywood studios began working together to develop initiatives to produce new and more positive images of African-Americans in pop-culture (Sperb, 2012). In clear contrast to these enterprises, soon after the war ended, “Disney decided to make a film that reduced black characters to the same prewar stereotypes that the OWI, NAACP, and most other Hollywood studios had consciously made a decision to avoid,” it thus came as no surprise that Disney was met with much criticism by the mainstream media and activists rejecting the premise of the film (Sperb, 2012, p.15). As a result, *Song of the South* (1946) ultimately failed at generating the success Disney hoped that it would.

However, the disappointment of its initial release, mixed with the ever-changing racial climate in America did not stop Disney from re-releasing the film in 1956, 1972, 1981, and 1986, even though in 1970 Disney did make a statement saying that they had “permanently” retired the film (Snopes, 2007). Therefore, while Disney’s initial use of pre-war black stereotypes was

already troubling, their insistence on the recirculation of this media text in American culture speaks volumes and is indicative of Disney's continued discriminatory portrayals of African Americans in their films since *Song of the South* (1946). This notion which is only further supported by the fact that, as Patricia Turner in 1994 recognized, *Song of the South* was the first and only Disney feature "in which an African-American played a prominent role" (As cited in Sperb, 2012, p.6). Disney did not feature another black lead character until Tiana was animated as the first black Disney Princess in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)—some staggering sixty-three years after *Song of the South's* initial release. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Disney studios have "long privileged an overtly white view of the world" (Sperb, 2012, p.6).

Racial Anthropomorphism: Racialized Representations in Disney's Animated Films

Disney has always been an animation powerhouse, and there is no question that in the last decade Walt Disney Animation Studios and Disney's Pixar Animation Studios have dominated the animation game, winning all but one of the Academy Awards in animation. Disney's stronghold in this arena is paramount because children's animated films contribute just as much to the cultural landscape as other films of various genres and modes of production. Due to the pervasiveness of Disney in American culture, in many cases, both children and adults often use their films as lenses to better understand the world around them and their place in it. Therefore, "As a quintessential form of American public culture, animated movies may be examined as a site where collective social understandings are created and in which the politics of signification are engaged" (Silverman, 2002, p. 299). Specifically, as it relates to ethnicity and the politics of identity, it is essential to take a closer look into how Disney performs race through animation.

As Janet Wasko (2001) explores the "classic" Disney films in her book, *Understanding Disney*, she establishes that, "Disney anthropomorphizes animal characters, presents formulaic

heroes, heroines, and villains, and provides stereotypical representations of gender and ethnicity” (As cited in Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009, p.168). To better evaluate these

stereotypical representations of ethnicity in animation, Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo and Mary K.

Bloodsworth-Lugo (2009) provide the useful term: “racialized anthropomorphism” claiming that,

Even though animals (and other non-human characters) are anthropomorphized in children’s animated films, these films also, unfailingly, racialize nonhuman characters in the process. That is to say; these characters are not simply transformed into some generic “human” (for there are no generic humans); rather, they are inscribed, for example, as White “humans,” Black “humans,” Asian “humans,” or Latino “humans.” Thus, we maintain that animal and other nonhuman characters undergo a kind of racialized anthropomorphism within animated films (p. 168).

Given that racialized portrayals of animated characters have become standard industry practice, it is important to look at the work that racialized anthropomorphism is doing, and how it has provided a replacement to the overt racist modes of the past, while still managing to illustrate certain racial undercurrents. This process is twofold: “On a basic level, such films provide children with important signifiers that chart racialized, and racist, dynamics,” and “On a more profound level, these films serve as tools that help to teach children to maintain the racial (and racist) ideologies that maintain the status quo” (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009, p.175).

Though it may come as no shock that Disney films use their animation to uphold dominant white ideology through their conveyance of racialized stereotypes, it is valuable to scrutinize just how “race” takes shape in this medium. David Gillota (2013) suggests that the phenomenon that produces race in most contemporary animated texts is the use of famous and easily recognizable celebrity voices, often those of comedians. He posits that, “Since nonhuman

characters do not usually have the physical signifiers that mark racial difference, animators typically rely on speech patterns and well-known stereotypes to make clear a character's ethnicity" (Gillota, 2013, p.108). To further support this theory, he calls on Disney's *Dumbo* (1941) and its infamous gang of crows, the leader of which is poignantly named Jim Crow. Gillota (2013) identifies that the crows,

Speak in an exaggerated African American dialect and seem to spend most of their time hanging around on tree branches (i.e. they are unemployed).

Furthermore, the crow's role in the narrative—to help the unracialized and thus presumably white Dumbo—conforms to a long history of fictional African Americans helping white characters with their problems (108).

This is a practice which Disney is notorious for as the crows share these ranks with many others; most notably King Louis in *The Jungle Book* (1967) and Sebastian from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), to name a few.

These practices became more interesting once the studios began replacing professional voice actors with recognizable celebrity voices. Gillota (2013) credits this shift to Robin Williams' exceptional voicework as Genie in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992). Because of its popularity, virtually all theatrical animated film productions have used celebrities to bring their animations to life since then. However, in regard to addressing the racial implications in animation, some of these larger than life voices presented their own drawbacks in resolving tensions as they often belong to notable ethnic humorists, and therefore their race becomes readily known to the audience (Gillota, 2013). In many cases, ethnic comedians use their voices as tools to mobilize their comic personas and core values (Haggins, 2007). Consequently, these voices that are so often used for purposes of dissent in stand-up habitually have become neutralized under the

mantle of animation. As Gillota states, “The voices of the ethnic comedians are used in the simplest possible manner and thus help to reinforce stereotypes while maintaining little of their transgressive potential” (2013, p.109).

To support this position, Disney’s *The Lion King* (1994) can be used as a prime example. Gillota (2013) brings attention to the fact that, while *Scar* is the primary villain with a British accent, his hyena counterparts, also villains, voiced by Whoopi Goldberg and Cheech Marin, with their easily identifiable voices, vary from their leader. He goes on to assert that though these comedians have typically aligned their personas with progressive values, in the film they are reduced to “simple thugs” (Gillota, 2013, p.109). Respectively, this is due to the fact that as Giroux expresses, though the film may be set in the jungle their voices are meant to personify accents belonging to a “decidedly urban black or Hispanic youth” (1999, pp.105-106). Thus, a “racial hierarchy is reinforced further because these urban hyenas take their orders from a lion who is coded, through his British accent and royal aspirations, as white and aristocratic” (Gillota, 20113, p.109). Even though in some cases comedians can take on stereotypes and accents in such a way that confronts and devalues them, Disney has cemented a formula which forsakes these attempts. Films like *The Lion King* which,

Transplant ethnic stereotypes into imaginary settings and thus strip them of any relevant historical or social context. This makes it difficult for their viewers, especially children, to view a stereotype as a cultural construction or as a result of particular historical circumstances. The result, then, is simply to reinforce the stereotype as an essentialist trait (Gillota, 2013, p.109).

Casting Practices and Whiteness in Hollywood

Damaging stereotypes and tropes are not the only setbacks which plague minorities in Hollywood however. While it may be true that minority actors face the challenge of rising above established stereotypes, so that they may create more diverse and stimulating characters, they can only do this if they are cast in films. Minorities in Hollywood are not only systematically oppressed by the damaging representations on-screen, but also off-screen through a lack of representation in the industry itself. To better understand this, it is imperative to recognize the interrelation between casting practices and the impact they have on public consciousness, or what Kristen J. Warner (2015) calls *casting as cultural production*. This is the idea that, “casting functions as a mode of cultural production that shapes and maintains racial hierarchies” in the television and film industries (Warner, 2015, p.32). These practices while having long gone unnoticed and unchecked, however, are beginning to face resistance as increasingly there has been a desired expectation for media representations “to reflect America in whole and not just the so-called mainstream” (Associated Press, 2009). The question then is, what are these practices and how do they promote the white status quo?

Warner (2015) boils it down to the word “actor,” while she recognizes that some of these casting directors may, in fact, believe that they are looking for diverse casts, “For these professionals, the best actor does not always reflect America as a whole; best actor reflects the person who can portray the best version of America as a whole” (p.32). This is not just true in the case of racial minorities, the politics of acting regarding authentic representations applies to all identities including ethnicity, age, sexuality, gender, and those with disabilities (Warner, 2015). The issue is that historically, the “best actors” often have reflected an exclusionary or privileged view of what America looks like. This is due of course to the fact that contemporary

casting is still following the same hegemonic ideals towards race and ethnicity that have been reinforced since the beginning of Hollywood, and thus little has transpired in the way of progress. Justifying prejudiced industry practices in these ways is a symptom of a more significant issue and as a result, attempts to correct for a more balanced system of representation both on and off screen have failed, and one finds that the same demand for authenticity in representation that was called for in the 1930s still exists today.

In early Hollywood, this demand was met in the form of censorship when The Motion Picture Production Administration (PCA) established and began enforcing The Motion Picture Production Code or Hays Code in 1934. This came as a response to the federal government's threat to regulate the industry if they did not do something to "clean up the movies," after a wave of protests erupted calling out the risqué content in films (O'Neil, 2001). The code was not only concerned with sex and violence, however, but representation became an object of growing concern as well. Due to the impending promise of war with the Nazis, the American film industry needed to expand to other lucrative foreign markets outside of Europe, and so they turned to Latin America (O'Neil, 2001). Furthermore, a by-product of World War II was that the United States government also found themselves in need of fostering closer relations with the countries of the Western Hemisphere and began to utilize the film industry to promote "Pan-American" propaganda to help with the war efforts (O'Neil, 2001).

Similarly, Disney Studios began producing wartime propaganda, including anti-Nazi commercials and flyers encouraging Americans to support the war (Jones, 2016). Issues arose however when Latin American people began to reject Pan-American sentiment due to egregious stereotyping of their countries and people in film. To correct for this Hollywood began to more urgently screen films for foreign offense under section X of the production code, which states

that regarding representations of foreign nationals, “The history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be fairly represented” (O’Neil, 2001, p.363). Regulating films in this way did succeed in promoting greater authenticity in characters, historical facts and cultural essentials in films, though other filmmakers found ways around the code by introducing, “the practice of obscuring national identities in films featuring foreign settings,” which lessened the effectiveness of the code (O’Neil, 2001, p.366). This and other areas of lack of effectiveness paired with several years of minimal enforcement caused the Production Code to be replaced with a rating system in 1968.

Nevertheless, elements which exhibited a rejection of the ideals of improved depictions, such as the obscuring of foreign national identity or foreign settings, still exist in contemporary works. This type of obscurity is something that Disney itself often utilizes and can be seen in the identities of Aladdin from Agrabah, Elsa of Arendelle, or more recently Elena of Avalor, all characters whom have assumed tangible ethnic traits but are from fictional lands. It could be argued that this form of ambiguity is used as a defense to protect against wrongdoing with concerns to taking responsibility for reporting historical inaccuracies of misrepresented depictions, and in effect serves to maintain racial biases and hierarchies. It is the idea that if something is perceived as fiction than one cannot be made accountable.

This notion transcends into the realm of casting as well. In her research on casting practices something that Warner (2015) heard consistently was that “Acting is fiction” stating, That platitude presents a paradox of knowledge because while a common-sense notion of what various racial and ethnic groups look and act like pervades, if an individual who is not necessarily a member of those racial/ethnic groups can perform or is imbued with

their apparent essences, then that person is just as worthy of the part as the more “natural” candidate (p.33).

Ethnic and racial lines are further blurred and muddled in this way when the film industry can hold on to the racial conventions that they have curated. This allows not only for white actors to receive roles which they, in reality, would not be fit for but also creates more significant opportunity for minority actors to be typecast. Even the term “common-sense” in this case is fiction, as it signifies the imagined representation of race and ethnicity as a result of dominant media depictions. This fabrication of culture has, in turn, created prejudiced casting procedures such as the “paint-down” and “blind casting” all the while promoting them under the guise of equality, claiming that these methods are used to ensure that the best actor for the part gets the job.

The Paint-Down

A “paint-down” is where a white actor is cast in a role that is signified as a role of color, and “justified through best-man-for-the-part logics” (Warner, 2015, p.53). In popular media a paint-down is more commonly referred to as the practice of whitewashing or white casting in popular media. This tradition began with white actors wearing blackface and yellow face and has since evolved with historically non-white characters getting rewritten as white or with white actors simply embodying a different race to play a role. This is troubling for many reasons, but particularly because in an industry where racial minorities are already underrepresented, they are now even excluded from roles that depict their own race. Essentially it is a way to include white actors at the expense of non-white ones. This practice is not only significant in that it exhibits white entitlement or ownership of the non-white form but in a sense also in taking credit for the

historical achievements of other cultures, it reveals the belief that the right view of history is the white view.

Disney has been guilty of this actor “paint-down” on more than one occasion. One recent occurrence was in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2010), where a non-Persian white Jake Gyllenhaal took on the role of Persian Prince Dastan, causing Alex Eichler (2010) of *The Atlantic* to ask, “Why Is a White Actor Playing 'Prince of Persia' Title Role?”. In his discussion on reviews of the casting choice, he cites critic Adriel Luis, who suggests political climate in relation to the politics of casting, and marvels at "the Walt Disney Company's ability to make a massively-budgeted film about Middle Eastern people that takes place in the Middle East and market it to an American population that sometimes fears and disdains Middle Eastern people. The magic formula, of course? Don't use Middle Eastern people!" (Eichler, 2010). In taking the story out of its cultural context in this way, it is distorted with a white retelling of history, and consequently, this dynamic of racial hierarchy is maintained.

Color-blind Casting

While the “paint-down” systematically extinguishes hopes for diversity, “blind casting” in theory should promote inclusivity. Colorblind casting works with roles that are not designated by a specified race, opening a role to actors of all races and ethnicities. It assumes that, “each actor selected will be the best person for the role, and somehow the diversity issues will organically work themselves out as a result of good casting choices” (Warner, 2015, pg.36). This practice has been successful in certain instances; however, it is important to note that this is not the same as promoting diversity. To intentionally cast with an appeal to diversity is to seek racial difference purposefully, where colorblind casting’s prerogative is not to see race (Warner, 2015). Warner (2015) suggests that this ultimately leaves casting up to the taste of a director or producer

who is not an objective party, but instead comes in with their own biases towards various portrayals. This practice can thus prove very successful or detrimental in reflecting racial diversity.

Though not a prominently used practice by the studio, Disney has achieved some success in the realm of colorblind casting in their Broadway Musical productions, as this practice is more permissible in live theater. Over the years many of Disney's animated classics have been transformed into stage productions, and while casting has not always represented diversity and there have been instances of whitewashing roles, there has also ultimately been progress. To be specific in the last year, Disney's *The Little Mermaid* on Broadway has cast a Japanese-American Ariel, and Disney's *Frozen* on Broadway has cast a black Kristoff. There is little to be found on the casting decision regarding Kristoff. However, in the case of Ariel, director Glenn Casale who is known for this practice thinks regarding talent. "Though the practice can be thorny, he admitted, when used correctly, he feels it's an effective and visible way to combat the lack of diversity onstage," resulting in the director having cast both actors of color in traditionally white roles and white actors in roles of color (Chen, 2017). As seen by Casale however, it ultimately becomes a question of intent and not just convenience, which relies on what the casting director was trying to achieve.

Despite what seems to be progress on Disney's end, according to a 2016 study titled "Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment," Disney failed inclusivity evaluations (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2016). Ideally, these efforts towards colorblindness in casting should be beneficial, but they often backfire in the casting room. In her findings, Warner concluded that "Colorblindness in its various manifestations is largely about reproducing and denying the systemic inequality that is alive and

well and Hollywood” (2015, p. 47). Every time a white actor is permitted to paint down historic roles of color, or a color-blind casting call fails to produce a diverse cast, a culture is produced that opens far more doors for white actors than actors of color. A culture that robs non-white actors’ proper representation in their industry and that robs audiences who want to see themselves authentically represented on screen.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

This thesis will analyze the treatment of race as it pertains to Disney through a critical cultural lens. Specifically, it will examine Disney's system of representation as illustrated in the original animated texts, while also addressing what I will define as the *pre-reception* of their live-action remake adaptations of *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020). According to Barker (2008), "cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field in which perspectives from different disciplines can be selectively drawn on to examine the relations of culture and power" (p.6). These disciplines, for example, tackle issues such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. This field is vital as it fleshes out and critiques the politics of difference. Dominant ideologies are presented to maintain and legitimize power and thus respectively oppress the powerless by creating an "us" versus "them" view of the world (Kellner, 2003). Thus, media texts are an integral site of examination in this field as the images they create, "provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture" (Kellner, 2003, p.9).

This study will utilize the existing frameworks of reception studies and a theory of paratexts, to work toward developing a theory of pre-reception. Reception studies works to derive meaning from a text based on how that text has been received by its audience. Stuart Hall, an early proponent of reception theory, explains that media texts which often represent the "dominant-hegemonic position" are not always passively accepted by

viewers; rather their meaning can be negotiated by the audience as a result of an individual's cultural background (1980, pp.136-137). This stands to reason that the less similar an audience's cultural background is from those individuals who have produced the text, the less likely they will be in successfully accepting a text as intended. This allows for an audience to challenge the privileged position or preferred reading presented, and in turn, offer an oppositional reading. In studying a text in this way, it is not to suggest that a researcher provides their own biased interpretation of a text, but rather uses historical, social, and political cues to provide clarity as to why audiences may be presuming meaning in a particular way. Jonathan Culler (1981) further supports this in his views of reception studies by stating it, "is not a way of interpreting works but an attempt to understand their changing intelligibility by identifying the codes and interpretive assumptions that give them meaning for different audiences at different periods" (p.13).

In a different approach, Jonathan Gray (2010) expands upon this view of a media "text" and argues that a film is only one piece of a larger entity, and rather than a production's release seen as completing the text it can continue to transform. Citing Julia Kristeva, he says the text, "is not a finished production, but a continuous "productivity." It is a larger unit than any film or show that may be part of it; it is the entire story world as we know it" (Gray, 2010, p.7).

Therefore, a theory of paratexts suggests that a text, or source text, should not be examined in isolation but rather in conversation with its many paratexts, as they also undoubtedly work to define its meaning. Gray (2010) characterizes a media paratext as any entity which exists as an extension of, or filters through, by which audiences encounter a film or tv program (p.3). As a result, these paratexts take on many forms and include, but are not limited to, materials such as promos, posters, trailers, videogames, reviews, and merchandise.

While both reception studies and paratextual analysis build a strong foundation for this thesis, their frameworks still do not fully subscribe to the type of analysis I am proposing. This is due to the fact that I am concerned with the way in which audiences are receiving these live-action film texts, even before the release of any tangible production materials. Of course, as the films have yet to be released, I will rely heavily on paratextual analysis. Still, even within the boundaries of media paratexts, audience-driven texts have largely been identified as “media res paratext,” or paratexts that emerge during or after viewing of the source text has already taken place (Gray, 2010, p. 23). Therefore, in proposing what I will call pre-reception, I will work to develop a model which analyzes the ways in which audience discourses are shaping public understanding of a text; and how this, in turn, may be affecting the consumers ability to challenge existing modes of cultural production in order to influence the production and distribution of media content. In reevaluating the roles of audience reception and industry production in this way, the audience shifts from a once passive to a more active role. The implications of which help to further flesh out the question of “why now,” in addressing the growing controversy surrounding Disney and their identity politics.

For this analysis it is also imperative then to define the critical lens with which to examine representation in the American film industry and Hollywood, and this is a hegemonic structure which privileges whiteness. Whiteness Theory is as the name suggests the theoretical study of whiteness as a social construct. Whiteness scholars seek to understand the development of the “white” identity, and how it has historically, culturally, socially, and institutionally constructed whiteness as a position of power in society (Thompson, 2004). As race is viewed as a social construct, this infers that whiteness is a learned behavior rather than a biological characteristic. Therefore, whiteness does not represent someone who is literally white but

represents a spectrum that has shifted over time that has used skin color and imperialistic positions of power to produce a structural advantage. Therefore, while not relative, there is no fixed concept of what it is to be white. Dyer (1997) sees the unclear boundary lines of whiteness as one of its strengths stating,

Because whiteness carries such rewards and privileges, the sense of a border that might be crossed and a hierarchy that might be climbed has produced a dynamic that has enthralled people who have had any chance of participating in it (p. 20).

An idea which has been represented historically in the initial treatment of American immigrant groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews. Cian T. McMahon (2015) defends, European immigrants were not considered white upon arrival just because they possessed pale skin. Instead, their status as white was one they struggled to achieve.

Asserting that whiteness (or any racial category) is socially constructed and can change over time is to accept that definitions of whiteness are dynamic and mutable. However, across white literature, Ruth Frankenberg is largely cited in the understanding of whiteness as a tangible concept. She argues that there are three features of whiteness: the first being a “location of structural advantage” (the advantage being, race privilege); second that whiteness is a “standpoint” (in which there are “whites” and the “others”); and lastly that whiteness is seen as the creator of cultural practices that are deemed normal (1993, pp. 169-170). Richard Dyer dissects this privilege further claiming, “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people” (1997, p.1). Therefore, the dominance of whiteness is ultimately defined in its invisibility. The goal of this paper then will be to shine a

light on Disney's invisible whiteness, in order to dismantle their prejudiced representations of race.

Methodology

To critically evaluate the system of representation at work in the new Disney live-action remakes *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020), one must first assess the complexities of changing racial representations in Disney films over time. This is necessary to develop a thorough understanding of the conditions and contexts from which their contemporary representations have emerged. Towards this end, this study will utilize Barbara Klinger's (1997) model of reception studies which she outlined in her article, "*Film history terminable and interminable: recovering the past in reception studies.*" This model suggests that films should not be studied as solitary texts, but in correspondence with all materials surrounding a film's release, as those artifacts by association also become part of the work. This involves the process of analysis, "taking the text to the intertext—the network of discourses, social institutions, and historical conditions surrounding a work," helping to create what Fernand Braudel conceptualized as a "*histoire totale*" (Klinger, 1997, pp.107-108). To understand this further, David Bordwell has discussed this relation between film and culture; he explains that a "totalized view" of history suggests that recovering the past is eminently tied not only to the discovery of documents of yore, but also to reflection upon how best to engage thoroughly with that past" (As cited in Klinger, 1997, p.108). This form of analysis is essential to this study because, as previously discussed, these live-action films have not yet been released. Therefore there is no specific film text to scrutinize. This makes it necessary to investigate multiple modes of production such as casting calls or popular discourse on production, whether through fan tweets or established media publications, to better understand these upcoming films.

To embark on the journey of producing a film history in this way, Klinger outlines both synchronic and diachronic areas of study which can be employed to interpret a focused historicity of a film (1997). Synchronic areas of study focus on the reception of a film text at the time of its initial release and relate to practices that constitute the final film the audience views, such as production, distribution, and exhibition. These synchronic practices are all associated with the preferred and intended meaning of a film. On the other hand, diachronic areas of study focus on those significations that are created by industries removed from those which shaped its original meaning. The diachronic approach relates to media texts and how they evolve through time, as older films take on different meanings as they recirculate through history. These areas encompass what Klinger addresses as the, “significant ways in which Hollywood films are resuscitated for contemporary audiences” (1997, p.123).

It is not the goal of this research to provide a total history of these three films, a feat which Klinger declares, “may well be an impossible enterprise” (1997, p. 127). Instead by using only the elements of film reception which are most prevalent to the phenomenon at hand, the objective of this study is to define one of these multiple historicities, to shed light on the issue of race and how it functions in the world that is Disney. To do this, I will diachronically assess the racial representations of Disney’s animated features in *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994) and *Mulan* (1998). However, as the focal point of this research is, in fact, the analysis of the live-action adaptations, which are still currently being produced, the crux of this study will mostly involve implementing synchronic practices to evaluate these films. To better understand how this will be done, I will explain in further detail these synchronic elements and how these will be used to further this research.

Cinematic Practices

“These are primarily all of the practices associated with film production, distribution and exhibition that shape the film the audience finally sees” (Klinger, 1997, p.115). This zone includes all materials that the film industry might develop to create a ‘preferred’ reading of the film. The first aspect of this zone is ‘Film Production,’ Klinger defines film production as the, “focus on how the economic structure and production practices of a studio during a specific historical period helped shape the film product” (1997, p.115). This would involve aspects such as selection of personnel on the film, like the choice of director, producer, and cast. This also includes how the studio that produced the film, in this case, Disney, influenced the genre or style. This factor will prove significant as the live-actions are being adapted from the animated classics, which follow Disney’s strict formulaic script. This also concerns technological developments, like the switch from animation to live-action. In other words, this zone focuses on how industry practices ultimately affect the style of the film. Cinematic practices go on to cover ‘Film Distribution,’ ‘Film Exhibition,’ and ‘Film Personnel.’ However, as the films are not set to be released until 2019, and after the conclusion of this study, these aspects will not prove relevant to this analysis.

Intertextual Zones

Intertextual zones relate to practices outside of the film industry that can influence a prospective audience. The way that other media, industries, or businesses talk about or interact with a film, inevitably becomes attached to it. This field of investigation may have the biggest influence on this study, as one of its focuses is the influences that adaptations from a pre-existing form can have on the audience. As all three films have pre-existing animated texts, the originals will prove crucial as points of reference in critically gauging the attitudes of fans to the new

films. Klinger (1997) establishes these intertextual zones as various content spanning anywhere from other businesses and industries; other media and arts; review journalism; star journalism and fan culture (pp.117-119). She also emphasizes that these intertextual zones are imperative to this process of analysis as they in so many ways define the expectations audiences bring into, and thus define their experience of a film.

Social and Historical Contexts

The last of the synchronic domains of study are the social and historical contexts in which the films exist. These aspects of society are ever present and continually serve as lenses that negotiate the meaning of a film for their audiences. Klinger (1997) lists these contexts as follows: economy; law; religion; politics; class; race and ethnicity; gender and sexual difference; family; ideology; and cross-cultural reception (pp.119-122). It is these contexts which allow for a critical interpretation of media texts, as they allow for various meanings of a film depending on the lens that is emphasized.

Looking Ahead: Chapter Overview

This thesis will examine to what extent the Walt Disney Company is attempting to reframe their identity politics in a more progressive light by choosing to re-adapt their animated classics into live-action remakes. To do this, I will need to make clear the significant role that animation has played in relation to the conversation surrounding inclusion, diversity, and representation in film, which will then lay the groundwork for analyzing the production practices used in the development of these live-action remakes.

The first body chapter will seek to historically map representations of race in Disney's animated classics, and their role in upholding the dominant hegemonic systems of whiteness in Hollywood. Having already touched on issues of race and how they were characterized in

Disney's early years in the review of the literature, this chapter will serve as a continuation of this investigation. As the existing Disney canon is vast, it would prove challenging to analyze all of Disney's films. Therefore, in an effort to design this chapter to better frame the contemporary moment in respect to identity politics in Disney's live-action remakes of *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019) and *Mulan* (2020), this chapter will only examine how Disney as a media institution previously primed their audiences to certain belief systems regarding the non-western cultures presented in the animated versions of *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Mulan* (1998). Specifically, I will situate the period which is popularly referred to as the Disney Renaissance (1989-1999), as an era of particular importance in the company's pursuit of global expansion and multiculturalism. Then I will conduct a paratextual analysis of the three films in question to illustrate how Disney has maintained racial hierarchies in their animated canon by examining the way in which they represent race through casting, star power, visual representations, and animation styles, and vocal and music performances. In providing a historical breakdown in this way, this chapter will serve as a description of how Disney has implemented racialized animation as a means of cultural production to maintain Western ideological, racial hierarchies.

The second body chapter will then use the information provided by the animated texts as a critical point of comparison in analyzing the live-action remakes of *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020). Specifically, I will situate the current social and historical context which is inciting the controversy surrounding these films and discuss how these reflect the larger pre-reception discourses which are becoming a central part of the contemporary moment in media production and consumption practices. As Disney has engaged in a long-standing history of prejudiced practices, a pre-reception analysis is significant to analyze what

changes, if any, are being made to Disney's systems of identity politics as they hyper realize their animated classics in this representational shift. To do so, I will discuss the casting practices used in each of the films, the way in which race is represented through star power, and any visual representations of race that have arisen thus far. All of which will be put into conversation with the pre-reception dialogues surrounding *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019) and *Mulan* (2020) to uncover the specifics of this discourse, and whether this discourse could be affecting the production of these films.

This will be achieved by inquiring into the various cultural artifacts, as outlined in Klinger's (1997) methodology of film reception. Primarily this will look at the developments in casting and hiring which have been released in popular journalistic sources and trade magazines such as *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, and *Vanity Fair*. This will also include specific production resources including Disney's PR materials, casting calls, scripts, and any official Disney statements that have been released in response to any of the resulting controversy. In collecting this evidence and any subsequent audience or industry critiques which I will further supplement with images of tweets, I will be able to considerably outline the progression of these film's productions as they relate to developing this model of pre-reception.

Finally, I will conclude with a discussion further examining the ramifications of such findings and suggest further areas of critical inquiry. In investigating the media paratexts that are currently available, while also evaluating Disney's response to audience pre-reception of the live-action remakes, I should be able to answer the research questions I previously presented properly. Which are to determine what role these live-action remakes are playing in contemporary critical discourse, and therefore what implications they pose to the larger site of cultural struggle that exists today. In doing so, I will seek to understand what is at stake for

Disney now that their systems of representation have become more publicly questioned and exposed than ever? By pursuing a pre-reception study of this kind and scrutinizing these films within the context of their ideological and historical significance, the findings should shed light on to what extent Disney is using these live-action remakes to promote a more progressive system of representation or if they are still enforcing a dominant ideological system of whiteness. Since this study is anticipatory, it also provides the opportunity to conclude with an evaluation of what Disney could do better.

CHAPTER I
AN EXAMINATION OF DISNEY’S ‘MULTICULTURAL’ FILMS DURING ITS 1990’S
RENAISSANCE

Upon mention of Walt Disney Studios, the image of their animated classics would flood the mind of many. In fact, it could be said that for the greater part of the studio’s history the name Disney was synonymous with animation. While Disney has moved through many generational eras, the Disney Renaissance (1989-1999) marks an evolution in Disney feature animation unlike any that came before it and is critical in understanding animation as a mode of cultural production. This era includes the films, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), and *Tarzan* (1999). This Renaissance proved animated films were a powerful cultural (and economic) force and deserved to be taken seriously, especially when *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) became the very first animated feature in cinema history to be nominated for the Academy Award for best picture, 54 years after the release of the first ever feature-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) (Hahn, 2012). Through these successes, Disney has become a force in shaping both American and global popular culture, and, for this very reason, Disney must be held accountable for the images they circulate in popular media.

To understand a Disney worldview by way of the animated features they produce, Annalee Ward (2002) states, “the individual Disney films act as chapters in the Disney book on what the world looks like or ought to look like” (p.116). The concerns here, and what has prompted the much critical attention of the Disney canon, are the ideological values that Disney promotes when animating racial and ethnic difference, where the underlying contention remains that Disney’s worldview propagates racism. When discussing the overall Disney brand, Giroux (1995) finds that, “The strategies of entertaining escapism, historical forgetting, and repressive pedagogy in Disney’s books, records... movies and TV programs produce a series of identifications that relentlessly define America as white” (p. 47). Consequently, this hegemonic structure, in turn, defines for their viewers the constructs of beauty, masculinity/femininity, family values, and good versus evil, all through a lens of white privilege. This privileged viewpoint can be witnessed from the start of the Studio’s history, where Disney has almost exclusively adapted European fairytales with predominantly white characters. However, during its Renaissance era, Disney embraced a kind of “multicultural” agenda and decided to take on more diverse depictions of various non-western people’s and cultures. It is uncertain as to why Disney animation began making such strides towards the diversification of their animated characters during this era, however the acquisition of a new Disney management team paired with the media and cultural landscape of the 1990’s helps in better understanding this shift in the studio’s approach.

The death of Walt Disney in 1966 brought about a long period of decline in the studio’s history that would not turn around until the 1984 hiring of Michael Eisner as CEO. Part of Eisner’s vision, and ultimately a large determining factor in the success of the Disney Renaissance was the development of Disney’s global brand. Disney began extending its global

reach in the 1980's with the opening of the Tokyo Disney theme park in 1983. Hoping to continue in this path of global expansion Eisner felt that France would be the ideal country for the placement of the Euro Disney theme park, later called Disneyland Paris, which opened in 1991. However, the park was met with tremendous backlash and resistance by the French people and staff, doing so poorly that opponents to the project nicknamed the park, "Cultural Chernobyl" (Kehr, 1991). The downfall of the park was cited in its inability to adapt to European and French culture, where instead the Walt Disney Company simply attempted to transplant its American values abroad. Even attempts to later "Frenchify" the park proved unsuccessful, and the resulting increased debts almost led to the closure of the park in 1994 (Wills, 2017).

The response to Euro Disney was representative of the larger opinion towards globalization of the American media industry at the time. In the 1994 meeting of the General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the Americans looking to break into foreign markets and further increase profits wanted to negotiate fully deregulated access to the European film and TV markets. However, some European nations, mainly the French, rejected this position and ultimately the audiovisual sector was left out of the final deal altogether. The main concern was that U.S. brands abroad could cripple those nation's media industries which they were looking to enter, and as a result of their popularity also pose a threat to those countries sense of cultural identity. Michael Chanan (1994), a British filmmaker and writer, expressing that "Even champions of globalization increasingly fret that it may damage or destroy the diversity that makes the human race so fascinating, leaving nothing but homogenized, least-common-denominator forms of creativity." This foreign resistance along with the evolution in American demographics, which witnessed a dramatic increase of Hispanics and Asians to its population, meant that Hollywood's new globalization efforts would also need to coincide with efforts

towards the rise in the specialization of cable television programming. Seeking specialized markets in the U.S. and abroad became a necessity to target the ever-changing consumer base, and as such tailoring content to various audiences proved essential in competing with other media industries to retain viewers (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2016).

Beyond the inner workings of the media industry was the sociopolitical climate of the 1990's which resurfaced heated racial tensions. Along with the globalization of the industry was a time of global and national racial change concerning racial meaning. The overarching American ideal of the "Melting Pot" was on its way out, and instead, diversity and ethnic identity were moving in. However, in America where the dominant white mindset persisted to be one of "color-blindness" or "beyond race," to venture into the need for "color-conscious" discourse, such as calls to advance policies like affirmative action, were often deemed reverse racism (Omi, 2001). As a result, the country was faced with the major challenge of fostering dialogue to deal with racial disparities and prejudice. President Clinton, seeing it as such a priority that he developed an initiative on race in 1997 calling it the, "One America Initiative" to prepare the American people for diversification and promote avenues for racial conciliation. So, whether overseas or at the national level, the respect for ethnic difference was a highly sensitive issue, and to gain either cultural or economic capita media brands such as Disney surely saw the importance of integrating a multicultural approach.

However, regardless of Disney's true intentions in promoting a multicultural agenda, as noted by Ward (2002) previously, their efforts produced images of what these cultures "ought to look like" which is problematic as these representations often catered to a dominant white gaze, and therefore lacked the cultural sensitivity that many Americans were seeking at this time. These animated images were only further complicated by the fact that during the Renaissance,

the chairman of the motion picture division at the time, Jeffrey Katzenberg pushed to make new Disney “classics” (Wasser, 2001). What this meant for the Studio was that the Disney Renaissance visually witnessed a return to the artistic ideologies of the Disney-Formalist period which fundamentally, “prioritized artistic sophistication, ‘realism’ of characters and contexts, and, above all believability” (Pallant, 2014, p.35). Of course, in promoting these animations as real and believable, especially when portraying non-white cultures, this conjures a crucial site of ideological struggle relevant to the politics of identity.

While multiple films from the Renaissance period could serve as examples in illustrating the issues of presenting non-white cultures through the white gaze, I have specifically chosen to analyze *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Mulan* (1998), as these texts are the only films from this era which are derived from stories that are non-western in origin. As a result, these texts provide a unique perspective as to how Disney tailored these narratives to fit the tastes of white audiences. Furthermore, as these specific films are being transformed into live-action adaptations, they provide a unique opportunity to shed light on the dichotomy between animation and live-action in their representations of race on the screen. Therefore, in order to better understand this contemporary moment in respect to identity politics in Disney’s live-action remakes of *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019) and *Mulan* (2020), it is imperative to first examine how Disney as a media institution previously primed their audiences to certain belief systems regarding the non-western cultures presented in *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Mulan* (1998), as viewers have already been socialized to the representations produced in the original animated texts. To do so, I will first discuss the Studio’s approach to multiculturalism, and then use the following films to illustrate how Disney has maintained racial hierarchies in

their animated canon by examining the way in which they represent race through casting and star power, visual representations and animation styles, and vocal and musical performances.

Multiculturalism in Disney's *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, and *Mulan*

With over twenty years distance from the release of *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Mulan* (1998), it is easy for contemporary audiences to call out Disney on their reductive and racist representations, and, in many ways, these films have come to serve as examples of Disney's lack of cultural sensitivity and historical accuracy. However, some critics may rebuke this statement, such as John Wills who suggests, "While sometimes reactionary, the studio has often promoted an ethos of harmony, happiness, and social progress conducive to better race relations" citing *Aladdin*, *Jasmine*, and *Mulan* among Disney's other non-white lead characters as examples (2017, p.121). However, I argue that rather than celebrate true diversity, Disney promotes their version of multiculturalism. The multicultural narrative that Disney has developed follows more of an American assimilationist narrative, where these non-white leads must first contend with their diverse pasts often weighted in and by their specific cultural traditions and the issues that accompany it before they can rejoin society as a person of worth. The concern here is that typically these characters find that whom they are by "breaking free" from the barbaric constraints of their 'oppressive' non-western cultures. This then symbolizes or signals a point of departure from their assumed cultural values in order to fall in line with an American value system. As a result, these protagonists begin their stories inherently flawed and must work their way to redemption, and only then can they achieve hero status, a kind of badge of honor representative of the whiteness they have embraced.

This proposed interpretation of Disney's "multiculturalism" is most strongly exemplified in the *Mulan* (1998) narrative. At the beginning of the film, *Mulan* is a very conflicted character.

She is expected to bring honor to her family, and, according to the film's version of Chinese culture, this means to be obedient, marry well and bear male children. However, Mulan cannot seem to reconcile herself to this fate. After failing miserably with the matchmaker, Mulan recognizes her plight by claiming, "I am now in a world where I have to hide my heart and what I believe in" while singing "Reflection." In this scene she finds her reflection difficult to look at, wiping away the makeup she wore to meet the matchmaker, feeling as though she does not see her true self. It is after this point that Mulan's father gets his military orders, and Mulan decides to take his place to save his life. Chinese law of this period stated that if Mulan was caught that her punishment should be execution, though she takes that risk. Later when she is revealed Shang spares her stating, "a life for a life" as Mulan had previously saved him in battle. In the final moments of the film, though she had greatly dishonored her family and China, she chooses to go to the imperial city to warn the army which had abandoned her of a Hun attack. Ultimately Mulan ends up saving the emperor and all of China. Still, the emperor's council claims she is of no worth because she is a woman. Only when the Emperor recognizes that Mulan had saved them all and bows to her, does everyone follow suit and deem her worthy. The way that Disney constructs this story suggests that Mulan succeeds, not as a result of adhering to the values of Chinese culture, but rather despite them. By being true to herself, which was dependent on her rejecting all facets of her Chinese identity and embracing more western ideals, she was able to find honor.

These tensions between East and West are also found in *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Lion King* (1994) and serve to illustrate a form of hegemony which requires the protagonists in these films to assimilate into representations of whiteness, demonstrating that to be a Disney hero/heroine is to be white and to subscribe to dominant western values. These representations

can be detrimental to Disney audiences and their construction of identity, even more so as Douglas Brode asserts, “There can be no arguing with the fact that Disney entertainment...exerts a greater influence on our line of vision than any of its competitors” (2005, p. 6). In this way, the Walt Disney Studios can be said to have employed a form of cultural imperialism where even though they have dedicated films to non-western cultures, they still maintain an unequal representation of race and ethnicity as they present them from the white perspective. This conversation will continue by focusing on how Disney amplifies and reinforces its assimilationist, multicultural narrative through constructions of race in the casting.

Casting

Casting for an animated feature is somewhat different from a live action film. Of course, the apparent difference is that the audience will never see the faces of the actors voicing the role. However, this does not mean that there is not a recognition or association created between the voice actor and the animated character on the screen. Therefore, when discussing casting as an industry practice related to animation, it is not only important to note those actors behind the voices of these films but also to put them into conversation with the animated image itself, as it is the animators who will inevitably play a pivotal role in bringing the image of the character to life. Furthermore, in the case of *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Mulan* (1998) the image created in tandem by voice actor and animation team does specifically speak to the construction of race in these films, as it highlights industry practices of whitewashing roles of color and paints these non-western cultures with damaging representations.

In 1992, when Disney imagined their first Middle-Eastern story, it appears that cultural specificity did not play a role in the casting of the film, and ultimately all roles were cast with white actors apart from *Aladdin*'s Lea Salonga, a Filipino actress, who provided Jasmine's

singing voice. Unlike the current debates that are emerging around Disney's contemporary casting practices, whitewashing was still seen as an industry norm that mostly went unquestioned in the 1990s. Consequently, it appears Disney found that authenticity regarding the ethnic background of their voice actors was a non-issue and suffered little criticism for this practice at the time. Similarly, Disney's *The Lion King* (1994), a story set in Africa, though more diverse than the *Aladdin* (1992) cast, still paid little attention to authenticity in casting these roles. Again, casting individuals with African heritage was not a deciding factor and the roles of Simba (young & adult), Adult Nala, Scar, Timon, Pumba, and Zazu which are heard most frequently throughout the film are all voiced by white actors, while the roles of Mufasa, Rafiki, Shenzi, Banzai, Sarabi, and Young Nala went to black and Hispanic actors.

It was not until *Mulan* (1998) that race became a deciding factor in casting. It is not clear as to why Disney made these decisions however, there are possible explanations. The first being that *Aladdin* (1992) did face significant backlash for their representations of Arab culture and the production team behind *Mulan* wanted to avoid similar controversy by presenting more authentic casting. Though, a more discernable motive for this effort, which better representation undoubtedly assists with, is that this action could have been a calculated move on Disney's part to improve their relations with the Chinese government to gain access to their film market. *The Lion King* (1994) and *Toy Story* (1995) had been the only animated American films up to that point which had been accepted by China, with both performing exceptionally well at the Chinese box office, and as a result Disney was hoping that *Mulan* too would be imported by the Chinese (Chu, 1998). However, the Studio had wounded relations with China when they released *Kundun* (1997), a Martin Scorsese film which recounted the life of the Dalai Lama under China's occupation of Tibet, a portrayal which greatly angered the Chinese government (Langfitt, 1999).

Following this event, Disney knew that it would be difficult to improve this relationship and get the film shown there. Disney even went so far as to develop a unique marketing campaign to target Chinese audiences, with Buena Vista film Marketing Manager, Laura Folta claiming, “Our positioning is: This is a project with great pride to the Chinese people.” (Flannery, 1998). All of which are elements that suggest that Disney’s attempts in tailoring to a specific culture, are done to improve the financial bottom line rather than doing so to ensure more true representations for their audiences. Still, it cannot be denied that certain efforts were made.

In Disney’s quest for “authenticity,” the production team set out to find Chinese, Japanese, Filipino and Korean actors for the vocal talent of the film (Shaefer, 1998). Initially, Disney sought out Tia Carrere an actress of Filipino, Chinese, and Spanish heritage to play Mulan (Tsai, 2002). They later settled on Lea Salonga, a Filipino actress who also provided Princess Jasmine’s singing voice. However, while recording Salonga found it difficult to speak in the lower register required to impersonate Mulan’s male voice Ping, so she was retained to perform the singing vocals but replaced as Mulan’s speaking voice (Hischak, 2011). This resulted in Ming-Na Wen, a Chinese-American actress in the title role of Mulan. Wen was joined by fellow Chinese-American Actors B.D. Wong and James Hong voicing Li Shang and Chi Fu; Japanese-American actors Pat Morita, James Shigeta, George Takei, and Gedde Watanabe as the Emperor, General Li, First Ancestor and Ling; and lastly other prominent Asian-American actors Freda Foh Shen and Jerry Tondo as Fa Li and Chien-Po.

The only lead roles not played by Asian actors were Shan Yu, Grandmother Fa, Yao, and Mushu. White Broadway actor Harvey Fierstein was brought on to voice Yao, and according to the Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB), he was at first hesitant to accept the role as he wanted to provide chances for Asian actors, though later accepted when he was assured that many “true”

Asians were being cast in the title roles (Mulan (1998) Trivia, n.d.). After further research, no other mention of these claims was found. However, after reaching out to Fierstein via Twitter, he confirmed the reports were accurate. This exchange provides exciting insight into the casting climate of the 1990s, illustrating some of the seeds of unrest that have grown into the very vocal criticism towards whitewashing in the industry today. Though whitewashing was commonplace of the time, it was beginning to be recognized as a problem and marks a shift in industry efforts towards diversity in casting.

In comparison to its *Aladdin* and *The Lion King* counterparts, *Mulan* exhibits the most progressive casting techniques. Rather than settle for a blind-casting approach and hope for a diverse or representative cast, the *Mulan* team instead employed a rare intentional casting strategy. Again, though unclear this could have been an effort to correct for *Aladdin* by seeking a uniquely Asian perspective to an Asian story in hopes of justly representing the culture, or it could have been a ploy to gain access to the Chinese market. Whatever the case, *Mulan*, even with its more diverse cast, is not without its faults. While the film's lead role, Mulan, eventually went to a Chinese-American actress it could have just as easily been given to Salonga or Carrere. In Disney's quest to cast this film, they opened their search to actors from more of a pan-Asian perspective. This conflation of culture, or suggestion that any Asian will do paints all Asians as fundamentally the same. Not only is this simply not true, but it shows how media and pop culture promote stereotypes such as all Asians look the same, stripping of them of their own unique sense of cultural identity. Furthermore, for Mushu, the casting team went with prominent black comedian, Eddie Murphy. When asked in an interview with the *Boston Herald*, "How did such hip urban American sensibility squeeze its way into a Chinese folktale?" co-director of the film, Tony Bancroft replied, "It has to do with contrasting Mulan's character, which is a selfless

motivation,” he explained, “What better contrast than to have a selfish character like Eddie’s ‘Beverly Hills Cop’s’ black streetwise con artist personality?” (Schaefer, 1998). This statement in of itself is incredibly racist, as it insinuates that in order to better promote character leads who often exhibit white values, one must undoubtedly turn to black tropes to juxtapose them. Lastly, IMDB also states that Bruce Willis was originally cast in the role of Li Shang (Mulan (1998) Trivia, n.d.). This shows that at some point there may have been a predisposition to whitewashing the film’s most prominent roles as was done with *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*.

Star Power

In addressing casting, it is also important to note the star persona that could become attached to specific characters and the significance that holds in shaping the racial understanding of a role. Star power and recognition cannot be masked by animation, and therefore the characters are perceived as an extension of the actor, even when they are heard and not physically seen. “Dubbing for animations, furthermore, entails the paradox of a voice *divorced from the body and yet belonging to the body*” (Ma, 2013, p. 151). What this means is that though audiences never see the films’ vocal stars, they know who they are by proxy of their recognizable vocal performances. However, this was not always the case. The Disney Renaissance signaled a period of rebirth and success for Walt Disney Animation Studios, and a major contributor to this success was the new marketing strategy of calling on A-list Hollywood actors to lend their voices to Disney’s newly animated “classics.” The grandiose star power and persona of the actors used effectively became the selling point of these films and the merchandise that accompanied them. Furthermore, due to the visibility of a star persona, this marked the beginning of a star’s image being used to help shape the understanding of a character in an animated film, especially regarding race.

Originally voice acting was done almost exclusively by TV actors, Broadway actors, or professional voice actors who trained to provide the voices for animated characters. *Aladdin* (1992) changed this however and established the trend of celebrity voice acting. Scott Meslow of *The Atlantic* reports,

Though *Aladdin* boasted some of the world's most seasoned voice actors—including Frank Welker, whose astonishing range of characters include Scooby-Doo, Kermit the Frog, and *Transformers'* Megatron—there was one man who stood out from the rest of the cast: Robin Williams, who voiced the film's hyperactive Genie (2011).

Before the release of *Aladdin*, Pallant (2014) says that casting of animated features followed an Eisensteinian *Tipazh* approach. This refers to a strategy that favored actors of typical appearance, or non-professional actors as Eisenstein referred to them (Rebecchi & Vogman, 2013). Casting in this way prevented the notoriety of any actor too, “inadvertently influence the meaning of the shot through any unwanted visual signification” (Pallant, 2014, p.103). With the attention placed on voice instead, voice actors could add many different personas and characters to their repertoire without the risk of type-casting. This allowed for the focus to be the work of the animators and not the actor behind it. Of course, the contribution of celebrity voices complicates this, even more so when an actor’s star persona is tied to their race. For instance, in the case of Eddie Murphy as Mushu, Whoopi Goldberg as Shenzi, or Cheech Marin as Banzai, a star centered reading of the text sheds light on the issues of racial stereotyping as their star persona is fundamentally intertwined with their racial identity. Paul Wells (2002) argues that this “kind of interpretation in some senses fundamentally ignores the visual text altogether, and merely casts ‘the actor’ as the condition of reading” (p. 116).

When using this framework to contemplate the casting of Li-Shang in *Mulan*, it is interesting to note that though Disney was actively searching for Asian actors, they sacrificed casting one of the most prominent Chinese actors in Hollywood, though they had ample opportunity. Jackie Chan, whose star persona is unmistakably tied to his Chinese roots and Kung-Fu ability, was used for the dubbing of both *Mulan*'s Cantonese and Mandarin releases, providing both the talking and singing voice for Shang. However, when it came to the American version, they chose to cast B.D. Wong as Shang's talking voice and Donny Osmond as Shang's singing voice. While B.D. Wong is of Chinese descent, and therefore a good fit for the role in terms of representation, he does not share the same star power or recognition that Jackie Chan does, and so does not elicit a visual of Chinese representation when an audience hears his voice in the film. Though Chan's star persona made him an ideal fit for Chinese releases of the film, it could be argued that it is also what made him a less ideal candidate for the American release. As Chan's accent and fame would have marked the American Shang as noticeably Chinese, this would have contradicted Disney's values of representing their heroes/heroines with distinctly white American values. As a result, in the roles that Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, and Cheech Marin were cast in, it can be said that in the way Disney abused their star power to elicit damaging images of race, a prominent star persona is only valuable to Disney when it maintains dominant white ideology.

Visual Representation and Animation Styles

Even more so than casting decisions and star power, the visual representation created through animation undeniably reflects the racial understanding of the character they are tied too. Though audiences may be familiar with an actor, the representation that more so imprints upon a viewer in animated films are the image of a character. In dissecting the characters of these films

further, an analysis reveals how ideologies of whiteness are reproduced in these portrayals. Starting with *Aladdin*, the characters drawn relied heavily on negative stereotypes of this region of the world, offering their audiences with a racist product defined by Hollywood, which did not accurately reflect the indigenous cultures of the Middle East. In actively choosing to present these base stereotypes of Arabs when the Renaissance period claimed to be invested in animating with the artistic ideologies of the Disney formalist style, one of which includes “realism,” the depictions created are even more damaging for their audiences. To make matters worse, the making of *Aladdin* coincided with the highly televised media attention given to Operation Desert Storm. Consequently, due to the pervasive onscreen images of the Gulf War, Dianne Macleod (2013) argues that by, “Mirroring and magnifying popular stereotypes of Arab Culture, *Aladdin* played to an audience already primed by the media” (p.179). Rather than take an opportunity to right the media’s wrongs, the film played an active part in promoting the further villainization of these peoples.

One of the most overt ways the film accomplishes this is to distinguish their protagonists Aladdin and Jasmine as “white” in comparison to their antagonist counterparts. In contrast to Jafar, the villain of the film, and his band of guards, Aladdin and Jasmine have far lighter complexions and do not play to same stereotypical “Arab” traits. In this way, these representations prejudicially distinguish “good” characters from “bad” characters as those with darker skin and menacing foreign looks (Macleod, 2013, p.182). After its release, Yousef Salem, spokesman of the South Bay Islamic Association reproached the film claiming:

All the bad guys have beards and large, bulbous noses, sinister eyes and heavy accents, and they’re wielding swords constantly. Aladdin doesn’t have a big nose; he has a small nose. He doesn’t have a beard or a turban. He doesn’t have an accent. What makes him

nice is they've given him this American character. They've done everything but put him in a suit in tie (Scheinin, 1993).

It was not just people of Middle-Eastern descent that were critical of the film, however. In his review of the film, famous film critic Roger Ebert also took notice maintaining that,

One distraction during the film was its odd use of ethnic stereotypes. Most of the Arab characters have exaggerated facial characteristics - hooked noses, glowering brows, thick lips - but Aladdin and the princess look like white American teenagers. Wouldn't it be reasonable that if all the characters in this movie come from the same genetic stock, they should resemble one another? (Aladdin, 1992).

In agreeance with Ebert, it should go without saying that Aladdin and Jasmine should share some semblance of similarity with all the other characters presented in the film. However, without Disney resorting to the use of these stereotypical traits that have long distorted the Middle-Eastern, Arab, and Muslim communities they are meant to represent they would not be able to portray their heroes as essentially white. The same goes for the characters in *Mulan*, where outside of Mulan and Shang's more white features, "almost all the major characters, it goes without saying, sport "proper" Orientalist markings—slant eyes, round moon faces, long straight hair, and goatees for males" (Ma, 2013). This further supports the argument that for Disney, ideologically, white is right. This idea is further exhibited in the way that the supervising animators went about created the images for Aladdin, Jasmine, and Jafar.

In the documentary, *Diamond in the Rough* (2004), which discusses the various aspects of the making of the film *Aladdin*, supervising animator Glen Keane mentions that when he went about designing the character Aladdin, he originally intended to avoid the "stereotypical hero" look and make him the "little guy" modeling him after Michael J. Fox (Clements & Musker,

2004). Perhaps this is because Keane did not see people of color as stereotypically heroic, but, had he succeeded, his would have been the first change of script in Disney history where the male protagonist did not take on Prince Charming ideals. This did not last though as Disney chairman, Jeffrey Katzenberg, felt a disconnect from Aladdin's look and the story. Katzenberg felt as though Aladdin had to fit more of a hero type to get the girl, as director/producer John Musker says that Katzenberg claimed, "you've got Julia Roberts and Michael J. Fox, they don't fit together. You need Tom Cruise and Julia Roberts; they'd fit together" (Clements & Musker, 2004). From this point on in the production, the image of Aladdin was based on actor Tom Cruise and was meant to display those characteristics of Western beauty ideals and whiteness.

Furthermore, Glen Keane recognizes there is a pressure to meet these expectations. In the depictions of both Aladdin and Jasmine, there was a balance the animators were trying to achieve between Western and Middle-Eastern aesthetics as to not alienate viewers who were already accustomed to Western-looking Disney characters. Keane says, "this is the most ethnic film we've ever done," and "we tried to satisfy an American taste without sacrificing an Arabian look" (Susman, 2017). However, as Disney had never attempted a film of this nature, it is difficult to understand this reasoning, as there is no way of knowing how audiences would have reacted to a more authentic look. Rather, it seems more likely this was an explanation produced to justify the ongoing whitewashing of these characters. Furthermore, in seeking to cater to the whiteness of their perceived audience, this statement exhibits that the alienation of non-white audiences was a non-issue for production.

As for Jasmine, she was not based on Julia Roberts, but she was still created in a white image. Mark Henn was the supervising animator in charge of Jasmine and had animated Belle and Ariel before her and would later go on to animate young Simba and Mulan. In his search to

animate Jasmine, Henn says, “I had lots of other pictures of models and exotic looking women up just trying to understand what it is that makes for that particular look,” though when it actually came time to illustrate her Henn didn’t use a Middle-Eastern woman as his inspiration or even a woman of color, instead he turned to a picture of his little sister Beth Allen (Clements & Musker, 2004). Later in the *Diamond in the Rough* documentary, his sister sends Henn a photo of her in a Jasmine costume that she has sewn, and his response was to say, “its Jasmine in the flesh, it really is” (Clements & Musker, 2004). This statement is troubling of course because Beth Allen is white, and Jasmine is not. In an interview in the documentary *The Making of Aladdin: A Whole New World*, Henn further states, “When animating Jasmine and bringing her to life I think as in any character that I work on, believability is I think paramount” (Kroopnick, Booth & Schreiber, 1992). If believability was paramount, then why would Henn seek to create Jasmine within the bounds of a white construct? Therefore, it is so important to look at who is behind the making of these productions, because, as they are made by predominantly white men, these stories ultimately are told from their point of view. Macleod affirms this in addressing the fact that Jasmine’s representation subscribes to,

Western standards of beauty designed to appeal to the male gaze: dark doe-like eyes and artificially diminished noses offset by pale skin. Garbed in the exotic costumes and heavy gold jewelry of male fantasy rather than the modest robes of reality (2013, p. 181).

Jasmine is thus an embodiment of white, western values because she not only subscribes to ideals of white beauty, but she also plays to exoticized cultural notions of what Edward Said (1979) calls *orientalization* in her over-sexualization. Said (2003) defines, Orientalism, as a product of Western ideals and discourse which intentionally divides the world into the in-group, the “Us” which represents the progressive West, versus the dangerous “Them,” who are

conceived as the Orientalist other. Though Jasmine is painted as white, her image is still racially charged as they exhibit how the West often devalues the Middle-Eastern female.

Jafar's characterization likewise adheres to Orientalist tropes, which more clearly express the racial difference between him and the "white" protagonists. Jafar is already presented as "other" in his darkened skin tone, but his animation style also suggests this. Eric Goldberg who was the supervising animator of the Genie also developed the design style for the film. The design style of animation was influenced by Al Hirschfeld's caricaturist work as his drawings appeal to a curvy streamlined aesthetic, which Goldberg also felt strongly exhibited the traits of Arabic script style (Clements & Musker, 2004; Kroopnick, Booth & Schreiber, 1992). All characters fit into this sinuous animation style except for one. In, *The Making of Aladdin: A Whole New World*, supervising animator of Jafar Andreas Deja discloses that he went the opposite direction, "and chose a lot of straight lines rather than curved lines and angularity to just offset the character from the rest of the cast" (Kroopnick, Booth & Schreiber, 1992). This literately positions him as the "other." Aside from this fact Jafar's image is further racially charged by the characteristics Deja appealed to in his drawings. In the *Diamond in the Rough* documentary, Deja walks the viewer through the animation process and discusses how he used many different styles and looks for Jafar before he finalized the look. As he goes through the different variations, he affirms that many of them were "too extreme" and so the audience would laugh rather than take him seriously; then as he stops on the image that was closest to the Jafar in the film he announces, "there was sort of a monkey quality in this here [pointing to his mouth] that I liked in his teeth and in his mouth" (Clements & Musker, 2004), a statement which shudderingly draws on the racist tropes of comparing black people to apes.

Based on the creation of these representations in *Aladdin*, it becomes clear how race is constructed. These same types of methods, specifically, the light versus dark as a conveyance of good versus bad, is also used in *The Lion King* and *Mulan*. In *The Lion King*, Scar's coloring both in his mane and coat are darker than all the other "white" lions, and his closest companions the hooligan hyenas, are relegated to only openly roam what is designated as "The Shadowy Place" or the elephant graveyard. Wasko discusses the problems with these portrayals regarding race, as the hyenas who are, "definitely recognizable as Black and Hispanic characters lurk about in a jungle version of a ghetto" (2001, p.141). In *Mulan*, the racial tensions are between the dominant Chinese race (or the Hans) in, opposition to the "other" which are the Hun invaders, to which Sheng-mei Ma asserts:

The polarization of race manifests itself in the Huns' gray skin tone and in the Hans' fairer skin tone. Disney accomplishes this further by rendering Shan-Yu and his followers as animalistic, predatory barbarians. With fingers like hawk's talons, the steep forehead of a gorilla, eye and eyebrows squashed together, and two pointed fangs, Shan-Yu is, arguably, simian. He hangs upside down like an ape; he scales the Great Wall and climbs trees; he sniffs at the doll which his falcon brings back from his scouting (2013, p.162).

Again, it is seen how *Mulan*, likewise incites the primitive racist tropes previously discussed with Jafar.

Performance

In any film, animated or live action, the way in which a character is conveyed through their performance can most definitely iterate notions of race. However, in animation, as audiences do not see an actor's physical body, the question becomes how do these characters go about performing race? The most reliable indicators of racial and cultural performance can be

found in the features of drawn animation, the voice that specific characters embody, as discussed, and also the musical styles of the films. In animated films, the voice is arguably the most tangible element available to speak to larger issues of racial representations, as a notable voice can often signify the race of the actor playing the role even if the actor is not known initially. However, before analyzing specific characters' vocal qualities, it is important to scrutinize vocal performance in relation to the music of these films. As all three of the films are fundamentally constructed as musicals, it should not be overlooked how musicality can set the racial tone of a film.

The Musical Component of Race

To examine how the music in these films performs race, one can look at the first song of each film: list each song with the film here. While other songs in these films could of course apply, an opening number uniquely orients the audience to the world they are now entering and shares the first glimpse of what that world looks (and sounds) like. In *Aladdin*, in the opening title sequence the song "Arabian Nights" is paired with glimpses into the movie's setting, first scanning the desert and then ultimately ending with images of the palace situated in the city of Agrabah (Clements & Musker, 1992). In the original 1992 theatrical release, the first lyrics that audiences heard went as follows: "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/ Its barbaric, but hey, its home."

The depictions created by these lyrics actively play to Western characterizations and stereotyping of the Arab world as "backward and demonic," and further mirrored and exaggerated the racist portrayals of Arabs in media coverage of the Gulf War at the time of the film's release (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Furthermore, the lyrics enraged many members of

Arab-American communities. Nationally syndicated 'American Top 40' disc jockey and Lebanese-American, Casey Kasem was quick to criticize the song and film as, "gratuitous Arab-bashing," and claims:

It just drives another nail into the casket of what has been a bad image for decades. If you were to replace the word 'Arab' with 'black,' 'Jew,' 'Italian' or 'Irishman,' it just wouldn't float because everyone would be up in arms (Scheinin, 1993).

Disney however, did not take the wide-spread criticism of the song seriously, and Howard Green a Disney spokesman responded by saying,

It's certainly coming from a small minority, because most people are very happy with it. All the characters are Arabs, the good guys and the bad guys, and the accents don't really connote anything, I don't think. ... As for the song, it's talking about a different time and a different place. It's a certain license that they're taking, but it's certainly not meant to reflect on the culture of today. It's a fictitious place. This seems kind of nit-picky (Scheinin, 1993).

This rebuttal, however was not enough to stop deejay Casey Kasem from partnering with the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee to protest the film and its representations, specifically a lyric change for "Arabian Nights," the elimination of discriminatory accents, and removal of the scene where the merchant tries to cut off Princess Jasmine's hand (Frook, 1993). While Disney did not concede on all matters, the protests ultimately led to Disney altering the "Arabian Nights" song lyrics from, "Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face" to "Where it's flat and immense, and the heat is intense, It's barbaric but hey its home" for the subsequent video and worldwide film release of the film (Frook, 1993). The Studio, however, did not make alterations to the CD and defended the choice to maintain the final line of the stanza

framing the Arab world as barbaric, as Disney distribution president Dick Cook claimed that the term “barbaric” signified the heat and landscape and not its people (Fox, 1993). This is an interesting early example of Disney coming to terms with racial accountability during production and will become even more pronounced in the next generation of these films.

Though this marked a small victory for representation, however, this did not keep Disney from painting Eastern culture as backward in *Mulan*. In the opening song titled “Honor to Us All,” our Chinese heroine is sent to be made-over for the matchmaker. Mulan’s groomers instruct her on how women in Chinese culture are meant to bring honor singing:

A girl can bring her family/Great honor in one way/By striking a good match/And this could be the day/Men want girls with good taste/Calm/Obedient/Who work fast-paced/With good breeding/And a tiny waist/You'll bring honor to us all/We all must serve our Emperor/Who guards us from the Huns/A man by bearing arms/A girl by bearing sons.

These lyrics illustrate that Eastern cultures devalue women, as they view women’s only role as glorified breeders of sons. They also assert women as less than men as they are meant to be subservient and “obedient” to them. Moreover, only when they subscribe to all these standards can a woman bring honor to her family. The lyric choices in both “Arabian Nights” and “Honor to Us All” alert the films’ audiences that in interacting with either Arab or Chinese cultures, you are interacting with the “other.” In this way, Disney connotes clear ethnic and racial boundaries between the perceived civilized West and the barbaric East.

The opening number of *The Lion King*, “The Circle of Life,” works differently than that of *Aladdin*’s or *Mulan*’s. The chanting in an unfamiliar African language which begins the film signals to the audience the disconnect from Western American culture and instantly constructs an

air of ethnic difference as it introduces the viewer to the African savannah. However, as the typical Disney audience member may not understand Zulu, the lyrics cannot be perceived as a polarizing factor in advancing the notion that the audience is encountering the barbaric. For the music on the film, Disney enlisted an all-star team with Tim Rice, who is a famous award-winning lyricist, and rock icon Elton John as composer, neither of whom are remotely African or even black. In the documentary, *Pride of The Lion King* (2017), Tim Rice even states, “When you think of the great African composers of our time you don’t think of Elton John, but we had a great melody” (Hahn, Allers & Minkoff, 2017). Hans Zimmer, who was hired to compose the score of the film, contacted African composer Lebo M. whom he had worked with on *The Power of One* (1992). In the 2003 *The Lion King* DVD bonus features, Zimmer tells the story of how he had been attempting to contact Lebo for months but could not find him. Suddenly, on the day that Zimmer was meant to pitch to the directors, Lebo showed up. Director, Rob Minkoff, gives his take on the meeting, stating that after explaining the premise of the film, Lebo took a minute to think and then came back and recorded the “chant” that starts “The Circle of Life” in only one take, “and it was all in African” (Hahn, Allers & Minkoff, 2003). Of course, the lyrics he is referring to is the: “Nants ingonyama bagithi Baba Sithi uhm ingonyama Nants ingonyama bagithi baba Sithi uhmm ingonyama Ingonyama Siyo Nqoba Ingonyama Ingonyama nengw' enamabala,” which are in Zulu, but this goes to show how out of touch the directors were in taking on a film about Africa as they did not know that “African” is not even a language. Furthermore, the director’s awestruck response to the song despite his lack of familiarity with the culture or even understanding of the lyrics which had just been presented to him exhibits an all too common form of orientalizing the East where the “other,” specifically Lebo here, is

disconcertingly exoticized. To this point, no matter the language you are watching *The Lion King* in, it will always be that first take and Lebo's voice as the intro to "Circle of Life."

In *Pride of the Lion King*, Zimmer makes the comment, that it is this opening sequence that, "lets the audience know you are not in Kansas anymore" (Hahn, Allers, & Minkoff, 2017). It proved so powerful that for the first time ever, Disney used an entire opening scene and song as a trailer (Hahn, Allers & Minkoff, 2003). With all this information, it begs the question, without an African musician, would the film have had the same impact? This is especially intriguing as, according to Zimmer, a happy accident that Lebo M. came to work on the project. After all, Disney hired Zimmer, a white man to compose the African sound, and it was Zimmer, not Disney, who then decided to bring Lebo on. President of Walt Disney Music, Chris Montan, also speaks in the documentary style bonus features and addresses the impact of Lebo's Zulu lyrics best when he states, "At that point, it wasn't a bunch of Hollywood people trying to do what we thought Africa should be. It was someone from that place who was able to express his feelings about that place" (Hahn, Allers & Minkoff, 2003). This statement is so vital to the understanding of race in this film and other Disney films, as it serves as an admission that, as long as white Hollywood types are the execs behind films on other cultures you are going to get their whitewashed perspective on what those places should look like, effectively stripping away a sense of authenticity to that culture.

Racial Coding of Accents

Vocal performance can also serve as a performance of race when certain accents in a film are racially coded. This is most obvious in displaying characters as good versus evil. All the main heroes/heroines in the three films speak in "proper" white American accents, while the villains do not. Calvin Gidney and Julia Dobrow conducted a study analyzing the use of accents

in animated films and television shows, and results showed that, “Foreign accents and non-standard dialects were being used to voice all of the “bad” characters” (Fattal, 2018). This can be seen with Jafar, Gazeem, Iago and the band of guards in *Aladdin*, Scar and the hyenas in *The Lion King*, and Shan-Yu, the Huns and Chi-Fu in *Mulan*. Overall the study found that the vilest accent was British English, and, though not exclusive, is the most commonly used for villains (Dobrow & Gidney, 1998). This is true in the case of both Jafar and Scar, although as the research suggests this is not always true as some of the other “bad” characters take on stereotypical Arab and Chinese accents. As for henchmen or assistants to villains, the study found that these characters did not use British accents, but often their voices portrayed dialects associated with low-economic statuses such as regional American dialects or Eastern European accents (Dobrow & Gidney, 1998). This is seen with Iago who speaks in more of a Brooklyn Jewish dialect, and the hyenas who take on dialects of African-American English and English coded with a Hispanic accent.

In this way it can be seen that, similar to how the animated image is racially coded and created to depict “good” versus “bad,” so is the accent. The accents used for villains can exhibit a combination of different ethnicities, though no matter the accent used, what is clear is that in all cases the audience perceives it in some way as foreign or different from that of the protagonists. In an interview, Gidney explains this dichotomy further by recognizing that there is a common denominator in the use of an accent as “foreign,” and that is, “the binary distinction of ‘like us’ versus ‘not like us.’ Villainy is marked just by sounding different” (Fattal, 2018). However, building upon Gidney’s statement, I would like to argue that “sounding different” can also be used to code for racial deviance in the case of characters who are considered “good,” as

their nonconformity in accent often codes that character as outside of the valued status quo of whiteness if they employ certain racial tropes to develop their character's voice.

Blackness and Minstrelsy

Apart from a character's voice, though not as apparent a character type and physicality may also be used to code a role racially. Disney has a long history of representing heroes and their helpers, and of course, every diabolical villain has a minion to push around. In *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, and *Mulan* all the sidekick characters (e.g., Abu, Genie, Iago, Zazu, Timon, Pumba, Shenzi, Banzai, Ed, and Mushu) are employed to insert comedic relief in these films and follow the tradition of animated minstrelsy. Like Mickey before them, they embody some of the vestigial markings of minstrelsy in their looks and actions, and as a result in a way perform blackness.

As minstrels, their character construction relies upon the mythos of a black body which is resistant to forced labor and is expressed in the fact that all these characters are tied to either a hero/heroine/or villain who ultimately controls their actions and serve as their "massas." Though these characters appear complicit in these relationships, like their slave counterparts from which minstrelsy was born, they are often degraded in their secondary status as servant and companion to the title characters. This is often shown in a sidekick's abuse of body, as their animated forms are exposed to physical violence when, "bodies twist, stretch, explode, melt; they are crushed by anvils, pianos, giant mallets, whole buildings; they are sliced and diced by razors and knives," and audiences do not react with horror but rather laugh through it as they are reduced to mere gags (Sammond, 2015, p.203). Audiences can see this clearly in *Aladdin*, when Abu's body, much to his horror and against his will, is contorted and warped into a camel, horse, duck, peacock, turtle, car, and elephant, to find the perfect mode of transportation for Prince Ali.

Zazu in *The Lion King* is likewise subjected to violence when he is reduced to Simba's glorified cat toy. Zazu plays the role of a dutiful servant when Simba needs a target for pouncing practice, as he remains still at Mufasa's behest, even though he vocalizes that the act is "humiliating."

While all these characters revert to minstrel forms, the most obvious example of this performance of minstrelsy and race is the character of Mushu, voiced by Eddie Murphy, from *Mulan*:

Not far from the Amos and Andy crows in *Dumbo* is Mushu, a tiny red dragon with a black voice...Mushu is a servile and boastful clown who seems unsuited to a mythic fable about China. He is a stereotype of the craven, backward, Southern American, chitlin-circuit character that appears to feed the popular racist imagination (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 111).

In his essence, Mushu is a pickaninny. He relies on his child-like tricksterish behaviors and antics, such as biting Ling on the butt to aid Mulan but also tricks Chi-Fu into deploying troops to the war front to serve his selfish purpose which is to be taken seriously by the ancestors as a guardian. Dubbed by Eddie Murphy, Mushu also performs blackness in his accent and jokes which, "stem largely from streetwise black lingo," by virtue of this Sheng-mei Ma asserts that, "Murphy-Mushu is unadulteratedly "black", the Chinese murphy wears race like the emperor's new clothes, unabashedly exposing an ebony self" (2013, p.151).,

A character need not be as overt as Murphy's portrayal of Mushu, to perform race and effectively "wear blackness." The Genie dubbed by Robin Williams still conforms to many aspects of the minstrel tradition in his performance. To start, he refers to Aladdin as "Master," besides this the entire persona is built upon his wisecracking gags, which are only aided by the fact that the character is the physical embodiment of an elastic form, allowing his figure to

morph and compliment his jokes, creating a very physical comedic style. Specifically, this is seen through the way in which the Genie effortlessly shapeshifts from one impersonation to another, sometimes so fast the viewer does not have time to process who it is he is even parodying. In these scenes what the audience may not realize is that the Genie often masquerades as people of color, assuming the likenesses of Arsenio Hall, Carole Channing, Wenceslao Moreno, and Cab Calloway, and effectively wearing blackness with ease.

Furthermore, the entire concept of the genie was based on representations of blackness. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, composer of *Aladdin*, Alan Menken recalls,

We didn't know who was going to play the genie when we wrote the song. We were looking at the character as black, a hipster, and I suggested a Fats Waller, Harlem stride-piano style from the '40s. When Robin Williams was suggested, my first thought was 'Can he sing like Fats Waller?' Robin learned every note...When we went into the studio, we got exactly the Fats Waller performance we wanted (Snetiker, 2015).

This statement expertly expounds upon the problem concerning racial representation in Hollywood. Menken never once questions whether Robin Williams would be an ideal candidate for the role because he was white; the authenticity of Williams's acting ability to take on blackness was never an issue, instead his concern was whether Williams would be able to sing "black." So, while dubbing these scenes, Robin Williams may not have been wearing blackface in the recording studio, but his performance and comedic style speak to the larger dilemma which has faced representation since the time of minstrelsy, which is white commodification and ownership of the black body.

These examples serve as only a small sample from the films regarding the performance of race. What they show, however, is that difference in dialect or the performance of difference,

does not always mark “bad” characters, but it still signifies and maintains racial hierarchy as these characters are designed to be laughed at and ridiculed. Giroux and Pollock affirm this position by explaining,

It is astonishing that these films produce a host of representations and codes through which children are taught to laugh at or deride, rather than respect, difference and to think that anyone who does not bear the imprint of white, middle-class ethnicity is likely to be inferior and unintelligent at best, if not also deviant and potentially threatening (2010, p.111).

Thus, the stereotypical images produced in the performance of race, no matter the race of the actor, further support the white hegemonic system at the core of Disney’s values.

Conclusion

Disney has been challenged by many critics and fans over the years for their troubling representations, yet their films still see little in the way of progress. As this analysis of *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Mulan* (1998) has revealed, despite Disney’s approach at incorporating a more “multicultural” narrative in their Renaissance era, in many ways their films fell tone deaf to the changing cultural attitude of that time. Nevertheless, Dines (2010) defends Disney’s system of privileged whiteness arguing:

[Disney] Scripts are written by real people, who themselves have been socialized by this society, and they have internalized these norms and these values. So, when they produce work, it’s bound to come out in some way [expressing that society]—unless they make a *conscious decision* to operate within an alternative ideology (cited in Brode, p. 18).

In justifying the racist and stereotypical representations of Disney’s animated canon in this way, she is suggesting that Walt Disney Animations Studios, and all those who work for them, have

unwittingly played into the extensive system of oppression that exists in American society. However, in depicting the world as methodically as Disney has and by repeatedly using their animated cannon to maintain racial hierarchies through their casting, star power, visual representations, animation styles, and performance, I find issue with asserting ignorance as an excuse for the Studio's blatant disregard for racist representations.

Therefore, I argue that in fact, Disney's production practices of the Renaissance era demonstrated a blatant lack of regard for authenticity and more importantly respect in their racialized portrayals. Though Disney was apparently confronted with the growing mindfulness of and public urge for multiculturalism within the context of their efforts to globalize the company; and even in the wake of financial devastation as a result of Euro Disney, they continued to handle the subject of diversity callously. To repeatedly ignore the concerns of their viewing public and to belittle their protests, as was done in the case of *Aladdin* (1992), shows a concerted effort to operate within the dominant white ideology at the cost of injuring those audiences which the representations depicted. These production practices show whom Disney views as their target audience, and consequently what values they will continue to uphold regardless of the changing political economy of the time. Moving forward, I will consider the current cultural perspective towards identity politics in Hollywood, which has seen an increased awareness and rejection of such portrayals. This paired with the fact that contemporary audiences are now more diverse than ever before, begs the question, will Disney do better in respect to representation in their live-action adaptations of *Aladdin*, *Mulan*, and *The Lion King*?

CHAPTER II
FROM WHITEWASHING TO BLACK PRIDE: PRE-RECEPTION OF DISNEY’S LIVE
ACTION REMAKES

In the Academy Awards 90-year history, only sixteen black actors, five LatinX actors, three Asian actors, and one actor of indigenous descent have been awarded an Oscar, a disparity in diversity which has been famously highlighted by the hashtag “Oscars So White.” Its creator, April Reign explains that,

The hashtag came about very organically. I was sitting in my room watching the nominations and was just so disappointed with the lack of representation of people of color and marginalized communities in the major categories. So, the very first tweet was ‘Oscars so white they ask to touch my hair.’ And it just sort of took off from there (Peoples, 2016).

The tweet of course was not an actual reference to Reign’s hair but was popular for addressing the fact that the 2015 Academy Awards became the first Oscars since 1995 to have zero peoples of color nominated in the acting categories, which spurred a cultural phenomenon a year later when the hashtag went viral as the trend repeated for the 2016 awards. The conversation quickly transcended twitter and served as a catalyst in reigniting the movement towards inclusion in Hollywood, when many prominent figures in the industry boycotted the ceremony as a result. This is not to say that the tweet uncovered Hollywood’s race problem (as this has been an issue since the industry’s inception). However, it has encouraged new activism

in support of this cause. The effects of which have continued to reverberate and produce upheaval within the entertainment industry in the years since the tweet's origination.

Specifically, what I mean by "new activism" is that critical audience discourse has largely in part changed as a result of social media platforms like Twitter, actively shifting the format and mode of these types of conversations. Social media platforms and ease of access have also thus allowed for audience critiques and interventions to run parallel to the development of film productions, where in the past they were limited to post-reception efforts. Additionally, this movement has far exceeded an issue of race and has grown to include the disproportionate representation concerning sexual orientation, gender, and the differently abled as well and have ignited similar protests with the Time's Up and #MeToo movements which address sexual assault, harassment and inequality towards women in the workplace. Overall in working to shed new light on the lack of opportunity in film this campaign has resulted in what some are calling the greatest systematic change ever seen in the history of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences ("About April," 2018).

This, of course, begs the question, what does this change look like and what does it mean for the future of Hollywood? For one, it means that the industry is under a microscope, and appropriately so. The sparking of this debate in the mainstream paired with the accessibility of technology in the 21st century has marked a cultural shift in response to problematic industry practices, unlike that which has been witnessed before. Those who are in positions of power are now being made to answer for their questionable choices, and this accountability is being demanded by none other than audience members. This is due to the fact that production announcements are now updated in real time via the internet. As a result, audiences have unfettered access to engage with this material immediately, and the discourse surrounding

movements such as #OscarsSoWhite has given them the terminology to do so. Of course, actors and those within the industry are still exercising their influence to bring about progress, but this evolution in audience engagement is proving more interesting and, in some ways, more productive in bringing about change.

It is this kind of audience engagement which I will now refer to as the *pre-reception* of a text. To elaborate further, pre-reception is the dialogue that unfolds between audiences and a film text *prior* to a film's release. These dialogues are often started by fan-made petitions or through the establishment of viral hashtags on Twitter, which is then further circulated by popular media outlets. This is a growing trend that is worth examining further as these pre-reception conversations, often critical in nature, debate the industry practices used to produce a film. Pre-reception has emerged mainly in part as a response to unfair casting practices and the likewise troubled representations they yield. As these discussions can work to shape the understanding and meaning of a film before it has been released, a negative pre-reception can ultimately prove detrimental to a film's success. However, as this trend begins to gain traction, the entertainment industry has certainly taken notice, and as a result, pre-reception has had the ability to influence and, in some cases, even alter production decisions. Thus, pre-reception is proving invaluable in championing the cause of inclusivity in Hollywood.

As for Disney's take on the current cultural climate towards diversification, the studio's motion picture production president Sean Bailey, who oversees Disney's live-action features, echoed popular discourse telling *The Hollywood Reporter* that, "Inclusivity is not only a priority but an imperative for us, and it's top of mind on every single project," (Ford, 2016b). Despite these claims, however, Disney's live-action remakes of *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) are proving to be no exception to pre-reception controversy. Furthermore,

Disney's contemporary shift from animation to live-action remakes has played an active role in the foregrounding and encouraging of debates concerning questions of representation and whitewashing. This suggests that while Disney is claiming to make strides towards a more progressive system of representation, they may still be enforcing the same dominant ideological values of whiteness that they have in the past. As the studio continues to adapt their animated classics, this has created a unique opportunity for a pre-reception study as audiences are already familiar with the animated images that Disney has previously circulated. Consequently, audiences and fans are making sure to hold Disney accountable for the way they translate this to live-action.

This analysis seeks to understand what is at stake for Disney now that their identity politics have become more publicly questioned and exposed than ever before. As Disney has engaged in a long-standing history of prejudiced practices, a pre-reception analysis is significant to analyze what changes, if any, are being made to Disney's systems of representation as they hyper-realize their animated classics in this technological shift to live-action. In this chapter, I will discuss the casting practices used in each of the films, the ways in which race is represented through star power, and any visual representations of race that have arisen thus far from the films. These aspects of production will be put into conversation with the pre-reception discourse surrounding *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019) and *Mulan* (2020) in order to examine Disney's engagement with contemporary identity politics and to evaluate how these conversations are potentially shaping the production contexts of these films.

Casting & Star Power

Mulan

On March 30th, 2015, *The Hollywood Reporter* released an exclusive announcing that Disney would be adapting their animated feature *Mulan*, into a live-action film (Ford, 2015). While the news may have been expected to cause celebration for many House of Mouse fans, the announcement had the opposite effect rather. Michigan librarian and activist, Natalie Molnar, was quick to respond with a pre-emptive petition titled, “Tell Disney You Don’t Want a Whitewashed Mulan.” Creating this in hopes that it would pressure Walt Disney Studios to cast an Asian actress for the role of Mulan rather than a white actress, Molnar claimed that whitewashing has a “direct harmful impact on not only the movie itself but the audience” (Molnar, 2015). At that point little information if any had been released about the film or its intent for production and casting. However, many fans worldwide still rushed to sign the petition, and, not even two weeks after the film’s announcement, the petition had already gathered 42,000 signatures (Zhu, 2015). To some, a petition of this nature may seem ridiculous -- of course, Disney would cast a Chinese actress if not at least an Asian actress to play Mulan. Though, with Hollywood’s overt and unfortunate track record of whitewashing films, fans may have been right to be worried, especially as Disney was not quick to quiet these concerns and waited a year and a half to make another announcement regarding the project.

In October of 2016, Walt Disney Studios announced a release date for the film set to November 2, 2018, and publicized that they would, in fact, be launching a global casting search to find a Chinese actress to play the heroine lead (McClintock, 2016). While this may have set some of the initial naysayers at ease just a few days later, on October 10th, the Studio was struck with controversy for the second time. An anonymous post titled, “An Open Letter to the Creators

of Disney's Live-Action Feature Film ‘The Legend of Mulan’” was published to the blog *Angry Asian Man* and stated:

As an Asian American person in the industry, I am furious after reading this script. I am writing this letter anonymously, so all the fans anticipating this remake will know how problematic it is in its current form. We must urge the creators of Disney's live-action *Mulan* to reconsider the story before the film goes into production (ConcernedForMulan, 2016).

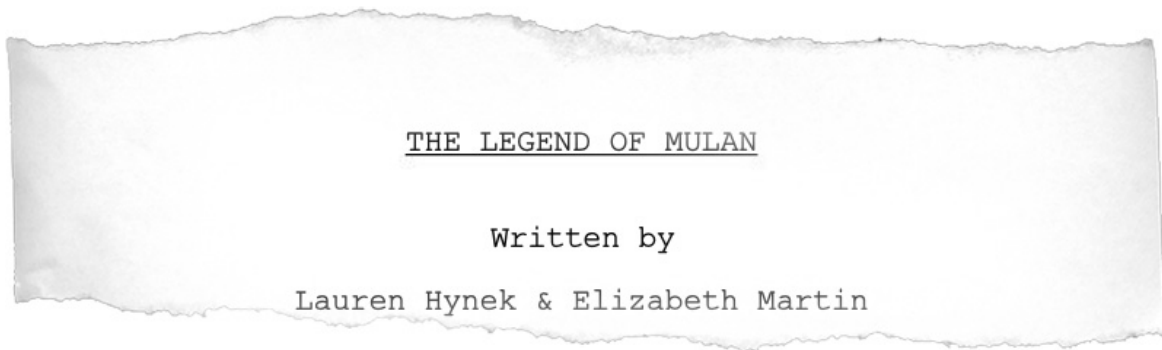


Figure 1. Disney’s Live-Action *Mulan* Spec Script.

Though Disney had released that the live-action production of *Mulan* was based off a script written by Lauren Hyneck and Elizabeth Martin, they failed, however, to state that the intent for production was to veer from the original 1998 animated narrative. In doing so, the anonymous writer of the post conveys that their concern lies with the fact that *Mulan* is no longer the focal point of the story, but instead favors a white narrative featuring a white male lead.

The writer goes on to illustrate the new plotline and character stating:

The man is a 30-something European trader who initially cares only for the pleasure of women and money. The only reason why he and his entourage decide to help the Chinese Imperial Army is because he sets eyes on *Mulan*. That's right. Our white savior has come

to the aid of Ancient China due to a classic case of Yellow Fever. In this script written by Lauren Hynek and Elizabeth Martin, more than half of its pages are dedicated to this merchant who develops a mutual attraction with Mulan and fights to protect her in the ensuing battles. To top it all off, this man gets the honor of defeating the primary enemy of China, not Mulan. Way to steal a girl's thunder (ConcernedForMulan, 2016).

Besides fundamentally altering a beloved Disney classic, this explicit and upsetting whitewashing of the narrative works to suppress positive and authentic representation of Chinese culture. In this form, the film would only seek to perpetuate further the myth that the only stories worth telling in Hollywood are those which are presented from a white or Western point of view, so much so that a story which is inherently Chinese in origin could not be entrusted to a Chinese lead. This interpretation also leaves reason to be alarmed with the portrayal of the film's female representation, as Mulan would cease to take charge of her agency and instead would transform into a passive secondary character. Both points show serious regression from the animated film which has no white character leads, and which was hailed as a progressive feminist text by many; one review even praising it as, "a female empowerment story par excellence" which "blazes new Femme territory" (McCarthy, 1998). This post confirmed what fans had initially feared and protested; a whitewashed *Mulan* stripped of its original cultural significance.

The whitewashing of the film was not the only aspect of production that the anonymous writer took issue with, however. The author goes on to express,

I am deeply disturbed that a remake of the beloved Disney classic rejects the cultural consciousness of its predecessor by featuring a white male lead, once again perpetuating the myth that cultural stories are not worth telling without a western lens or star. Instead of seizing the opportunity to highlight a tenacious, complex female warrior, this remake

diminishes her agency. But what I find equally troubling is the fact that Disney plans to cast a 16-17-year-old established Chinese actress as Mulan and will not be casting an Asian American (ConcernedForMulan, 2016).

Interestingly the writer suggests that beyond the concerns of altering the text to suit a white vantage point, there are greater obstacles regarding representation when the industry chooses to hire Asian actors from within Asian entertainment markets rather than Asian-Americans. This develops a new depth to the question of progressive identity politics in the industry that many who do not belong to an immigrant diaspora would truly understand, which is the unique experience of identifying as neither truly American or in this case Asian. Therefore, calling into question the difference between surface representation and the need for accurate self-identification in media. This anonymous individual is thus of the opinion that the 1998 animated feature of *Mulan* was successful in its casting techniques as it utilized Asian-American actors, and in doing so had a profound impact on the sense of Asian-American belonging in American culture. Of course, as a person within the industry, this “anonymous” would also be familiar with the plight that Asian-American’s in Hollywood face, as there are many Asian-American actors and actresses who are already struggling to find work and taking casting calls to China creates yet another missed opportunity for them. However, when addressing this live-action remake of *Mulan* this debate is at somewhat of an impasse because this is not a telling of the Asian-American experience nor is it a Pan-Asian story. Therefore, there is merit in deviating from the practices that the animated feature utilized.

The Pan-Asian approach that the animated feature took on in its casting, though at the time may have been considered progressive in nature still sought to portray the “Asian” with a broad brush and as interchangeable, and for some within the industry utilizing the same approach

to cast the Live-Action remake would be unacceptable. When asked about her preferences for character casting, the original voice of Mulan, Ming-Na Wen, had only one request: “That she’s Chinese in her heritage. Even though we’re Pan-Asian, it is specifically a Chinese folklore and I really think that someone with that ethnic background would really just add more to the story” (Aguilera, 2017). This difference of opinion highlights the enormity of the representation issue in Hollywood. Proper representation is so far behind that even the proper course of action to correct for the lack of diversity within the industry is at somewhat of an impasse. Regardless of the desired approach, in this circumstance, however, the anonymous writer makes the argument that casting a Chinese born actor/actress is not a sincere move towards progress on the part of Disney’s production. Rather, that it is a marketing ploy made under the guise of improved representation. Citing *Mulan* (1998) as a reference, the writer claims that the animated film desperately sought to break into the Chinese market. Despite efforts, still the film flopped there, and the suggestion is that this casting of Chinese nationals is just an attempt to pull in Chinese dollars they failed to do bring in before. The post then ends with a plea for help calling on fans to preserve the film text they are familiar with asserting, “Mulan is the heroine that we want. Not some white dude. Please do not disappoint us, Disney. #MakeMulanRight” (ConcernedForMulan, 2016).

This blog post revived the original suspicions that accompanied the film’s announcement, causing what I am calling the pre-reception of the text to develop and mature from mere speculation of a few good intentioned fans to a driving force in the discourse on race and identity politics within the industry. Though the original petition had been successful in gaining signatures this article and the hashtag it proposed breathed new life into the project and was met with an enormous outpour of support from both fans, and those within the industry alike.

Molnar's original petition grew to 112,683 supporters, and a new appeal was started by the 18 Million Rising (18MR) website, a site dedicated to representing Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States. This site took to Twitter and used the #MakeMulanRight hashtag to start their own petition, which demanded that writers with Asian heritage be included in the live-action *Mulan* writing team. This expanded the original request from proper casting, demanding more of a response in terms of inclusion from the project's production team. The point was to recognize that casting is only a fraction of the problem facing diversity, which in fact reflects across all facets of the industry. It is not enough to simply hire actors with Asian heritage because as Figure 2 shows the Digital Campaigner for 18MR, Oanh-Nhi Nguyen affirms:

When our stories are never told by and for us, we become mere stereotypes, and that harms us. It is a systemic issue in media diversity that requires change. We need meaningful representation on screen, in writing rooms, and in executive leadership (Pequenino, 2016).



 **18MR.org**
@18millionrising



Replying to @18millionrising

Tell @Disney to ditch the white savior plot and hire an Asian American writer. #MakeMulanRight sign our petition: action.18mr.org/makemulanright/

3:02 PM - Oct 10, 2016

Figure 2. 18 Million Rising organization's response to AngryAsian.com anonymous blog post by Concerned for Mulan.

 **Harry Shum Jr** 
@HarryShumJr



Proper representation is more important than ever. This story is important to millions around the world. Can we just #MakeMulanRight

8:20 PM - Oct 10, 2016

 5,669  3,833 people are talking about this



Figure 3. Asian Actor Harry Shum Jr. also responds to Concerned for Mulan blog.

This time around Disney was quick to respond to the allegations, yet they did not entirely deny them. Instead, *Vanity Fair* confirmed that very same day that a “source” close to the project informed the publication that,

The spec script was a jumping-off point for a new take on the story that draws from both the literary ballad of *Mulan* and Disney’s 1998 animated film. *Mulan* is and will always be the lead character in the story, and all primary roles, including the love interest, are Chinese (Desta, 2016).

The official script is to be adapted and written by *Jurassic World* writers Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver, and they are not Chinese as the 18MR campaign had urged. However, Jake Pitre (2016) of *Polygon* writes, “While the married pair are not Asian, it’s interesting to note that in their draft of *Jurassic World*, the protagonists were Chinese; director Colin Trevorrow made the decision to focus on Chris Pratt and Bryce Dallas Howard (white) characters.” Nevertheless, their good intentions do not count, and it still doesn’t make them a Chinese writing team. So, just as 18MR feared the film at that point still had white writers working off a spec script written by other white people and was being produced by white men (Jason Reed, Chris Bender, and Jake Weiner) (McClintock, 2016). The last hope that the film had not to be completely told from a white perspective was to land an Asian director. A hope that was assumed to become a reality when Rebecca Ford of, *The Hollywood Reporter*, wrote a story claiming that Disney was on the hunt for an Asian director (2016). Walt Disney Studios reached out to Taiwan-born director Ang Lee, who unfortunately had to pass due to obligations related to another film, but went on to express that, “it’d be great to see an Asian do it, of course” (Lee, 2016). Ultimately, the position of director went to Niki Caro who is a white, which in the industry is still being recognized as

progress, as she is only the second woman at Disney to direct a \$100 million-dollar film (Sun, 2017).

Nevertheless, it brings into question how long the studio was willing to look for the right fit (someone of Asian heritage) before they conceded, as the announcement of her appointment was made only two months after the Ang Lee reportedly declined the position. In what seems like an effort to appease members of the public and the industry, however, with Caro's announcement it was also announced that the film is bringing on Hong Kong based, Billy Kong as executive producer (Sun, 2017). So hopefully, his cultural influence will provide enough for the film to take on more of an authentic Chinese tone. Whatever the final text will become it yet to be seen, nevertheless, the culmination of this controversy did result in Disney maintaining their original promise of Chinese leads in their casting, yet even this process did not go unscathed by audiences. As the casting call would soon affirm that though there was not a white male love interest, there was also no longer a Shang love interest, and the fans were not pleased. The casting call sheet that circulated, as seen in Figure 4, instead mentions a character lead by the name Chen Honghui (Marc, 2016). While some fans were upset that the new character would essentially change the original *Mulan* plotline, others were distressed due to concerns of representation and what the character Shang means to the LGBTQ community.

The image shows a casting call for Disney's live-action film 'Mulan'. At the top, the word 'Disney' is written in its signature script font, and 'MULAN' is written in a large, bold, green serif font. Below the title, there is a paragraph of text explaining the casting search. This is followed by a bulleted list of requirements for potential participants. A 'NOTE' section follows, stating the project is set in 7th Century AD China. Two character descriptions are provided: one for the lead role of Mulan and another for the character Chen Honghui. The entire text is enclosed in a decorative green and black border.

Disney
MULAN

Debra Zane Casting is currently searching for the two leads of Disney's live action feature film, Mulan. If interested in auditioning, please send us your photo (and resume, if available) to mulan Casting@disneympp.com. Those who seem well suited for a role will be invited to audition.

- Potential participants must be available April of 2017 through October of 2017.
- Those auditioning must be 100% available for the entire shoot and will live in China during the film's production dates.
- Martial Arts training is a plus.
- Must be at least 18 years old by May 1st, 2017. No Exceptions.

NOTE: This project is set in China in the 7th Century AD. Most roles are Chinese.

[MULAN] 18-20 years old to play 18; must be able to speak fluent English and Mandarin Chinese; lithe, athletic, quick, tougher than she looks, Mulan lives in rural China in 630 AD, and her country is besieged, under attack by the Gokturk invaders. When her aging father volunteers to join the Army, Mulan sneaks out by night and takes his place, strapping down her breasts so she can pass for a man. There is a mysterious power inside Mulan, a power of speed and coordination and sheer force that places her at the peak of her unit – where no one suspects her secret.

[CHEN HONGHUI] In his 20s, must be able to speak fluent English and Mandarin Chinese; strapping, cocky, and handsome, Honghui is another recruit who joins Commander Tung's unit, and he's determined to be the best soldier in human history. Full of himself, with a mean, bullying streak to him, he quickly realizes that Mulan is his chief rival, but he does not realize that she is a woman. Grittily determined to be simply the best at everything, Honghui is increasingly peeved by Mulan's ability to match or out-manuever him. But after learning that his rival is a woman, his intense feelings of rivalry turn into something very different, something like love.

Figure 4. Disney's Live-Action *Mulan* Casting Call.

Shang holds significance to those who identify as LGBTQ, because he is seen as a meaningful bisexual character in the Disney canon. The *Huffington Post* reports that, “Many viewers have theorized that Shang is an LGBTQ character due to his strong bond with Mulan’s male alter ego, “Ping,” which became an official romance after Mulan was revealed as a woman toward the end of the film” (Yam, 2018). Many fans believe that Shang’s presence in the upcoming *Mulan* would speak volumes for representation of queer characters in Disney films, and so they have taken to Twitter to voice their dismay at the shift in the love interest. The main argument is that the way in which the new Chen Honghui character is described differs greatly from Shang’s character development in the original animated version because,

Chen, Mulan’s new love interest, will allegedly be an army recruit who is bent on being the “best soldier in human history,” the casting call notes. Mulan, disguised as a man, eventually becomes Chen’s biggest rival, increasingly irritating him. Only after he learns she is a woman do “his intense feelings of rivalry turn into something very different, something like love,” the call notes. For many on social media, this character description of Chen eliminates the possibility that he could be bisexual (Yam, 2018).

No matter the individual reading of Shang’s character, fans are unhappy with the changes being made. The casting process for the film has been long and rigorous, and Disney has remained true to their commitment in hiring actors of Chinese heritage. One thing is certain, however. With the announcement of each new cast member, Disney has revealed that this live-action version of *Mulan* is shaking things up and will not stick to the originally animated narrative. None of the original characters is secure, and it is probably safe to assume that just like Shang, audiences will not be seeing Mushu or Crikee this go around.

To date this is what is known about the cast, however this is not a complete list as the studio is still in the casting process and has not begun filming:

- Chinese actress **Liu Yifei**, also known as Crystal Liu, is playing the lead heroine Mulan (Sun & Ford, 2017).
- **Yoson An**, will play opposite Liu Yifei in the role of Chen Honghui, who is an army recruit and Mulan's love interest (Ford, 2018).
- **Donnie Yen** will play the role of Commander Tung, Mulan's mentor (Galuppo, 2018a).
- **Jet Li** joins the cast as the emperor of China (Sun, 2018).
- **Gong Li** will play a new villain, a powerful witch (Sun, 2018).
- **Xana Tang**, another new original character, will play Mulan's sister (Sun, 2018).
- **Ron Yuan** will play loyal Sergeant Qiang (Galuppo, 2018b).
- **Utkarsh Ambudkar** will play the character of Skatch, who is one half of a con-artist duo in the film (Galuppo, 2018b).
- **Chum Ehelepola** will play Ramtish, the other half of the con-artist duo (Ford, 2018).

All the characters are of Chinese heritage, except for Utkarsh Ambudkar who is of Indian ethnicity and Chum Ehelepola who is of Sri Lankan ethnicity. While little is known of the new original characters and the roles they will play in the film, all the casting choices are of consequence when put into conversation with identity politics and casting as cultural production.

First and foremost, not unlike the animated *Mulan* which purposely looked for Pan-Asian voice actors, this film specifically sought out Chinese actors. Both examples signal a departure from typical color-blind casting procedure and suggest that diversity issues can be resolved as a

result of deliberate casting choices. As Warner (2015) suggests, the terms diversity and colorblind casting exist in paradox to one another because, “to be diverse means intentionally seeing racial difference while blind casting literally means not to see race,” and thus the two notions cannot coexist (p.36). An alternative to colorblind casting then is to cast with intention as these films have. This is representative of a new industry development which has taken hold and is being termed “color-conscious casting,” which implies an understanding of the profound implications of skin color” (Gelt, 2017). In doing so, one can cast actors who relate to the fundamental experience of the character they are portraying.

Casting in this way has served to benefit the production value of this film, as many fans and people in the industry alike have been thrilled with the live-action *Mulan*'s appointment of characters. Articles with such titles as *The Wrap*'s, “‘Mulan’ Fans Thank Disney for Not Whitewashing Live-Action Movie by Casting of Chinese Star,” or *Buzzfeed*'s, “Fans Are Very Happy a Chinese Actor Has Been Cast in the Live-Action ‘Mulan,’” show the importance of better representation to an increasingly diverse and empowered audience (Fuster, 2017; Flaherty, 2017). However, what the titles do not show is that the majority of the tweets provided as examples actually hint at a level of sarcasm, which serves to take a jab at Disney Studios for the fact that they even have to thank them in the first place. Such as @aqua-womann shown in Figure 5 who tweets, “We're all praising Disney for not whitewashing Mulan like that's how bad it's gotten lmfao we're praising them for casting a Chinese person in a Chinese role,” or @the_ns shown in Figure 6 who tweets, “It's a little heartbreaking how happy I am that Disney cast a Chinese woman to play a Chinese woman. #Mulan” (Flaherty, 2017).



 **raaga | WE ARE VENOM**
@aqua_womann 

We're all praising Disney for not whitewashing *Mulan* like that's how bad it's gotten Imfao we're praising them for casting a Chinese person in a Chinese role

12:32 PM - Nov 29, 2017

♡ 158 💬 73 people are talking about this

Figure 5. Twitter response criticizing *Mulan* casting call announcement.

 **Dead Sea Squirrel**
@the_ns 

It's a little heartbreaking how happy I am that Disney cast a Chinese woman to play a Chinese woman. #Mulan

12:10 PM - Nov 29, 2017

♡ 602 💬 210 people are talking about this 

Figure 6. Twitter response expressing dismay at excitement to *Mulan* casting call.

When approached on the subject, even Ming-Na Wen who hoped for a Chinese actress to replace her as Mulan starts by saying, “she’s perfect for it. I’m so excited. And she’s Chinese! Thank you!” but then she later adds a disclaimer of skepticism recognizing that, “definitely for me it was such a relief” (Lovett, 2017). Moreover, the casting choice alone is not a definitive level of success for Wen, as she also offers this piece of advice to Liu Yifei, “Just don’t eff it up... I’m very proud of the continued legacy. I hope that they do it justice” (Lovett, 2017). Both the fans and Wen seem hesitant to extol Disney’s virtues on the topic, as better representation should have been what Disney was striving for from the start. Also, there is a recognition that though Disney has successfully cast Chinese stars, this does not immediately determine that the film as a whole will live up to the standards audiences now seem to expect. It begs the question of whether Disney would have made such progressive steps if it were not for pre-reception pressures. Twitter user @yingxu03 touched on this issue when she tweeted out, “the fact that we have to say, ‘whew I’m so glad Hollywood casted a Chinese actress to play Mulan’ explains something very problematic” (Fuster, 2017).



Figure 7. Twitter response noting Hollywood’s problematic representation practices in Mulan.

Additionally, in Figure 7, @yingxu03 addresses the same arguments made by the anonymous post on *Angry Asian Man*, when she adds, “Also, when can we have Chinese American representation? Liu Yifei is amazing all around, but she isn't American, we still need a voice” (Fuster, 2017). This sentiment shows that not all audience members are set to commend these casting choices, rather there are some who are discontent, and it could be that the anonymous post’s argument holds some merit. This would not be unheard of as Disney also fought very hard to get the 1998 animated *Mulan* into Chinese distribution (Groves, 1998). Though, if Disney’s intent was to cast Liu Yifei for reasons other than the sake of better representation, but instead as more of a ploy to tap into the Chinese market (20% of global box office pie) they may be sorely disappointed. As many Chinese moviegoers are claiming that she is one of the worst actresses in China (Cain, 2017).

When Rob Cain (2017) of *Forbes*, reached out to Disney representatives asking about the marketing tactic concerning this information, an individual who asked that their name go unmentioned told Cain,

The studio and the filmmakers have bent over backwards trying to find someone who checks everyone’s boxes, which, as you know, is impossible. The Chinese partners supported her and ultimately the decision was made based on the quality of the performance. I hope that people are able to step back and judge the movie as a whole when it is finished...That’s too bad [about the comments from China]. There has been an overwhelmingly positive response from the rest of the world, especially in the U.S.

It cannot be said with any certainty that audience pre-reception of the live-action *Mulan*, swayed Disney’s casting decisions. Still, comments such as these make one wonder, who is the “everyone” that Disney is apparently bending over backwards to check off boxes for? It appears

that audience involvement may have played a bigger role than Disney would like to admit, and it begs the question, to what extent would white-washing have occurred if the fans had not stepped in? The fact that the term whitewashing has even become a staple in popular vernacular speaks volumes towards this concept of pre-reception that I am attempting to construct, and it is illustrative of the sheer scale of dialogue that is occurring between the industry and audiences in this contemporary moment.

Aladdin

While the controversy surrounding *Mulan's* (2020), casting has in a sense worked itself out, it seems that this is only due to the pushback from the critical response the film was receiving and not initial intentions of good will on the part of Disney. If anything, the *Mulan* (2020) script leak exhibits a lack of research on Disney's behalf and suggests that the Studio may not have been prepared to bring 'The Renaissance' back in live-action format. Specifically, they have now had to postpone the *Mulan* release date two years to 2020, as the Studio claims it took over a year to cast the film's star (McClintock & Couch, 2018). Presumably, it could be argued that had Disney not received the initial backlash they would have sought out easier casting options for the sake of time and possibly even whitewashed the role. This idea is especially troubling where films like *Aladdin* (2019) are concerned, as its animated feature was already subject to much criticism. Therefore, a lack of examination and reworking of some of the film's prior issues could prove disastrous on Disney's end when it comes time to release the *Aladdin* live-action remake. Nevertheless, Walt Disney Studios failed to heed the warnings and criticism of *Mulan*, and so the *Aladdin* live-action remake has to been caught in a storm of controversy.

On October 10, 2016, the same day that *Mulan* received the *Angry Asian Man* anonymous letter, Disney announced that they would be releasing a live-action *Aladdin*, and, like

Mulan, a preemptive petition was started to avoid possible whitewashing of the film. The petition was titled, “Disney: Don't Whitewash the Live-Action *Aladdin* Film” and was created by Sarah Rose, the Care2 petition site’s social media coordinator and LGBTQ activist (Rose, 2015). Interestingly in both cases, the curators of the casting petitions have been white women and not members of the communities for which the petition is meant to protect. This reflects the notion that the issues facing identity politics today are becoming more pervasive amongst audience members of different cultural backgrounds, and also may speak to the fact that there is intersectionality across gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. when speaking of concerns about representation. The petition asks its signers to, “Join me in urging Disney to cast Middle Eastern actors and actresses in the new *Aladdin* film” and to date has received 21,820 signatures (Rose, 2015). Upon its announcement though, *Aladdin* had already had its executive team in place. The film was to be directed by Guy Ritchie, the script had been written by John August, it was to be produced by Dan Lin, and Jonathan Eirich would serve as executive producer in what Disney was calling, “an ambitious and nontraditional take on *Aladdin*” (Kit, 2016b). Once again, Disney had a team of predominantly white men appropriating and shaping the Middle-Eastern story. Unlike *Mulan*, there was not even an attempt made to have a person of Middle-Eastern heritage consult on the film as writer, director, or producer. Instead, the film would use their token person of color, producer Dan Lin who is Taiwanese-American, to address their publics on matters of representation. In an interview with *Collider* when broached about casting Lin simply replied:

Look at me. (Laughs) I mean I’m not a typical guy. Listen I’m very fortunate working in Hollywood; I am diverse. So, when I came in to make the movie, I wanted to make a diverse version of the movie. Luckily for me Guy Ritchie has the same vision and Disney

has the same vision, so we're not here to make *Prince of Persia*. We want to make a movie that's authentic to that world (Chitwood, 2017).

The producer was referring to the Disney film which was highly criticized for casting Jake Gyllenhaal, a white man in the role of the Persian lead. While it was bold to focus attention on a Disney controversy for comparison, it is unclear how Ritchie and Lin, even though Lin comes from a minority background can promise an “authentic” take on a culture they have no connection too. As Warner (2015) suggests in casting as cultural production, the level of accuracy in the film will thus become a subjective interpretation of what casting directors and producers determine as a “suitable” portrayal, and not necessarily an authentic one. However, there proved to be some hope that Ritchie would get it right when to fan's surprise, production released an open casting call (Figure 8) specifically asking for Middle-Eastern actors from 18-25 to play the *Aladdin* leads (Galuppo, 2017a).

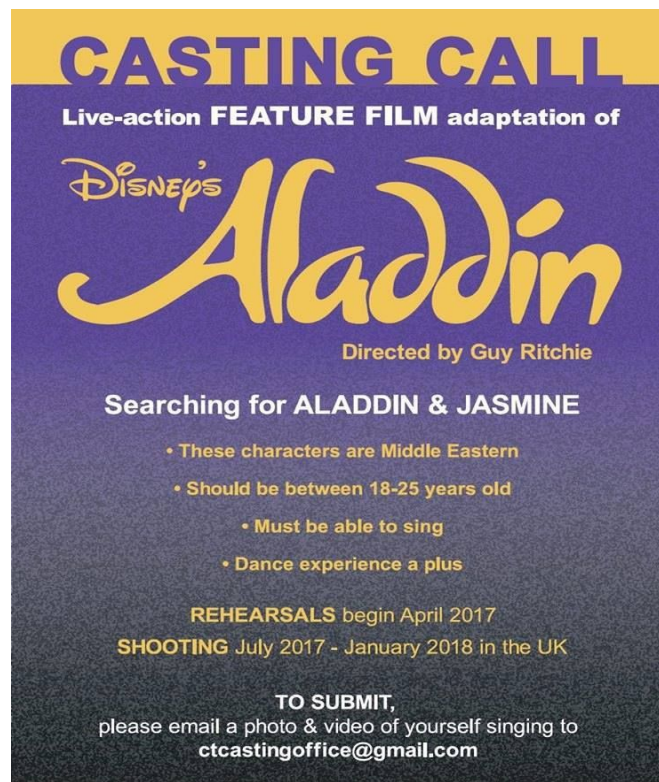


Figure 8. Disney's Live-Action *Aladdin* Casting Call.

Yet, excitement tempered when it was reported that the film was struggling to find actors after a month's long search stating, "finding a male lead in his 20s who can act, and sing has proven difficult — especially since the studio wants someone of Middle-Eastern or Indian descent" (Ford & Galuppo, 2017). In disbelief of these claims, the twitter-verse of fans was quick to erupt and provide their input. *Buzzfeed* released an article titled, "Disney Apparently Can't Find A Single Actor to Play *Aladdin*, So People Gave Them All the Options" (Rizwan, 2017). Some of the popular suggestions included British singer Zayn Malik (Figure 9) who is of Pakistani origin and Canadian singer/actor Avan Jogia (Figure 10) whose father is Indian.

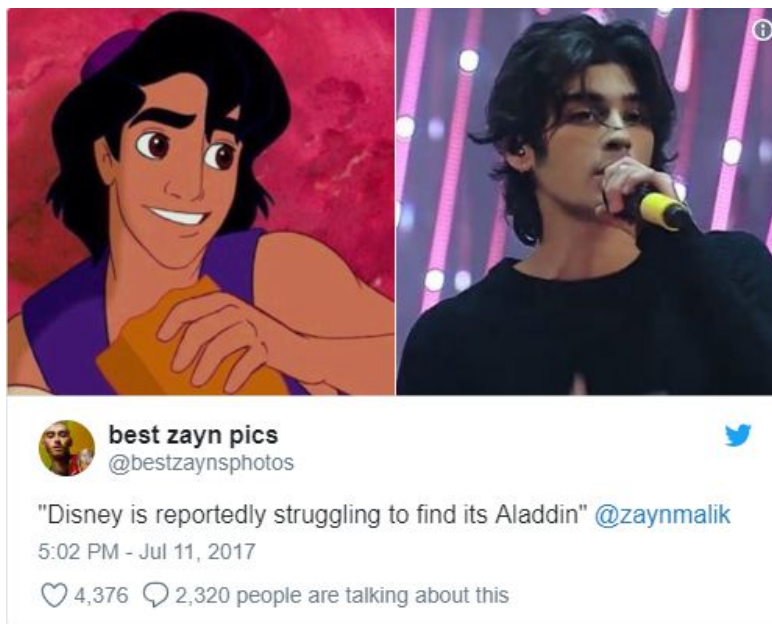


Figure 9. Twitter user suggesting Zayn Malik as possible Aladdin.

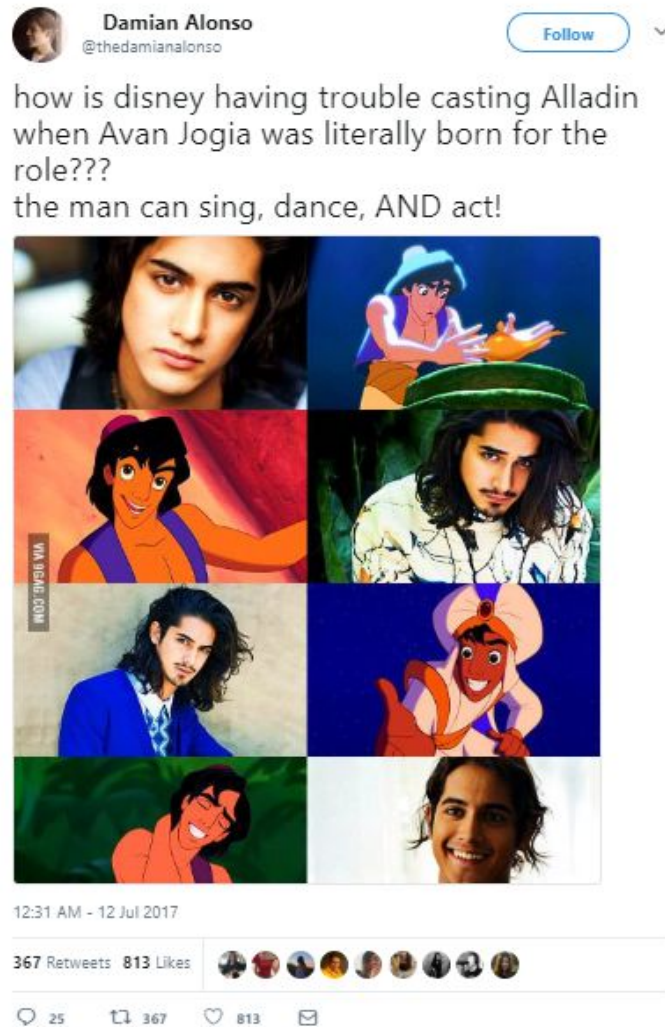


Figure 10. Twitter user suggest Avan Jogia as possible Aladdin.

Members from within the industry chimed in as well. Lexi Alexander, Academy Award nominated director who is half German and half Palestinian, exclaimed:

Nobody in their right mind can state that it is impossible to find a young male South Asian or Middle-Eastern actor who can dance, sing and act. Bollywood is an entire industry made up of talents like this, and the Middle East has equally as much talent. It's a convenient system that insists actors-of-colour need to be household names to be cast, while nobody wants to give them a break (Galer, 2017).

Alexander then followed this up with a tweet (Figure 11) stating that she had a list of actors and told Guy Ritchie to give her a call. She was not the only one, other popular media outlets formulated their own lists, and the film’s casting quickly became a globally trending topic (Beydoun, 2017; Holt 2017).



Figure 11. Director Lexi Alexander tweeting asking Guy Ritchie to contact her for actors.

The most poignant tweet, however, was not concerned with providing a solution to casting the leads, but it rather highlighted Disney and the Hollywood industry’s history of dealing with Middle-Eastern characters. @SimplySimra tweeted, “if the film industry can actively seek out Middle-Eastern actors to portray terrorists it shouldn't be this difficult finding one for Aladdin” (Tejada, 2017). This uncovers the root of the larger issue when tackling this problematic representation. When it comes to the Arab typecast, Stone asks, “when was the last time you saw an Arab character in a movie who was anything but one of the three B’s (Billionaire, bomber, belly dancer)?” adding, “One group should not be singled out as enemies of

all that is good and decent and American...It is time for Hollywood to end this undeclared war” (1996, p.1C). For so long industry practices have relied on negative stereotyping when narrating these cultures through casting. As a result, to use these same visual representations to bring Disney’s beloved characters to life would be a serious deviation from the norm, and it may not even be an industry standard that Disney is willing to challenge. Evidence of this lies in the fact that production for *Aladdin* cited issues with casting only one month after releasing the call sheet publicly. A month in comparison to *Mulan*’s comprehensive yearlong casting process seems to convey a serious lack of commitment on the part of production to find an authentic Aladdin and Jasmine rather than suggest that there were truly no suitable options to be found. Furthermore, this announcement seems to have problematically broadened the original casting call from Middle-Eastern to now include actors of Indian descent as well. This conflation of culture is troubling in its own right and again serves to support further industry standards of stereotyping. Further cementing the notion that this film is still in many ways attempting to cater to predominantly white sensibilities as the miscasting of race is a tradition that adheres to a white gaze which sees all “brown” people as the same or interchangeable.

While some may argue that Agrabah is a fictional land and as a result, there should be no strict cultural standard for casting, according to John Musker director of the animated *Aladdin*, composers Howard Ashman and Alan Menken's original version had been set in Baghdad, Iraq. He explains, “We kept it Baghdad in our first treatment, and then the Gulf War happened—the first Gulf War. Roy Disney said, ‘This can't be in Baghdad.’ So, I took letters and did a jumbled anagram and came up with Agrabah” (Johnson, 2015). This type of muddled appropriation of other cultures is problematic and indicative of the deaf attitudes towards respect of cultural difference on the part of the producers at the time.

Furthermore, if Agrabah was in fact designed to elicit Arab culture and then it stands to reason that *Aladdin* should be cast with Arab or at least Middle-Eastern actors as they share many similarities in culture, whereas India is a separate entity altogether. In making these types of strides towards more authentic and positive representation, Disney could break positive ground in mending the public image of the Middle-East in Hollywood. This being an important endeavor as the contemporary sentiment in the media towards these ethnic groups is plagued with a negative stigma as they remain highly misunderstood putting these individuals at risk. Evidence of this was presented in a 2015 Public Policy Polling which showed that 30% of Republican voters and 19% of Democratic voters believed that Agrabah was real, and also said that they were in favor of bombing the city (Evan, 2018). While the Public Policy Polling took the matter very lightly and joked off the responses by stating, “Silly polls about Aladdin should be something to brighten your Friday, not get really mad about” (Berenson, 2015). For those Americans from Middle-Eastern backgrounds, this is no laughing matter. If fear and hate are so palpable towards something that merely connotes Middle-Eastern images, that Americans would consider taking violent action without probable cause. Then Middle-Eastern individuals have every right to demand that their media representation be correct, especially from a media conglomerate as pervasive in the American psyche as Disney.

This would not be the last of *Aladdin*'s controversy, however. Once the casting announcements began rolling out audiences were sure to take notice. In stark contrast to the *Mulan* cast, which subdued some of the original whitewashing concerns. The finalized cast of *Aladdin* added fodder to an already open flame. According to Kristen Chuba (2017) of, *The Hollywood Reporter*, the complete cast includes:

- **Mena Massoud**, an Egyptian-Canadian as the lead of the film, Aladdin.
- **Naomi Scott**, a bi-racial half Indian, half Caucasian actress as Princess Jasmine.
- **Will Smith** as the Genie.
- **Marwan Kenzari**, Tunisian-Dutch actor will play the villain Jafar.
- **Nasim Pedrad**, an Iranian-American actress in the new role of Dalia, Princess Jasmine's handmaiden/friend.
- **Navid Negahban**, an Iranian-American actor as the Sultan.
- **Billy Magnussen**, a Caucasian-American actor, in the new role of Prince Anders who will replace the original movie's Prince Achmed as Jasmine's suitor and potential husband.
- **Numan Acar**, a German-Turkish actor, will play a new character Hakim, who will replace the original movie's Razoul as Jafar's right-hand man.

The announcement of the leads, Aladdin, Princess Jasmine, and the Genie came first, and fans became furious with the choice of Naomi Scott as Jasmine. The arguments against the actress varied. Some fans were distressed because they felt the live-action *Aladdin* was a chance for Arab and Middle-Eastern cultures to get proper representation and, as there is only one titular female role, that even casting an Indian actress denied them that opportunity. In Figure 12, Twitter user @awk5SOSward recognizes this on a personal level as she writes, "I'm pissed at the Aladdin casting. As an Arab girl I was really excited for some representation SMH I hate Hollywood #Aladdin" (Willet, 2017).

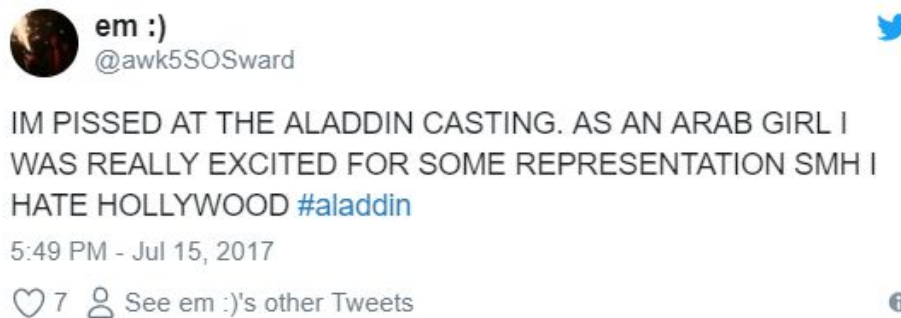


Figure 12. Twitter user expressing dismay at *Aladdin* live-action casting.

This is troubling, as a major role of efforts to improve minority representation in media is centered around the fact that audiences should be able to find a visual point of reference in order to identify with or see themselves in the representations of their cultures on the screen. Scott clearly fails to provide this for audiences.

Others however more poignantly addressed the fact that this casting was a blatant whitewashing of the role. Though Naomi Scott is biracial and of mixed British and Gujarati Indian descent, due to her very fair complexion, western features and name, Scott is racially ambiguous in her appearance. As a result, she passes for and in many cases reads as white. This becomes apparent in Figure 13 when twitter user @Baeobab tweeted statements such as, “For weeks Arab twitter and desi twitter was making threads about who should play Jasmine in Aladdin and they gave it some white girl, L” (Willet, 2017).



Figure 13. Twitter user recognizes Naomi Scott as “white girl”.

The content of the post suggests that the user would have been satisfied with either an Arab or Indian casting choice. However, as they could not identify her as Indian based on her appearance, they designated her as white. In Figure 14 another user, @HamzaMusse juxtaposes images of the actor and the character image stating, “This is Naomi Scott. She is Indian, and white. This is Jasmine, she is middle eastern. And not white #Aladdin” (Willet, 2017).



Figure 14. Twitter user compares Naomi Scott and animated Jasmine.

Mary Beltran (2005) contends that, “An emphasis on actors with an “is she or isn’t she?” off-white look can be said to erase ethnic difference” because, “When multicultural actors replace monocultural actors of color, perhaps for easier consumption by audiences, they erase darker ethnic bodies in the process” (p.63-64). This stands to argue that regardless of Scott’s mixed-race background, in casting a visibly white actress, the Disney casting team did, in fact, whitewash the role of Jasmine. In placing the white and Western beauty ideals, which Scott exudes in her appearance onto the character, Disney’s attempt to “consciously cast” failed and supports the idea that Disney is still operating within the dominant system of whiteness in Hollywood regarding race.

However, there may still be hope in terms of progress in Jasmine’s representation as a woman. Like in Emma Watson’s feminist revamp of Belle in the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), Scott hints that Jasmine may be heading in a similar direction stating:

There are so many amazing new things about the character in this adaptation — I could literally go on for an hour! Everyone involved in this project weren't afraid to really just rip things down and start again especially the Princess Jasmine character, because it's so important to get that right (Lee, 2017).

She goes on to add that in this adaptation of the story Jasmine is,

A multidimensional woman and she doesn't have to just be one thing. So, in this movie, you see her go on such a roller coaster, as opposed to her one goal being to fall in love or get married. You really get in this adaptation of the movie that her heart is for her people, and her main objective is what's best for her kingdom (Lee, 2017).

Though the points that Scott brings up could be a positive turn in adapting the live-action into more of a feminist text, Scott's portrayal of the character will read white because of her skin tone and presumably have less of an impact. In the original animated text, Jasmine is belittled as a woman by an outdated custom that is presented as an essential component of eastern and barbaric cultures; a custom which states, that she must be married by her sixteenth birthday. If the live-action were to have cast a brown actress, Jasmine's character development in this way would have been monumental. As a rejection of this former plot line would have signified empowerment of an image or culture that is believed typically to denigrate women, it would have served to turn old stereotypes inside out. However, as Scott is light-skin toned and therefore representative of a Western value system based on white supremacy, the growth or impact of this character development will prove far less substantial. As white women are already afforded many privileges that women of color are not, and therefore audiences are already far more accustomed to media portrayals which depict white women in positions of power or leadership. Therefore, audiences have every right to be angry and make claims of whitewashing regarding

this casting choice, as this role and chance at meaningful representation was effectively stolen from a Middle-Eastern actress and given to someone due to their white privilege.



Figure 15. Twitter user jests about whitewashing in live-action *Aladdin*.

Disney went on to make matters much worse when they created a role and character out of thin air for a white actor. Prince Anders, “a suitor from Skanland and potential husband for Princess Jasmine” was added to the cast as an original character (Galuppo, 2017b). The news spiraled into yet another PR nightmare for the *Aladdin* production. Consequently, actor Billy Magnussen whom the role was developed for, has a flawed track record regarding assuming roles in films designed for people of color as *The Nerds of Color* described him as, “white dude who was shoehorned into a movie about Bruce Lee...is getting shoehorned into live-action *Aladdin* movie” (Gallagher, 2017). While most critics were crying whitewash, others felt as though the move, “shows that Disney doesn’t trust a cast made up entirely of people of color”

(Velocci, 2017). In Figure 16, Producer and film critic Jovanny Evans questions the decision tweeting, “Why did they add a white prince to #Aladdin? This is going to be a disaster” (Oppenheim, 2017).

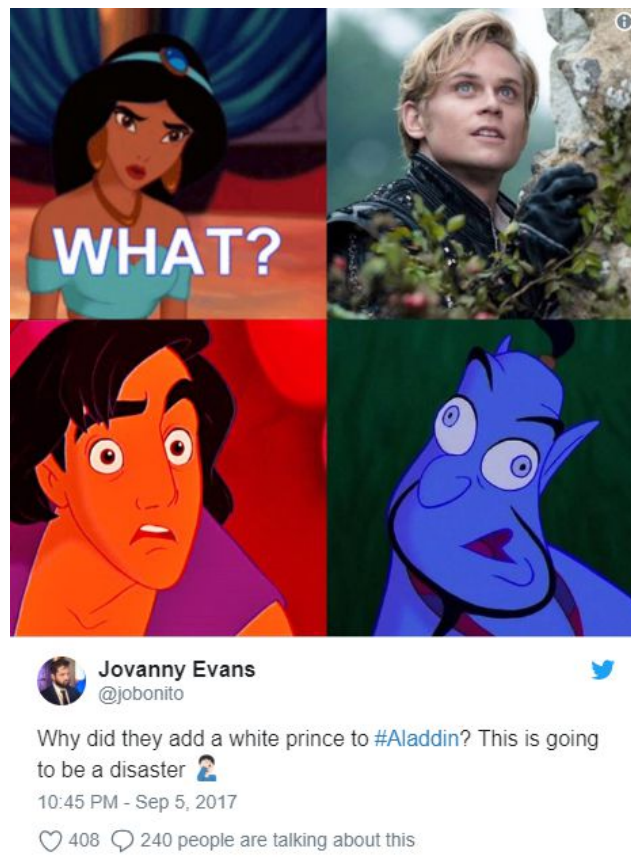


Figure 16. Twitter user question addition of white prince to Aladdin.

To those who suggested that this was not a type of whitewashing, as in taking a role away from a person of color in order to cast a white actor, Hanna Flint of *Screen Rant* proposes otherwise. She recognized that the Disney press team seemed particularly adamant in making it clear to their audiences that this was a brand-new character who was not informed by the original 1992 animation (Flint, 2017). However, she questions the validity of this claim as, “Prince Anders may not have appeared in the original, but he could be a replacement for another prince

hoping to win the hand of Princess Jasmine” (Flint, 2017). Thus, referring to Prince Achmed, a suitor from the animated film whom Jasmine turns away. As Prince Achmed was not brought back in the live-action version, it stands to reason that Magnussen did, in fact, take away a chance at representation from another Middle-Eastern actor. Furthermore, even if there had not been a substitute for Prince Anders, like Prince Achmed in the animated film, this casting choice would still constitute whitewashing. In hiring Magnussen, Disney has made an active choice to integrate a white character into a cultural narrative where there was not one before. So, in this case, whitewashing is still occurring, as the story is being manipulated to better serve or appeal to white audiences.

In part, moves like the casting of Naomi Scott or Billy Magnussen are only part and parcel of a much larger dilemma that faces the Middle-Eastern culture in media. Khaled Beydoun (2017) affirms that even if all roles in the film had been cast with Arab actors like Mena Massoud, it still would not correct for *Aladdin*'s inherent racism. He notes:

Aladdin is supposed to take place in the Arab World or the Middle East or the Muslim World, which to the broader public and scores of Hollywood filmmakers are interchangeable. But it doesn't. The story is set in Agrabah, which is what Orientalism imagines Arab or Middle Eastern authenticity to be. Therefore, to some measure, the demand to cast Arab actors to play the lead roles in Aladdin amounts to an endorsement that Agrabah is indeed an Arab land or an accurate representation of the Arab world (Beydoun, 2017).

Referencing back to producer Dan Lin's promise of, wanting to make a film that is “authentic to that world” (Chitwood, 2017). One realizes that Beydoun makes a compelling argument. To make a film that was authentic to a world in which Agrabah existed, no matter the number of

Arab or Middle-Eastern cast members, the construction of that world remains fundamentally flawed. In doing so, one would be casting representations that fit within the racist and stereotypical bounds that the original animated *Aladdin* was constructed. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the live-action adaptation of this film is receiving just as much negative backlash as the animated film did in 1992.

The Lion King

With the controversial buzz surrounding both *Mulan* (2020) and *Aladdin* (2019), surely Walt Disney Studios was relieved that the news of the live-action adaptation of *The Lion King* was met with general praise. In September 2016, Disney announced that they would be reteaming with Jon Favreau, the filmmaker who brought to life the live-action, *The Jungle Book* (2016), to also make the live-action *The Lion King* (2019). Favreau is set to both direct and produce the 21st-century take on the tale, along with a white executive team. However, dissimilarly to *Mulan* and *Aladdin*, in this case, the fact that an all-white production team is taking on the telling of an African narrative has been of little consequence in its pre-reception like there has been with *Mulan* and *Aladdin*. Popular online news outlets have taken to their sites to produce what they believe would be a “dream cast” for the adaptation, but negative responses to casting or production decisions have been far less explosive by comparison. As the other films’ announcements and controversies preceded that of *The Lion King*, *Mulan* and *Aladdin* proved instructive in navigating the current political tensions regarding diversity in Hollywood. Furthermore, as *The Lion King* will deal with CGI renderings of animals set to voice-overs rather than African human characters, the issue of proper representation provides a different angle to the question of portrayal of race. However, this does not deny the fact that the production of the

live-action *The Lion King* still raises questions concerning race and casting. In fact, it is quite the opposite; race is just as fundamental a component in this production as its counterparts.

Taking a closer look at *The Lion King*'s history, it is possible that the live-action remake has managed to escape specific controversies with reference to race and casting, as some of these concerns in part have been fleshed out over the years by the casting of the Broadway production of the text. When adapting the film text for the stage, director Julie Taymor was tasked with bringing the animals to life in a way that made sense and did not rely on furry costumes. To do so, Taymor designed masks that sat above the principal characters heads, supporting this decision by claiming, "The success of the movie is its humanity. It's not that they're animals it's that they're humans in animal guise so the mask was the solution, the double event mask where you would never hide the performer" (Hahn, Allers & Minkoff, 2017). This feature became particularly significant when considering questions of race and the role it plays as it relates to the characters of *The Lion King*. In the *Pride of The Lion King* documentary, when asked exactly how she figured out that the show was a sensation, Taymor responded:

In Minneapolis, yeah at the first performance. There's something that was very critical to me that happened in Minneapolis and that had to do with race. And when we went to Minneapolis and had that mixed crowd of African American and Caucasian and just all kinds of people and it's the first time their children got to see a king who is African. Because it really is about race for African-Americans and for white audiences it had nothing to do with race, and that is a really interesting place to be (Hahn, Allers & Minkoff, 2017).

Unlike its animated form, the stage adaptation allowed for a connection between race and the characters as their human faces remained exposed.

In hiring prominent Hollywood names to voice the CGI characters of the live-action *The Lion King*, this too mirrors this sense of exhibition and exposure, as audiences may never truly be able to detach the star behind the voice with the characters on the screen. Therefore, the default would be to associate the race of the actor with the animal portrayal. Furthermore, as the stage adaptation has never used white actors for the core lion group, Mufasa, Simba, Nala, Sarabi, or the character Rafiki (Vine, 2017). Instead, white actors have been reserved for roles such as Timon, Pumba, and Zazu. Scar has been racially interchangeable over the years. In this way, the stage adaptation has set a precedent in promoting a dignified “African” representation, and for years the Broadway production has paved the way in cementing a black presence with *The Lion King* characters. As a result, audiences and those in the industry may not have been as concerned that the live-action *The Lion King* would engage in whitewashing practices, causing the production of this film to be spared the negative backlash.

Additionally, improved identity politics regarding African-Americans and representations of Africa in this contemporary moment may not need to be forced on Disney, for the studio to do right by *The Lion King* remake. The Walt Disney Studios has just recently come off the unprecedented success of Marvel’s *Black Panther* (2018) which featured an almost exclusively black cast and black executive team. Offering a prime example of more conscientious representation while breaking many box office records, Coggler’s film avoided racist black tropes to its benefit. The fan response to the film was incredible. Black audiences came out to the movies in unprecedented numbers, dressed in African prints and costumes inspired by the actors of the film who dressed to the theme of “African royalty” for the *Black Panther* red-carpet premieres (Wanshel, 2018). It is safe to say that Africa and black pride are having a cultural moment in the industry right now, and it would be misguided for Disney to ignore these black

audiences, as they have in the past. The impact of *Black Panther* has not only dominated the American industry of Hollywood but has far surpassed expectations in the global market as well. *Black Panther* was selected to be the first film premiered in Saudi Arabia after a 35-year ban on movie theaters in the kingdom was lifted. A staff writer at *Al Arabiya English* states that, “the selection of *Black Panther* as the first film to screen in the country is no mere accident. The curating committee has undoubtedly selected a film that is rich in culture, orientated toward the family and is rich in thought” (2018). Now that the Saudi government has lifted its ban the, “race is on to serve the country’s mostly young population—a box-office market that could quickly reach \$1 billion” (Keegan, 2018). Fortunately for Disney, this is a race they already have a head start in and, if they continue to make culturally resonant texts which it appears, they may be doing with *The Lion King*, it could be a global market in which they dominate.

When the complete cast of the live-action adaptation of *The Lion King* was released, it featured stars from the *Black Panther* franchise and, without any pressure from fans, racially mirrored the current Broadway stage adaptation. In fact, as shown in Figure 17, the announcement was also accompanied by a compilation of the cast’s headshots with their roles listed underneath, resembling a cast list style that one could find in a Broadway *Play Bill*. The announcement confirmed a number of casting speculations including:

- **Donald Glover** as Simba.
- Queen Bey herself, **Beyoncé Knowles Carter** for the role of Nala.
- **James Earl Jones** is reprising his role as Mufasa.
- **Seth Rogen** and **Billy Eichner** as the impeccably cast Pumbaa and Timon
- **Chiwetel Ejiofor** as the villainous Scar.
- **John Oliver** as Zazu.

- **Alfre Woodard** as Simba’s mother, Sarabi.
- **John Kani** as the wise Rafiki.
- Newcomers **JD McCrary** and **Shahadi Wright Joseph** will play young Simba and Nala, respectively.

However, there was also a surprise which revealed that some members of the hyena pack would be getting an upgrade with some new names:

- **Florence Kasumba** will play the lead hyena, Shenzi which has not been changed.
- **Eric Andre** will play Azizi, a new hyena character.
- **Keegan-Michael Key** will play Kamari, a new hyena character.



Figure 17. Disney confirms Live-Action *The Lion King* All-Star Cast.

There is no information available to suggest what alterations are being made, if any, to the hyena trio outside of a name change. However, if the studio takes this opportunity to define these characters more constructively, then modifications made to the hyena lineup could be indicative of a positive transformation in racial representation on behalf of these characters. In the animated version of the film, many critics compared the hyenas to reductive racist stereotypes of ghetto and urbanized Latino and black communities. The researchers from the University of California's Field Station for Behavioral Research who allowed Disney animators to observe their hyenas to illustrate them better, only did so under the condition that they portray the species in a positive light for the sake of their preservation. Though, when researchers saw *The Lion King* and found that they had been cast as the villains of the film and marked with unjust depictions, many of the researchers became angry with the studio and decided to take action.

While some of the researchers merely called for a boycott of the film, one biologist was so dismayed that he went so far as to take legal action against the company and sue Walt Disney Studios for defamation of character on behalf of the hyenas (Frank, 2006; McPherson, 2008). Though nothing came of the lawsuit, the action that these researchers were willing to take exhibits the power that media images can have on the work that they do. Similarly, this power when misused can seek to denigrate peoples of color in their representation, and the original hyenas: Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed are examples of this. This motion taken on behalf of Disney to change the names of the hyenas seems to signal a redesign of the characters. If this is proven to come to fruition, the live-action *The Lion King* would be the first of the three films to have taken

a preemptive step to address criticism of its initial animated text regarding the portrayal of race, before being prompted too by a pre-reception controversy.

However, just because it appears Disney is managing to get things right with respect to diverse and dignified black representation, it cannot be forgotten that this live-action line up presents a stark contrast to the 1994 animated classic. The original film featured a long list of white voice actors, with all title roles except that of Mufasa, being voiced by white actors. This unprecedented evolution in Disney casting has audiences taking notice, and, though less critical in nature, it is promoting a conversation about race and representation. While the film does not feature an exclusively all-black cast, it has been referred to as “The Blackest Disney Movie Ever Made” (Judge, 2017). Like *Black Panther* (2018), this live-action remake is being touted by many publications as a text that will work to solidify the presence of black excellence within the entertainment industry (Bradley, 2017). The impact of which is already recognizable in fan reactions. In Figure 18, one Twitter user, @yazzz__ taking to Twitter to say, “We do not deserve this! Imagine, this being black kids' first intro to The Lion King” (Bradley, 2017). The connotation of which exhibits the severe damaging implications created by the lack of representation for minorities in Hollywood, as this individual has been denied a source of proper identification in entertainment for so long that she now feels undeserving of such recognition.



Figure 18. Twitter user remarks disbelief and joy at Lion King casting.

It is not just the fans who are in a state of shock. *Black Panther* actor John Kani who is set to voice Rafiki in the live-action *The Lion King*, could not believe his luck at receiving the role. For Kani, who is South African, having a part in this film hits close to home as the story of *The Lion King* has South African roots. Through his perspective, it is made clear the sense of ‘pride’ which can result as an effect of reflective representation. When asked in an interview what he felt was the greatest aspect of working on this film, he praises the opportunity he has been given to tell what he refers to as “an African story”:

It’s happening in Africa — that’s where you find giraffes, lions, hyenas. Africans always told these animal stories, which are the fiber of the learning process of young children. We [would] sit around at night around the fire and my grandmother would say ‘once upon a time’ (Lenker, 2018).

His response shows how the role has touched him personally, as he can recognize himself and his life experiences in this media text; a connection that would not have been possible with the animated text.

Still, this role or experience does not define the film's casting as a whole, and where this South African recognizes a casting success another South African, host of *The Daily Show* Trevor Noah, recognized an opportunity for improvement. In particular, he discussed the casting of John Oliver, the host of *Last Week Tonight*, as the character Zazu. Noah remarks on the casting choice:

If they wanted like a late-night host to play an African character, I feel like there were maybe like some other options. I don't know maybe someone who has actually spent time in Africa or around the birds of Africa. I mean it's a great choice though don't get me wrong I'm just saying like when Mufasa asks Zazu for the latest news from the pride land, he's probably gonna be like I'll get to that later—but first let's talk about reverse mortgages (Withers, 2017).

While stated in a joking manner, there is truth to this skit and in what Trevor Noah is questioning. When considering “best for the part” casting practices, Noah should have been an ideal candidate for the role as his upbringing in Africa would have provided him invaluable insight into an understanding of the character, especially since he is a comedian like Oliver and would not be lacking the comedic chops to play the role. Ultimately, whether he was right for the part or not, the fact that Noah even introduced this as a commentary on his show reveals that this type of dialogue is a topic of interest to audiences and very much a part of the contemporary cultural exchange.

Although Trevor Noah will not be joining the cast, there is still enthusiasm regarding representation in the film as the casting team sought out major star power, pulling in some of the most significant pillars in the black entertainment community to voice Simba and Nala. These title roles, which are being played by singer/actors Beyoncé Knowles and Donald Glover, serve

to emphasize questions of contemporary black representation, particularly since their star personas are undoubtedly tied to and defined by their racial background. Therefore, understanding their star power is essential in uncovering possible goals that production may have had for the development of these characters when making their casting selections. Furthermore, each of these actors possesses a unique and particular approach in the way they curate and produce their work for their audiences. By fleshing out these styles, it will also provide further knowledge in distinguishing what type of representations may be expected from these stars as it relates to their performance of race.

While both artists have managed to stake their claim in the socially and politically driven celebrity landscape, Beyoncé reigns supreme in connecting with her audiences. Though her star persona has seen an evolution through the years, the choices she has made across the culmination of her career have situated her as one of the most powerful pop-culture superstars of all time. A fact which most likely attributed to her casting announcement being received as one of the most exalted decisions to date for Disney's live-action line up; Twitter user @Ziwe even went so far as to assert that, "It's not called the lion king anymore. If Beyoncé's in it, it's called the Lion Queen. It's Nala's movie now" (McCluskey, 2017). The artist has somehow managed to create such an air of reverence around her persona that she has ascended to the highest levels of fame, and as a result has exceeded mere celebrity into the realm of idolatry. It is not just the super fans who worship at her alter, however, with such achievement Queen Bey, as she is popularly referenced, has accomplished universal appeal. To illustrate this allure, Arwa Mahdawi (2016) writes, "When she dropped Lemonade, the world dropped everything to listen – Beyoncé doesn't release albums; she creates cultural events." In such an immense position of power, it is of great significance the way in which a star like her chooses to wield her influence.

For Beyoncé, her brand has most definitely evolved with contemporary cultural movements, and this has involved taking on a more radical voice in the latter half of her career. She has engaged her activism towards her own advantage and has thus used her art to become a voice for both civil rights and feminism. Through her music, she has empowered women by declaring that, “girls run the world” and exhibited her black pride with lyrics such as, “I like my baby hair, with baby hair and afros / I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils.” Accordingly, the *Lemonade* album has cemented Beyoncé as an artist who “encourages black women, in particular, to examine the wholeness of their beings and the complexities of their identities” (Brooks, 2016). In many ways with *Lemonade* (2016), she is treading new territory as one of the first black female superstars to so overtly use her platform to draw attention to the racial and gender oppression black women face. By using what could be considered a world stage, the Super Bowl halftime show where the singer performed for millions, Daphne Brooks (2016) reports that Beyoncé effectively demanded, “That mainstream popular culture reckon with the conditions of being a modern black woman in ways never before seen and felt.” That being said, Beyoncé, unlike others who may have come before her, can afford to own her blackness so publicly. Her air of divinity and ferocious super fan protectors, the Bey Hive, make her irreproachable and therefore able to largely escape criticism and scandal. Consequently, if there were an industry standard for black excellence, Beyoncé would serve as its archetype. For that reason, whether the intent was to promote improved portrayals of blackness or to rake in box office dollars with her notoriety, Disney has made a massive statement regarding progressive representation by hiring Bey as their Queen.

Donald Glover too plays an active role in taking on the issue of race in America by performing his own form of blackness. He has primarily moved into the role of

actor/producer/director but also has produced rap albums under his alter ego, Childish Gambino. In his work rather than appropriate negative stereotypes in popular media to get his point across, he seeks to present his truth by validating and representing black audiences that he feels have gone largely neglected by both white and black driven projects. To understand his point of view on his track “Not Going Back,” Glover raps, “Black dudes assume I’m closeted or kinda gay / White people confused like girl on Glee and Gabourey.” Lyrics which are meant to describe his own personal struggle of feeling misunderstood by and not fitting in, with either the white or black community. Later in the song, however, he explains that he remains true to himself because, “these smart middle-class black kids need a role model.” This track like most of his artistic ventures demonstrates that apart from what others may think of him, he loves being black, but will continue to do so on his own terms. Glover believes that there are so few narratives available to black audiences that to do what he calls, “transformative work” in the industry he needs to continue evolving and creating new projects in order to raise awareness (Friend, 2018).

Nevertheless, the productions that he has worked on thus far have succeeded in encouraging further diversity in the industry and better representation both in front of and behind the camera. Glover made history when he became the first black person to win an Emmy for best directing in a comedy for his FX show *Atlanta* (2016-present), proving that a black story told by an all-black writing cast can prosper in Hollywood. The show works to shed light on the truth of the black experience in America. For his black audiences, *Atlanta* serves as a mode of catharsis. However, for his white audiences, Glover has different intentions stating in an interview, “I don’t even want them laughing if they’re laughing at the caged animal in the zoo,” he said. “I want them to really experience racism, to really feel what it’s like to be black in America” (Friend,

2018). This shift in gaze or perspective is what Glover hopes will allow white people to understand that they still have much to learn about black culture and telling black stories.

Through their bodies of work, both Beyoncé and Donald Glover have presented themselves as gatekeepers of the black community in popular media. Due to the nature of their dominance in the industry and their achievements, they have been privileged with unfettered access to take creative control of the media they produce and are thus able to select what content they present to the world, and on what terms. Both are unequivocally and unapologetically themselves and embrace their blackness as strength, and in doing so have worked to develop a more positive black image in media that has long gone underrepresented. Representation is still largely neglected by the House of Mouse and the narratives they tell. However, with Beyoncé and Donald Glover leading the charge of the live-action *The Lion King*, they will fight for control of the image they portray. Consequently, their performance will almost assuredly define a path of progress for the Studio as it will be a first for Disney in terms of a take on black royalty.

Conclusion

In summation, following a pre-reception analysis of the live-action films *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019) and *Mulan* (2020), I have found that although Walt Disney Studios continues to affirm the general public of their commitment to diversity and inclusion, they still mostly work within the same recognizable prejudiced industry codes, conventions, and expectations of their past. Of course, this is not to say that the company has made no progress since its Renaissance. However, in questioning what was at stake for the studio when considering this contemporary shift from animated classics to live-action remakes, an interesting point to make is that Disney has deviated from their unique selling point (USP). In doing this and

revisiting their earlier films, it seems as though Disney may have also largely regressed to the representations, they utilized in that period. This could be representative of the fact that in returning to the existing Disney canon, rather than looking towards their next original film, the studio is now faced with the daunting challenge of understanding how to change these films to reflect the times, while still keeping what original audiences loved about them.

By USP, I am referring to Disney's hand-drawn animation, original songs, and childlike earnestness which unlike the live-action are unsullied by considering what might draw in older audiences, a risk that Disney introduced by mining the vault. The identity politics of media corporations are all more exposed than ever as a result of the current cultural sentiment regarding the disparity of diversity in the film industry. However, it could be said that the Walt Disney Company may be left further vulnerable to questioning as the original target audience and devoted fan base of their Renaissance, are now millennials who actively troll the internet, and therefore a dominant participatory force in this era of pre-reception engagement. Though I would argue that rather than harm the production values of the live-action *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, and *Mulan*, Disney has these very pre-reception debates to thank.

After a further examination of the resources available, I uncovered that the primary source of contention in the pre-reception discourses regarding these three films was related to industry practices and their mistreatment of race. Specifically, audiences were concerned that Disney would ultimately whitewash the characters of these ethnically diverse narratives. While the casting controversies in large part have been resolved by the introduction of the intentional casting of race, I acknowledge this as a success on the part of the critical response these films have received effectively pushing Disney to take action, and not as a recognition of initial intent on the part of Disney studios. Though Disney has not formally confirmed these speculations, the

fact that on multiple occasions there have been production materials leaked to the general public which show early renderings of these films actively whitewashing provides damning evidence. Still, to support this claim further is the fact that *Mulan* has had to push its original release date by more than a year in order to accommodate a vigorous international casting search to find the perfect Chinese cast, and the most overt evidence of which exists in *Aladdin* where production created the role of a white prince and cast a white actress in the role of Jasmine. Therefore, without this mounting pressure placed on these productions by pre-reception, I believe that it is very doubtful that these films would have been as inclusive in their casting.

Though the Walt Disney Company would never publicly express it as it would in many ways exemplify an admission of guilt and past wrongs, it seems Disney is, in fact, attempting to use these live-action remakes as a mode of cultural production to right the wrongs of their racist past, and they are engaging with pre-reception texts to do so. For example, an email that was sent out to subscribers of *Bitch Magazine* states that Disney reached out to one of their contributors personally in order to consult her opinion on how to make the *Aladdin* remake better (A. Zeisler, personal communication, May 23, 2018). The article by Aditi Natasha Kini (2018) titled, “The Problem with *Aladdin*” spoke of the racist and misogynistic representations in the animated feature, and how the casting decisions for the live-action remake of the film could never change that. After reaching out to Aditi directly, she confirmed this but said that she could not comment on the interaction. A company like Disney with endless resources could hire any number of specialists to consult on these projects. However, the fact that they have chosen to reach out in this capacity is a significant development as it shows that Disney is taking notice of the popular discourses being circulated in the pre-reception of their films, and also the impact that they could

ultimately have in not only affecting the meaning of these three live-action films but also those which they may plan to produce in the future.

DISCUSSION

This thesis has examined the values that Disney works to reflect in their films when representing race. In regard to their identity politics, the studio has long promoted their “tale as old as time,” which has sought to endorse and maintain a worldview that privileges a hegemonic system of whiteness. As a result, even as the company claims to promote progressive ideals, their existing canon has persisted in providing proof of the racial disparities in representation that have long plagued Disney’s history. Though this privilege has primarily gone unchecked, this new phenomenon of pre-reception audience engagement is developing as a surprising source of change in the industry. Unlike anything that has been witnessed before, audiences are working to call out those in the industry and hold them accountable for their transgressions in justifying racist and prejudice production practices. Disney has proved to be no exception to these discourses, and their new marketing strategy of adapting their animated canon into live-action remakes has been a crucial site of cultural struggle informing this pre-reception phenomenon. Now that Disney can no longer hide behind the pretext of animation—as what was once easy to disguise as misunderstanding is now questioned as an unmistakable and overt move to promote a white status quo in the live-action real life imaginings—audiences seem determined to encourage the studio towards a more diverse and inclusive system of representation.

What has made this pre-reception trend even more interesting is that these live action films: *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020), have emerged as controversial even before casting announcements or film texts have been circulated to audiences. Prompting the

question: How are audience pre-reception discourses shaping public understanding of Disney's films and how is this influencing the production and distribution of Disney's live-action remakes of *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020). In order to address this, I first outlined Disney's racist beginnings in the review of the literature and used this to examine the role that the animated versions of *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Mulan* (1998) played in establishing animated texts as integral to the larger conversation concerning inclusion and diversity in the film industry. Then by using these films as a point of reference, I was able to critically compare the representations that emerged from these texts to the production practices used in the development of their subsequent live-action remakes. This allowed for an investigation to determine to what extent if any, the Walt Disney Company is attempting to reframe their identity politics in a more progressive light by choosing to re-adapt their animated classics into live-action remakes.

Findings

As Disney possesses a pervasive cross-generational influence in the American media market, they are an inescapable force in understanding the current political economy which works to define the film industry as a whole. So appropriately, in conducting this analysis, I used the social and cultural contexts surrounding the moment of production for both the animated and live-action texts as an anchor to guide this research. The primary result of which served as a lens of interpretation in studying these films and found that in each case, the Disney Renaissance era (1989-1999) and this contemporary revival period (roughly 2015-present), though in different ways, are both a by-product of cultural movements interested in denouncing dominant white ideologies in order to advocate for a more reflective and diverse America. In conducting the analysis by this means, I was able to uncover reoccurring themes which highlighted Disney's

own system of identity politics. For the animated texts the themes which emphasized race were most visible in the studio's casting, use of star power, visual representations, and aspects of performance. These key motifs likewise translated well when analyzing the live-action remakes, and I found that casting and star power were still very much at the core of responding to issues facing representation in the industry.

When studying the texts using these frameworks, I uncovered that in their animated forms, *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Mulan* (1998) were initially troubling and damaging to the non-Western cultures they depicted as they promoted stereotypical and whitewashed racial representations. Consequently, in this representational shift from animation to live-action, Disney is now faced with the challenge of adapting films that have already come to be known as “problematic” texts. As a result, the primary focus of the pre-reception controversy surrounding the live-action remakes of *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) was also concerned with whitewashing practices in the industry. Specifically, fans pleaded with Disney to abandon whitewashing as an approach to casting, and also resisted Disney's intentions to whitewash by manipulating the narrative to better serve white protagonists and therefore better appeal to a white audience. Ultimately these pre-reception debates evidenced the role these discourses are taking on as a cultural mediator and even as a facilitator in influencing the change of highly contested industry practices.

Thus, films like *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), *Mulan* (2020) and other Disney live-action remakes also address the messiness of these pre-reception controversies, and I believe that is why Disney live-action films individually have worked to foreground this question of representation. What I mean by messiness is that, due to the nature of the very existence of the animated texts, unlike other films, fans can address these questions of representation even before

any production decisions like casting have been announced because they know what to expect from the studio. So, in the case of a remake where the animated structures are already so profoundly problematic but still confined as they are dependent on the nostalgia of audiences, is it even possible for Disney to make significant changes to correct for all their racist animated representations and still have room to call these films remakes?

Conclusion and Further Implications

In summation, Disney's response to pre-reception controversies shows that the company is listening, and perhaps understands, that they can no longer ignore their diverse viewing demographics or their demands for inclusivity. While this signals a departure from the Renaissance era and suggests that Disney may, in fact, be attempting to adopt a more progressive set of values, the Walt Disney Company clearly still has a long road ahead of them to fully and more accurately address their troubled past, a past which unfortunately continues to influence their current practices and modes of cultural production. As for the role these live-action remakes are playing in the broader contemporary discourse, they are proving critical to the overall movement towards inclusivity and authentic representation for people of color in the film industry.

Specifically, the productions of *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) have and are still working to shape this very prominent debate of whitewashing. Though they represent only a small sample in this larger cultural conversation, the fact that they cover various ethnic backgrounds and also showcase the notion of racialized anthropomorphism in relation to representation in technologies like computer-generated imagery (CGI) adds new depth and complexity to the contemporary cultural landscape. Furthermore, in producing a film like *Mulan* with an almost exclusively global cast, Disney is also in a way remapping the globalization

efforts of the industry. Rather than work to promote Western media products in global markets, Disney instead is, in a sense, promoting Asian interests here in America by introducing Asian actors to the American public. Seeing as immigrant communities and immigrant diaspora is a prominent driving force behind these calls for enhanced representation, one must also consider the potential cultural impact a trend like this could have in the long-term re-structuring of Hollywood's political economy.

Nevertheless, when considering the sheer extent of the controversies that have erupted in response to these live-action remakes, it speaks volumes of the distrust Disney fans have placed in the brand and its ability to represent them. Despite having had an entire generation to marinate on the animated features of these three films and the troubling representations they produced, pre-reception evidence suggests that the film studio still cannot seem to get it right. This questions what lengths Disney will have to take in order to effectively address this problem and provides an opportunity to suggest what Disney could also do better moving forward. Jake Pitre (2016) asserts that:

Part of the problem for Disney is that they are transforming their animated films into live-action for an entirely different audience and era. This brings all kinds of new considerations, in ways that have an impact in front of and behind the camera. A live-action film makes us think much more honestly about who is representing the story onscreen, and who is telling it. We see their faces. And when you combine this with the greater role of identity in our cultural discourse, it becomes impossible to separate the actor from the character, the storyteller from the story.

Regarding this statement, Disney's attempts to employ intentional casting of race in these live-action films, though I credit this to pre-reception influences, suggests that they were at least

willing to make an effort on screen. However, in all three cases, the writers, producers, and directors all fail to reflect any individuals on their production teams who identify with the ethnic cultures the films are seeking to represent. This is significant, because while Disney may be addressing these issues of whitewashing at a surface level of representation, they are still not responding to representation in terms of who controls the production of these texts, and therefore the overall narrative.

This is not just an issue facing racial representation in the industry but is indicative of the systematic hiring problem facing identity politics as a whole and the disparity in representation of all marginalized groups in Hollywood. This problem, of course, is the fact that the industry and those with the power to tell stories are all primarily white, heterosexual, cisgender males. In order to do better, Disney must become a leader in the industry to combat this inequality, and that starts with hiring people of color to take control of their own narratives. However, this seems unlikely as this can only happen if media conglomerates like Disney are actively looking to make moves to produce change, but as Kristen Warner (2015) affirms,

Hiring actors of color may work to reflect the literal diversity of America's population, but it does not translate into actual representations of cultural difference because that concept is not and will not be at the forefront of these professional's agendas (pp.58-59).

To expand on this further, there is the industry misconception, supported by white films execs, which suggests that "the screen speaks for itself," or as long as there are people of color on the screen then progress is being made (Quinn, 2011). Nevertheless, though already inherently flawed, in the context of the Hollywood industry and the contemporary moment, this argument is in a sense void, as recent research rejects these claims.

The U.S.C. Annenberg's latest study which examined inequality in the portrayals of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBT & disability in the top one hundred films from 2007 to 2017 indicated that there was "no meaningful change" when it came to diverse racial representation on-screen in the last ten years (Smith, Choueiti, Pieper, Case & Choi, 2018). Furthermore, the statistics for racial minorities behind the camera was even more disappointing. A similar study which focused on inclusion in the director's chair for women, black and Asian directors in the top one hundred films from 2007 to 2016 showed no progress for any of these groups over this ten-year period, and Disney proved the worst in hiring blacks, employing zero black directors in this ten-year span (Smith, Pieper, & Choueiti, 2017). These statistics are more representative than any claims Disney may make feigning improvement of their identity politics and illustrate further that pre-reception discourses may have played an instrumental role in influencing any progressive practices that the live-action films have adopted. This begs the question if Disney can even make a movie with any cultural sensitivity or insight.

As for further implications and avenues for future study, this research could expand to include many more films from the Disney canon and of course could continue with a paratextual analysis and film reception study when the live-action remakes of *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) are released. However, it is this attention to pre-reception analysis which I believe is far more pivotal to the overall understanding of cultural studies in this contemporary moment. To provide support for this claim, I put forth the production and release of *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) as an example. Like the live-action remakes, the controversy surrounding the production and release of the film fits into the larger conversations regarding cultural representation in Hollywood, as the casting of actress Scarlett Johansson in what fans thought should be an Asian role was labeled as whitewashing. Mirroring the efforts of *Mulan*

(2020) and *Aladdin* (2019) fans launched a petition to recast the role, however the production team and director rejected these motions and kept Johannsson on the project. The results of which ultimately led to the failure of the film at the box office. Some could argue that there is no correlation between pre-reception response and ticket sales, however the studio behind the film addressed the whitewashing with Paramount's domestic distribution chief Kyle Davies telling CBC News that though, "We had hopes for better results domestically. I think the conversation regarding casting impacted the reviews," Davies added "You've got a movie that is very important to the fanboys since it's based on a Japanese anime movie. So, you're always trying to thread that needle between honoring the source material and make a movie for a mass audience" (Herrera, 2017). This response from a Paramount executive illustrates the interesting triangulation that is occurring between fans, popular critics, and those within the industry itself. Furthermore, demonstrating that pre-reception may, in fact, be signaling a turning point and that these discourses could ultimately work to change the face of cultural production and the social, political, and economic reality of making films in contemporary America.

Cases such as *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) demonstrate the consequences of pre-reception and may address the "what's at stake" question in response to Disney and these live-action remakes. Of course, it is impossible to say at this point in time whether these films will prove to be box office flops or if viewers will take actions to boycott them. As this phenomenon expands, one thing that is certain is that audiences will continue to develop these conversations and address these productions as they evolve. As media convergence continues to empower the consumers of film, it also alters the perceived position of the audience from one of a passive role to more of a critical spectator. Correspondingly, Henry Jenkins (2004) posits that these new outlets for consumer engagement are, "gaining new currency within media industries" and

“creating new opportunities for academic intervention in the policy debates that will shape the next decade of media change” (p.38). Therefore, in dealing with this new resistant, culturally aware, and more socially connected audience, I would like to introduce and further develop my method of pre-reception as a suitable approach to engaging with these unfamiliar territories of media convergence. I feel as though this cultural phenomenon of pre-reception is only beginning to gain traction, and with a greater understanding of how identity works there will only be a greater appeal from audiences to demand that the industry take identity more seriously. This phenomenon not only requires further critical attention, but more of this pre-reception analysis needs to be done in order to answer the questions which will face the film industry in the coming decade, and these are questions like: What does the future of the film industry and media look like? Will this attention to pre-reception discourse and free expression on the part of audiences actually have an impact on transforming diversity in media? Alternatively, will powerful media conglomerates work to suppress and regulate this audience engagement, effectively resulting in less or another ten years of stagnant media diversity in the process? As this study has shown, the relationship between paratexts, film production, films, and their audiences is evolving. If film studios like Disney fail to take action, they may very well find that their fan base’s loyalty could cease to remain a financial asset and instead threaten to become a creative curse.

[7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E886357062380273664&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thisisinsider.com%2Fdisney-aladdin-cast-controversial-2017-7.](https://twitter.com/Baeobab/status/886592306488500224?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E886357062380273664&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thisisinsider.com%2Fdisney-aladdin-cast-controversial-2017-7)

Baeobab. (2017, July 16). For weeks Arab twitter and desi twitter was making threads about who should play Jasmine in Aladdin and they gave it to some white girl, L [Twitter Post].

Retrieved from

[https://twitter.com/Baeobab/status/886592306488500224?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E886592306488500224&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thisisinsider.com%2Fdisney-aladdin-cast-controversial-2017-7.](https://twitter.com/Baeobab/status/886592306488500224?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E886592306488500224&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thisisinsider.com%2Fdisney-aladdin-cast-controversial-2017-7)

Barker, C. (2008). *Cultural studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Bell, E., Haas, L., & Sells, L. (1995). *From mouse to mermaid: The politics of film, gender, and culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Beltran, M. C. (2005). The new Hollywood racelessness: Only the fast, furious, (and multiracial) will survive. *Cinema Journal*, 44(2), 50-67.

Berenson, T. (2015, December 18). A lot of Americans support bombing the fictional country from Aladdin. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/4155228/amiercans-bomb-aladdin-agrabah/>.

Bestzaynsphotos. (2017, July 11). "Disney is reportedly struggling to find its Aladdin"

@zaynmalik [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from

[https://twitter.com/bestzaynsphotos/status/884895726148489216.](https://twitter.com/bestzaynsphotos/status/884895726148489216)

Beydoun, K. A. (2017, July 19). It doesn't matter that an Arab will play Aladdin. *Aljazeera*.

Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/07/doesn-matter-arab-play-aladdin-170719091927577.html>.

- Blasberg, D. (2017, February 28). Cover story: Emma Watson, rebel belle. *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved from <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/02/emma-watson-cover-story>.
- Bogle, D. (2001). *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, & bucks*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- Bradley, N. (2017, November 2). This live-action 'Lion King' casting tweet nails the biggest reason to celebrate — besides Beyonce. *Bustle*. Retrieved from <https://www.bustle.com/p/this-live-action-lion-king-casting-tweet-nails-the-biggest-reason-to-celebrate-besides-beyonce-3206677>.
- Brode, D. (2005). *Multiculturalism and the mouse: Race and sex in Disney entertainment*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Brooks, D. (2016, June 27). Beyoncé's star formation: from Destiny's Child to Queen Bey. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jun/27/beyonce-star-formation-destinys-child-queen-bey-tour>.
- Cain, R. (2017, November 29). Disney's choice for 'Mulan' lead role leaves some Chinese moviegoers baffled. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robcairn/2017/11/29/disneys-choice-for-mulan-lead-role-leaves-some-chinese-moviegoers-baffled/#664f71152f92>.
- Campbell, R., Martin, C. R., & Fabos B. (2016). *Media & culture: Mass communication in the digital age*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Chanan, M. (1994). What was GATT about? *Vertigo Magazine*, 1(3). Retrieved from https://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-1-issue-3-spring-1994/what-was-gatt-about/.

- Chen, S. (2017, August 23). 'Little Mermaid' actress shines a light on colorblind casting. *ABC News*. Retrieved from <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/mermaid-actress-shines-light-color-blind-casting/story?id=49362339>
- Chitwood, A. (2017, February 8). Disney's live-action 'Aladdin' won't be 'Prince of Persia', says producer; promises diverse cast. *Collider*. Retrieved from <http://collider.com/aladdin-live-action-movie-diverse-cast/#dan-lin>.
- Chu, H. (1998, August 8). 'Mulan' hits a wall of Chinese red tape. *The Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/1998/aug/08/entertainment/ca-11080>.
- Chuba, K. (2017, November 9). 'Aladdin': Meet the cast of Disney's live-action reboot. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/aladdin-meet-cast-disneys-live-action-reboot-1056151/item/hakim-aladdin-meet-cast-disneys-live-action-reboot-1056193>.
- Cirisano, T. (2018, January 11). Love, diversity & acceptance: How positivity propelled 'Greatest Showman' soundtrack to success. *Billboard*. Retrieved from <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/movies/8093808/greatest-showman-love-diversity-acceptance-soundtrack-success>.
- Clements, R., & Musker, J. (Producers/Directors). (1992). *Aladdin* [Motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Clements, R., & Musker, J. (Producers/Directors). (2004). *Aladdin: Special Edition* [DVD]. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Coats, P. (Producer), Bancroft, T., & Cook, B. (Directors). (1998). *Mulan* [Motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.

- Coats, P. (Producer), Bancroft, T., & Cook, B. (Directors). (2004). *Mulan: Special Edition* [DVD]. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Coggan, D. (2017, March 24). Beauty and the beast and the future of Disney's live-action remakes. *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved from <http://ew.com/movies/2017/03/24/beauty-and-the-beast-and-the-future-of-disney-live-action-remakes/>.
- ConcernedForMulan. (2016). *Disney's Live-Action Mulan Spec Script* [Photograph]. Retrieved November 1, 2018, from <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2016/10/an-open-letter-to-creators-of-disneys.html>.
- ConcernedForMulan. (2016, October 10). An open letter to the creators of Disney's live-action feature film 'The Legend of Mulan'. *Angry Asian Man*. Retrieved from <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2016/10/an-open-letter-to-creators-of-disneys.html>.
- Culhane, J. (Writer), & Kroopnick, S. (Producer). (1992, November 25). *The making of Aladdin: A whole new world* [Television broadcast]. In Booth, D., & Schreiber, S. (Producers). Burbank, CA: The Walt Disney Company.
- Culler, J. (1981). *The pursuit of signs: Semiotics, literature, deconstruction*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Desta, Y. (2016, October 10). Don't worry: Mulan will not feature a white male lead. *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved from <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/10/mulan-white-male-lead-disney>.
- Desta, Y. (2018, August 15). Aladdin remake: Disney's finally giving princess Jasmine her own song. *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved from

<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/08/aladdin-live-action-princess-jasmine-song>.

Dobrow, J. R. & Gidney, C. L. (1998) The good, the bad, and the foreign: The use of dialect in children's animated television. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 557. 105-119.

Dyer, R. (1997). *White*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ebert, R. (1992, November 25). Aladdin. Retrieved from

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/aladdin-1992>

Eichler, A. (2010, May 26). Why is a white actor playing 'prince of Persia' title role?. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/05/why-is-a-white-actor-playing-prince-of-persia-title-role/345435/>

Elias, L. (2013, July/August). Mulan. *Celebrations Disney Magazine*. 36-41. Retrieved from

<http://www.celebrationspress.com/issues/Celebrations-Issue-30-DV16498.pdf>

El-Kadi, E. (2016). *Disney's Live-Action Mulan Casting Call* [Photograph]. Retrieved November 1, 2018, from <http://www.honolulumagazine.com/Honolulu-Magazine/November-2016/Could-You-Be-the-Mulan-Disneys-Looking-for/>.

Emerson, K. (1997). *Doo-dah!: Stephen foster and the rise of American popular culture*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Evon, D. (2018, May 9). Did 41% of Trump supporters favor bombing a fictional city from 'Aladdin'? Snopes. Retrieved from <https://www.snopes.com/news/2015/12/18/agrabah-aladdin-republican-poll/>.

- Fattal, I. (2018, January 4). Why do cartoon villains speak in foreign accents? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/01/why-do-cartoon-villains-speak-in-foreign-accents/549527/>.
- Fernandez, D. (2017). *Disney's Live-Action Aladdin Casting Call* [Photograph]. Retrieved November 1, 2018, from https://twitter.com/msdanifernandez/status/839729143377911808/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E839729143377911808&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.hollywoodreporter.com%2Fheat-vision%2Fdisneys-live-action-aladdin-holds-open-casting-call-leads-984892.
- Flaherty, K. (2017, November 29). Fans Are Very Happy A Chinese Actor Has Been Cast In The Live-Action "Mulan". *Buzzfeed*. Retrieved from https://www.buzzfeed.com/keelyflaherty/fans-are-very-happy-a-chinese-actress-has-been-cast-in-the?utm_term=.pyma3WWbMw#.wsmvdgg4kA.
- Flannery, R. (1998, July 31). Disney targets Asian audiences with special 'Mulan' marketing. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB901819621706984000>.
- Flint, H. (2017, September 12). Is Billy Magnussen's Aladdin character a whitewashed Prince Achmed?. *Screen Rant*. Retrieved from <https://screenrant.com/is-billy-magnussens-aladdin-character-a-whitewashed-prince-achmed/>
- Ford, R. & Galuppo, M. (2017, July 11). Aladdin': Disney struggles to find stars for its live-action movie. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/aladdin-movie-disney-struggles-find-stars-1019690>.

- Ford, R. (2015, March 30). Disney developing live-action 'Mulan' (Exclusive). *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/disney-developing-live-action-mulan-784892>.
- Ford, R. (2016, October 12). 'Mulan' mania: Disney, Sony hunt for Asian directors to helm rival action pics. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/mulan-mania-disney-sony-hunt-937274>.
- Ford, R. (2016b, November 2). Black Santa and Hip-Hop 'Oliver Twist': Disney's Diversity Push. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/black-santa-hip-hop-oliver-twist-disneys-diversity-push-942983>.
- Ford, R. (2018, June 6). Disney Casts 'Mulan' Love Interest (Exclusive). *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/mulan-disney-casts-yoson-an-as-love-interest-live-action-movie-1116949>.
- Foutch, H. (2017, November 1) 'The Lion King': Disney announces full live-action cast; new synopsis revealed. *Collider*. Retrieved from <http://collider.com/the-lion-king-cast-live-action-synopsis/#images>
- Fox, D. J. (1993, July 10). Disney will alter song in 'Aladdin': Movies: Changes were agreed upon after Arab-Americans complained that some lyrics were racist. Some Arab groups are not satisfied. *The Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from http://articles.latimes.com/1993-07-10/entertainment/ca-11747_1_altered-lyric.
- Frank, L. (2006, May). Girl Power. *Africa Geographic*, 33-40. Retrieved from <http://www.lionconservation.org/PopularArticles/Girl-power,Africa-Geographic,2006.pdf>

- Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Friend, T. (2018, March 5). Donald Glover can't save you. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/05/donald-glover-cant-save-you>.
- Frook, J. E. (1993, July 13). 'Aladdin' lyrics altered. *Variety*. Retrieved from <https://variety.com/1993/film/news/aladdin-lyrics-altered-108628/>.
- Fuster, J. (2017, November 29). 'Mulan' Fans Thank Disney for Not Whitewashing Live-Action Movie by Casting of Chinese Star. *The Wrap*. Retrieved from <https://www.thewrap.com/mulan-fans-thank-disney-for-not-whitewashing-live-action-movie-with-casting-of-chinese-star/>.
- Galer, S. S. (2017, July 14). The Aladdin controversy Disney can't escape. *BBC*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170714-the-aladdin-controversy-disney-cant-escape>.
- Gallagher, C. (2017, September 6). A new live-action 'Aladdin' character is angering fans & they've got a point. *Bustle*. Retrieved from <https://www.bustle.com/p/a-new-live-action-aladdin-character-is-angering-fans-theyve-got-a-point-81165>
- Galuppo, M. & Couch, A. (2017, July 15). 'Aladdin': Disney remake finds its leads. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/aladdin-disney-remake-finds-leads-1020047>
- Galuppo, M. (2017a, March 9). Disney's live-action 'Aladdin' holds open casting call for leads. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/disneys-live-action-aladdin-holds-open-casting-call-leads-984892>.
- Galuppo, M. (2017b, September 5). Disney's live-action 'Aladdin' casts Billy Magnussen as new character (Exclusive). *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/disneys-live-action-aladdin-casts-billy-magnussen-as-new-character-1035329>.

Galuppo, M. (2018a, April 11). Donnie Yen joins Disney's live-action *Mulan*. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/donnie-yen-joins-disneys-live-action-mulan-1101967>

Galuppo, M. (2018b, May 23). Disney's 'Mulan' Casts 'Pitch Perfect' Actor Utkarsh Ambudkar. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/disneys-mulan-casts-utkarsh-ambudkar-1114478>.

Gelt, J. (2017, July 13). Authenticity in casting: From 'colorblind' to 'color conscious,' new rules are anything but black and white. *The Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-authenticity-in-casting-20170713-htmllstory.html>.

Gillota, D. (2013). *Ethnic humor in multiethnic America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Giroux, H. (1995). Memory and pedagogy in the 'wonderful world of Disney': Beyond the politics of innocence. In E. Bell, L. Haas, & L. Sells (Eds.), *From mouse to mermaid: The politics of film, gender, and culture*. (46-61). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Giroux, H. A. & Pollock, G. (2010). *The mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Giroux, H. A. (1999). *The mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Gray, J. (2010). *Show sold separately: Promos, spoilers, and other media paratexts*. New York: New York University Press.

- Haggins, B. (2007). *Laughing mad: The black comic persona in post-soul America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hahn, D. (2012, February 22). Oscars 1992: How 'Beauty and the Beast' changed animation. *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved from <http://ew.com/article/2012/02/22/oscars-1992-beauty-and-the-beast/>
- Hahn, D. (Producer), Allers, R., & Minkoff, R. (Directors). (1994). *The Lion King* [Motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Hahn, D. (Producer), Allers, R., & Minkoff, R. (Directors). (2003). *The Lion King: Platinum Edition* [DVD]. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Hahn, D. (Producer), Allers, R., & Minkoff, R. (Directors). (2011). *The Lion King: Diamond Edition* [DVD]. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Hahn, D. (Producer), Allers, R., & Minkoff, R. (Directors). (2017). *The Lion King: The circle of life edition* [Blu-Ray DVD]. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In Baron, S., Denning, M., Hall, S., Hobson, D., Lowe, A., & Willis, P. (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (128-139). London, UK: Hutchinson & Co.
- HamzaMusse. (2017, July 15). This is Naomi Scott. She is Indian, and white. This is Jasmine, she is middle eastern. And not white. #Aladdin [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/HamzaMusse/status/886332479292026884/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E886332479292026884&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thisinsider.com%2Fdisney-aladdin-cast-controversial-2017-7.
- HarryShumJr. (2016, October 10). Proper representation is more important than ever. This story is important to millions around the world. Can we just #MakeMulanRight [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/harryshumjr/status/785651224196616193?lang=en>.

- Herrera, C. (2017, April 5). Paramount says 'Ghost In The Shell' flopped because of whitewashing controversy. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/paramount-admits-ghost-in-the-shell-did-poorly-because-casting_us_58e486cbe4b0d0b7e1660b61.
- Hischak, T. S. (2011). [Disney voice actors: A biographical dictionary](#). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers.
- Holt, B. (2017, July 12). 15 guys Disney should actually cast as Aladdin. *Buzzfeed*. Retrieved from https://www.buzzfeed.com/briannaholt/17-guys-disney-should-actually-cast-as-aladdin?utm_term=.diobgmZz2#.no3G6dYqk
- Jackson, L. M. (2017, December 7). How today's most daring, weird cartoons transform the minstrel aesthetic. *Vulture*. Retrieved from <http://www.vulture.com/2017/12/weird-cartoons-today-transform-minstrel-aesthetic.html>.
- Jenkins, H. (2004). The cultural logic of media convergence. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 33-43.
- Jobonito. (2017, September 6). Why did they add a white prince to #Aladdin? This is going to be a disaster 🙄 [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/jobonito/status/905275708901130240/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2F14191553093067153121.ampproject.net%2F1810301740350%2Fframe.html.
- Johnson, Z. (2015, October 15). Disney myths debunked by Ron Clements and John Musker, directors of The Little Mermaid, Aladdin and Hercules. *E! News*. Retrieved from <https://www.eonline.com/news/706200/disney-myths-debunked-by-ron-clements-and-john-musker-directors-of-the-little-mermaid-aladdin-and-hercules>.

- Jones, A. (2016, November 28). The 9 eras of Disney animation. *Odyssey*. Retrieved from <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/nine-eras-disney-animation>.
- Judge, M. (2017, November 1). The blackest Disney movie ever, *The Lion King*, will have the blackest cast ever—including queen bey. *The Grapevine*. Retrieved from <https://thegrapevine.theroot.com/the-blackest-disney-movie-ever-the-lion-king-will-have-1820059823>.
- Keegan, R. (2018, April 20). Another kingdom discovers Wakanda. *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved from <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/04/another-kingdom-discovers-wakanda>.
- Kehr, D. (1991, June 8). Its not all ooh-la-la over French Disney park. *Chicago Tribune*.
- Kellner, D. (2003). Cultural studies, multiculturalism and media culture. In G. Dines & J. M. Humez (Eds.), *Gender, race and class in the media: A text reader* (Second Ed, pp. 9-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Khatchatourian, M. (2017, March 3). Alabama theater cancels 'Beauty and the Beast' screenings due to gay character. *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved from <http://variety.com/2017/film/news/beauty-and-the-beast-gay-character-alabama-theater-1202001627/>.
- Kit, B. (2016a, September 28). 'Lion King' live-action movie in the works from Disney. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/lion-king-live-action-movie-933335>.
- Kit, B. (2016b, October 10). Disney's live-action 'Aladdin' enlists Guy Ritchie to direct. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/disneys-live-action-aladdin-enlists-936881>.

- Klinger, B. (1997). Film history terminable and interminable: Recovering the past in reception studies. *Screen*, 38(2), 107-128.
- Kylekrieger. (2017, September 6). ..and currently over on the Disney live-action #Aladdin set [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/kylekrieger/status/905295108702134275?lang=en>.
- Langfitt, F. (1999, May 3). Disney magic fails 'Mulan' in China. *The Baltimore Sun*. Retrieved from http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1999-05-03/features/9905030250_1_disney-s-mulan-sui-dynasty-chinese.
- Lee, A. (2016, November 22). Ang Lee on Disney's live-action 'Mulan': "it'd be great to see an Asian" director. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/rambling-reporter/ang-lee-disneys-live-action-mulan-itd-be-great-see-an-asian-director-949162>.
- Lee, A. (2017, November 8). Next Gen: 'Aladdin' star Naomi Scott says Jasmine is "a multidimensional woman". *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/aladdin-star-naomi-scott-is-reinventing-jasmine-shes-a-multidimensional-woman-1055350>
- Lee, T. G., & Gandhi, L. (2017, December 21). Hollywood has whitewashed Asian stories for decades. This year, they couldn't ignore the backlash. *NBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/hollywood-has-whitewashed-asian-stories-decades-year-they-couldn-t-n830241>.
- Lenker, M. L. (2018, January 30). John Kani talks the 'unbelievable cast' of The Lion King and telling an 'African story'. *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved from <https://ew.com/movies/2018/01/30/the-lion-king-john-kani-cast-african-story/>.

- LexiAlex. (2017, July 11). There are plenty of amazing MENA & South Asian actors. I have a list. Give me a call Guy [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/thr/status/884766764151836676>.
- Lott, E. (2013). *Love and theft: Blackface minstrelsy and the American working class*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Lovett, J. (2017, December 3). *Ming-Na Wen reacts to live action 'Mulan' casting*. Retrieved from <http://comicbook.com/movies/2017/12/03/ming-na-wen-mulan-live-action/>.
- Lugo-Lugo, C. R., & Bloodsworth-Lugo, M. K. (2009). "Look out new world, here we come"? Race, racialization, and sexuality in four children's animated films by Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks. *Critical Studies/Critical Methodologies*, 9(2), 166-178.
- Ma, S. (2013). *Mulan Disney, it's like, re-orient: Consuming China and animating teen dreams*. In B. Ayres (Ed), *The emperor's old groove: Decolonizing Disney's the magic kingdom*. (149-166). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Macleod, D. S. (2013). The politics of vision: Disney, Aladdin, and the gulf war. In B. Ayres (Ed), *The emperor's old groove: Decolonizing Disney's the magic kingdom*. (179-192). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Mahdawi, A. (2016, June 27). Beyoncé's star formation: from Destiny's Child to Queen Bey. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jun/27/beyonce-star-formation-destinys-child-queen-bey-tour>.
- Malken, M. (2018, August 15). Aladdin': Justin Paul and Benj Pasek reveal details of new songs for live-action reboot (exclusive). *Variety*. Retrieved from <https://variety.com/2018/film/news/aladdin-justin-paul-and-benj-pasek-reveal-details-of-new-songs-for-live-action-reboot-exclusive-1202904865/>.

- Marc, C. (2016, November 4). Open casting-call for leads in Disney's 'Mulan': Will shoot in China this spring. *Omega Underground*. Retrieved from <https://omegaunderground.com/2016/11/04/disney-launches-casting-call-mulan-leads-must-speak-english-mandarin/>.
- McCarthy, T. (1998, June 8). Mulan – 'Mulan' blazes new femme territory. *Variety*. Retrieved from <https://variety.com/1998/film/reviews/mulan-mulan-blazes-new-femme-territory-1200454130/>.
- McClintock, P. & Couch, A. (2018, March 1). Live-action 'Mulan' pushed back more than a year to spring 2020. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/live-action-mulan-pushed-back-more-a-year-spring-2020-1090015>.
- McClintock, P. (2016, October 4). Disney's live-action 'Mulan' gets winter 2018 release date. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/disneys-live-action-mulan-gets-934976>.
- McCluskey, M. (2017, November 2). Like the circle of life, *The Lion King* cast has moved us all. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/5007137/lion-king-cast-beyonce-internet-reactions/>.
- McMahon, C. T. (2015). The pages of whiteness: Theory, evidence, and the american immigration debate. *Race & Class*, 56(4), 40-55.
- McPherson, J. (2008, Summer). The good, the bad and the hyena. *BBC Wildlife*, 47-52.
- Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20141027025919/http://www.suzieszterhas.com/a/pdf/BBC_WL_SUM08_HYENA_final.pdf

- Meslow, S. (2011, October 28). How celebrities took over cartoon voice acting. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/10/how-celebrities-took-over-cartoon-voice-acting/247481/#slide11>.
- Molnar, N. (2015, April). Tell Disney you don't want a whitewashed Mulan. *Care2 Petitions*. Retrieved from <https://www.thepetitionsite.com/505/768/292/tell-disney-you-dont-want-a-whitewashed-mulan/>.
- Mulan (1998) Trivia. (n.d.) *IMDB*. Retrieved from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120762/trivia>.
- O'Neil, B. (2001). The demands of authenticity: Addison Durland and Hollywood's Latin images during World War II. In D. Bernardi (Ed.), *Classic Hollywood classic whiteness*. (359-386). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Omi, M. A. (2001). The changing meaning of race. In N. J. Smelser, W. J. Wilson, & F. Mitchell (Eds.), *America becoming: Racial trends and their consequences*. (243-263). Washington D.C.: National Academy Press. Retrieved from <https://www.nap.edu/read/9599/chapter/1#i>.
- Oppenheim, M. (2017, September 6). Disney accused of whitewashing after creating role for white actor out of thin air. *Independent*. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/disney-aladdin-white-actor-billy-magnussen-whitewashing-racism-backlash-response-a7933201.html>
- Pallant, C. (2014). *Demystifying Disney: A history of Disney feature animation*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic. (originally published in 2011).
- Peoples, L. (2016, February 26). Talking with the woman who started #OscarsSoWhite. *The Cut*. Retrieved from <https://www.thecut.com/2016/02/oscarssowhite-april-reign.html>.

- Pequenino, K. (2016, October 11). Petition demands 'make Mulan right'. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/11/entertainment/make-mulan-right-petition/index.html>.
- Pitre, J. (2016, October 27). Mulan leak shows Disney wasn't prepared to bring the '90s back in live action. *Polygon*. Retrieved from <https://www.polygon.com/2016/10/27/13438526/disney-live-action-mulan-aladdin-controversy>.
- Quinn, E. (2011). Sincere fictions: The production cultures of whiteness in late 1960's Hollywood. *The Velvet Light Trap*, 67, 3-13.
- Rebecchi, M. & Vogman, E. (2013, October 31). Sergei Eisenstein and the anthropology of rhythm. *Doppiozero International*. Retrieved from <http://en.doppiozero.com/materiali/sergei-eisenstein-and-anthropology-rhythm>.
- Rizwan, S. (2017, July 12). Disney apparently can't find a single actor to play Aladdin, so people gave them all the options. *Buzzfeed*. Retrieved from https://www.buzzfeed.com/sahilrizwan/dis-nope?utm_term=.vrB4wxmVP#.eflrqWeoA.
- Rose, S. (2016, October). Disney: Don't whitewash the live-action Aladdin film. *Care2 Petitions*. Retrieved from <https://www.thepetitionsite.com/987/471/369/>.
- Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Said, E. (2003). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books. First published in 1983 by Pantheon Books.
- Sammond, N. (2015). *Birth of an industry: Blackface minstrelsy and the rise of American animation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Saturday Night Live [Username]. (2015, March 29). *New Disney movie – SNL* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFJz2IMUeDE>

- Schaefer, S. (1998, Jun 16). No China doll: Disney's newest heroine fights her own battles in 'Mulan'. *Boston Herald*, 37. Retrieved from <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/0EB41E18EFE2298A?p=AWNB>.
- Scheinin, R. (1993, January 10). Angry over 'Aladdin'. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1993/01/10/angry-over-aladdin/46f2aacd-444b-4a81-9aa7-7c43cc84d65b/?utm_term=.adcca0ca4394
- Shakeri, S. (2017, July 17). Disney criticized for casting Naomi Scott as Princess Jasmine for 'Aladdin'. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/07/17/disney-aladdin-jasmine-naomi-scott_a_23034316/.
- Silverman, H. (2002). Groovin' to ancient Peru: A critical analysis of Disney's the emperor's new groove. *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 2, 298-322.
- SimplySimra. (2017, July 11). if the film industry can actively seekout middle eastern actors to portray terrorists it shouldn't be this difficult finding one for Aladdin [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/simplysimra/status/884920166244634624?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E884920166244634624&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.firstpost.com%2Fentertainment%2Fis-guy-ritchies-aladdin-remake-getting-it-all-wrong-with-their-casting-3805151.html.
- Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., & Pieper, K. (2016). Inclusion or invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg report on diversity in entertainment. *Institute for Diversity and Empowerment at Annenberg (IDEA)*. Retrieved from

https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf.

Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., Pieper, K., Case, A., & Choi, A. (2018, July). Inequality in 1,100 popular films: Examining portrayals of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBT & disability from 2007 to 2017. *USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative*. Retrieved from <http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/inequality-in-1100-popular-films.pdf>.

Smith, S. L., Pieper, K., & Choueiti, M. (2017, February). Inclusion in the director's chair? gender, race, & age of film directors across 1,000 films from 2007-2016. *Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative*. Retrieved from [https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/06/MDSCI_Inclusion%20 in the Directors Chair.pdf](https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/06/MDSCI_Inclusion%20in%20the%20Directors%20Chair.pdf).

Snetiker, M. (2015, January 22). Alan Menken tells stories behind 7 classic Disney songs. *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved from <http://www.ew.com/article/2015/01/22/alan-menken-disney-songs/>.

Snopes. (2007, August 21). Song of the south and NAACP: Is 'song of the south' unavailable on video in America because of NAACP threats?. *Snopes*. Retrieved from <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/song-of-the-south/>

Spector, A. J. (1998). Disney does diversity: The social context of racial-ethnic imagery. In Y.R. Kamalipour & T. Carilli (Eds.), *Cultural Diversity and the U.S. Media* (39-48). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Sperb, J. (2012). *Disney's most notorious film: Race, convergence, and the hidden histories of Song of the South*. Austin Texas: University of Texas Press.

- Staff Writer. (2018, April 18). Why Black Panther is the perfect choice for Saudi cinema comeback. *Al Arabiya English*. Retrieved From <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2018/04/18/Why-Black-Panther-is-the-perfect-choice-for-Saudi-cinema-comeback.html>.
- Sun, R. & Ford, R. (2017, November 29). Disney's 'Mulan' Finds Its Star (Exclusive). *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/disneys-mulan-finds-star-1061585>.
- Sun, R. (2017, February 14). Disney's live-action 'Mulan' Finds director (Exclusive). *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/disneys-live-action-mulan-finds-director-975869>.
- Sun, R. (2018, April 12). Disney's Live-Action 'Mulan' Lands Gong Li, Jet Li (Exclusive). *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/disneys-live-action-mulan-lands-gong-li-jet-li-1101994>.
- Susman, G. (2017, November 9). 24 things you never knew about Disney's 'Aladdin'. *MovieFone*. Retrieved from <https://www.moviefone.com/2017/11/09/disney-aladdin-robin-williams-trivia/>.
- Tejada, C. (2017, July 13). The internet can't believe that Disney can't find an actor to play Aladdin. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/07/13/disney-aladdin-casting_a_23028027/.
- The Lion King' Roars to Life with All-Star Cast. (n.d.). *The Walt Disney Studios*. Retrieved from <https://www.waltdisneystudios.com/the-lion-king-roars-to-life-with-all-star-cast/> pic site
- The Walt Disney Studios. (2017, October 17). *Disney confirms Live-Action The Lion King all-star cast* [Photograph]. Retrieved November 1, 2018, from

<https://www.waltdisneystudios.com/news-post/-the-lion-king-roars-to-life-with-all-star-cast>.

the_ ns. (2017, November 29). It's a little heartbreaking how happy I am that Disney cast a Chinese woman to play a Chinese woman. #Mulan [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/the_ns/status/935918927342792704?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.buzzfeed.com%2Fkeelyflaherty%2Ffans-are-very-happy-a-chinese-actress-has-been-cast-in-the.

TheDamianAlonso. (2017, July 12). how is Disney having trouble casting Alladin when Avan Jogia was literally born for the role??? the man can sing, dance, AND act! [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from pic.twitter.com/2ilMF1q1Md.

Thompson, A., (2004). Gentlemanly orthodoxy: Critical race feminism, whiteness theory, and the APA manual. *Educational Theory*, 54(1), 27-57.

Tran, D. (2017, June 24). Why The Lion King casts actors differently from any other Broadway show. *Playbill*. Retrieved from <http://www.playbill.com/article/why-the-lion-king-casts-actors-differently-from-any-other-broadway-show>.

Tsai, M. (2002, June 21). Lilo' captures Hawai'i spirit in an appealing way. *The Honolulu Advertiser*. Retrieved from <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2002/Jun/21/en/en01a.html>.

Velocci, C. (2017, September 6). Disney slammed for adding white character to 'Aladdin'. *The Wrap*. Retrieved from <https://www.thewrap.com/disney-white-character-aladdin/>

Vine, H. (2017, November 13). Do you know all the Mufasas and Simbas of Broadway's The Lion King? *Playbill*. Retrieved from <http://www.playbill.com/article/do-you-know-all-the-mufasas-and-simbas-of-broadways-the-lion-king>.

- Wanshel, E. (2018, February 16). People went all out for the 'Black Panther' premiere and it was glorious. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-panther-opening-night-was-a-straight-up-cultural-phenom_us_5a86e286e4b05c2bcac9fb0c.
- Ward, A. R. (2002). *Mouse morality: The rhetoric of Disney animated film*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Warner, K. J. (2015). *The cultural politics of colorblind tv casting*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wasko, J. (2001). *Understanding Disney: The manufacture of fantasy*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc.
- Wasser, F. (2001). *Veni, vidi, video: The Hollywood empire and the VCR*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Wells, P. (2002). *Animation and America*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Wilett, M. (2017, July 16). Disney announced its cast for the live-action 'Aladdin' — and some people are furious. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/disney-aladdin-cast-controversial-2017-7?r=UK&IR=T>.
- Wills, J. (2017). *Disney culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Withers, R. (2017, November 3). Trevor Noah is only slightly bothered that he's not the late-night host in The Lion King remake. *Brow Beat*. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2017/11/03/trevor_noah_should_be_in_the_lion_king_instead_of_john_oliver.html.
- Wootton, D. (2018, February 9). Can't wait to bey king theatre legend Tim Rice joins Sir Elton John and Beyonce for Lion King remake soundtrack. *The Sun*. Retrieved from

<https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/5542574/theatre-legend-tim-rice-joins-sir-elton-john-and-beyonce-for-lion-king-remake-soundtrack/>.

Yam, K. (2018, April 17). Shang might not be in Disney's live-action 'Mulan,' and people aren't taking it well. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/shang-disney-live-action-mulan_us_5ad61b50e4b0edca2cbe516e.

Yazzz_. (2017, November 1). WE DO NOT DESERVE THIS! IMAGINE, THIS BEING BLACK KIDS' FIRST INTRO TO THE LION KING 🙄 [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/yazzz_/status/925911779724742657?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E925911779724742657&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bustle.com%2Fp%2Fthis-live-action-lion-king-casting-tweet-nails-the-biggest-reason-to-celebrate-besides-beyonce-3206677.

Yingxu03. (2017, November 29). the fact that we have to say, 'whew I'm so glad Hollywood casted a Chinese actress to play Mulan' explains something very problematic also, when can we have Chinese American representation? Liu Yifei is amazing all around, but she isn't American, we still need a voice [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/yingxu03/status/935935586942246912?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E935935586942246912&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thewrap.com%2Fmulan-fans-thank-disney-for-not-whitewashing-live-action-movie-with-casting-of-chinese-star%2F.

Zhu, L. (2015, April 15). Petition grows over Mulan cast. *China Daily USA*. Retrieved from http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2015-04/15/content_20438626.htm.