Animated Stereotypes –

An Analysis of Disney's Contemporary Portrayals of Race and Ethnicity

Alexander Lindgren, 36761

Pro gradu-avhandling i engelska språket och litteraturen

Handledare: Jason Finch

Fakulteten för humaniora, psykologi och teologi

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Abstract for Master's Thesis

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Author: Alexander Lindgren
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Abstract: *Walt Disney Animation Studios* is currently one of the world's largest producers of animated content aimed at children. However, while Disney often has been associated with themes such as childhood, magic, and innocence, many of the company's animated films have simultaneously been criticized for their offensive and quite problematic take on race and ethnicity, as well their heavy reliance on cultural stereotypes.   This study aims to evaluate Disney's portrayals of racial and ethnic minorities, as well as determine whether or not the nature of the company's portrayals have become more culturally sensitive with time. To accomplish this, seven animated feature films produced by Disney were analyzed. These analyses are of a qualitative nature, with a focus on imagology and postcolonial literary theory, and the results have simultaneously been compared to corresponding criticism and analyses by other authors and scholars.   Based on the overall results of the analyses, it does seem as if Disney is becoming more progressive and culturally sensitive with time. However, while most of the recent films are free from the clearly racist elements found in the company's earlier productions, it is quite evident that Disney still tends to rely heavily on certain cultural stereotypes. Furthermore, it seems as if the Disney films that could be regarded as musicals, as well as films based on other culturally specific material (e.g. legends or folk stories), frequently include more problematic portrayals of racial and ethnic minorities.   This study provides an overview of Disney's contemporary portrayals of race and ethnicity, and the findings presented here could consequently be used to further explore Disney's approach towards this issue.
Keywords: Disney, race, ethnicity, minority, representation, stereotype, imagology, postcolonialism, animated films
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1. Introduction

In our modern society, it might be quite difficult, if not even impossible, to find someone completely unfamiliar with names like Snow White, Cinderella, Mickey Mouse or Walt Disney. Ever since the release of *Steamboat Willie* in 1928, the Walt Disney Company has been largely dominant in the animated market, and almost a century worth of animation has seen both children and adults, from all over the world, falling in love with Disney's characters and films. Today, this American corporation operates in more than 40 countries, employs nearly 200,000 people, and describes itself as "a leading diversified international family entertainment and media enterprise" (Disney, 2018). In addition to being the producer of the animated motion pictures we all know and love, the Walt Disney Company also owns theme parks, various product lines and a number of broadcasting networks; such as the American Broadcasting Company and the ESPN sports cable network. The enterprise has expanded even more since the turn of the century, and is now the proprietor of studios like 20th Century Fox, Marvel Studios, Lucasfilm, and Pixar Animation Studios. The Walt Disney Company is, in other words, more than right to regard itself as diversified – in terms of business.

Ironically, for a company associated with childhood, happiness and innocence, Disney's films have frequently been criticized for their gender-portrayals, their offensive and racist content, and their lack of ethnic diversity in terms of positive characters and protagonists. While the jive-talking crows in *Dumbo* (1941), as well as the dramatic love story of Pocahontas and John Smith (*Pocahontas*, 1995), surely have entertained and amused millions of viewers, they have, simultaneously and clearly, offended and agitated others. Walt Disney himself has had a reputation as an anti-Semite (see e.g. Eliot, 1994), and many academics have taken interest in the man, the company, and the ideologies that the two really represent. Some do claim that the modern Walt Disney Company has taken a step towards the more culturally sensitive film industry, but many argue that Disney still has a long way to go in terms of positive representations of diversity and multiculturalism.

In this study, I will delve into the world of Disney animation, with a specific focus on race and ethnicity. By analyzing a number of animated Disney films, I hope to be able

to examine and discuss how Disney portrays race and ethnicity in their modern animated feature films, and see how – and if – the nature of these portrayals have changed over time. While issues like gender or sexual orientation might overlap with a topic like this, I have still chosen to commit solely to one area. This will narrow my scope and make this topic more suitable to a master's thesis. Before defining the aims and scope for this study in more detail, I will first, however briefly, consider the historical perspective regarding Disney's relationship with race and ethnicity. While the focus of this thesis will be on contemporary change in Disney's racial and ethnic portrayals, it might still be important to acknowledge the criticism of Disney's earlier productions. This will set the scene for this study, as the issues presented here surely will reemerge throughout the thesis. The following subchapter will consequently provide a historical overview of the Walt Disney Company and the relevant criticism surrounding some of its films.

1.1   Historical perspective

Walter Elias Disney was born in Chicago, Illinois on December 5, 1901. In 1923, Walter "Walt" Disney and his brother Roy founded the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio (which eventually turned into the Walt Disney Studio). Four years later, the iconic Mickey Mouse was born (Wasko, 2001). While the Walt Disney Company clearly is one of the most influential companies of our time, it could also be regarded as one of the most controversial, since instances of the company's racial and ethnic stereotyping arguably can be found in all different eras of Disney filmmaking.

In 1937, the world of animation was forever changed with Disney's release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* – one of the first animated feature-length features ever made. This marks the beginning of the five-year-period generally known as Disney's Golden Age (1937-1942) – an era marked by features such as the successful adaptation *Pinocchio* (1940), the already mentioned *Dumbo*, and the sugar-and-tar (sweet and innocent, yet tragic and dark) feature *Bambi* (1942). Another film from the Golden Age, still criticized for its racist content, is *Fantasia* (1940). This particular motion picture featured the controversial character Sunflower; a centaur with a torso of a black girl and the lower body of a donkey. This character has been extremely criticized for its caricatured features, as well as for its position as a servant to the other "white" centaurs, and was eventually removed by Disney (Byrne & McQuillan, 1999). Nevertheless,

despite some controversial content, most films released during the Golden Age were still quite successful.

In 1941, however, Disney came close to bankruptcy and consequently started producing propagandistic short films for the US government to survive. These short films usually featured familiar Disney characters; such as the seven dwarves who head into town to trade their freshly mined gemstones for war bonds (*7 Wise Dwarfs*, 1941), as well as Donald Duck who struggles with his nightmares about living in Nazi Germany (*Der Fuehrer's Face*, 1940). This period in Disney animation has, not surprisingly, often been referred to as the Wartime Era (1943-1949). Disney's economic weakness during this time also resulted in feature films based on both animation and live action (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2018). One of these films was the box-office success *Song of the South* (1946) – another Disney product widely criticized for its portrayal of African Americans, as well as African-American history. *Song of the South* is set in a post-slavery America, where no racism seems to exist, and where everyone, irrespective of race and status, is happy; a phenomenon that Richard M. Breaux has described as "a sanitizing of African-American history and denial of its and our nation's racist past" (2010: 399). According to Breaux, this underlying racism is still present in many of Disney's films, while the more straightforward issues, such as what can be seen in *Fantasia*, might have faded away with time, as also Western society has become more multicultural and culturally sensitive.

While many of the motion pictures produced during Disney's Silver Age (1950-1967) – the third era of Disney filmmaking — have been regarded as improvements over Disney's productions released during the Second World War, some of these films still remain problematic. Issues such as the extremely caricatured Native Americans in *Peter Pan* (1953), as well as its featured song "What Made the Red Man Red", still top many lists of Disney controversies today. Other controversies from the Silver Age can interestingly enough be found in Disney's animated animal characters; the antagonistic Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) are clearly built on negative stereotypes about East Asians, while the monkeys in *The Jungle Book* (1967) happen to be the only animals in the film portrayed with African-American accents. Furthermore, the song "I Wan'na Be Like You", performed by the orangutan King Louie (voiced by Caucasian American singer Louis Prima), depicts the monkeys' wish to become more human – something many critics have found problematic due to the targeted stereotypical traits the monkeys possess (see e.g. Giroux, 2010). *The Jungle Book* was, interestingly enough, the last

animated feature film overseen by Walt Disney himself, and his death in 1966 is generally what marks the beginning of the end of the Silver Age.

However, many of the earlier criticized issues still made it into Disney's Bronze Age. Some examples of this are the (again) slanted-eyed Siamese cat in *Aristocats* (1970) that plays various instruments with his chopsticks, as well as the clearly Latino-stereotyped Chihuahua in *Oliver & Company* (1988), Ignacio Alonzo Julio Federico de Tito, who, among other foolish things, steals a car. These stereotyped characters are arguably added to provide comic relief, and despite the critique, stereotyping through animals seems to remain a quite popular formula for comedy during the more contemporary Disney eras as well.

The release of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989 marks the beginning of the period generally known as the Disney Renaissance (1989-1999) – one of Disney's most financially successful eras of filmmaking. Many of the films released during this era usually featured non-Western characters or settings, and some have consequently (although remaining immensely popular) gained a somewhat controversial status. This period in Disney animation, together with the company's Post-Renaissance (2000-2008) and Revival Era (2009-present day), will be the main focus of this thesis. The reception and criticism of the films released after 1989 will thus be discussed and analyzed in more detail further on. With this brief historical overview as a foundation, I will now be able to present the specific scope, aim, and justification for this particular master's thesis.

1.2   Aims, scope and justification

This study will be a development of my bachelor's thesis from 2015, which also treated the portrayal of race and ethnicity in Disney's films. By analyzing two feature films, *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), I tried to provide a general overview of Disney's approach towards race and ethnicity, and discuss whether two decades worth of animated feature films had brought any change to Disney's portrayals. Due to the extent of that particular study, many relevant films released between 1992 and 2009 remained unexamined, and much more could probably have been said about Disney's creative choices, especially in terms of authorship and creative or artistic responsibility. Due to the extent of this master's thesis, I will now be able to focus on questions similar to those discussed in my previous study more thoroughly, now with a

wider set of materials and resources. Disney has also released new theatrical animated features since 2015, which will result in a more updated analysis. By examining and comparing a greater number of films, I hope to provide a more extensive presentation and discussion regarding the changes in the portrayals of race and ethnicity in Disney's films, than was possible in my bachelor's thesis.

It is fair to say that this topic is quite controversial, and there are many existing arguments both for and against Disney. Douglas Brode is one of the few scholars who actually defend Disney, as he, in *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: race and sex in Disney entertainment* (2005), in fact, argues that Walt Disney was something of an early advocate of multicultural values in America. While some might remain somewhat critical of Brode's work (see e.g. Giroux, 2010), various scholars have still recognized and praised *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*. For instance, Deborah C. Mitchell of Westminster College comments:

> Finally someone has written a defense of Disney – and in an era when it's become politically correct to criticize 'the Mouse'. What a brave thing to do, and what a beautifully structured defense it is.

(Brode, 2005: back cover blurb)

This comment portrays an opinion sometimes expressed in situations where the theme of Disney and race is being discussed; the accusations regarding Disney's racism has gotten out of hand. According to Brode, contemporary Disney critics tend to over-analyze and search for issues where none exist, and there generally seems to be a current opinion that we actually live in a society where it is trendy to criticize huge corporations and find everything racially offensive. However, one could still easily argue that the critical analyses of these films are essential in many ways; mainly due to the immense impact the Walt Disney Company and its films actually might have on our society and our lives. An example of the degree of influence the Walt Disney Company arguably possess can be found in Gerard C. Raiti's article "The Disappearance of Disney Animated Propaganda: A Globalization Perspective" (2007), in which the earlier mentioned propagandistic material that Disney produced during the Second World War is discussed. A particular feature film from this era, *Victory Through Air Power,* based on the non-fiction book with the same name, was also released by Disney in 1943. The book, written by Alexander P. De Seversky, was published six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and focused on aerial strategies and long-range bombing. Both the book and the film had a huge impact

on American society at the time, and Raiti does, in fact, argue that "[i]f it wasn't for the US Military, the Walt Disney Company may not exist today; and…if it wasn't for the Disney Studios, there may never have been an air strike on Japan" (Raiti, 2007: 157). This statement shows how influential this enterprise already was more than seventy years ago. Today the Disney Company is one of the largest producers of media and entertainment in the world, and it is almost impossible to avoid Disney's productions entirely. The impact cinema, media and text have on our realities of the world has been immensely studied, and the way racial or ethnic minorities are portrayed in popular animated films will certainly affect children, as well as adults, to some extent, no matter if they are a part of the minority or the majority (Hurley, 2005). Since Disney is an "international family entertainment and media enterprise", and Disney's films (both its contemporary productions as well as the old classics) still remain essential parts of many a childhood, it is fairly easy to argue that the company has played, and will continue to play, an important role in the shaping of our realities of the world. As a result, The Walt Disney Company clearly has a significant responsibility; and that is why I personally believe it is important to discuss what these products really represent.

I would still like to clarify that this particular thesis will solely focus on representations of race and ethnicity in animated Disney films, and not pay any more attention to Walt Disney himself or any other non-cinematic branches of the company. However, due to the massive size of the Walt Disney Company, it is almost impossible to consider all of its animated products in a study such as this. I will, therefore, only focus on feature-length films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios – a subdivision of Walt Disney Studios owned by the Walt Disney Company. A sole focus on Walt Disney Animation Studios still results in a vast amount of source material, wherefore the films have had to meet additional criteria before being considered as primary sources. These criteria, which will be presented and discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.3, leaves us with the following films; *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Mulan* (1998), *Lilo & Stitch* (2002), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Big Hero 6* (2014), and *Moana* (2016). Through a qualitative analysis and comparison of the chosen films, I hope to clarify the situation regarding racism and stereotypes in something as culturally central and seemingly innocent as Disney.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter will define the scope, methodology, and theory of my thesis in more detail. The existing material examining Disney's relation to race and ethnicity will be reviewed, and my research questions will be presented. By doing this I hope to demonstrate what we already might know about this topic, and where my research fits into it all. A significant part of this chapter has also been reserved for reviewing my source material, in which I will highlight the importance of the films chosen for this study. In addition to explaining how these seven films were chosen, the way in which this material will be treated and analyzed will also be established here. A review of relevant concepts and theory relating to this topic will consequently be provided, and by the end of this chapter, we will hopefully have all the necessary tools needed for moving on towards the essence of the thesis.

2.1   Previous research

> The most frequent criticisms [of Disney] include sexism, racism, conservatism, heterosexism, andro-centricism, imperialism (cultural), imperialism (economic), literary vandalism, jingoism, aberrant sexuality, censorship, propaganda, paranoia, homophobia, exploitation, ecological devastation, anti-union repression, FBI collaboration, corporate raiding, and stereotyping. It would seem only a matter of time before conclusive proof is discovered linking Walt Disney to the assassination of J. F. Kennedy and the production of antipersonnel landmines.

> (Byrne & McQuillan, 1999: 1)

During the 1970s, criticizing Disney was already, if you will, considered "mainstream" (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1971). However, Disney; indicating the man, the company and the films, have not only been a subject of general criticism, but a point of interest in a great deal of scholarly work as well, and from the 1990s onward, many volumes treating Disney's take on diversity have been published – both in favor of and against Disney. Three of these publications might be quite central in this study; *Deconstructing Disney* (Byrne & McQuillan, 1999), *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (Brode, 2005) and *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of*

Innocence (Giroux, 2010). These quite prominent volumes, published at least five years apart from each other, all discuss Disney's portrayals of race and ethnicity. However, unlike Brode's already mentioned work, the two remaining volumes take a more critical approach towards Disney's various productions.

Together with volumes such as *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (Bell et al., 1995), *Deconstructing Disney* still remains one of the frequently quoted critical editions regarding Disney and diversity. While issues such as gender, sexuality and religion are present throughout the work, the authors have also dedicated an entire chapter to race and ethnicity. Much of what is said here will most likely correlate to what is discussed in this thesis, as Byrne and McQuillan mainly examine Disney films released after 1989. However, with *Deconstructing Disney* being published back in 1999, *Mulan* remains the most recent film discussed in this particular volume. This is where other articles, as well as Giroux's work, published over ten years after *Deconstructing Disney*, might provide more insight.

While Giroux arguably is most known for his work on critical theory, as well as critical pedagogy – with the latter focus earning him a chapter in Routledge's *Fifty Modern Thinkers on Education: From Piaget to the Present* (Palmer, 2001) – he is arguably also one of the most well-known Disney critics of our time. As a result of Giroux's general area of focus, *The Mouse that Roared* mainly focuses on the social impact of Disney's productions, rather than providing separate literal analyses of Disney's films. Unlike Byrne and McQuillan's work, Giroux arguments might therefore be more central in relation to the discussion of the results from the upcoming film analyses, rather than the analyses themselves.

One could argue that Douglas Brode's take on Disney is a combination of the two volumes mentioned above, however based on a counterargument. In *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*, Brode argues that Disney actually was one of the first producers of Western films with fair portrayals of racial minorities. To strengthen his arguments, Brode analyzes both Disney's products, as well as the socio-political climate at the time. However, while Brode's arguments are interesting, they simultaneously remain somewhat dubious. Giroux actually criticizes Brode for supporting many of his claims with quite selective readings of Disney films, and argues the following:

> [Brode] claims that the very fact of Disney's representation of racial minorities, implied homosexuals, or women (regardless of whether the characters are construed as positive or negative or the politics of

representation is actually suppressed) makes Disney's politics laudatory for promoting multicultural diversity.

<div align="right">(Giroux, 2010: 241)</div>

Furthermore, Brode barely discusses Disney films produced after 1989 – even though *Multiculturalism and the Mouse* was published as late as in 2005. While all this might result in Brode's work being irrelevant for this particular study, it is simultaneously what makes *Multiculturalism and the Mouse* somewhat central to my thesis. The decision to focus on films released after 1989 is, in fact, partially based on the absence of these films in Brode's analysis, and it could be argued that this thesis, in a way, "picks up where Brode left off". To take some of Brode's arguments regarding the films released prior to 1989, and apply them to the more contemporary films analyzed in this study, might also bring some interesting perspectives to the discussion.

Nevertheless, due to the time of publishing, none of these works treat any of the films from Disney's Revival Era (2009-present day) – and it is here I really hope to provide something new to the field. Similar arguments and criticism as provided by the earlier mentioned scholars can be applied to the more recent films, and change or progression might, as a result, be determined. Additionally, none of the volumes above review the overall change of Disney's portrayal of race and ethnicity in a similar manner.

A final volume quite central to this study is Janet Wasko's *Understanding Disney* (2001). Unlike the previous three volumes, Wasko's work does not include specific analyses of Disney's films, but rather tries to generally explain "everything Disney". Everything from the history and the structure of the company, to the typical formula for an animated Disney feature film is described here, and Wasko's work will thus be a useful point of reference as I try to explain how and *why* the portrayals of race and ethnicity in Disney's films have changed over time.

2.2   Research questions and hypothesis

While the topic for this thesis already might have been defined, the research questions for the study have still not been presented. These questions have been designed to narrow my scope, and will establish the aims and limitations for this thesis even further. The main research question for this study simply reads as follows:

1) Based on the analyses of seven films released between 1992 and 2016, how has Walt Disney Animation Studios' portrayal of race and ethnicity changed over time?

As already mentioned, due to the extent and variation of Disney's productions, I will only focus on animated feature films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios. For reasons already stated, I have decided to focus on films released after the beginning of the period generally known as the Disney Renaissance (beginning with the release of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989) – which gives me about 30 years' worth of Disney productions to analyze. Be that as it may, seven feature films is still a more suitable amount of material for this particular study, and the discussion regarding change in Disney's ethnic and racial portrayals will therefore be based on the analyses of the seven earlier listed feature films. However, to specify what the analyses of these films will focus on, an additional question have to be asked.

2) How does Walt Disney Animation Studios portray racial and ethnic minorities in *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, *Mulan*, *Lilo & Stitch*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana*?

As this thesis clearly is written from a Western perspective, "racial and ethnic minorities" refers to racial and ethnic groups regarded as minorities in Western contemporary society. This is, however, still a somewhat complex concept that will be discussed further in chapter 2.4.2. Furthermore, the focus will not only be on the minority characters themselves, but also their distinct cultures represented by Disney – since this combination really might give the film audiences an image of the minority in general. To call this research question secondary would not be quite fair, since it clearly will cover an important part of this study. By applying this question to the analysis of the seven films, the relevant issues will hopefully be highlighted, and the results from the analyses can consequently be used to discuss the primary research question. These analyses will be based on existing literary theory, as well as supported by earlier research and criticism, such as the material discussed earlier in this chapter.

A general hypothesis for this study could be based on the results found in my bachelor's thesis from 2015. Based on the results found there, it appears as if Disney generally is becoming less offensive and more culturally sensitive with time. As of late, Disney has clearly taken certain measures to provide positive representations of foreign cultures and minorities (Anjirbag, 2018); focus groups representing the people portrayed

through animation have been consulted for several productions, and the creative minds behind the films usually spend some time in the country or the culture where the film will take place. Still, these measures have sometimes not been enough. While the straight-forward racism, (present in some of the earliest Disney films) might have disappeared, many supposedly subconscious choices made by Disney could still be regarded as problematic. However, the two Disney films examined in my bachelor's thesis were partially chosen based on the vast amount of criticism they had been exposed to. With a focus on a greater number of Disney films, with varying amounts of relevant criticism, it will hopefully become clear whether this hypothesis holds up.

2.3   Source material

Before moving on to the introduction and general overview of the films analyzed in this study, I will first discuss the process of choosing these particular films. Excluding material in a study such as this might be quite dangerous, as some choices might lead to somewhat selective results – which possibly has been the case with Brode's earlier mentioned work. The animated feature films included in this analysis have therefore been carefully chosen based on the following pre-established criteria.

1) The feature film has been released by Walt Disney Animation Studios sometime between 1989 and 2016.

To be able analyze Walt Disney Animation Studios' more contemporary approach towards race and ethnicity, I will clearly have to focus on films that have been released more recently. This criterion leaves us with 29 feature films, and to be able to narrow the scope even further, the films included in this study still have to meet a few additional requirements.

Based on the justification for my thesis, I want to focus on films that people from all over the world actually have seen. Disney could produce the most diverse and culturally sensitive film ever made – but would it matter if no one saw it? The second requirement consequently relates to popularity – a quite difficult concept, to which a subjective view really cannot be applied. However, a film with a great worldwide revenue could possibly be seen as a popular production; people have paid to see the film, merchandise has been sold, and people have generally been exposed to the feature and

what it might represent. Unfortunately, statistics like this are quite difficult to find, and the only numbers generally found are those of box-office revenue. This is a somewhat unreliable trait in this case, since there are many Hollywood blockbusters with a high box-office revenue that still have been poorly received. These "bad" films are usually not being watched over and over again, and they might just become "forgotten". This is why another element regarding popularity has to be considered – the ratings. There are many mediums and platforms for rating films – however, one of the most popular platforms today is the *Internet Movie Database*, IMDB, and it is here we turn for additional data. Unlike platforms such as *Rotten Tomatoes*, IMDB's ratings come solely from its users, which makes it more relevant for this particular criterion. A film with a high rating from general audiences, combined with an initial high worldwide-revenue, will arguably be remembered, as well as revisited many times. To determine popularity, we therefore apply these criteria to the remaining Disney films:

2) The film's worldwide box-office revenue exceeds 314 million (inflation adjusted) US dollars.
3) The film has a current (2018) rating of 7.1 or higher on IMDB.

The particular sum of 314 million US dollars, as well as the IMDB rating of 7.1, is based on the popularity of *The Princess and the Frog*. With mixed reviews and a somewhat mediocre worldwide revenue of 314 million dollars, the release of this film still marks the beginning of the period known as Disney's Revival Era. The introduction of Tiana as Disney's first African-American princess resulted in the film gaining presence in media already prior to its release, and the impact of this film can still be seen in popular culture and Disney's general branding. Based on the popularity of *The Princess and the Frog* in relation to its average worldwide revenue and rating, this film could arguably set the limit for what a popular Disney production is.

14 films passed the three requirements described above, and can now be considered in terms of the fourth, and most important, criterion:

4) The film features either a foreign or alien setting (that is based on a real culture or demographic), or central characters that belong to a racial or ethnic minority.

This criterion really relates to the essence of this thesis – as it, clearly, is the representation of these characters and their cultures that will be analyzed. While the minority, the foreign, and "the other" will be the focus of this study, a certain comparison between Western and non-Western settings and characters will surely find its way into the analysis.

It is, however, important to clarify that films set in the West, with Western non-minority characters, such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) or *Frozen* (2013), generally will remain unexamined, even though they did pass the three first requirements. As a result, we are now left with ten relevant, arguably popular, contemporary animated feature films; all presented in the table below.

Table 1: Relevant films by Walt Disney Animation Studios

Title	Year	Worldwide revenue	IMDB rating	Characters	Setting
Aladdin	1992	$906.9 million	8.0	Middle Eastern	Agrabah (fictional)
The Lion King	1994	$1,649.6 million	8.5	Animal	Africa
Hercules	1997	$397.4 million	7.3	African American	Ancient Greece
Mulan	1998	$471.3 million	7.6	Chinese	China
Tarzan	1999	$679.1 million	7.2	Caucasian	Africa
Lilo & Stitch	2002	$383.2 million	7.2	Hawaiian	Hawaii
The Princess and the Frog	2009	$314.2 million	7.1	African American	New Orleans
Big Hero 6	2014	$701.4 million	7.8	Multiracial	San Fransokyo (fictional)
Zootopia	2016	$1,076.8 million	8.0	Animal	Zootopia (fictional)
Moana	2016	$676.6 million	7.6	Polynesian	Ancient Polynesia

As one might notice, some films may appear more relevant than others, and a few additional films will therefore be excluded. These final exclusions are based on the film's relevance, as well as its year of release. To be able to discuss and determine change in Disney's portrayals of race and ethnicity as efficiently as possible, the films included in the analysis should be released over the widest possible period. The final criterion therefore reads as follows:

5) The films have been released at least two years apart from each other.

This final requirement leaves us with the seven animated films already listed earlier in this thesis. A few decisions still had to be made when applying this final criterion. For instance, the decision to exclude both *Hercules* and *Tarzan*, rather than just *Mulan*, was made on the amount of relevant data present in the films. While the African American-portrayed muses in *Hercules* generally were received positively by audiences, their minor presence in the feature does still not necessarily justify a qualitative analysis of the entire film – at least not when the data is compared to what possibly can be found in *Mulan*. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the minority representations found in the excluded feature films will be ignored entirely. If relevant issue appears in one of the chosen films, it might be useful to draw examples from other relevant films as well. Some of the excluded material could thus still be regarded as secondary sources for this study.

There is much to be said about the films chosen for this study, and to briefly introduce their characters, settings, and plots is no easy task. A general synopsis is, however, still quite necessary, and the films are consequently, however briefly, presented in the following subchapters. Relevant characters, scenes, and plot points will, of course, be discussed further in the analysis itself.

2.3.1 The Disney Renaissance

The Disney Renaissance is, as already mentioned, one of the most successful eras of Disney animation; even though the animation process generally got more expensive, the films themselves generated more profits than ever. The love for the films released during this period eventually turned some of these productions into Broadway musicals, and many of these Renaissance animations have already been (or are currently being) developed into live-action feature films by Walt Disney Studios. These films do, in other words, still remain quite relevant – even though they were released in the past millennium. The majority of Disney's Renaissance-films also feature non-Western settings and characters, and three of the films included in this study are, not surprisingly, found here.

The list of relevant films begins with *Aladdin* – an Academy Award-winning box-office success, with its plot and characters loosely based on one of the most well-known stories included in *The Thousand and One Nights*. This film, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, is set in the fictional and mystical city of Agrabah at an unspecified time in history, and follows the story of the orphan Aladdin who comes across a magical lamp that contains a genie. The genie grants Aladdin three wishes and the orphan boy consequently begins his pursuit to change his life to win the heart of princess Jasmine. Although being an instant success, *Aladdin* also received a lot of criticism from its audiences, including the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (Breaux, 2010). Many issues regarding Disney's portrayal of the Middle East were regarded as inaccurate and misrepresenting, and with the combination of the film's post-Gulf War and orientalist clichés, *Aladdin* eventually came to be regarded as one of the most controversial films of all time (King, 2010).

Walt Disney Animation Studios' following feature film, *The Lion King*, was released two years after *Aladdin*, and could arguably be seen as Disney's most popular film to date. This feature animation, directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, focuses on the life and journey of the lion Simba – the heir to the throne of the Pride Lands (based

on the African savannah). The events of *The Lion King* are arguably loosely based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, with the evil uncle Scar murdering Simba's father and usurping the throne. As a result, Simba has to flee, before eventually returning as a fully-grown lion, to take his rightful place as king. While a film featuring only animals might have felt like a safer choice than a film portraying a "real culture" and its people, *The Lion King* still received its fair share of criticism. Some critics and scholars have, for instance, criticized the lazy, freeloading, antagonistic hyenas for having "jive accents of decidedly urban black or Hispanic youth" (Giroux, 2010: 110). Nevertheless, this particular film is still fondly remembered, with, for instance, its Broadway adaptation being the third-longest-running Broadway musical of all time (The Broadway League, 2018).

Four years pass before the following film included in this study, *Mulan*, was released. In 1998, after films set in Pre-Colonial America, Medieval France, and Ancient Greece, Disney decided to release its first animated film set in China. This film (directed by Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft) features Disney's second non-white female protagonist (after *Pocahontas*) – a warrior woman with the same name as the film title. The story of Mulan takes place sometime during the Northern and Southern dynasties of China (420-589 A.D.), and is based on the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan. In the film adaptation, Mulan steals her father's armor and enlists in the Imperial army, disguised as a man. After immense training, as well as moral and tactical support from her dragon-companion Mushu, Mulan becomes a soldier, is sent into battle, and eventually (almost single-handedly) leads China to victory in the war against the Huns. While *Mulan* is one of the less criticized films included in this study, with many actually praising the film for being both feminist and progressive, the film was, interestingly enough, still not very popular in China (Ward, 2002). This particular reception and criticism will clearly be further discussed in relation to the main analysis of the film.

2.3.2   The Disney Post-Renaissance

Another four years pass, the Disney Renaissance ends, and a number of less successful feature films are released before Disney's 2002-feature *Lilo & Stitch* makes it to the silver screen. Disney's Post-Renaissance was clearly not as successful as its previous era, which can be seen based on the fact that *Lilo & Stitch* is the only film from this period to pass the earlier described popularity criteria. The film's popularity is, nonetheless, further established by the fact that it is the only Post-Renaissance film (yet) planned to get its

own live-action/CG adaptation in the near future (McNary, 2018). In this particular story, Lilo – a somewhat misunderstood and lonely orphan – befriends the creature Stitch – an alien experiment mistaken for a dog who eventually gets adopted by Lilo and her sister. With most of its events taking place on the island of Kauai, *Lilo & Stitch* is one of the few films from the Post-Renaissance to actually be set in a non-Western environment. It is unclear if Disney's choice to revisit exotic cultures was the reason for the film's success, but this fact does, nevertheless, make this feature quite relevant for this study. Interestingly enough, *Lilo & Stitch* is directed by Chris Sanders and Dean Deblois – two of the people most involved in the story-writing on *Mulan* – and similarly to *Mulan*, this particular feature have not been as criticized as *Aladdin* or *The Lion King*. Even in comparison with *Moana* (also set in Polynesia, but released over a decade later), *Lilo & Stitch* could possibly be regarded as the more progressive and culturally sensitive film, as it generally seems to have received more praise for its portrayal of Polynesian culture and people than *Moana*. All this might lead to a quite interesting comparison between *Lilo & Stitch* and the other films included in the analysis, as one could ask oneself if this film actually is more progressive and culturally sensitive than the other entries on the list. Are certain creative minds simply more considerate in terms of ethnic and racial representation, or is the positive criticism of *Lilo & Stitch* a result of other factors?

2.3.3   The Disney Revival Era

As the generally given name of this particular period might demonstrate, the Revival Era brought back much of Disney's former glory – beginning with the release of *The Princess and the Frog*. This is the fifth Disney film directed by Musker and Clements, and while the popularity surrounding this production and its role in the revival of Disney animation might already have been discussed, the plot of the film has still not been introduced. *The Princess and the Frog* centers on Tiana, the African-American protagonist of the story, who, after kissing a frog, accidentally turns into a frog herself. The transformation of Tiana takes her and the frog-prince Naveen on a journey through the Louisiana bayou, where they encounter new companions as they are searching for a way to break the frog-curse, put on by the evil voodoo witch Dr. Facilier (who turned Prince Naveen into a frog in the first place). To make Disney's first African-American princess narrative as progressive and free from racial bias as possible, Disney actually worked with various

African-American focus groups (McCoy Gregory, 2010). However, despite their efforts, the film still received a great deal of criticism, further explored in chapter 3.5.

After a number of successful titles following *The Princess and the Frog*, *Big Hero 6* was released. This film, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, was even more successful than some of its Disney Revival predecessors, and does, in fact, differ a great deal from the typical Disney films. Based on the Marvel comic book with the same name, *Big Hero 6* is actually Disney's first take on the superhero-narrative. The story focuses on the 14-year-old mixed-race protagonist Hiro Hamada and his healthcare robot Baymax. After the death of Hiro's brother Tadashi (the creator of Baymax), the protagonist eventually forms a team of superheroes, consisting of himself, Baymax and Tadashi's former friends from the university – all in order to solve the mystery of his brother's death. The film is also, interestingly enough, set in the fictional city of San Fransokyo – a fictional hybrid city combining characteristics from both San Francisco and Tokyo. *Big Hero 6* actually received a great deal of praise for its multicultural setting, and the film was generally received well by its audiences. The multiculturalism of this film will be an interesting area of focus, especially when compared to Disney's portrayal of Asian culture in *Mulan*, or Disney's other, already mentioned, fictional city Agrabah.

Moana is Disney's most recent film included in this study – and can actually be linked to many of the other entries. This is one of the three films of focus that have been directed by Disney veterans Musker and Clements. Furthermore, it was co-directed by Hall and Williams, the directors of *Big Hero 6*. It can even be linked to the only Post-Renaissance film in this study, as it shares some of its setting with *Lilo & Stitch*. Both films take place in what could be considered as Polynesia, but while *Lilo & Stitch* clearly is set in contemporary Hawaii, the fictional events of *Moana* takes place about 2000 years ago. The story centers on Moana – an islander (and the daughter of the village chief) eager to explore the seas and see more of the world. When her village begins to struggle to survive on their dying island, Moana ventures out to see to seek the help of the demi-god Maui, and together they embark on a journey similar to the one found in *The Princess and the Frog*. Similarly to that film, Disney's production of *Moana* was influenced by relevant focus groups. Nevertheless, while receiving less criticism than *The Princess and the Frog*, *Moana* has still been the center of some controversy – for instance regarding the representation of Maui as an overweight, lazy man, rather than a slim, heroic demigod.

2.4   Concepts and theory

We now know what material this study is going to focus on. We have familiarized ourselves with the earlier research, and we know where this study fits into it all. The research questions have been established, and we are almost ready to begin the analysis. However, we still have to discuss the theory and concepts relevant for this study. The frequently mentioned terms *Disney*, *race*, *ethnicity*, and *minority* have to be defined in more detail, and while it has been established that a qualitative analysis of the seven chosen films is required in order to answer the main research question of this thesis, the specific theory essential for the analysis has still not been established. As we are dealing with portrayals of race and ethnicity in Western film, significant theories such as imagology, postcolonialism, and disneyfication consequently require revision and discussion in the following subchapters.

2.4.1   Disney

The term *Disney* has, as mentioned, been frequently used in this study, usually as an umbrella term for the company, the studio, the producers, the directors, and everyone else involved with the material of focus in this study. *Disney* has, thus, so far, been more or less regarded as the author of this particular source material. However, when focusing on how the portrayals of race and ethnicity in these films have changed over time, it would be somewhat unreliable to simply regard Disney (as a whole) as the creative force behind the film, since it is possible that certain stereotyping (or progressive cultural sensitivity) could be more frequent with, for example, a certain director. Had this study focused on a novel, a poem, or any literary work by a specific author, it would have been fairly easy to link the creative choices found in the literary work to the aforementioned author. It is quite clear that this issue becomes more complicated with (Disney) films, due to the vast amount of people it takes to actually make an animated feature film.

While the director sometimes can be seen as the author of the film (see e.g. Auteur theory), it is still quite difficult to argue that an animated Disney feature film is the result of a single creative mind. As many of the films chosen for this study also have different directors, an analysis completely reliant on the premises of Auteur theory would not work, as we are trying to determine whether (all) the films produced by Walt Disney Animation

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Studios (irrespective to the films' directors) are becoming more progressive and culturally sensitive. The term *Disney* will therefore, generally and continuously be used as an umbrella term for everything closely associated with the authorship of the films chosen for this study. When referring to *Disney's* approach towards race and ethnicity in this thesis, we consequently refer to the approach of all these creative minds behind the specific Disney films. Nevertheless, a specific chapter will be reserved for analyzing and discussing the directors' impacts on the films, as well as the division of the artistic and creative responsibility between the filmmakers and the studio.

2.4.2   Race, ethnicity, and minority

While terms such as race, ethnicity, diversity, multiculturalism, and minority generally might be familiar to many, a few of these specific concepts will still need to be clarified before moving on with the study, as to avoid confusion and ambiguity.

 Race is probably one of the more complicated words present in this study, mainly due to its somewhat controversial, complex and ever-changing meanings. Starting out as a denominator for people from distinct families and heritage, *race* went on to refer to people from different cultures and nations, before it eventually became a categorical term for the division of people based on their physical traits. In the beginning of the nineteenth Century, Georges Cuvier hierarchically divided humanity into three separate varieties; Caucasian, Ethiopian and Mongolian (basically white, black and yellow). With their physical differences as foundation, Cuvier argued Caucasians to be superior to the other races – an argument that has been used to justify many injustices ever since (Derksen, 2007). Thankfully, this is clearly not the general or scientific consensus today, and race is no longer treated as a biological concept – at least not in that sense. Today, the word *race* has gained a more social and subjective meaning , with the word now referring to "[a]n ethnic group, regarded as showing a common origin and descent; a tribe, nation, or people, regarded as of common stock" (The Oxford English Dictionary, 2008).

 This brings us to the term ethnicity. The OED describes *ethnicity* as "[s]tatus in respect of membership of a group regarded as ultimately of common descent, or having a common national or cultural tradition; ethnic character" (The Oxford English Dictionary, 2014). This might resemble the earlier mentioned definition of *race*, and the words could, in this sense, be regarded as synonyms. Nevertheless, *race* generally refers to what can be determined based on physical traits, while *ethnicity* is determined based

on cultural factors, such as religion, nationality or language. Based on this definition, a person could arguably belong to several ethnic groups, while one usually is regarded as belonging to one race (or being mixed-race).

However, the meanings and definitions of these words might still overlap, especially since the definition of *race* to this day generally remains somewhat ambiguous. An example of this ambiguity can be found in the United States Decennial Census, in which the US population has been divided into different races for statistical purposes.

Table 2: The races of the United States in 2010

Race	Percent of US population
White	72.4
Black or African American	12.6
Asian	4.8
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.9
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.2
Some other race	6.2
Two or more races	2.9

Source: Humes et al., 2011

This quite simplistic division has been present, although updated, since 1790, and the approach has received some criticism (see e.g. Snipp, 2003). The US Census Bureau's decision to exclude Hispanic and Latino as alternatives for race (and rather presents the additional question "Are you of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin?") have, for example, raised some questions (López, 2018). Simultaneously, other informative sources, such as Encyclopædia Britannica, lists, for instance, African Americans as an "ethnic group" (Lynch, 2019), rather than a racial group. Due to this ambiguity, I have chosen to treat the concept of race in a similar manner as described in The National Research Council's *Measuring Racial Discrimination* (2004), in which they state the following:

> There is no single concept of race. Rather, race is a complex concept, best viewed for social science purposes as a subjective social construct based on observed or ascribed characteristics that have acquired socially significant meaning.

> (The National Research Council, 2004: 38)

Nevertheless, to ignore or favor either the term *race* or *ethnicity* in this study might not lead to a meaningful analysis. Whether Aladdin is Middle Eastern in terms of race or ethnicity does not necessarily matter for this particular study, and as there clearly are

various interpretations of the words, I have decided to treat them (more or less) as a unity – keeping in mind the earlier mentioned general lines of race being a question of physical traits, and ethnicity being a question of culture. This study does, in other words, not focus on solely racial nor solely ethnic minorities, but both terms are included as to not leave out any specific minority of importance.

When determining what a racial or ethnic minority in the Western world is, one could use the statistics by the United States Census Bureau here listed in Table 2 as a reference. With "White" constituting about to thirds of the US population, one could clearly regard the other races as minorities. While it might be a bit dubious to refer to these minorities as minorities in the Western World, as the statistics only refer to the United States, these demographics could arguably still be regarded as minorities in Europe and Australia as well. The same is true for all the characters analyzed in this study. While, for example, the character Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (set in France) could be regarded as belonging to an ethnic minority if she had lived in the United States, she does still not belong to a minority when looking at the entire Western world – and this particular type of character is therefore, as earlier established, not included in this study.

2.4.3 Imagology

"The tendency to attribute specific characteristics or even characters to different societies, races or 'nations' is very old and very widespread" (Leersen, 2007). The study of the constructed representations of national characters in literature – here defined as imagology – has, however, not been around for that long. While the early studies of national characters and characteristics generally focused on proving that certain behavior and ideologies were linked to a certain race or nationality, the modern imagology is arguably doing the opposite. After the Second World War, a new interest was put on the perception of national characters and characteristics, the concept of stereotypes gained more attention, and imagology eventually emerged. While imagology found its ground in comparative literature, it has since then become something of an interdisciplinary study, with strong links to social sciences (Chew, 2006). Imagology will, likewise be applied to the analyses found in this study.

Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen's *Imagology: The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters: A critical survey* was published in 2007, and contains various articles and on the subject of imagology. This volume will hopefully

prove itself quite useful in the upcoming analysis, as it also contains surveys on stereotypes and characteristics usually ascribed to specific ethnicities and nationalities. To alone determine whether or not something is a stereotype might be a quite subjective task, and Beller and Leerssen's work might provide the objectivity required for this part of the study. By referring to these surveys and articles, written by various scholars with varying national and ethnic backgrounds, it will hopefully be possible to demonstrate whether the issues present in the analyzed films feed into certain common stereotypical views.

2.4.4   Postcolonialism and orientalism

Ever since there have been Western colonizers and colonies, there have also been Western texts about these colonies and their inhabitants. Most of these texts have been written *by* the colonizers – *about* the colonized. As the name suggests, postcolonialism deals with what comes after the colonization. By highlighting the separate meanings of "post-colonialism" and "postcolonialism", Camelia Elias (*The Way of the Sign*, 2011) critically defines this concept even further. While the aftermath, the effects and the products of imperialism and colonization have been the focus for post-colonial criticism, it is the representations of people and cultures before colonization, during colonization, and after colonization that is important in postcolonial criticism (Elias, 2011). Postcolonial literary criticism regards the Western texts about the colonies as unreliable narratives, and brings attention to the value of colonized peoples' own representations of themselves and their cultures. As all films included in this study could arguably be seen as set in areas affected by the British Empire, and with Disney being the huge Western company it is today, postcolonialism will clearly remain central in this study.

A reoccurring term in discourse relating to postcolonial criticism and theory is *orientalism*. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term "orientalism" generally referred to the study of Asian or Eastern cultures. By the end of the twentieth century, however, "Asian studies" had almost entirely replaced the earlier term – probably as a direct result of the Palestinian American scholar Edward Said, and the publishing of his work *Orientalism* in 1978 (Thomas, 2014). Here, Said uses the term *orientalism* to refer to the Western interpretation of "the orient", rather than the studies about it.

> "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient."

<div align="right">(Said, 1978: 3)</div>

The biased representation of the East, described in *Orientalism*, is usually based on stereotypes and prejudice; it is patronizing, fictional, and supports the notion of cultural imperialism, as well as the Western colonial policy. According to Said, this form of orientalism has been present ever since the eighteenth century and the colonialization of the Middle East. Besides bringing more focus to "the orient" and the Islamic world, Edward Said also emphasized and defined the notion of *the other* – i.e. the binary relationship between *us* and *them*, (here) created by the colonizers and the West – which has remained quite central in much of the post-colonial literature. This type of orientalism, with a special focus on the concept of "othering", will be examined further in relation to the films chosen for this study.

2.4.5 Disneyfication

Disneyfication is, as mentioned, another concept central to this thesis. With the large number of studies made on Disney in various fields, disneyfication has become something of a loose term. A quick online search usually gives us the sociology-related definition of disneyfication; a transformation of a society into something that could resemble a Disney theme park, all relating to Western-globalization, consumerism and merchandizing. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines disneyfication as "the transformation (as of something real or unsettling) into carefully controlled and safe entertainment or an environment with similar qualities" (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2019). This definition does not only fit in the field of sociology, but in literary criticism as well.

In *Understanding Disney* (2001), Janet Wasko discusses how Disney, since the very beginning, have disneyfied the folk- and fairytales and used them as source material for their films. Wasko argues that the disneyfication-process includes "sanitization and Americanization" (2001: 113), or westernization; the source material is, in other words, rewritten so it is better suited for young American (or Western) audiences. While this might seem like a logical and profitable decision on Disney's part (with young Americans

as their main audience), this has many times also resulted in a backlash from the real population that these stories originally belong to, as the process of disneyfication often change, simplify or westernize quite important aspects of the source material. The source material is often turned into what Wasko presents as the classic Disney film, which she describes with the following formula:

Table 3: The classic Disney film

Style	Themes/Values
- Light entertainment - Music - Humor (usually physical gags and slapstick) ***Story*** - Often revised fairy tales or folklore - Classic Hollywood cinema model ***Characters*** - Anthropomorphized, neotenized animal characters - Formulaic heroines, heroes, villains, sidekicks - Stereotypical representations of gender and ethnicity - Good over evil	- Mainstream American - Individualism - Work ethic - Optimism - Escape, fantasy, magic, imagination - Innocence - Romance, happiness - Good over evil

Source: Wasko, 2001: 114

As all films but one (*Lilo & Stitch*) are based on source material not written by the filmmakers, it will be interesting to see whether these characteristics appear in the different films, and how they have affected the reception of the feature itself.

3. Results

As the theoretical framework has been established, it is now time for the main part of this thesis. This chapter is reserved for the analyses of the films chosen for this study. The seven films will, as mentioned, be analyzed with a focus on imagology, postcolonialism, and disneyfication, as well as the reviews and the criticism these films have received in general. The results will be presented separately, in a chronological order based on the feature films' year of release. While some comparison between the films naturally will occur here, the real question of change will, however, be the focus of Chapter 4.

3.1 Aladdin

"Unconscious racism is still alive and well in Hollywood"; so argues Jack Shaheen in the 1993 article "Aladdin: Animated Racism" (1993: 49). Although the degree of Disney's unconsciousness could be questioned, racism, irrespective to its nature, clearly remains relevant in relation to the animated feature film *Aladdin*.

3.1.1 The Disney Orient

One does not have to wait long before the problematic issues start to arise in Walt Disney Animation Studios' 31st feature film, as its opening song "Arabian Nights", sung by a merchant riding a camel through the desert, quickly became a topic of controversy. In the original version of the film, the song started with the following lines:

> Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place
> Where the caravan camels roam
> Where they cut off your ear
> If they don't like your face
> It's barbaric, but hey, it's home
>
> (*Aladdin*, 1992)

It is not difficult to understand that "Arabian Nights" offended and agitated many, as it, as Shaheen puts it, "slandered the heritage of 300 million Arabs" (1993: 49). The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee asked for the removal of the song, and

the line "Where they cut off your ear / if they don't like your face" was consequently changed to "Where it's flat and immense/ and the heat is intense" for the home-video versions of the film (Giroux, 2010). Nevertheless, even with this change of lyrics, "Arabian Nights" still introduces *Aladdin*'s audience to a strange, mystical and somewhat barbaric setting.

This particular introduction is arguably a text-book example of Said's (1978) notion of orientalism. The earlier mentioned merchant sings about the desert and flying carpets, and greets the viewers with the lines "Ah, Salaam and good evening to you worthy friend. […] Welcome to Agrabah, city of mystery, of enchantment, and the finest merchandise this side of the River Jordan, on sale today" (*Aladdin*, 1992). This, apparently, is Disney's orient; a combination of elements found in old Arabian folktales, and Western stereotypes of the Arabs as greedy merchants with "the finest merchandise", which here breaks as soon as the merchant touches it. These merchants really have a presence throughout the film, and can usually be seen or heard somewhere in the background, selling, for example, dates and figs – but the instances of Western orientalism do not stop here. The film feature many exotic animals (usually pets, like the monkey *Abu*, the tiger *Rajah*, and the parrot *Iago*), and the streets of Agrabah are filled with sword swallowers, fire breathers, and belly dancers. Furthermore, even some of the more orientalist elements central to the story, such as the flying carpet, are, in fact introduced solely by Disney, and do not exist in the original version found in *The Thousand and One Nights*. Traces of orientalism can also be seen through the character designs, especially if one focuses on the "exotic" clothing of the Princess Jasmine. While most of the female characters in the film do not speak, and often only appear in the background, one can still see that they all usually dress according to Islamic fashion, for example by wearing a headdress. Jasmine, on the other hand, does not wear a headdress and her clothes are, in fact, quite revealing. Lacroix (2004) believes this to be an example of the orientalization of Middle Eastern women (discussed by Said), and argues that Jasmine's costume "plays into Western cultural notions of the Orient through the referencing of the imagery of the harem and the associated exotic, sexual stereotypes" (2004: 221). One might argue that Jasmine looks nothing like a Middle Eastern Islamic princess, and more like one of the harem girls that also resides in the city of Agrabah.

While Disney's orientalist representation of the Middle East can be questioned, it is also important to point out that Agrabah is a fictional city. One could therefore argue that Disney represents a fairytale orient, rather than the real Middle East. This argument

still becomes somewhat dubious, due to the narrative structure of *Aladdin*. The story of Aladdin is presented by the narrator – the merchant – as something that happened long ago. However, he simultaneously enters Agrabah on camelback before he begins his story. In other words, while the story of Aladdin alone might be a legend, the city of Agrabah is, in this film, a real place. More links to the "real world", which simultaneously makes Agrabah more "real", can also be seen during Aladdin and Jasmine's magic carpet ride, as they pass historic landmarks, such as the sphinx and the Forbidden City. The orientalist Agrabah might, consequently, be considered by some as a truthful representation of the Middle East. This argument is further strengthened by the fact that *Aladdin* originally was supposed to be set in Baghdad. The setting was, however, changed due to the ongoing conflicts in the Gulf War between the United States and Iraq (Waxman, 2019).

3.1.2   The Disney Arab

While the barbaric setting of *Aladdin* raised some questions, many also reacted strongly to the unsympathetic and harsh nature of many of the Arab characters in the film (see e.g. Shaheen, 1993), such as the various merchants and the sultan's guards. While the audiences might feel sorry for Aladdin and the other homeless and hungry children that live on the streets of Agrabah, the merchants and the guards show no sympathy towards these poor characters at all. The guards draw their swords and chase Aladdin all over the city – all because he stole a loaf of bread. Further on in the film, they even laugh and seem to enjoy themselves as they try to kill Aladdin on the orders of the main antagonist, Jafar. In one particular scene, a merchant even goes as far as to try to cut off Jasmine's hand when she takes an apple and gives it to a hungry boy; another scene that many critics have objected to (James, 2009). As Shaheen, who criticizes Disney for ignoring the Islamic values relating to compassion, again puts it: "What will children reason about Islam, a religion embraced by more than 1 billion people, on hearing a street vendor insist that the standard penalty for stealing is chopping off one's hand?" (1993: 49). Most of the additional characters featured in Aladdin (with the exception of the protagonist and his friends) possess these unsympathetic attributes, and seem like the kind of people one does not want to meet in reality. Additionally, the remaining characters with speaking parts are mostly thieves or harem girls. This truly makes the community of Agrabah, and perhaps metonymically the whole Middle East, look like a barbaric wasteland.

Nevertheless, Aladdin and his friends are clearly, as mentioned, portrayed in a more sympathetic manner. This is quite interesting due to the fact that Aladdin, Jasmine, and the Sultan all belong to the same demographic as the one described above. However, while one could argue that the protagonist is portrayed as a "good Arab", it is still somewhat misleading as Aladdin, in fact, appears more American than Arab. While the "bad" characters in *Aladdin* are portrayed with caricaturized features, such as dark beards, big noses, thick accents and slightly darker skin, Aladdin is a clean-shaven adolescent with Caucasian physical attributes and a distinct American accent. The other "good" main characters share many of Aladdin's features as well, and these "black-and-white" portrayals have, not surprisingly, received a great deal of criticism.

The Middle Eastern characters' approach towards religion is another matter of interest. As Di Giovanni (2014) points out, Disney usually uses different linguistic aids to reinforce the feeling of the distant culture represented in their films, and familiar western expressions included in *Aladdin* have consequently been transformed to support the setting of this narrative; for instance the expression "God forbid" has been transformed into "Allah forbid". Yet, expressions such as "by Allah" and "praise Allah" are never used by Aladdin or Jasmine. *Aladdin*'s protagonists are, in other words, never associated with Islam, and "Muslim" is probably not the first word that comes to mind if a viewer is asked to describe the hero or the heroine of the story. Disney has clearly westernized (or disneyfied) its protagonists to make them more appealing to Western audiences, but by portraying the remaining characters as thieves and barbarians, Disney has created a clear polarization that reinforces the negative stereotypes of Arabs – and simultaneously makes the Arab "the other".

Nevertheless, while the antagonist Jafar, per definition, is considered to be one of the "bad Arabs", there is still a few interesting differences between him and the rest of the barbaric population of Agrabah. Even though Jafar is bearded, wears a turban and, like the other minor antagonists, have a slightly darker skin-color, this evil sorcerer does not possess a Middle Eastern accent, but speaks with a distinct British accent. While keeping the earlier arguments of making someone (or something) "the other" in mind, one might wonder why Disney decided not to give this antagonist a Middle Eastern accent. Interestingly enough, many have argued (see e.g. Mitchell-Smith, 2012: 218) that Disney often uses the standard British accent to indicate intelligence or authority. Jafar is clearly intelligent; he is a skilled sorcerer and knows a great deal about the occult and the magical lamp. He is also able to brainwash and control the Sultan through magic, which

again gives him some kind of authority. It could, in other words, be possible that Disney saw it unsuitable to give Jafar a Middle Eastern accent, due to his intelligence and authority; these attributes had to be associated with something more familiar, such as a British accent. The notion of the British villain is, however, quite common in American film, and Disney might simply be following the standard Hollywood practice by making Jafar British. Whatever the case may be, the Middle Eastern accent in *Aladdin* still remains associated with poverty, stupidity, and barbaric behavior.

3.2   The Lion King

The Lion King was, as mentioned, the following film released by Walt Disney Animation Studios after *Aladdin*. With directors Allers and Minkoff, Disney created the arguably most successful hand-drawn animated feature film of all time – but *The Lion King* is, as mentioned, not without its criticism. However, the fact that the criticism mostly focuses on race and ethnicity is quite interesting due to the fact that the film only portrays animal characters.

3.2.1   Disney's Africa

The Lion King begins with a dark screen and faint nature sounds – a red sun rises, and the film's opening song "Circle of Life" begins with Zulu chanting. The audience is immediately provided with images of various animals associated with the African savannah, as well as shots of real landmarks such as the Victoria Falls and Mount Kilimanjaro, before the camera finally centers on Pride Rock – the fictional home of the lions. This colorful setting is quite different from many of the colonial representations of "the dark continent", and some (e.g. Towbin et al.) have considered this to be a quite positive and fair representation of Africa. While this might be somewhat true, one could also argue that African culture barely has a presence in the film. It is true that Disney use both Zulu and Swahili for some of the film's songs, as well as for some of its character names – but only one character in *The Lion King* is portrayed with an African accent. The fact that this character happens to be the eccentric baboon Rafiki is yet another somewhat problematic issue. Similarly to what happens in *Aladdin*, the main demographic of the portrayed setting is, thus, again subjected to othering, and while Rafiki remains one of

the "good guys", he is still described as a "creepy little monkey" and possesses a somewhat different mindset than the lions. Furthermore, no humans (and therefore no real Africans) are present in the film, and no links to African history are ever provided. In other words, the events of *The Lion King* could actually take place in a world where no Africans, or any humans exist (be that in the past, in the future, or in an alternate universe). There are varying opinions regarding this representation of Africa; Gooding-Williams (1995), for example, argues that Disney's Africa partially might be built on the Western presumption that Africa is without its own real history and culture – and that Disney therefore had no interest in portraying Africans and their culture. Others have even hinted at a certain reluctance by Disney to portray Africans as humans (see e.g. Byrne & McQuillan, 1999). However, one can clearly only assume what Disney's reasons for excluding Africans and African history in *The Lion King* really were.

3.2.2   Stereotypical animals

Some examples of how Disney has played on cultural stereotypes through animals was already presented in the beginning of this thesis. The characters in *The Lion King* are all, as mentioned, talking animals, and the stereotypes that many of the earlier Disney animals represent can be found here as well, which partially could be seen with the earlier mentioned Rafiki. Giroux classifies this stereotyping as being done mostly through "[r]acially coded representations and language" (2010: 110). Similarly to what is happening in *Aladdin*, the "good" animals in *The Lion King* have been given brighter-colored features, while the "bad" animals all have dark skin. Even the antagonist Scar – another lion and a close relative to the protagonist – has a black mane and brown skin. Like many of the Disney villains, Scar (voiced by Jeremy Irons) is portrayed with a British accent – arguably for the same reasons as Jafar. However, it is not the main antagonist Scar, nor the eccentric Rafiki, that has been the main source of the criticism regarding *The Lion King*.

In his *Social Identities* article from 1995, Gooding-Williams argues that Disney's Africa, in fact, is nothing more than an allegory for Disney's America. In the film, the civilized animals inhabit the prosperous pride lands (all taking part in the circle of life), while the uncivilized antagonistic hyenas live in the "Elephant Graveyard" (the dangerous "shadowy place", to which Simba is forbidden to go) outside the lion kingdom. It is fairly easy to argue that the land of the hyenas could be seen as a metaphor for the American

inner cities, or "ghettos" – especially when one takes a closer look at the racial characteristics of the hyenas themselves. The two hyenas with actual lines in the film (Shenzi and Banzai) are voiced by Whoopi Goldberg and Cheech Marin; and, similarly to what happens in *Aladdin*, these characters do not use a "mainstream US English" like the film's "good characters". While Goldberg's Shenzi uses an African-American accent, Marin's Banzai (as Lippi-Green puts it) "shifts in and out of Latino-accented English, throwing in Spanish at one point […] to make sure there is no mistake about his ethnicity" (2012: 122). Towbin et al. also describes the hyenas in *The Lion King* as mimicking "stereotypes of inner-city minorities; they are portrayed as sinister and thieving, and they often complain that the lions maintain the power in their society" (2004: 36). The antagonistic characteristics of the hyenas, combined with the way they talk and where they live, really creates a stereotypical (and even racist) metaphor of ethnic minorities in American inner cities. It is quite interesting how the African Americans, in a way, are portrayed as "the other", even in a story set in Africa.

However, as Byrne and McQuillan point out, this issue does still become somewhat "complicated by the fact that both hyena and lion are figured as black" (1999: 103). Unlike *Aladdin* (where "Arabic" accents were provided by Caucasian voice actors), many of the voice actors in *The Lion King* are African American, providing voices to both "good" and "bad" characters. For instance, Simba's parents are voiced by African-Jamaican actress Madge Sinclair and African-American actor James Earl Jones. Even the main protagonist could be regarded as partially African American, due to the fact that the singing voice of young Simba is provided by Jason Weaver – known (among other things) for playing a young Michael Jackson in "Young Jacksons: An American Dream". This consequently makes this issue less "black and white" than it is in *Aladdin*. Nevertheless, one could still argue that the accents and dialects of the "bad" characters in *The Lion King* are more distinguished than those of the "good" characters.

3.3   Mulan

> Tsiek tsiek and again tsiek tsiek,
> Mu-lan weaves, facing the door.
> You don't hear the shuttle's sound,
> You only hear Daughter's sighs.
> They ask Daughter who's in her heart,

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They ask Daughter who's on her mind.
"No one is on Daughter's heart,
No one is on Daughter's mind.
Last night I saw the draft posters,
The Khan is calling many troops,
The army list is in twelve scrolls,
On every scroll there's Father's name.
Father has no grown-up son,
Mu-lan has no elder brother.
I want to buy a saddle and horse,
And serve in the army in Father's place."

(Frankel, 1976: 68)

So beings *The Ballad of Mulan*, the Chinese poem (here translated by Hans Frankel), written sometime around the fifth or sixth century. While the main plot of the poem and Disney's *Mulan* are somewhat similar, there are still, however, certain differences between the original and Disney's version. Some of these differences, described in the following subchapters, did not necessarily work in Disney's favor.

3.3.1 When West meets East

In a similar manner as with *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*, the audience is exposed to the foreign culture of *Mulan* as soon as the film begins. Exotic music plays as the screen follows what looks like calligraphic lines, before the title *Mulan* appears above a red dragon. The screen then fades in on the Great Wall, where the plot of the film immediately begins. Here, the audience is quickly introduced to the antagonists of the film – the Huns, who have begun their invasion of China. Chinese warning beacons are lit, and the screen cuts to the Forbidden City – another iconic piece of Chinese setting – where the Emperor declares that one man from every family shall enlist and protect their homeland against the invaders. This type of representation of Chinese culture retains a presence throughout the film, and Disney has, in fact, received some praise for its portrayal of China (see e.g. Dong, 2010: 164). China in itself is, unlike *Aladdin*'s Agrabah, not portrayed as a barbaric wasteland, but as an impressive kingdom, filled with cherry trees, high mountains and beautiful architecture. Simultaneously, unlike *The Lion King*, *Mulan*'s China is actually inhabited by people that lived during a (more or less) specific time in history.

However, while *Mulan* clearly did well domestically (as it is included as one of the most popular films in this study), it was still, as mentioned earlier, somewhat

unsuccessful in China. While the disappointing box office results in China might be related to timing and other more bureaucratic issues, Chinese audiences also criticized the film for being too Western (BBC News, 1999). This time it was not the general representation of China that was the problem, but rather the representation of its cultural values. Ward discusses this criticism in *Mouse Morality*, and argues that Disney here favors the (generalized) "Western" individualistic values, over the "Eastern" collectivistic values (2002: 97-99). While the Mulan of the original poem goes to war for honor, Disney's Mulan does it (as she later admits) to find out who she really is – a common theme in Disney's films. Nevertheless, unlike earlier examples in this analysis, this is not really a case of stereotyping, but rather westernization and disneyfication. While this makes this issue more complicated in terms of racial and ethnic portrayals, the choice to include Western values in a Western movie aimed for children is also somewhat more understandable and even defensible. Nevertheless, this does become a question of cultural appropriation, and this particular disneyfication does, in fact, become problematic, as it leads to a certain "othering", described in the following sub-chapter.

3.3.2   The American, the Chinese, and the African American

In the already mentioned documentary *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*, its writer and producer, Chyng Feng Sun, states the following:

> If we compared the Siamese cats [*Aristocats*, 1970] with Mulan, I must say that Disney has made very significant improvement in the visual portrayal of Chinese. However, in order to create this model feminist figure, China is portrayed as probably the most sexist and oppressive society in all Disney's children's films.

> (Chyng, 2001)

As already stated, and as many have noticed and criticized (see e.g. Dong, 2010), Mulan, as a character, is portrayed with many Western values. She has been regarded as one of the most feminist and progressive "Disney Princesses", and she repeatedly has to work hard to prove herself in a China dominated by men. Throughout the film, she is being told to be quiet in a man's presence, and many of the musical numbers feature lines such as:

> 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

Furthermore, the song "Honor to us all", to which these lines belong, is later countered by Mulan's solo performance "Reflection"; in which the protagonist sings about her role in the world, about fitting in, and about being true to whom she actually is. According to Ward, this is "a conflicted version of Chinese culture, one that attempts to acknowledge the collectivist mind-set but in reality sets in within a Western idea of individualism" (2002: 112). Mulan both questions and breaks the norms of Chinese society – and simultaneously becomes "American", all while making China "the other".

Nevertheless, the visual or linguistic othering, which clearly was present in *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*, is not as clear in *Mulan*. Even though the leader of the Huns, Shan Yu, is portrayed almost animal-like (big and skulking, with yellow eyes and fangs), the Chinese soldiers retain more sympathetic and non-stereotypical features. The film sticks to this formula in relation to other aspects as well; with the Huns being the bad "others", while the Chinese remain the good (and civilized) characters. This is, of course, still a case of othering, but not a polarization of Western and non-Western, or Caucasian and non-Caucasian, which has been the case in earlier films. *Mulan* has, as mentioned, really received some praise for its representation of China, and old stereotypes of "Chinese cunning, deviousness, duplicity […], treachery, greed and malice" (Schweiger, 2007: 128) are barely present in the film. However, it is still worth repeating that the general Chinese population remains "the other" in relation to the Western-valued protagonist. They are not "the worst other", but "the other" nonetheless.

It would also not be a Disney film without some comic relief from an ethnic minority character. In *Mulan*, this part is filled by the little red dragon Mushu, voiced by Eddie Murphy. While one might find a well-established comedian such as Murphy perfect for this part, and while the character Mushu is likeable, he is still portrayed as "a fast-talking, self-absorbed Chinese dragon and the self-appointed guardian of Fa Mulan". This description, found and the top of the character's entry in the Disney Wiki (2019), is not necessarily positive, and does, ironically enough, resemble Giroux's quite critic description of Mushu as "a servile and boastful clown who seems unsuited to a mythic fable about China" (Giroux, 2010: 110). Linguistically, Mushu is clearly African

American, and while he remains one of the "good guys", it is still difficult to ignore some of his more negative characteristics and the way these specific character traits tend to link themselves to certain ethnicities in Disney's films. This particular issue does, however, raise a question partially found in Brode's work (2005: 264): is this type of comic character (self-centered, fast-talking, and obnoxious) then "off-limits" for actors that belong to a specific ethnic minority? Would it have been better if a Caucasian or Asian voice actor had portrayed the character Mushu? This would have meant that no African-American actors would have been included in *Mulan*. This issue will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

3.4   Lilo & Stitch

Lilo & Stitch does, as mentioned, appear to be one of the least criticized films examined in this study. However, while it also is the only film from Disney's Post-Renaissance Era to pass this study's popularity criteria, it simultaneously remains one of the less popular films analyzed in this thesis. Although dealing with alien creatures, the majority of the film's main characters are Hawaiian, and almost the entire film is set on the island of Kauai. *Lilo & Stitch* was originally supposed to be set in Kansas, but the location was later changed by directors Sanders and DeBlois. Consequently, the tools Disney use to portray Hawaii, its people, and its culture will now be examined in more detail.

3.4.1   Welcome to paradise

Unlike all of the earlier examined films, *Lilo & Stitch* does not begin in the foreign culture that is portrayed throughout the narrative, but in space. In this prologue, the experiment 626 (a.k.a. Stitch) and his creator Jumba are facing a trial at the "Space Federation", and Stitch is eventually imprisoned as he is rendered too dangerous to be free. Stitch does, however, escape and an intense spaceship chase follows. Stitch still manages to get away, but the Space Federation are not too worried; his ship is heading towards a small island on the planet "E-arth", which consists mostly of water, and Experiment 626 cannot swim.

This is where we cut to the main title, as Hawaiian music (performed and partially composed by Hawaiian musician Mark Keali'i Ho'omalu) is playing in the background. In a similar fashion as in the already analyzed films, the audience is introduced to the

film's main setting via exotic colors and visuals. Colorful exotic fish fill the screen, dolphins are swimming in the ocean, the water is clear blue (almost turquoise), and a little girl (Lilo) is swimming through the ocean. She rushes to her hula dance class, and manages to sneak in and join the performance even though she is late. This is Hawaii – a tropical and exotic, yet relatively modern, paradise, portrayed in a very positive light. After introducing Lilo as the other main character, and establishing the relationship between her and her "friends", as well as her sister Nani, Stitch enters the picture. He is adopted by Lilo, who believes him to be a dog, and they eventually become close friends. As the alien initially tries to find a way off the island, riding Lilo's bicycle from coast to coast, we are introduced to many typical (and real) landmarks of Kauai; beaches filled with tourists, large cliffs and mountains, and even the Kilauea Lighthouse. The audience is constantly reminded that they are in Hawaii, and the corresponding exoticism would probably have been more difficult to achieve if the film had been set in Kansas.

But does this exoticism become problematic, in a similar fashion as it, for instance, did in *Aladdin*? The truth is that it almost does not. A quick google search on stereotypes about modern Hawaii and Hawaiians gives us examples like, "Hawaiians live in grass huts on the beach", "They ride dolphins to school or work", and "Girls walk around in coconut bikinis" (Keoni, 2017) – but none of these stereotypes are reinforced in *Lilo & Stitch*. Dolphins do swim close to Lilo as she makes her way to hula practice, but she does not ride them; the hula practice takes place in a wooden house, not a hut; and the hula dancers are wearing traditional hula clothing, not coconut bikinis. The film does, in other words, address the cultural and geographical characteristics of its setting without building on stereotypes. *Lilo & Stitch* actually received a lot of praise for its fair and accurate portrayal of Hawaii, and has been considered, among other things, as "the film that best captures the true spirit of Hawaii" (Fischer, 2019).

Another interesting aspect about Disney's Hawaii in *Lilo & Stitch* is the fact that the setting mostly is seen through the eyes of a local – Lilo. The following statement about imagology and Polynesia can be found in Beller and Leerssen (2007):

> The vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean […] has long been the ultimate locus of exoticism in the European imagination. In the European literary imagination, the Pacific islands take shape as a tropical otherworld where strayed travelers are marooned: from Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe to Jonathan Swift's Gulliver.
>
> (Leersen, 2007: 219)

These narratives are, in other words, often told through the perspective of a Western character. While it is true that Stitch is a stranger to Hawaii and its customs, as well as someone who technically has been shipwrecked and stranded on a tropical island, Lilo (arguably) still remains the main protagonist. This is supported by the fact that Stitch is an alien of few words. One can suspect that the chance for offensive or stereotypical representation might have been higher, if a similar story where the alien would have been replaced by a Western character had been made.

3.4.2   Natives, locals, tourists, and aliens

On her way to hula practice, Lilo stops to take a picture of a tourist having an ice cream. This is one of her hobbies, she collects photos of tourists and put them up on her wall. In this film, it is, in fact, the white tourists that seems to be the anomalies – not the locals. This brings us to the question regarding the characters themselves. Is there a certain westernization of the protagonists or more positive characters, similarly as in *Mulan*, or an "othering" of the remaining local population?

Besides being a local, the protagonist Lilo is also portrayed as native Hawaiian. Lilo is voiced by American voice actor Daveigh Chase, while Lilo's sister Nani is voiced by Hawaiian voice actor Tia Carrere. Naturally, the sisters speak somewhat differently, but no certain non-lingual characteristics are associated with either accent. Nani's love interest David, portrayed by Hawaiian voice actor Jason Scott Lee, might have an even stronger Hawaiian accent, and uses pidgin words and phrases, such as "howzit", several times. Although he might provide some comical relief and come across as the stereotypical "surfer dude", he is, nonetheless, generally portrayed in a good light.

Furthermore, since the antagonists of this film all are aliens, it is difficult to argue that they would feed into stereotypes about Hawaiians or Polynesians. It is worth pointing out that the antagonist Jumba (who later sides with the protagonists) is portrayed with what could be regarded as a Russian accent, while Captain Gantu (who ruthlessly chases Stitch throughout the film) is voiced by African-American voice actor Kevin Michael Richardson. While a mad scientist with a Russian accent might be something of a classic stereotype, the African-American voice for Captain Gantu was arguably only a combination of a big and intimidating character and its need for a deep and powerful voice. Whatever the case may be, it is still quite safe to acknowledge the lack of a clear-

cut distinction between Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian characters in terms of positive or negative attributes.

Another aspect Disney seems to have gotten right in this film is the portrayal of the general population of Hawaii. The people on the island are not divided into "native Hawaiians" and "white tourists" (which could have been the case with a simple film affected by disneyfication), but the film actually shows locals of very different ethnic backgrounds. According to the United States Census Bureau statistics, only 10.2 percent of the Hawaiian population regard themselves as native Hawaiian alone (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2019), and *Lilo & Stitch* seems to stay quite true to these statistics. In her article "Family, Race and Citizenship in Disney's *Lilo and Stitch*", Emily Cheng describes Disney's Hawaii as a "multiracial paradise" (2007: 125), and it truly seems as if Disney avoids the mistake of simplifying the population of Hawaii in a similar manner as they might have done in earlier films.

It is, however, still worth mentioning that the home-release of the film includes a deleted scene, in which comic relief and even othering is received at the expense of the white American tourists. In this particular scene, stereotypical white tourists drive up to Lilo, asking for directions to the beach while mispronouncing Hawaiian words such as "mahalo". While Disney avoided all forms of othering by excluding this from the theatrical version, it would still have been interesting to see how this specific scene would have been received by Western audiences, had it stayed in the film. This would have strengthened Brode's argument (2005: 2) regarding Disney's representations being caricatures of all kinds of people, rather than stereotypes of specific demographics.

3.5   The Princess and the Frog

> Long ago and far away, she was an unnamed little princess in a little story called the 'The Frog Prince'. […] One day, through the magical powers of Disney animation and commercial marketing, the forgotten little princess was transformed into Tiana, a beautiful black princess from New Orleans. She became the star of 'The Princess and the Frog', a movie set to premiere in November. Her doll and toy set were unveiled last month, and the Disney promotional machine is already humming, for Tiana is the first Disney princess in more than a decade, and the first ever to be black.

> (Tucker, 2009)

Disney's return to the traditional hand-drawn princess-musical was big news for many. That Disney was going to produce a movie with a female African-American protagonist was, still, even bigger. However, with *The Princess and the Frog* being the arguably least popular of the films included in this study, one could yet wonder how well the world remembers Tiana as the first black Disney princess, especially since this particular animated feature is one of the more controversial films included in this study. This is also the only analyzed film that is set in a city in the continental United States. The criticism is therefore, simultaneously, "closer to home" for its American audiences.

3.5.1 The African-American frog and a Maldonian prince

One of the most criticized aspects in relation to *The Princess and the Frog* (see e.g. Gehlawat, 2010) is the fact that Disney's first African-American princess spends more time on the screen as a frog rather than a human. After 28 minutes of runtime, Tiana agrees to kiss Naveen and is, as a result, turned into a frog. During the film's 88th minute, Tiana and Naveen break the spell and become human again, after which Tiana gets to spend about two more minutes on screen as a real princess, before the credits start to roll. The longed-for first African-American Disney princess is, in other words, portrayed as a frog for about 66 percent of the actual film. Critics have also questioned Disney's choice to feature the protagonist as a waitress, rather than as royalty (Lester, 2010) – and the status of Tiana as "the first, African-American Disney Princess" could consequently be questioned. However, while it is true that many of the characters regarded as "Disney princesses" have been of royal heritage, it is also essential to point out that some have not. For instance, Cinderella (*Cinderella*, 1950), an incredibly archetypal character in relation to this category and franchise, does not become a princess until the very end of her film – just like Tiana.

The criticism regarding royalty in *The Princess and the Frog* does, however, not end with the princess, but is directed towards her prince as well. Prior to the film's release, the ethnicity of Prince Naveen of Maldonia had already been questioned by many (see e.g. Barnes 2009) – mainly due to the fact that the brighter-skinned Naveen, voiced by Brazilian voice actor Bruno Campos, clearly is not African American. While Disney has argued that Naveen remains non-Caucasian (Barnes, 2009), some have yet pointed out how unfortunate it was that Disney passed on the opportunity to present the first Disney animated fairytale ending for a black couple, by not portraying Naveen as African

American (Lester, 2010). It has even been argued that Disney's choice to feature a non-black prince derives from Disney's supposed unwillingness to give a black man the title of *prince* (Barnes, 2009).

3.5.2 Colorblindness, blackness, and whiteness

The setting of *The Princess and the Frog* is another questionable issue, which relates a great deal to the earlier discussed criticism regarding Disney's 1942-feature *Song of the South*. Disney chose to place its first story featuring an African-American protagonist in 1920s New Orleans – a city and period immensely affected by the segregation and the Jim Crow Laws. However, while the setting and story partially is affected by its racist time period and its injustices, Disney fails to address these issues almost entirely. This is where the earlier mentioned issue of colorblindness (discussed by, e.g. Breaux, 2010) becomes relevant. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Disney has tried to create a New Orleans without any existing racism; where an African-American girl can own a restaurant, where her mother possesses the title as "the finest seamstress in New Orleans", and where Tiana and her white, rich friend, as well as employer; Charlotte, can enjoy a close friendship, without complications due to issues concerning race and class. This is a colorful, yet colorblind, fairytale New Orleans. Disney claims that *The Princess and the Frog* was created to entertain – not educate (McCoy Gregory, 2010: 443), and the decision to avoid issues like segregation and the Jim Crow laws could therefore, arguably, be justified. Nevertheless, if Disney wanted to take a step away from the question of race, and still do justice to their African-American audience, one could wonder why they chose to set the story in this city, with its history of segregation and racism, instead of in an unbiased fairytale land. When Disney decides not to present the problems and limitations which racism brought upon the African-American community during the 1920s, the issue of segregation and the social status of the African Americans is never explained, and an audience without knowledge of history might just get the assumption that it is natural that, for instance, Tiana's family and the whole black community live in simple bungalows outside the city. In other words, Disney stays somewhat true to history regarding the African Americans' low social status in 1920s New Orleans, while the film studio simultaneously rewrites history by never addressing the circumstances and by (partially) providing these black characters with the same possibilities as the film's white characters.

While Disney remains somewhat colorblind regarding the issues presented above, there is still a certain portrayal of blackness present throughout *The Princess and the Frog*. Due to the film's status as "a first", Disney's representation of blackness, i.e. the portrayal of African Americans and African-American culture in this particular film, has generally received a great deal of attention, and is consequently brought up in many of the articles chosen as secondary sources for this analysis (see e.g. Gehlawat, Lester, and McCoy Gregory). Hence, it is not only the portrayal of the films main characters and setting that has been a target for a substantial amount of criticism; but the portrayal of supporting characters and issues regarding blackness as well. For instance, the approach towards magic in *The Princess and the Frog* arguably differs a great deal from the traditional Disney fairy-tale magic. Instead of sparkles and fairy godmothers, we now have voodoo and dark magic, practiced on by both "good" and "bad" characters alike. Furthermore, the traditional Disney magic represented through songs such as "When You Wish upon a Star" has been exchanged for lines such as "But you remember […], that old star can only take you part of a way. You got to help him with some hard work of your own. And then […] you can do anything you set your mind to". This also ties into the general themes of the film, that likewise differ from the ones found in earlier Disney-princess narratives. Tiana is a hardworking independent woman with the goal of starting her own restaurant – she is not, as already established, a princess in search of a prince. While some of these themes could be regarded as bringing variation and modern values to a Disney-princess narrative, they have simultaneously raised questions among many viewers (Lester, 2010). Whether these themes and elements really are Disney's way of representing blackness can, however, still be discussed.

In contrast to the representation of blackness, it is still worth mentioning that some stereotyping, or caricaturizing (as Brode would call it), of whiteness does exist in *The Princess and the Frog*. Unlike *Lilo & Stitch*, both theatrical- and home-releases of the film does include scenes where comic relief is achieved at some of the white characters' expense. One of the more prominent characters in relation to this issue is arguably Tiana's friend Charlotte LaBouff; a rich white Southern girl, who originally is the one who is supposed to marry Prince Naveen. In her 2010 article, McCoy Gregory discusses the representation of blackness and whiteness in *The Princess and the Frog*, and argues that "the film suggests that the audience is to embrace Tiana as a black princess" (2010: 438). This is a quite simple task due to Charlotte's spoiled, hysterical and satirical character. In fact, almost all of the white characters in *The Princess and the Frog* are quite

caricaturized, as can be seen by looking at, for instance, the overweight and rich Eli "Big Daddy" LaBouff, the dorky Fenner Brothers, or the stupid and unpleasant frog hunters. However, most of the white characters in *The Princess and the Frog* are white Southerners, based on typical stereotypes about the American South. Due to the role of the film as Disney's first African-American narrative, one might understand Disney's choice to give the positive attributes to the African-American characters, rather than the Caucasian characters. Nevertheless, the validity of the title as "Disney's first African-American narrative" loses stature, due to the fact that African Americans, a minority with a history of being exposed to stereotyping, now only has been put up against another stereotyped group – white Southerners. Instead of letting the African-American characters coexist with non-stereotypical white characters, Disney has turned all white characters in this particular film into satirical representatives of Southern whiteness. Instead of giving Tiana a challenging competition in the form of a, more or less, sympathetic character, they put her up against Charlotte, whom many hardly regard as a desirable princess. This results in a more unserious narrative, compared to the earlier films that feature Disney Princesses. One could wonder if it would have been as easy for Disney to give Tiana her fairytale ending if a white character with the attributes of a previous Disney princess had replaced Charlotte LaBouff.

3.6 Big Hero 6

After Disney's acquisition of Marvel in 2009, and the company's rising success after the release of *Frozen* in 2013, Walt Disney Animation Studios decided to make their own animated superhero-feature. Similarly to *Lilo & Stitch*, *Big Hero 6* did not receive a lot of negative criticism in relation to their portrayal of race and ethnicity. This is quite interesting due to the fact that the majority of the film's characters are part of an ethnic minority. Another fascinating aspect regarding this film is its fictional Japanese-American hybrid setting, which surely will be an interesting aspect of this analysis.

3.6.1 San Fransokyo

While the story of Marvel's original comic book is set in Tokyo, Disney decided to create their own fictional setting for *Big Hero 6* – the hybrid futuristic combination of San

Francisco and Tokyo, San Fransokyo. The film begins with an overview of Disney's creation; the camera pans over the Golden Gate Bridge, which now has Japanese archways added to it; we see the Port of San Fransokyo; trams decorated with Japanese lanterns are making their way through the city; all while neon signs and more advanced means of transportation seen in the background gives the fictional city a more futuristic look. This hybrid mash-up has actually been praised for not building on stereotypes. In his review in *The New Yorker*, Roland Kelts states the following:

> I pictured a crudely expanded version of San Francisco's existing Chinatown, with maybe a few additional sushi counters and one or two Pikachu or Totoro dolls cluttering the background. Instead, the movie's metropolitan portmanteau is a marvel of architectural alchemy. Shibuya skyscrapers with pulsing video screens hug San Francisco's iconic Transamerica Pyramid. Victorian Mission duplexes line hilly San Fransokyo neighborhoods, aglow from the pink-white light of Japanese cherry blossoms in full bloom below. Trains from the Yamanote and Chuo lines, two of Tokyo's central and most popular railways, stream by on elevated tracks. […] In "Big Hero 6," such authentic details add up to a portrait of two onscreen cultures sharing the same world, undiluted by their affinities, tethered by mutual respect.

(Kelts, 2014)

While many might agree with this, one could still ask oneself why Disney decided to change the original setting of *Big Hero 6* in the first place. The answer is yet probably quite simple, especially when taking into account the earlier examined films in this study. Disney has clearly received a great deal of criticism for their westernization of foreign cultures, and the change of setting from Tokyo to San Fransokyo could be seen as another example of this form of disneyfication. However, instead of portraying a real place and incorporating it with western elements (such as the individualistic values in *Mulan*), or creating a fictional setting based on a foreign culture (like *Aladdin*'s Agrabah), Disney combines two cultures in this film, picking out "the best of both worlds".

Nevertheless, some problematic issues regarding this utopian setting still remain. In a research paper by Jamie Uy (2016), San Fransokyo is analyzed as a "Third Space". In postcolonial theory "Third Space" or "hybridity" (defined by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, 2004), could be described as the phenomenon where different cultures come together or are combined, rather than being compared as polar opposites. This seems to be the case with San Fransokyo. However, the main parts of San Fransokyo are still arguably based on San Francisco. In the earlier described intro scene, the audience

is actually introduced to San Franciscan landmarks, with a Japanese twist. Furthermore, the data model that was used in the animation process of *Big Hero 6* is (according to the film's producers) an exact replica of San Francisco. Uy consequently argues the following:

> The unquestioned use of San Francisco as the base for hybrid world-construction is problematic since it embodies an assumption of American culture as the norm for or foundation of global culture, suggesting an ethnocentrism at odds with the hybrid agenda of the film. San Fransokyo is San Francisco, but Japanified, and not as easily read as Tokyo, but Americanized; a distinction that weakens the idea that both cultures equally influence and merge with one another.

(Uy, 2016: 9)

One could, however, still ask oneself how *Big Hero 6* would have been received, if Disney had explicitly taken Tokyo (the original setting of the comic book) as a base and Americanized it with various elements, since this is what Disney generally tends to do and already has done in films such as *Mulan*. By giving the film a multicultural setting, one could also argue that Disney has eliminated the chance of getting accused for westernizing its characters.

3.6.2   Ethnic minorities in a multiracial setting

Hiro Hamada, around whom the film revolves, has come to be known as Disney's first mixed-race protagonist. However, unlike with Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog*, not as much focus was put on Hiro's race by audiences or critics –nor by the film itself. In San Fransokyo, Hiro is just a normal Japanese-American 14-year-old boy who lives with his Japanese-American brother and his Caucasian aunt. The racial composition of Hiro's family is never addressed in the film, and it never becomes a problem in a similar way as it did with the somewhat unrealistic and colorblind relationships portrayed in *The Princess and the Frog*. Hiro is never limited or affected by his race or ethnicity in any way, and the plot and the setting would probably have worked as well if Hiro were African American, Hispanic, or Caucasian. While the protagonist's intelligence might build on the stereotype of the "smart Asian", Hiro Hamada is, in fact, Japanese in the original Big Hero 6 comic, which thus would render Disney "innocent" in this case – as they rather westernize him more (by making him mixed-race) than build on that specific stereotype.

The questionable names of the other superheroes of Big Hero 6 (many resembling sushi ingredients) are in a similar fashion a product of the source material. Disney have, however, changed the ethnicity of all team members, as they all originally were Japanese. While Hiro, as mentioned, is Japanese-American, Go Go Tamago is Korean-American, Wasabi is African American, Fred is Caucasian, and Honey Lemon is (arguably) Hispanic. In a multicultural setting such as San Fransokyo, one could argue that the ethnically diverse team (and voice cast) is quite appropriate. Unlike the minority portrayals in earlier Disney features, cultural stereotypes are also avoided when it comes to these characters. Uy (2016) does, however, criticize the supporting characters and argue that Disney, in fact, only has reverted the stereotypes.

> Korean-American Go Go Tamago is squarely "an adrenaline junkie" and "speed demon" and not a polite, shy student; African-American Wasabi No-Ginger is a "risk-averse neatnik" instead of a tough, brazen muscleman; Latina Honey Lemon is a sweet, clever chemist as opposed to an over-sexualized service worker; Caucasian Fred, who appears to be "the dirtiest, grungiest, slacker-est member of the team" is actually phenomenally wealthy […].

(Uy, 2016: 12)

This might be true, but one must also take into account the type of film *Big Hero 6* actually is. In a 108-minute animated feature film it might be difficult to give all supportive characters deeper and more nuanced personalities and back stories. Disney has, as we can see by looking at older feature films, always relied on some forms of stereotypes or simplifications to achieve comedy. That Disney subverts expectations here could therefore still be seen as some form of progression towards a more culturally sensitive and non-stereotypical film era.

3.7 Moana

The final film included in this study is clearly a part of the more modern Disney era, as it (similarly to *Big Hero 6*) is somewhat free from criticism regarding ethnicity and culture. The most controversial issue found in critical reviews and articles on this film seems, in fact, to be related to merchandising. Before the film was even released, Disney started promoting a Maui costume for children; a brown-skinned full-body suit with tribal

tattoos, accompanied by Maui's grass skirt and his necklace made of bone and teeth. The reaction to this particular piece of merchandising was strong, and after being accused of depicting brownface, Disney quickly withdrew the costume from all its stores (Rika, 2016). While this, as well as the actual film version of Maui have been the main sources of *Moana'*s criticism, the culture and the characters portrayed in the film (although less criticized) will still be examined further in the following analysis.

3.7.1 History vs. mystery

The story of *Moana* begins on a fictional Polynesian island, in the village of Motonui. Moana and her tribe has lived on this island for a long time and they are running out of food sources, but no one is allowed to leave the island due to the dangers of the ocean. The inspiration for this story came, according to directors Clements and Musker, from the Polynesian wayfinder-civilizations that navigated the oceans about 3,000 years ago, but then suddenly stopped. After a 1,000-year break, which historians still do not know the reason for (Herman 2016), wayfinding did once more become a popular practice, and it is here *Moana*'s fictional story comes in.

Musker and Clements took some liberties with the explanation of the 1,000-year gap in the Polynesian wayfinding, also known as "the long pause" (Herman, 2016), but, as already mentioned, no one seems to know the exact reason for this particular pause. This, consequently, makes this case very different from, for example, *The Princess and the Frog*, where the same directors could be accused of re-writing the history of the portrayed demographic. The time-period in which the film is set does also make *Moana* different from the other films in this study, as the only other film with the most definable "ancient" setting besides *Moana*, seems to be *Mulan*. A thousand years is a long period of time, and one would think that it would be difficult to agitate or offend people when portraying fictional people of a real demographic that existed such a long time ago. Nevertheless, to still give a fair and correct portrayal of Polynesian culture, Musker and Clements, together with their team, travelled to Fiji, Samoa and Tahiti. Similarly to how it had been done in relation to earlier Disney projects, the filmmakers familiarized themselves with the culture, its history and the people in general. During the planning stage of the film, the film makers even created the Oceanic Story Trust, a focus group consisting of indigenous people from various fields and different Polynesian islands. This group of people was, according to the Musker and Clements, an essential part of the film

making progress, and it seems as if their input actually changed some of the more problematic scenes that otherwise would have been in the film. As a result, many historical aspects of Polynesian culture (however a mixture of Samoan, Hawaiian, Maori, etc.) are arguably portrayed correctly and respectfully in *Moana*, for example through the songs "There You Are" and "We Know the Way".

In a typical Disney musical such as *Moana*, there does, however, have to be some magic and mystery, and it is here some issues become a bit more complicated. In the fictional story of *Moana*, the earlier resourceful and flourishing world is dying, all because the demigod Maui stole the heart of the deity Te Fiti. To restore her island (and the whole world) to its former flourishing state, Moana has to find Maui, and return the heart to its original place. While many elements found in Polynesian legends and myths (life, death, water, fire, etc.) are present throughout the film, Te Fiti, as well as the lava monster Te Kā (Te Fiti's antagonistic counterpart), remains fictional. The filmmakers have, in this case, taken different elements from different aspects of Polynesian culture and produced their own disneyfied version of it all. However, while audiences seem to accept these aspects of the film, it is really the aforementioned demigod Maui (a character that actually exist in many Polynesian legends) that has received some criticism.

Critics have argued that Disney's Maui is quite different from the original Polynesian stories. While the heroic Polynesian Maui often has been depicted as "a teenager nearing manhood, a sort of trickster figure, well-dressed, charming, and intelligent" (Anjirbag, 2018), Maui in *Moana* is very muscular and big, and although charming and a bit of a trickster, this version of the demigod is arguably not very intelligent or even heroic. While some have criticized Maui's appearance and argued that his size plays on the stereotype of Polynesians as obese (see e.g. Downes, 2016), Disney has again claimed that Maui's size is supposed to display power. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that Maui (voiced by Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson) is not the main hero of the story, but rather a source of comic relief in Disney's *Moana*. Due to this "dumbed-down" representation, one could argue that it is quite problematic that Disney's Maui now is the more known version of the demigod, at least in the Western world. In her BBC article from 2016, Arieta Rika argues that: "After the release of Moana, Maui may be a Disney character to some, but to many Pacific people, he is very real - a hero, ancestor, demi-God and a spiritual guide". It would be interesting to see what kind of reaction this kind of cultural misappropriation would prompt among Christian Western audiences, had a non-Western film studio turned Jesus of Nazareth into a comical sidekick.

3.7.2 Polynesian representation

Nevertheless, when it comes to the other Polynesian characters in the film, it is again quite difficult to point out any clear "othering" or stereotyping. Most voice actors in *Moana* were also of Polynesian origins, and only one Caucasian voice actor, Alan Tudyk, was part of the main cast. Tudyk voices HeiHei, a non-talking, non-intelligent chicken, and similarly to earlier films, this animal side-kick is another source of comical relief. However, this time the animal does not talk, which simultaneously might make Tudyk's performance irrelevant in a discussion regarding ethnic portrayals. If HeiHei really had been portrayed as (a talking) Caucasian, *Moana* would also have been subject to the same "othering", or "[caricaturizing] for entertainment purposes" (Brode, 2005: 264), that we see in other films – only with the roles reversed and the Caucasian being "the other". In conclusion, there is really no clearly Othered, negative or stereotypical individuals among the talking main characters. While Moana's grandmother might be portrayed as "the village crazy lady", she is still likeable and her portrayal does not differ linguistically or visually from the other characters. Similarly, the only speaking antagonist, the giant monster turtle Tamatoa (voiced by Jermaine Clement), does have his quirks, but none of them play on ethnic stereotypes. Furthermore, an antagonistic Polynesian in a film where the majority of characters are Polynesians, does not stand out, and the division or westernization present in earlier Disney films is, in other words, not as central here.

There is, however, a rather questionable scene that resembles the issues found in the more problematic films included in this study. In this particular scene, Moana, Maui, and HeiHei are attacked by a pirate-gang consisting of anthropomorphic coconuts, known as the Kakamora. Besides the fact that the Kakamora already exist in Polynesian legends, however as slightly shorter humanlike creatures and not coconuts (Herman, 2016), this example becomes even more problematic due to the importance of the coconut in Polynesian culture (partly described in the song "Where You Are"), and the way this cultural element has been portrayed in this specific scene. This is arguably a combination of both disneyfication and a certain orientalism; with Disney taking an "exotic" element and "dumbing it down". It is, in fact, quite seldom one sees this kind of satire in Disney films that portray Western culture, and it would be quite unimaginable for many to see, for example, the characters Belle and the Beast, who exist within the narrative set in France in *Beauty and the Beast*, fighting monsters made out of baguettes and wine in the forest, rather than the wolves which originally exist in that film.

4. Discussion

With the film analyses found in the previous chapter as a base, we should now know the answer to one of the research questions for this thesis; we know how Disney has portrayed race and ethnicity in these seven specific feature films, but the main question still remains partially unanswered. To determine how Disney's approach towards race and ethnicity has changed over time, we now need to further discuss and examine the results, found in the film analyses. A clear overview, as well as a systematic comparison between the results and issues found in the different films, will hopefully clear up the issue regarding change in Disney's aforementioned portrayals.

4.1 Overview

The portrayals of racial and ethnic minority characters and cultures, analyzed in the previous chapter, will here be presented in a general overview. This subchapter will be quite central to the earlier hypothesis (mentioned in chapter 2.2), as we here should be able to see whether Disney's portrayals of race and ethnicity have become more progressive and culturally sensitive with time. Which film could be regarded as having the most problematic representation, and which film could be considered as having the fairest representation of ethnic and racial minority characters? Have the most problematic films been released during Disney's Renaissance Era, while the more culturally sensitive features all belong to the Revival Era? The answers to these questions will arguably lead to a better understanding of Disney's general approach towards race and ethnicity.

Based on the results found in the previous chapter, *Aladdin* is clearly the most problematic feature included in this study. Apart from being a textbook example of orientalism, as well as a subject of a great deal of othering, parts of the original film even had to be changed due to its extensive criticism. A post-cinematic release edit such as the change of lyrics in "Arabian Nights" has, in fact, not occurred with any other Disney film since *Aladdin*. As it also is the oldest film included in this study, its status as the most problematic film works well with the aforementioned hypothesis, and provides us with a valid starting point for analyzing and determining change. For the original hypothesis to

hold, we should now see constant positive progress in Disney's racial and ethnic portrayals, which is somewhat true for the following film; *The Lion King*. While being far from perfect in relation to its portrayal of African Americans and Hispanics, *The Lion King* was still not accused of having "slandered the heritage" of an entire culture (see the earlier criticism on *Aladdin* by Shaheen, 1993). While the racial profiling that the aforementioned hyenas represent, combined with their antagonistic roles, clearly is problematic, they are still only a minor part of the film as a whole, and not necessarily as clearly racist as the representation and othering of the ever present human Arab characters in *Aladdin*. *Mulan* also continues the predicted progression towards a more culturally sensitive Disney. Although the disneyfication of the Chinese ballad and its protagonist might be controversial, it is still a somewhat small issue compared to the racist and offensive nature of the issues found in the earlier films. Nevertheless, the othering of Chinese people that emerges with the westernization of its main protagonist, still renders this feature somewhat problematic.
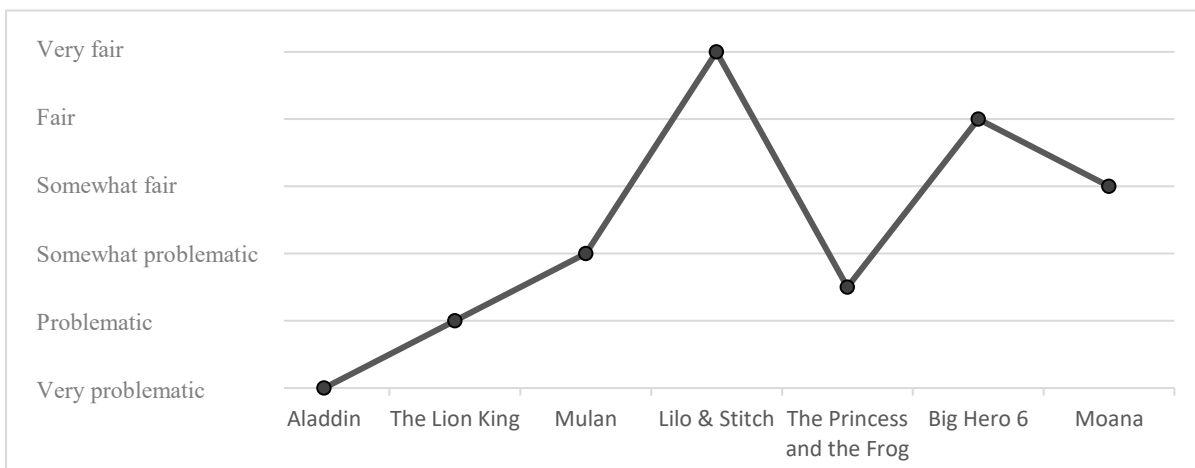
Lilo & Stitch is, however, not only step towards an even more progressive representation of ethnic and racial minorities, but arguably the film with the fairest and most positive representation of a culture, included in this study. This film's (here given) status as the most progressive film will be discussed further in the following sub-chapters, as it clearly is interesting that a relatively popular film from a relatively unpopular era of Disney filmmaking seems to get so much right, especially since even some of its successors seem to have failed where *Lilo & Stitch* succeeded.

One of the most interesting films in this overview is yet probably *The Princess and the Frog*, as many of the issues found in its analysis, as well as the generally negative criticism that have surrounded it, would place the film somewhere between *Mulan* and *The Lion King* in terms of the fairness of its ethnic and racial portrayals. When considering the ever-changing political climate, it is quite fascinating that the problematic racial representations found in this 2009-feature, could be compared to the films released during the 1990s. Similarly to *Lilo & Stitch*, much will therefore be said about this particular feature that clearly strays from the general progression (associated with the earlier films), and consequently questions the aforementioned hypothesis. The two following films do, however, seem to agree with the hypothesis, as *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* might be regarded as two of the most progressive films included in this study.

The complexity of the films, as well as the varying issues found within them, makes it difficult to simply rank them based on how progressive they are in terms of racial

and ethnic portrayals. While *Aladdin* clearly is more problematic than *Lilo & Stitch*, it is still not entirely fair to argue that *The Princess and the Frog* is less problematic than *The Lion King*, due to the varying extent and gravity of the problems and criticism associated with these films (i.e. while the former has been widely criticized, the issues found in the latter are clearly more offensive). However, for the sake of a more general overview, the analyzed films have still been given a certain label, based on what so far has been said about their portrayal of ethnic and racial minorities. These labels range from "a very problematic portrayal" to "a very fair portrayal", and the general progression of Disney's ethnic and racial portrayals can consequently be found in the table below. While this is a somewhat subjective, as well as a very much simplified summary of what has been treated in this thesis so far, it might still provide a general visual overview that might be useful when evaluating and discussing how Disney's portrayal of race and ethnicity has changed over time. It is, however, important to point out that this particular graph is far from the answer to the question regarding Disney's changing portrayals of race and ethnicity, and merely an instrument for analysis and discussion.

Table 4: Personal interpretation of the progressiveness of Disney's ethnic and racial portrayals

While a general progress can be seen here, there are some feature films (*Lilo & Stitch*, *The Princess and the Frog*, and *Moana*) that stray from the generally rising line of progression. The following subchapters will treat the question of this particular progression, as well as its anomalies, in more detail. By utilizing this table and the resuls from the analyses, we should now be able to compare the films, and discuss what really has happened in relation to race, ethnicity and Disney animation over the past three decades.

4.2 Different ethnicities – different portrayals?

Based on what is stated in the previous subchapter and what we see in Table 4, it might be important to examine the specific demographics and cultures depicted in the different films more closely. Are some cultures portrayed as more positive than others, and has there been more backlash in relation to films that portray a specific culture? Many of the films included in this study portray the same culture or demographic, and a comparison between these portrayals will be quite interesting here. We begin with the cultures or demographics that seems to have received the more positive portrayals by Disney, and move on towards the most problematic representations found in these Disney features.

4.2.1 Polynesians

Based on the earlier analyses and what we see on the general progressiveness scale, the two films portraying Polynesian people and culture are clearly some of the most progressive films in this study. That the portrayals of ethnic minorities in *Lilo & Stitch* and *Moana* can be considered as fair might be a result of several factors. The negative stereotypes found in some of the other films are not as present here, and the filmmakers seem to have avoided the most common problems found in other Western representations of Polynesia, such as the notion of the "noble savage", the representation of the area and culture through the eyes of a Western protagonist (such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*), or the depiction of the indigenous population as nothing more than a "part of the local colour" (Leerssen, 2007: 220). One could still wonder how much the specific portrayed demographic and culture had to do with the reception of these films, when compared to the cultures and demographics found in the other films. Is the fact that *Lilo & Stitch* and *Moana* have been better received and less criticized for their portrayal ethnic minorities a result of a generally less stereotyped vision of Polynesia? As seen in Beller and Leerssen (2007), Polynesia has frequently been portrayed in a European imagological sense, but, unlike Africa, China or the Middle East, Polynesia has, as mentioned, often been portrayed as a tropical paradise – not a dark continent or a barbaric wasteland.

Simultaneously, while a clear (positive) exoticism is present in both *Lilo & Stitch* and *Moana*, the films still avoid the othering present in many of the other Disney productions. Here, there is not as clear a distinction between the good, bad, or comic

characters and the way they speak or look, which again could be linked to racial or cultural profiling. Furthermore, some elements used to enforce the feeling of "the other" in some of the other films (such as language, musical elements or physical attributes), are here used in a more positive light. In *Lilo & Stitch*, both Lilo and Nani, as well as other main characters, use Hawaiian words and phrases throughout the film, and many of the songs in *Moana* are partially sung in both Samoan and Tokelauan. Both heroines of the films have also been given a slightly different look than the typical Disney princes and princesses, and do not stand out when compared with the rest of the portrayed population in the film (such as, for example, the protagonists in *Aladdin* do).

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that *Moana*, the more recent film, interestingly enough, ended up lower on the earlier progressiveness scale, compared to its predecessor *Lilo & Stitch*. It is possible that this mainly is a result of the disneyfication of Polynesian culture found in *Moana*, as well as the problematic portrayal of the character Maui. In *Lilo & Stitch*, no elements from local legends or religion is used in Disney's favor, and that is probably why this particular film works better than its successor. This issue will be discussed further in the following subchapters.

4.2.2   East Asians

Similarly to the films depicting Polynesian people and culture, no seriously problematic stereotypes emerge in neither *Mulan* nor *Big Hero 6*. In fact, the main problem and the main source of criticism regarding these films seems to have been Disney's westernization, which in the case of *Mulan* resulted in a certain type of othering. However, while it might be true that these films made it to the big screen without any extreme stereotypical characters with caricaturized features or thick accents, the culturally appropriate linguistic features, such as the ones found in the Polynesian narratives, are completely left out. No elements of Japanese or Chinese are present in the songs in *Mulan*, and the audiences have no idea whether the multicultural Hiro in *Big Hero 6* also is multilingual.

There is still a somewhat large gap between these films, not only in time (with *Mulan*'s year of release being 1998 and *Big Hero 6*'s 2014) but in progressiveness as well, as the portrayal in *Mulan* here has been ranked as somewhat problematic, while the portrayal in *Big Hero 6* has been ranked as fair. What does *Big Hero 6* then get right, that *Mulan* does not? Firstly, we have to acknowledge that *Mulan* is set in historical China,

while *Big Hero 6* is set in the fictional Third Space city of San Fransokyo (partially based on Tokyo). By merging Japanese and American culture, Disney avoided the serious accusations of westernization that can be found within the main criticism of *Mulan*. The status of *Big Hero 6* as the more progressive film might actually also be related to the general Western view of China and Japan – with Japan being more associated with the West ever since the end of World War Two. In a poll conducted by the BBC World Service, a generally more positive perception of Japan, in comparison to China, has, not surprisingly, been given by Western countries.

Table 5: The general perception of China and Japan in Western countries

Country	China		Japan	
	Mostly positive (%)	Mostly negative (%)	Mostly positive (%)	Mostly negative (%)
USA	23	67	66	20
Canada	29	59	61	23
Australia	36	55	53	36
UK	37	50	59	27
Germany	13	67	28	46
France	25	68	56	32
Average (%)	**27**	**61**	**54**	**30**

Source: GlobeScan Incorporated, 2008

When looking at the percentages of how people from different Western countries answered when asked if their perception of China and Japan were mostly positive or mostly negative (or neutral), it becomes quite clear that many Western countries tend to have a more positive view of Japan, while a more negative view of China simultaneously exists. It is consequently not too far-fetched to assume that a generally negative opinion of a culture or country might result in some biased, unconscious choices with unfortunate consequences, such as the othering in Mulan. In relation to the representation of China in the imagological sense, Schweiger argues the following:

> Alternating between Sinophilia and Sinophobia, to the present day the European image of China has reflected not actual facts, but historically varying perceptions and shifting cultural self-conceptions among Europeans.

(Schweiger, 2007: 126)

A slight mixture of Sinophobia and Western self-conceptions might arguably be the reason for *Mulan*'s shortcomings. While China might have been portrayed in a more negative light by Disney, Japan has, on the other hand, been treated a bit differently. Japan

has generally, according to Littlewood (2007), been seen as "a natural antithesis to the West" (2007: 200) from the very start. This antithesis was, however, somewhat problematic, due to the fact that the strong established Japanese culture "undermined the most reassuring antithesis of all: civilized European versus primitive savage" (2007: 200). Japan has, in other words, since the very beginning, been perceived more respectfully than China in the West. This seems to be the case with *Mulan* and *Big Hero 6* as well. No Japanese values are contrasted or dismissed in favor of Western values in *Big Hero 6*, and the Japanese elements in the film never affects the characters in a negative way.

In conclusion, one could argue that while the Japanese culture and demographic generally seems to have been portrayed in a more positive light than the Chinese counterparts, East Asian population and culture in general are still not as positively depicted in Disney's films as Polynesians. Nonetheless, they still receive a more fair portrayal than the remaining main ethnicities found in these films; African Americans and Arabs.

4.2.3   African Americans

As seen in the historical overview earlier in this thesis, the representation of African Americans in Disney's films has always been somewhat problematic. That this issue still remains partially unchanged can mainly be seen through the analyses of both *The Lion King* and *The Princess and the Frog*, as well as their low position on the progressiveness scale in the earlier graph. While there clearly was more to be said about *The Princess and the Frog* in the previous chapter, it could still be regarded as the more progressive of the two films, in terms of the portrayal of African Americans. Issues such as the clear racial stereotyping in the case of the hyenas in *The Lion King* is actually not present in *The Princess and the Frog*, and the latter does arguably portray the racial minority in a somewhat fair way. The protagonist Tiana is not a lazy, free-loading outcast like the hyenas, but an ambitious, kind, and hard-working woman. However, while Disney did manage to portray some positive African-American characters, other issues found in the film still remain problematic. This is somewhat strange as Disney really tried to make this particular portrayal as progressive and culturally sensitive as possible, due to their controversial history regarding their portrayal of African Americans.

The criticism regarding both of these films is, in a way, "closer to home" as Disney, an American corporation, here portrays an American demographic. African-

American history and the inequalities associated with this demographic might also make these portrayals more controversial and emotionally charged. The earlier mentioned, complex criticism regarding Eddie Murphy's portrayal of Mushu the dragon in *Mulan* could be seen as an example of this. While some might claim that this was a case of racial stereotyping, others might simply see this as a casting choice. Would it have been better to cast and portray Mushu as Caucasian, to avoid criticism? In *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*, Brode discusses the aforementioned crows in *Dumbo* (criticized for feeding into stereotypes about African Americans), and argues the following:

> The only way in which the issue of ethnic caricaturing could have been averted would have been for Disney to not include blacks. That would have opened the film – and Walt – to the criticism of ignoring the African American subculture. A nonblack artist finds himself in a no-win situation, damned if he does and damned if he doesn't.

> (Brode, 2005: 52-53)

While this argument in itself is quite problematic when put into the context of what really could be considered as racism in *Dumbo*, it does become somewhat central in the case with Mushu, but also when discussing *The Princess and the Frog*. Very few African-American characters existed in the Disney universe before this film, and many looked forward to seeing Disney's first African-American princess on the big screen. This was a big step for Disney, but the film was still wildly criticized. Again, would it have been better if Disney had not tried to make an African-American fairytale in the first place?

On the other hand, Giroux does question the reasons for Disney making this film in the first place:

> [I]t is difficult not to be cynical about what appears to be less a tribute to African American culture than a barely disguised attempt to round out the Disney Princess market base by targeting young black girls who may find Tiana dolls and products less alienating than the current Princess options (five white princesses and an Arab one).

> (Giroux, 2010: 123)

While it is difficult to know whether Disney's first African-American fairytale was made in the name of progress or merchandising, it is, in any case, quite clear that the filmmakers would not deliberately include these problematic issues in a film such as this. It is therefore also difficult to find an explanation to the backlash of *The Princess and the Frog* other than a certain underlying (or unconscious) racism still present in Disney

filmmaking. It would be naïve to ignore the fact that the people mainly in charge of these particular Disney films have been white Caucasian males, and many of the later criticized issues found in *The Princess and the Frog* is most likely unintentional (or ignorant) mistakes made or overlooked by these filmmakers. The impact the directors have had on these films will, as mentioned, be discussed in more detail further on.

4.2.4   Arabs

Arabs probably represent the ethnicity that has received the most problematic portrayal in the Disney films included in this study. *Aladdin* is therefore, as mentioned, the product that we turn to as a starting point, when we analyze change in Disney's portrayals of racial and ethnic minorities. The problematic nature of this film has already been discussed in the earlier analysis, and the issues found within the film agree well with the traditional stereotypical view of the Middle East (or "the Orient"), described by Leerssen as "pre-modern, suave, dignified, sensuous and ruthless" (Leerssen, 2007: 95). Unlike some of the issues found in the other films included in this study, many of the problems in *Aladdin* are inexcusably racist, and would probably not appear in a Disney film today. While a comparison with a more modern Disney film that depicts Arabs would have been interesting, *Aladdin* is unfortunately the only film included in this study that portrays this particular demographic. To find out what a Disney film set in the Middle East would look like today, one could technically turn to the 2019 live-action version of *Aladdin*. However, as this film is a live-action remake with the same story and characters, as well as a product of Walt Disney Studios (which consequently makes it irrelevant for this study), this comparison would still not be quite fair.

4.2.5   Concluding remarks on the different ethnicities in Disney films

As can be seen in this subchapter, a certain difference between the treatment of different ethnicities and cultures does exist. The way *Lilo & Stitch* and *The Princess and the Frog* deviated from the generally rising line of progression in the earlier graph could partially be explained based on the racial and ethnic minorities these films respectively represent. *Lilo & Stitch*, a film focusing on the demographic that seems to have received a more fair portrayal in media and literature in general, placed itself on the top of the graph, and could be considered as more progressive than its predecessors. *The Princess and the Frog*, on

the other hand, portrays a demographic generally portrayed quite negatively, and consequently placed itself quite far below the other films of its time, in terms of progressiveness and cultural sensitivity. One could, in other words, conclude that while Disney's film making generally is becoming more culturally sensitive with time, there are still certain ethnicities that Disney might find more difficult to handle.

The ranking of the third anomaly found in the graph, *Moana*, as one of the most progressive films in this study can also be explained based on what has been said in this subchapter. However, the fact that the most recent film analyzed in this thesis still only is the third most progressive film according to the graph in Table 4 does raise some questions. There are consequently other factors that might have contributed to *Moana*'s status as less progressive than *Big Hero 6* (which was released two years earlier). These factors, which might be applied to the other films as well, will be discussed in the following subchapter.

4.3   The effect of style and popularity

Interestingly enough, when examining the graph in Table 4 closer, a certain correlation between the films' position on the scale, and the specific style or genre of these films can, in fact, be seen. This subchapter is thus reserved for discussing the different types of films we have been dealing with, to be able to determine whether there are any significant correlations between genre and style, and the way race and ethnicity have been portrayed in the films. Finally, we also have to consider the popularity of these films. Are the more popular films more likely to be criticized, as more people see and discuss them?

When referring to films such as Disney's animated feature films (i.e. commercial or popular feature films), Barry Keith Grant (2007) uses the term *genre movies*. These are films that, "through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations" (2007: 17) – a definition that agrees well with Wasko's (2001) earlier demonstrated formula for the classic Disney film. With Disney's influential status in today's society, and the many films that have been released in the last ninety years, one could almost regard the Disney film as a sub-genre of the genre movie. However, in a similar fashion as other popular films, Disney's animated features can also be regarded as belonging to certain sub-genres, which in turn might have a significant effect on how a demographic or culture is portrayed in a Disney film.

4.3.1 Problematic musicals

Many of the films included in this study have often been defined as musical films, and some of the animated features, such as *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*, have even become immensely popular Broadway musicals. A *musical* could simply be described as a production "characteristically sentimental and amusing in nature, with a simple but distinctive plot, and offering music, dancing, and dialogue" (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019). Based on this description, the analyzed films that clearly can be considered as musicals are thus *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, *Mulan*, *The Princess and the Frog*, and *Moana*. The characters in these films might unquestionably burst into song and dance, and many of the musical pieces are used to move the story forward. Interestingly enough, these films have been regarded as the least progressive films included in this study, with *Aladdin* being the film placed at the bottom of the graph in Table 4, and *Moana,* the most progressive of the musical films in this study, having only a somewhat fair portrayal of racial and ethnic minorities. According to Warren Hoffman, the author of *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (2014), it seems as if theatrical musicals have had similar problems relating to portrayals of race and ethnicity as Disney's films. Issues such as an overreliance on stereotypes for comedic purposes and a simplification of certain matters are present in both mediums, and many aspects of the Disney films analyzed in this study make sense in the light of Hoffman's arguments. Hoffman does, for example, comment on a certain rewriting of history that has sometimes occurred in theatrical musicals.

> The Broadway musical, after all, is about America, but it's an imaginary America, one in which the country's real problems—poverty, social inequality, racism, and misogyny—often disappear.
>
> (Hoffman, 2014: 7)

This argument closely resembles what has been said about *The Princess and the Frog*, as well as the earlier discussed *Song of the South*. One could therefore argue that the style of this particular genre partially might contribute to the negative way in which race and ethnicity has been portrayed in certain Disney's films. The main goal of the musical is also arguably to entertain, which the directors, producers or filmmakers seemingly try to achieve at the cost of fair portrayals of ethnic and racial minorities (Hoffmann, 2014).

Furthermore, it does, in fact, seem as if the Disney musical generally has been the most popular type of Disney film. The films released during the successful Disney Renaissance all belong to the musical genre, while the films from the less successful Post-Renaissance era all deter from the musical formula. The popularity of the Disney musical can also be seen based on the fact that only two non-musical feature films passed the popularity requirement for being included in this study. The fact that these two films, *Lilo & Stitch* and *Big Hero 6*, a sci-fi and a superhero narrative, simultaneously placed themselves at the top of the graph in Table 4, also strengthens the argument of Disney musicals being more problematic in terms of the depiction of race and ethnicity. One could therefore argue that Disney's preference of musical films, and the negative racial and ethnic portrayals they tend to include, might be one of the reasons why Disney has been more criticized than, for example, DreamWorks Animation – an American animation studio with a majority of non-musical films.

While arguments for *Lilo & Stitch* and *Big Hero 6* being more progressive already have been made, one could assume that the non-musical style of these films also made it "easier" for the filmmakers to avoid the common stereotypes and the problematic style that we tend to see in musicals. In a Disney musical that focuses on a minority demographic or a different culture, everything in the film usually revolves around the portrayed demographic or culture. There are elements from this culture everywhere: the music is local, the people are eating local food, the villain has a local backstory, and Disney makes sure that you really know where this film is set. In the non-musicals, the setting is necessarily nothing more than a setting. In summary, a Disney musical might generally be more likely to have a more problematic portrayal of race and ethnicity, than a Disney film belonging to a different genre.

4.3.2 Cultural stories disneyfied

While the specific cultures and demographics depicted in the films already have been discussed, it might still be important to put some focus on the cultural heritage of the original stories that these films are based on. Disneyfication of traditional fairytales has been present ever since the 1930s, with the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* – Disney's first animated feature film, based on the Brothers Grimm fairytale. That Disney has taken these traditional stories and turned them into blockbuster films is no news, and Disney's versions might actually, as Wasko (2001: 113) points out, be better

known than the originals. While disneyfication already has been discussed in relation to some of the analyzed Disney films, it might still be interesting to focus on the amount of disneyfication these original stories have been subjected to, and how it in turn has affected the representations of race and ethnicity in the Disney version.

As seen in earlier chapters, the interpretation, alteration, and disneyfication of the source material have been widely criticized in relation to films such as *Mulan* and *Moana*. Among the entries in this study, these films, together with *Aladdin*, are the productions that have taken a traditional story or legend as a base for its narrative, and also chosen its setting based on this story or legend. These films are, interestingly enough, (here) ranked as having somewhat problematic, or worse, portrayals of ethnic and racial minorities. *The Lion King* and *The Princess and the Frog* are, again, films based on traditional stories (*Hamlet* and *The Frog Prince*), that do not share settings with the original narratives. While it is quite interesting that the films with issues relating to the representation of African Americans have been based on non-African-American stories, it is also worth pointing out that these films have been ranked as problematic in the earlier graph.

Among all the films included in this study, only one film draws its story from the filmmakers themselves. This particular film, *Lilo & Stitch*, is based on an unpublished story by Chris Sanders, one of the film's directors. The film is not based on Hawaiian or Polynesian legends or stories, and *Lilo & Stitch* is, as mentioned, simultaneously the film with the fairest portrayal of race and ethnicity included in this study. No demi-gods have been caricaturized for comic relief, no heroines have been more westernized to better fit in with Disney's version of the story, and no questions have been raised regarding deviations from the original story. One could, consequently, argue that a Disney story without a strong history or relation to a specific culture, while simultaneously dealing with the same culture, is less prone to criticism. This could also be true for *Big Hero 6*, a film that in fact is based on another story, but not necessarily a story as culturally loaded as folk stories or cultural legends. *Big Hero 6* might, in other words, be ranked higher in the earlier graph due to its somewhat neutral source material.

Regarding popularity, it is again important to point out that it, in fact, is the films based on traditional stories or legends that arguably tend to be more popular. Many of the films from Disney's Post-Renaissance Era that did not pass the popularity criteria (e.g. *Dinosaur* [2000], *The Emperor's New Groove* [2000], *Brother Bear* [2003], *Home on the Range* [2004], and *Bolt* [2008]) are, in fact, screenplays with original stories.

4.3.3 Concluding remarks on style and popularity

Based on what has been stated in this subchapter, it is quite clear that the style and genre of a Disney film seems to have an effect on its racial and ethnic portrayals. In addition to the varying amount of cultural sensitivity associated with specific cultures, the anomalies seen in the progressiveness graph in Table 4 can consequently be explained by this. The specific style and genre of *Moana* – a musical film based on a Polynesian legend – could, for example, explain this film's status as less progressive than *Big Hero 6* – a non-musical superhero narrative based on a comic book. It seems as if the grand Disney musicals or fairytales, such as *Moana*, have been the most criticized, but at the same time the most popular Disney features. All films included in this study are clearly popular, but based on their ratings and their initial box-office revenue, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* could arguably be seen as the most popular of all the films included in this study. It is, therefore, still quite difficult to argue that the most popular Disney films tend to be the productions most prone to criticism, since, for example, *Big Hero 6* is one of the least criticized films included in this study, while *The Princess and the Frog* – the least popular film according to the popularity criteria – again is one of the most criticized of the aforementioned productions.

It is, in other words, quite evident that it is the genre, the style, and the source material for the film (and necessarily not its popularity) that might affect how well ethnic and racial minorities are portrayed (or perceived) in a Disney feature.

4.4 Making a culturally sensitive Disney feature

We now know how the portrayals of race and ethnicity in Disney have changed over time, and what the reasons behind the progressiveness of their racial and ethnic portrayals might be. It is, however, still important to briefly discuss how these films have been made, and where the creative and artistic responsibility lies, especially when we look at films such as *The Princess and the Frog*, where Disney actually tried to do something right, but much still went wrong. Who are the directors of the films and what have they had to say about the criticism regarding the racial and ethnic portrayals? Which films are associated with focus groups and research trips, and how well were they received in relation to films without this kind of preparatory work?

4.4.1   The directors' impact

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, a director could, in fact, be seen as the author of a certain film. An animated feature film does, however, involve many people and we have already acknowledged the problem with holding a certain director solely responsible for an animated Disney film. There is, nevertheless, a quite clear and established view of what the duties and the responsibilities of a film director are. The directors are involved in most parts of the filmmaking progress; they read and edit scripts, they make general creative and technical choices, and they work with both actors and editors to produce the film as they envisioned it. While the executives and board members of the Disney studios might have the final say when it comes to its films, as there are cases where Disney has fired directors due to creative differences (see e.g. Cavna, 2017), the directors are still arguably the biggest creative force behind the film. As a result, it is important to (at least briefly) acknowledge their involvement, and discuss whether some stereotypical or progressive portrayals of race and ethnicity can be linked to the directors themselves.

Among all the directors of the analyzed films in this study, two particular directors are involved with more projects than the others. Ron Clements and John Musker have already been described as Disney veterans in this thesis, and rightfully so. Besides *Aladdin*, *The Princess and the Frog*, and *Moana*, Musker and Clements also directed *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Hercules* (1997), and *Treasure Planet* (2002). These are some of the most popular Walt Disney Animation Studios films, and the features by Clements and Musker that made it into this study are, interestingly enough, also some of the most criticized films in terms of racial and ethnic portrayals. It is, however, again worth pointing out the unfairness of blaming the problematic ethnic and racial portrayals solely on the directors themselves. A certain preferred style by Musker and Clements is, in fact, quite easily distinguished, as many of their films have been Disney musicals based on a non-American source material. These are two factors earlier established in this thesis as generally resulting in less progressive and more simplistic portrayals of racial and ethnic minorities. It is also worth mentioning that no criticism towards Clements and Musker's personal take on race and ethnicity (similar to that of Walt Disney's) seems to exist, and (as seen in bonus features included in the home-releases of their films) the directors generally seem interested in creating films that positively deal with different people and cultures. While it would be interesting to see how other directors' general progressiveness changes on the graph in Table 4,

compared to that of Clements and Musker, the latter two are, unfortunately, the only directors that have directed several features included in this study. Nevertheless, the earlier argument regarding a move towards a generally more culturally sensitive film industry can still be seen when focusing solely on the films by Clements and Musker.

It is also quite difficult to find any specific opinions on diversity or multiculturalism (either for or against) that the other directors associated with the films in this study have expressed. However, based on the fact that these directors genuinely seem passionate about these films that deal with foreign cultures and minorities (as can be seen when examining interviews and bonus material included DVD and Blu-Ray releases of the films), it would be quite farfetched to assume that these people discriminates or show prejudice against minorities in their spare time. Nevertheless, it is definitely worth repeating the fact that all the directors of the films included in this study have been exclusively American Caucasian males. Disney has generally been criticized for this particular issue, and one could only wonder what the films that feature minority characters would have looked like with a director that share the same culture or ethnicity.

4.4.2   Preparatory research and focus groups

To get a better understanding of the people, the cultures, and the traditions presented in these films, the Disney filmmakers have often still tried to familiarize themselves with the portrayed culture before making the feature films. Directors and crew have conducted research trips to the areas in which the films will be set, and various focus groups have been created and consulted throughout the filmmaking processes. Some of these instances have already been mentioned briefly, and a more thorough discussion of Disney's efforts, and its relation to the outcome of the film, will consequently be discussed here.

There is clearly a correlation between the preparatory research and familiarization with the portrayed cultures or demographics, and the progressiveness of the final portrayal of the same culture or demographic in Disney's films. It is, for example, almost impossible to find any information about Disney's preparatory work in relation to *Aladdin* and *The Lion King* – probably because none existed – and the portrayal of Arabs and Africa (as well as African Americans) in the films consequently turned out to be quite problematic. Disney could probably have avoided a great deal of criticism with both *Aladdin* and *The Lion King* if audiences that belong to the portrayed demographics had been consulted prior to the film releases.

When examining interviews featured in the bonus material on the home-releases of the Disney films, it is not before we get to *Mulan* that we start hearing words such as "research trip". The filmmakers behind this particular feature spent three weeks in China, to familiarize themselves with the culture and get inspired. While one could argue that three weeks is a very short time to familiarize oneself with a culture to then be able to fairly portray it to a Western audience, this research trips was arguably still a bigger effort than what was made in relation to the cultural portrayal in *Aladdin* or *The Lion King*. *Lilo & Stitch* did arguably receive a similar treatment in terms of preparatory research. Directors Sanders and DeBlois also took a three-week research trip to Hawaii, but unlike the trip done in relation to the production of *Mulan*, the story of *Lilo & Stitch* actually seems to have been affected by Hawaiian values, as the entire theme of 'ohana (family) present throughout the film was a direct result of what the directors saw and heard during this research trip (Harada, 2002). Some of the music in this film is also, as already mentioned, composed and performed by Hawaiian artist Mark Keali'i Ho'omalu, and the film makers actually consulted local voice actors Tia Carrere and Jason Scot Lee, who rewrote some of their lines to make them more local and culturally appropriate.

The Princess and the Frog was, as mentioned, criticized already prior to its release, and Disney took various efforts not to disappoint its audiences. Consequently, early versions of the film was shown to African-American audiences, after which many problematic elements of the film had to be changed. Nevertheless, focus groups consisting of these appropriate audiences were actually consulted, which is something that had not really happened in the earlier released films included in this study. However, rather than including these focus groups throughout the filmmaking process, it seems as if they rather were presented with a somewhat finished product, which then was edited according to some of the criticism. More pressing issues, such as the change of the protagonist's name Maddy (which sounded too much like "mammy") to Tiana, as well as her profession from a chambermaid to a waitress (McCoy Gregory, 2010), appear to have gotten the main focus during these sessions, and issues such as the questionable location and time period might not have been on the top of agenda. In the defense of Clements and Musker, it seems as if Louisiana and New Orleans actually was chosen based on the location's magical qualities and former chief creative officer John Lasseter's love for the city. Unfortunate (supposed) mistakes such as this problematic combination of the film's spatial and temporal setting might still have been avoided by giving the test screenings more time and including the focus groups more thoroughly in the creative process.

Interestingly enough, not much information can be found on the preliminary research regarding Japanese culture in relation to *Big Hero 6*. In all fairness, this is a film that mixes two cultures, and one could ask oneself if there is a correct way to portray a San Fransokyo (i.e. partly American) family with both Caucasian and mixed-race members. With or without extensive preliminary research, *Big Hero 6* still ranks as one of the most progressive films included in this study.

Clements and Musker's most recent film, *Moana*, does, however seem to be the Disney film associated with the most extensive preliminary research. The filmmaking progress began back in 2011, when the directors wrote a pitch for chief creative officer Lasseter, who, in turn, asked them to conduct a research trip to Polynesia before moving on with the project. During their research trip, Musker and Clements familiarized themselves with the cultures and traditions of Polynesia; this is how the element of wayfinding found its way into the film, and as the directors eventually understood importance of the ocean in Polynesian culture, the ocean actually became its own character in the film. While preparing for and making the film, Disney also founded the Oceanic Story Trust, which consisted of Polynesian linguists, historians, artists and other indigenous people from the region. The Oceanic Story Trust seems to have been involved throughout the filmmaking progress and the story eventually evolved through nine versions (Ito, 2016). Some culturally inappropriate or problematic issues, such as Maui being portrayed as bald and Moana venting her anger by throwing coconuts, were taken out of the film as a result of the comments made by the members of the Oceanic Story Trust (Robinson, 2016), but some issues introduced by the filmmakers, such as the earlier criticized coconut pirates (the Kakamora) and the representation of Maui as "very flawed, but very likeable" (Giardina, 2016), remained. Similarly to what we see in the more recent films included in this study, most of the cast was also of Polynesian decent.

4.4.3 Concluding remarks on the making of a Disney feature

Due to the commercialism that surrounds Disney, it is quite clear that some of the more problematic issues found in some of the analyzed films might have been unintentional or ignorant mistakes made by the filmmakers. While the aforementioned focus groups certainly have had a positive impact on the final products, it is still the filmmakers that make the final decisions, and some issues found by test audiences and focus groups might therefore still remain in the film to achieve a certain desired effect (such as Western

relatability or comic relief). It is, in other words, clear that certain stereotypes therefore still prevail in these films, and it is possible that a larger amount of creative responsibility to the focus groups or (even better) a director that actually belongs to the minority depicted in the film would result in less stereotyped and westernized portrayals.

In summary, with all parts of this entire chapter in mind, it is ultimately the filmmakers responsibility to give an appropriate and un-biased portrayal of the different cultures in their films, but this can simultaneously be a somewhat difficult task due to the material they are working with (e.g. folklore from foreign cultures), as well as the desired format (e.g. an easily understood musical) of the final product. It is, however, clear that Disney generally is trying (and succeeds) to move towards a more progressive and culturally sensitive film era, all while factors such as style, genre, source material and the general attitude towards the culture surely still might result in some of the Disney feature films placing themselves below the generally rising progression line in the graph presented earlier in this chapter.

5. Conclusion

With all that has been stated in this thesis in mind, how has the portrayal of racial and ethnic minorities I films released by Walt Disney Animation Studios changed over time? We begin with *Aladdin*, a film filled with stereotypes, othering, and other clearly racist elements – a very problematic entrance on this list. We continue with *The Lion King*, a film that generally could be considered as non-racist, save for a few quite offensive instances, although only present in parts of the animated feature. This still renders *The Lion King* as a problematic film, in terms of the portrayal of ethnic and racial minorities. This entrance is again followed by an only somewhat problematic portrayal in *Mulan*. This is a film without any clear racism, and a feature that many even would consider as quite progressive. Nevertheless, the westernization of the traditional Chinese ballad does lead to some othering, and the disneyfication consequently receives some criticism. As we move on to *Lilo & Stitch*, we get to what could be considered as the most progressive film included in this study, only to move on to the again problematic 2009-feature *The Princess and the Frog*. While the latter is free from any clear-cut racism, similar to that present in some of the earlier Disney films, many of the questionable creative choices made by the filmmakers still put Disney's first and only African-American princess in a different category than the company's earlier royal characters. The Disney Revival brings us two more films on the more culturally-sensitive side, but a clear rise in progressiveness can still not be seen between *Big Hero 6* and *Moana*, as the latter could be seen as more problematic than the former.

To sum up, the representations of race and ethnicity in Disney's films are becoming more progressive and culturally sensitive, but the altogether rising line of progressiveness does have its deviations, both in the more positive and negative direction. The reasons for these deviations have also been discussed in this thesis, and it has been argued that the source material and the general style of the film, in fact, might be the some of the forces behind the progressiveness or cultural insensitivity of an animated Disney feature film. For instance, based on what is discussed in Chapter 4.3, an animated Disney musical based on a culturally-specific folktale or legend tends to include more offensive or problematic portrayals of the culture, race, or ethnicity of focus. Nevertheless, due to their status as a global producer of animated content, it is somewhat obvious that the Walt

Disney Animation Studios make efforts to improve their racial and ethnic portrayals, as can be seen with the aforementioned research trips made by the filmmakers in preparation for making the film, as well as the focus groups consulted during the filmmaking progress. However, it still remains unclear whether these newly taken measures by Disney demonstrate a genuine attempt at becoming more diverse and culturally sensitive in their filmmaking, or if this simply are attempts to avoid possible criticism and accusations of othering, stereotyping and westernization.

Furthermore, while a certain rise in progressiveness here has been established by analyzing the relevant films for this study, it is still unclear whether contemporary Disney has been more or less progressive than other Western film studios, as this was not explored in this study (save for a brief comparison with DreamWorks in Chapter 4.3.1). This thesis could serve as material for a study focusing on just that. Disney has, as mentioned, received its fair share of criticism for stereotypical portrayals, but is Disney the only company that receives this sort of criticism? Or are we, the audience and the consumers, more likely to forgive other studios for similar problems as Disney have made, due to the fact that this particular studio and company is associated with childhood and innocence? This study could also be extended further by comparing the here analyzed animated feature films with some of their recently released live-action counterparts. At the time of writing this thesis, Walt Disney Studios have already released and begun production on live-action adaptations of various Disney classics. Among the animated features analyzed in this study, *Aladdin* and *The Lion King* already received live-action counterparts in 2019, while a corresponding version of *Mulan* is set to be released in 2020. As even a live-action adaptation of *Lilo & Stitch*, as mentioned, currently is on its way, it would not be surprising if the other films analyzed in this study will get similar adaptations in the future. While the Walt Disney Animation Studios and the Walt Disney Studios are two different branches of the company, it would still be interesting to see whether Disney (here again used as an umbrella term for "everything Disney") is trying to correct the problematic issues found in the original animated films by recasting roles and changing certain elements that were criticized in the original versions. As an example, the already altered but yet offensive lyrics of *Aladdin*'s "Arabian Nights" was changed a second time for the live-action version for the film.

Still, no matter how many remakes of the animated Disney classics the company decide to make, the original versions will still remain relevant for a long time. It is, as mentioned in the very beginning of this thesis, almost impossible to avoid Disney's

productions entirely, and it is quite safe to assume that most people (at least in the Western World) have seen at least one animated feature film by Disney. Due to their relevance, global reach, and, chiefly, young audience, these films have an immense impact on our lives and the way we view the world. I would therefore, once more, argue that analyses, such as this one, have significant value. Keeping in mind the socio-political climate during the releases of some of these films, one does not necessarily have to boycott all of Disney's productions due to their sometimes problematic or even offensive nature, but it is important to acknowledge that a great deal of stereotypes, in fact, can be found in these animated classics. I personally grew up with many of Disney's animated feature films, and while I probably would not recommend *Aladdin* to anyone today without providing some context regarding its racist nature, I would still be lying if I said that I did not enjoy watching some of the films (even as an adult) as I analyzed them. However, my admiration, or even love, for these animated classics should still not prevent me from criticizing them for some of their problematic, stereotypical or even racist elements. Disney has improved in terms of fair ethnic and racial representation, but the company and the studios still have a long way to go. Disney – a company associated with childhood, magic, and innocence – is, after all, not that innocent.

6. Summary in Swedish – svensk sammanfattning

Animerade stereotyper – en analys av Disneys framställning av ras och etnicitet

6.1 Introduktion

The Walt Disney Company har skapat animerade filmer ända sedan 1920-talet, och företaget är i dagsläget en av de största filmproducenterna i världen. Det är dock ironiskt att ett så till synes oskyldigt och familjekärt företag som Disney i så stor utsträckning har kritiserats för sina filmers rasistiska och sexistiska innehåll. Många kritiker och akademiker har ansett att Disney och företagets filmskapare inte alltid lyckats vara speciellt kulturellt medvetna eller känsliga, och företaget liksom dess produktioner har utgjort en utgångspunkt för många kritiska analyser och studier. Disneys äldre filmer kritiseras än idag för både tydligt och underliggande rasistiskt innehåll, och även flera av företagets modernare filmer har väckt starkt negativa känslor hos många tittare. Medan somliga påstår att Disney nog blivit progressiverare med tiden, hävdar andra att de problematiska framställningarna kvarstår och att speciellt den underliggande rasismen fortfarande framkommer tydligt (se t.ex. Breaux, 2010).

Denna studie kommer att fokusera på representationen av ras och etnicitet i *Walt Disney Animation Studios* modernare tecknade långfilmer. Utgående från en kvalitativ samt komparativ analys av sju, för min avhandling lämpliga filmer hoppas jag kunna skapa en bild av Disneys samtida representation av ras, etnicitet och kultur, samt definiera hur Disneys representationer har förändrats med tiden. Somliga kanske anser att diskussionen kring kultur- och rasfrågor inom media har gått för långt och att kritiker nuförtiden söker efter problem som egentligen inte existerar – speciellt med tanke på den negativa klang som begreppet "politisk korrekthet" har fått under de senaste åren. Jag hävdar däremot att kritik och analys av denna typ är otroligt viktig, speciellt när målgruppen för det kritiserade materialet består av barn och ungdomar, som till en stor del påverkas av film och media (Hurley, 2005). Disneys filmer påverkar oss mer än vi anar, och med denna forskning hoppas jag kunna bidra med medvetenhet och kännedom inom detta område.

6.2 Material, metod och teori

Med tanke på den otroligt stora mängden filmer som *Walt Disney Animation Studios* har producerat kan det dock vara svårt att begränsa en studie som denna. Jag har därför valt att endast fokusera på populära samt för temat relevanta filmer som kommit ut efter 1989. Filmerna som uppfyllde dessa krav var *Aladdin* (1992), *Lejonkungen* (*The Lion King*, 1994), *Mulan* (1998), *Lilo & Stitch* (2002), *Prinsessan och grodan* (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009), *Big Hero 6* (2014) samt *Vaiana* (*Moana*, 2016). Med dessa sju filmer som utgångspunkt försöker jag alltså besvara frågan:

1) Hur framställer Walt Disney Animation Studios ras och etnicitet i sina animerade långfilmer?

Utgående från analysen av de sju valda filmerna hoppas jag även kunna hitta svar på följande fråga:

2) Hur har Walt Disney Animation Studios framställning av ras och etnicitet ändrat med tiden?

Med ras och etnicitet syftar jag här främst på ras- och befolkningsminoriteter i västvärlden. Framställningarna av dessa minoriteter i de valda filmerna kommer med andra ord först att analyseras skilt och sedan jämföras med varandra. På detta sätt hoppas jag kunna förklara hur (och om) dessa framställningar har ändrat med tiden.

Denna studie är en fortsättning på min kandidatavhandling från 2015, i vilken jag försökte besvara liknande frågor som dessa, dock med en betydligt mindre mängd material och resurser. Utgående från min analys av *Aladdin* och *Prinsessan och grodan* hävdade jag att Disney i allmänhet gjort positiva framsteg angående sina framställningar av ras- och befolkningsminoriteter, men att företaget trots detta fortfarande kunde göra mycket för att trovärdigt och respektfullt framställa dessa grupper och deras kulturer. Den tydliga rasismen i filmerna har försvunnit, men stereotyper och problematiska representationer kvarstår. De här resultaten fungerar som en preliminär hypotes för denna pro gradu-avhandling. Emellertid, med tanke på att denna studie fokuserar på sju filmer istället för två, kan dock de kommande resultaten vara mer varierande i förhållande till de som dök upp i min kandidatavhandling.

Som sagt existerar redan en hel del forskning med fokus på just detta ämne. Några exempel på detta är Byrne och McQuillans *Deconstructing Disney* (1999), Brodes

Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment (2005), samt Giroux *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (2010). Till skillnad från Giroux samt Byrne och McQuillan som förhåller sig relativt kritiskt till Disney, försvarar Brode företaget och hävdar att Walt Disney var en av Hollywoods första filmskapare som rättvist och positivt framställde minoriteter i sina filmer. Dessa olika ställningstaganden, i kombination med kritiska artiklar med fokus på de sju valda filmerna, kommer att tas i beaktande under kommande analys och diskussion.

De valda filmerna kommer att analyseras utgående från bland annat imagologi och postkolonial teori. Beller och Leerssen (2007) definierar imagologi som studien om den allmänna uppfattningen om folkgrupper och nationaliteter – eller, med andra ord, studien om stereotyper. Deras verk *Imagology: The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters: A critical survey* innehåller flera kritiska artiklar med fokus på de vanligaste stereotyperna om olika folkslag, vilka kommer vara väldigt användbara under analysen av Disneys ras- och befolkningsframställningar. Postkolonial teori fokuserar däremot specifikt på västvärldens representation av östvärlden. Inom detta område dyker bland annat koncept som Den Andre (the Other) upp. Detta fenomen, myntat av bland annat Edward Said i hans verk *Orientalism* (1978), beskriver en process där något eller någon som skiljer sig från en själv beskrivs som avvikande, konstigt, eller negativt. På detta sätt skapas ett starkt vi-och-dem-tänkande, och flera forskare har kritiserat Disney för just denna form av representation. Förutom dessa två teorier kommer även begreppet "disnifikation" (egen översättning av "disneyfication") att dyka upp i samband med analyserna. Janet Wasko (2001) beskriver disnifikation som processen där något disnifieras. Disney baserar ofta sina filmer på redan existerande folksagor eller kulturella legender och myter, men framställer en egen tolkning av dessa berättelser som bättre lämpar sig för en ung amerikansk publik. Majoriteten av filmerna inkluderade i denna studie är baserade på just denna typ av material, och Disney har följaktligen kritiserats för att ha feltolkat samt västerniserat (egen översättning av "westernize"; införa västerländska ideal eller göra mer västerländskt) flera av dessa ursprungsberättleser.

6.3 Filmanalys

Filmerna analyseras till följande i kronologisk ordning, baserat på åren de kom ut. Analysen börjar alltså med *Aladdin*, filmen som utspelar sig i den fiktiva (men tydligt

Mellanöstern-inspirerade) staden Agrabah. Denna film har kritiserats hårt på grund av dess negativa representation av araber och Mellanöstern (se t.ex. Shaheen, 1993). Araberna framställs som barbarer med mörk hud, stora svarta skägg och en engelska med tydlig arabisk brytning, samtidigt som Disneys representation av Mellanöstern är fylld av orientalistiska klichéer och stereotyper, som till exempel flygande mattor och exotiska magdansare. Denna framställning blir ännu mer problematisk med tanke på att huvudkaraktärerna (som publiken ska sympatisera med) samtidigt har framställts med ljusare hudtoner och tydligt amerikanska dialekter. Aladdin och de övriga "goda" karaktärerna i Agrabah har med andra ord versterniserats medan Disney här tydligt framställer araben som Den Andre.

Den följande filmen på listan är *Lejonkungen*, en av Disneys populäraste filmer genom tiderna. Intressant nog har även denna Disneyklassiker kritiserats en hel del för sin framställning av ras- och befolkningsminoriteter, trots att alla karaktärer i filmen är djur. Enligt bland annat Giroux (2010: 110) framkommer denna problematiska framställning främst fram i samband med de antagonistiska hyenorna i filmen. Dessa karaktärer är lata, osympatiska samt från samhället utstötta individer som samtidigt har framställts med afroamerikanska och latino-dialekter. Även denna gång är "vi och dem"-förhållandet väldigt tydligt, speciellt med tanke på att filmens huvudkaraktärer talar "standard" engelska. Till skillnad från *Aladdin*, framställs dock en del av de "goda" huvudkaraktärerna i *Lejonkungen* av skådespelare som hör till ras- och befolkningsminoriteter, vilket i sin tur kunde ses som ett framsteg i Disneys framställning av ras och etnicitet (Byrne & McQuillan, 1999: 103).

Fyra år efter *Lejonkungen* släpptes filmen *Mulan*. Denna film har kritiserats betydligt mindre än de två hittills analyserade Disneyklassikerna, och många anser än idag att *Mulan* är både progressiv och feministisk (se t.ex. Ward, 2002). Medan detta verkar vara den allmänna åsikten i västvärlden, kritiserades dock *Mulan* samtidigt i Kina för att ha både förvrängt och västerniserat den ursprungliga folkberättelsen om Hua Mulan (BBC News, 1999). Disneys Mulan bestämmer sig, till exempel, för att ta sin fars plats i kriget mot hunnerna för att hon (som hon senare i filmen erkänner) vill hitta sig själv, medan den ursprungliga balladen framhäver de mer kinesiska värderingarna, så som kollektivism och ära (Ward, 2002: 97-99). *Mulan* är alltså helt tydligt ett till exempel på disnifikation samt västernisering, och framställer dessutom Kina som Den Andre, med tanke på det kontrast som uppstår i samband med Mulans västerländska normbrytningar i det bakåtsträvande kinesiska samhället.

Lilo & Stitch är dock antagligen den mest kulturellt medvetna och känsliga filmen inkluderad i denna analys. Medan exotiska element som vanligtvis förknippas med Hawaii (där berättelsen i filmen tar plats) tydligt framhävs i filmen, så görs detta på ett realistiskt och respektfullt sätt. Ja, huvudkaraktären Lilo dansar hula på sin fritid, men hon går inte omkring klädd i en hula-kjol hela filmen. Lilo råkar även simma förbi några delfiner i början av filmen, men delfinen är varken hennes trogne vän eller transportmedel. Filmskaparna har med andra ord undvikit de typiska (ofta simplifierade) inslagen som vanligtvis dyker upp i Disneys filmer. Skådespelare från Hawaii framställer även många av huvudkaraktärerna i denna film, vilket i allmänhet gör Disneys helhetsrepresentation av kulturen och befolkningen mer trovärdig.

Den följande filmen i tur, *Prinsessan och grodan*, diskuterades och kritiserades en hel del redan före den kom ut år 2009, vilket främst var ett resultat av filmens status som Disneys första prinsessfilm med en afroamerikansk huvudkaraktär. Filmen kritiserades även efter att den kom ut, delvis för att Disneys första afroamerikanska prinsessa spenderar cirka två tredjedelar av filmen som en groda. Många kritiker (se t.ex. Breaux, 2010) ifrågasatte också valet att placera filmens handling i New Orleans på 1920-talet, en period starkt associerad med Jim Crow-lagarna och segregationen i USA. Detta kunde ha varit ett bra tillfälle för Disney att hantera frågor relaterade till ras och afroamerikansk historia, men filmen går aldrig in på problemen som segregationen medförde för den afroamerikanska befolkningen, och huvudkaraktären Tiana lever ett väldigt simpelt och för tiden och platsen orealistiskt liv som inte påverkas av hennes ras och sociala status. Detta förskönar USA:s historia och förhållande till ras, vilket relaterar till den underliggande rasismen som diskuterades i början av avhandlingen. Många liknande problem dök upp i samband med analysen, och flera av Disneys kreativa val kan verkligen ifrågasättas.

Big Hero 6 skiljer sig dock en hel del från de andra filmerna inkluderade i denna analys, delvis för att detta är en film som för ovanlighetens skull tydligt hör till den typiska superhjälte-genren, men även på grund av filmens mer progressiva samt sensitiva framställning av ras- och befolkningsminoriteter. Huvudkaraktären Hiro och hans bror är båda blandras japanskamerikaner, men ras eller etnicitet får aldrig desto större uppmärksamhet i filmen. Till skillnad från *Prinsessan och grodan* som tog en äkta stad och tidsperiod som grund för sin iscensättning, utspelar sig *Big Hero 6* i den fiktiva staden San Fransokyo, en modern kombination av San Fransisco och Tokyo. På grund av San Fransokyos fiktiva natur förblir ras och etnicitet osynligt på ett positivt sätt (vilket inte

var fallet i *Prinsessan och grodan*), och trots att många i denna fiktiva stad tillhör någon befolkningsminoritet, undviker Disney de typiska stereotyperna som dessa minoriteter ibland associeras med i andra filmer.

Den sista och modernaste filmen som inkluderades i denna analys är *Vaiana*, och liksom *Big Hero 6* samt *Lilo & Stitch* kunde även denna film klassas som en av de mer progressiva Disneyfilmerna. *Vaiana* utspelar sig också i Polynesien, och vissa jämförelser kan därför göras med *Lilo & Stitch*. I stora drag upprätthåller filmen samma kulturellt sensitiva och respektfulla framställningar av lokalbefolkningen och kulturen som *Lilo & Stitch*, men några problematiska karaktärer och delar dyker dock upp i samband med analysen. Det mest problematiska inslaget i *Vaiana* är antagligen framställningen av karaktären Maui, en halvgud som även existerar i Polynesiska legender och religioner. I filmen *Vaiana* är Maui en komisk och bristfällig karaktär, vilket skiljer sig en hel del från hjälten Maui i polynesiska berättelser, och Disney kritiserades följaktligen för grov feltolkning av denna halvgud (se t.ex. Rika, 2016).

6.4 Diskussion

Om man enkelt skulle ranka dessa filmer baserat på hur väl och respektfullt de framställer ras- och befolkningsminoriteter, på ett spektrum från "en väldigt problematisk framställning" till "en väldigt progressiv framställning", kunde man plavera filmerna i följande ordning: *Aladdin* (1992), *Lejonkungen* (1994), *Prinsessan och grodan* (2009), *Mulan* (1998), *Vaiana* (2016), *Big Hero 6* (2014) och *Lilo & Stitch* (2002). Utgående från denna rangordning och åren filmerna kom ut, verkar det som att framställningarna av ras- och befolkningsminoriteter i Disneys filmer nog blir mer kulturellt sensitiva och progressiva med tiden. *Lilo & Stitch*, *Prinsessan och grodan* samt *Big Hero 6* avviker dock från denna med tiden jämnt stigande grad av progressivitet. Det är intressant att *Lilo & Stitch* här rankas som den mest progressiva filmen, med tanke på att den kom ut så tidigt som år 2002. Att *Prinsessan och grodan* (som kom ut sju år senare) samtidigt rankas som mer problematisk än flera av dess föregångare är också fascinerande. Medan kontrasten mellan *Big Hero 6* och *Vaiana* dock inte är lika stor, är det fortfarande värt att påpeka att *Big Hero 6* lyckas bättre i sin minoritetsframställning än sin efterträdare. Dessa avvikelser, i förhållande till den allmänt stigande progressiviteten bland de övriga filmerna, kan baseras på olika orsaker som till följande diskuteras i korthet.

Först och främst måste den specifika ras- eller befolkningsminoriteten som representeras i de olika filmerna tas i beaktande. Att hitta en film som framställer araber i den lägre ändan på progressivitetsskalan är kanske inte så förvånande med tanke på hur araber och mellanöstern överlag har framställts och fortfarande framställs i västvärlden. Medan det samma kunde sägas om framställningen av Afrika och Kina, skiljer sig dock framställningen av Polynesien en aning från dessa tidigare nationaliteter och kulturer. Polynesien var ett populärt tema i den kolonialistiska litteraturen, och trots att framställningen av den noble vilden fortfarande dyker upp i modernare verk, verkar Polynesien ändå allmänt associeras med positivare attribut än de övriga områdena och kulturerna som dyker upp i denna analys. För västvärlden är Polynesien framför allt ett tropiskt paradis, och det är antagligen delvis också därför som *Lilo & Stitch* och *Vaiana* här rankats som filmer med positivare representationer av ras- och befolkningsminoriteter. Framställningen av afroamerikaner i film, media och litteratur har dock länge varit problematisk, och många negativa skildringar existerar fortfarande, vilket vi delvis ser i samband med *Prinsessan och grodan*.

En annan aspekt i frågan om vilka filmer som lyckats eller misslyckats med sina framställningar av ras och etnicitet har att göra med genre och stil. Majoriteten av Walt Disney Animation Studios senaste filmer är musikalfilmer (fem av sju filmer i denna analys kunde klassas som animerade musikaler), men det är intressant nog filmerna som inte bygger på musikalformatet (*Lilo & Stitch* och *Big Hiro 6*) som här har klassats som de progressivaste filmerna. Amerikanska musikaler har i allmänhet kritiserats för rasistiskt innehåll, ofta i form av stereotyper som utnyttjas för att uppnå komik (Hoffman, 2014), och detta är tydligt vad som också ofta händer i Disneys musikalfilmer. Rankingen av *Lilo & Stitch* och *Big Hero 6* som de två progressivaste filmerna i denna analys, samt deras avvikelse från den jämnt stigande progressiviteten bland Disneys övriga filmer, kunde därför delvis bero på detta. Något man också kunde se som en orsak till dessa avvikelser är det specifika materialet som dessa två filmer är baserade på. Till skillnad från de övriga filmerna är *Lilo & Stitch* och *Big Hero 6* inte baserade på folksagor eller traditionella berättelser. Samtidigt har filmer som *Aladdin* och *Mulan*, vars källmaterial tydligt kan kopplas ihop med en specifik kultur, kritiserats för disnifikation, västernisation och orientalism, och därför också rankats som mer problematiska filmer i denna analys.

Slutligen måste även Disneys försök till att skapa kulturellt medvetna och progressiva filmer diskuteras. Utgående från intervjuer som inkluderats i bonusmaterialet

på de fysiska versionerna av filmerna verkar det som att Disneys filmskapare under den senaste tiden åkt på forskningsresor till landet eller platsen där den framtida filmen kommer att utspelas för att bekanta sig med kulturen och befolkningen. Ingen information om att detta gjordes under produktionen av *Aladdin* och *Lejonkungen* hittades dock, antagligen för att inga resor av denna typ genomfördes, vilket också kunde förklara de mer problematiska framställningarna i dessa filmer. I samband med produktionen av *Prinsessan och grodan* och *Vaiana* rådfrågade Disney även fokusgrupper som främst bestod av personer som hörde till de befolkningsminoriteter som framställdes i filmerna.

Medan detta förarbete tydligt har haft en positiv effekt på Disneys minoritetsframställningar, är det samtidigt svårt att hitta någon koppling mellan de tidigare nämnda avvikande filmerna och mängden förarbete från Disneys sida. Något man dock delvis kunde koppla ihop med *Prinsessan och grodan* samt *Vaianas* lägre status i mån om progressivitet är filmernas regissörer. Bland filmerna inkluderade i denna studie har John Musker och Ron Clements förutom dessa två filmer även regisserat *Aladdin*. Dessa tre filmer kunde anses vara några av de mer problematiska filmerna inkluderade i denna analys, speciellt med tanke på att de två modernare filmerna här anses vara mer problematiska än deras företrädare. Trots detta är det problematiskt att påstå att dessa två regissörer skulle vara mer rasistiska eller mindre kulturellt sensitiva än andra, eftersom det är väldigt svårt att avgöra hos vem det kreativa ansvaret egentligen ligger i samband med en Disneyfilm. Animerare, regissörer, producenter och företaget Disney ligger alla bakom den slutliga filmen, och det är väldigt svårt att tydligt avgöra vem som ligger bakom ett visst problematiskt beslut i filmen i fråga. Det är dock värt att poängtera att alla regissörer för filmerna som inkluderades i denna studie är vita amerikanska män. Man kan fråga sig själv om dessa Disneyfilmer skulle lyckas framställa ras, etnicitet och kultur på ett positivare sätt om regissörerna för filmerna själva hörde till den ras, folkgrupp eller kultur som filmen fokuserar på.

6.5   Sammanfattning

Framställningen av ras- och befolkningsminoriteter i Disneys animerade filmer verkar sammanfattningsvis bli allmänt progressivare med tiden. I denna studie har det dock framkommit att risken för feltolkning och kränkande material är större när det är frågan om en musikal, eller när Disney baserar sin film på en redan existerande folksaga eller

annat material med kulturspecifikt värde. Också i Disneys filmer verkar vissa folkgrupper vara mer utsatta för stereotyper än andra, och detta har med stor sannolikhet också påverkat resultatet av denna analys. Dessa orsaker fungerar dock inte som bortförklaringar från Disneys sida, och företaget kunde tydligt fortfarande göra mycket för att förbättra sina minoritetsframställningar. Disneyförsvararen Douglas Brode argumenterar i sitt tidigare nämnda verk att Disney varit bland de första i västvärlden som producerat multikulturella filmer, och medan detta delvis kanske stämmer så räcker det helt tydligt inte med att endast inkludera kulturella minoriteter om detta inte kan göras på ett jämställt och rättvist sätt.

Många stereotypier och allmänt problematiska inslag finns fortfarande kvar i flera av de modernare filmerna som *Walt Disney Animation Studios* har producerat, och företaget Disney som vanligtvis associeras med sagor, magi, barndom, och oskyldighet är sist och slutligen inte så oskyldigt.

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