Evolution of Disney

Disney has been known to have racial messages located within their movies for many years. During the time period when some of the more racial films were made, racism was more common in society. It was not nearly as frowned upon and was more culturally accepted. As time has progressed, the Disney Corporation has also progressed as well. They went from being completely stereotypical and racist against African Americans in *Dumbo* to having an African American princess in *The Princess and the Frog*. Many try to find arguments that show Disney is no better today than it was in 1940's, but it is evident that Disney no longer wants to be seen as a racist and impure company. In their newest animated film, *The Princess and the Frog*, the lead character is an African American woman who falls in love with an African American prince. Even more, the movie is set in New Orleans where much of African American culture and music has thrived throughout time. Disney created this movie to eliminate the talk about them still incorporating racism into their films. The company is aware of the fact that their older works have many racial innuendos located within the hidden parts of the films. Their hopes are to help people to understand that Disney has changed and no longer wants to be a “bad” corporation, and bring people together around the world. Racism may have been
more apparent within the earlier Disney animated films, but it has greatly decreased throughout time.

_Dumbo_ is one of Disney's films that greatly demonstrates the use of racial messages within their films. The crows are one of the most well known examples of racism within this movie. “They smoke cigars, speak in jive, and spend all their time doing nothing but observing the more civilized world”(Russo). This is the main stereotype of African American's in _Dumbo_. To make it even more apparent, Disney decided to make one of the crows’ names Jim Crow to emphasize the fact that they truly do represent the African American race and culture. Another racial scene located within the movie is when the workers are setting up a tent. They appear to have a darker skin tone and sing the words, "We slave until we're almost dead/ We're happy-hearted roustabouts/Keep on working/ stop that shirking/ Pull that rope, you hairy ape"(Russo). This clearly shows the use of racism within _Dumbo_. It clearly demonstrates Disney's insensitivity to African Americans. By incorporating this song into their film, they imply that African Americans are no better than unskilled slaves. It is brutally apparent that Disney put many obvious and less obvious racial messages within this film, but the time period it was created in made it more acceptable. During 1941, when _Dumbo_ was released, racism was a much greater part in society. Caucasians were the dominant race and not many questioned that. Disney just was going with the times. At that point in history, racism was not nearly as unaccepted as it is today, in fact it was not very noticed. It is true that today many people are able to understand the racial criticisms within _Dumbo_, but back in 1941, those racial comments and stereotypes were a common
thing. Disney is not justified in discriminating against African Americans in this movie, but it is more understandable based on the time period it was created and released in.

A very well known movie that was released twelve years after *Dumbo*, also displays traces of racism; this movie is *Peter Pan*. The most racist aspect within this movie is when the Lost Boys and when Peter visits Tiger Lily’s family. The Lost Boys are fascinated by the “different” looking people. The Indians are displayed as savages who do not know how to do anything except dance, sing, and smoke. “They have bright red skin, are portrayed as patriarchal and oppressive, and are very ugly” (Russo). The song, “What Makes the Red Man Red?” is a completely racist song that shows the lifestyle of Indians through Disney’s eyes. It explains that Native American’s solely speak through grunts and say “ugg”. Disney creates a character that is uneducated and truly personifies the word “savage”. In truth, Native American’s are very skilled people who know how to do many things that most “civilized people” could not do. For example, they know how to live off the land and be one with the earth. They can hunt, fish, create their own shelter and clothing, and many other such things that was more challenging for the white man. Disney does not take any of this into consideration when creating this scene within *Peter Pan*. They fill young children’s minds with the idea that Native Americans are uncivilized and untamed creatures, not real human beings. Racism within this movie is very evident but also somewhat understandable. During the 1950’s, many civil rights movements were happening and racism was just beginning its journey to getting better. Especially in the early 1950’s, the whole concept was very new and racism
was widely accepted still. Although it is inappropriate and unacceptable for the company to create people in such an insensitive manner, in a way, it is somewhat understandable.

_The Jungle Book_ was the next film that Disney decided racism was still allowable to be put into. Although racism was not nearly as apparent as the previous films of its time, it still had a few scenes in which racial innuendos came about. When Mowgli is traveling throughout the woods, he stumbles upon a group of monkeys. These monkeys are different from the rest of all the characters located within the movie. “The apes are the only characters in the film voiced by African Americans. All the refined characters speak in British or white-American accents, but the monkeys swing down from the trees, speaking in jive and jibberish”(Russo). As Russo points out, the monkeys are solely spoken by African Americans and are represented as smooth talking, laid back animals that want to be like a white man. The song “I Want To Be Like You” perfectly personifies this image. It explains how the apes desperately want to be like Mowgli and absorb everything he can possibly teach them, so they can be better off. Because the film was created in 1967, racism started to lessen at this point. The turning point for African Americans started to arise, and sensitivity toward other cultures and races began to emerge. During this time period, many equality protests were put together. Also, the very prominent African American activist, Martin Luther King Jr., was leading marches and giving speeches on the equality for man. This is when times began to change and where African American rights began to be set into effect. Disney may have put some
racism against blacks within its hit film, *The Jungle Book*, but they were far more sensitive than they were in the past with racial context and implications.

*The Little Mermaid* was the next big movie that Disney created. Although it was not as popular as some of Disney's other films, it still sold many copies worldwide and was very popular in theatres as well. This movie does display slight racism against African Americans through one of the main characters, Sebastian. Although Sebastian may be seen as a racist character because he seems to be a Jamaican black male, he is also one of the most important and influential characters throughout the story. Not all of Disney's personifications of races are necessarily bad. Disney may have created Sebastian as a Jamaican black man, but it was not in an offensive manner. He is a character that helps the main character, Ariel, through everything that she struggles with. "Sebastian helps the little mermaid become human" (Rothstein). As Rothstein points out within this article, racial characters can be seen as being discriminated against, but a lot of times they stand along the side of the main characters helping them throughout their most trying times and tribulations. At times, Disney portrays different races and cultures poorly and does not do a good job and representing the truth behind the color or a person's skin. *The Little Mermaid* was one of the first movies in which a controversial character is also one that is key to the story. The movie being made in 1989 gave Disney a whole new perspective on racism. During this time racism was starting to become much less present within the United States and the Disney Corporation recognized this. They began incorporating less racial messages into their films and became more sensitive to others. Because this movie has a character that can be seen as racist as one of its
most important roles, who also is personified as one of the heroes, demonstrates that Disney was not trying to discriminate against African Americans, but instead demonstrate equality.

Equality took a turn for the worse when *Aladdin* was released in 1992. Many people took it very offensively when Arabs were depicted so poorly within the film as more than evil and grotesque. Up until the release of this movie, Disney was doing an extremely great job at reducing racism within its films, but that racism was mostly against African Americans; Arabic people were a whole new target for Disney. During the very opening scene of the film a song called “Arabian Nights” is played. “The song described the Middle East as a land, "Were they cut off your ear/if they don't like your face/ It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.""(Russo). Arabian people took these lines in the song extremely offensively. Disney eventually changed the words to a kinder, more acceptable version. Although Disney was doing well with other such racial stereotypes like African Americans and Native Americans, other races still seemed to get put down. After Disney released this film, many controversies rose about how offensive the movie was toward Middle Eastern people, and how not all Arabic people act in such a manner. Disney had been used to hearing such criticisms from other such races, but Middle Eastern was something they had not yet explored into. After all of the uprising about the film, Disney received a wake up call that what they did was unacceptable, which then continued their track to becoming a more sensitive and racially accepting company.

One of Disney’s most successful movies was released next and it is called *The Lion King*. Mostly, the only argued racial element within this film was the group of
hyenas. The Hyenas were said to be the outcasts within the story who just want to be on top and kick out the oppressive power. The Hyenas were a darker shade compared to Mufasa’s family, who were a lighter shade. The voices of the Hyenas made them a racial target as well. “Using the voices of Whoopi Goldberg and Cheech Marin, these animals resided in a inner city ghetto equivalent of the jungle”(Disney’s Portrayal of Culture And Race In Film). By using the voices of an African American woman, and a Latino man, it makes the Hyenas a much more controversial group. Also, one out of the three hyenas does not speak but does do a lot of ignorant maneuvers. The last hyena is said to be mentally impaired. Protestors of the company have explained that Disney was trying to exploit the Hyenas as bad animals and the only good ones are the lions that represent Caucasians. Disney may have created characters that could be controversial and portrayed badly in some senses, but they also may have wanted to represent other cultures within the movie. Like Sebastian in The Little Mermaid, the Hyenas play a large role within the movie. In the end, they are made out to be heroes because they go against scar and join sides with Simba’s family. It is apparent that in the beginning it can easily be argued that the Disney Corporation was yet again trying to discriminate against other races except whites, but when one looks closer, it is visible that Disney made heroes out of the other cultures in the end. When the Hyenas join with Simba’s family in taking the power away from scar, Disney portrays everyone as equals. This yet again portrays the company trying to become more sensitive to cultures by making everyone a great part in the story and not letting any one culture stand-alone and be praised.
*Pocahontas* was Disney’s next released big animated hit. It encompasses a young Native American girl who does not want to have an arranged marriage, but rather find love on her own. Many have argued that Disney displayed racism in this movie, but what is unknown by most is that Disney tried to be sensitive to the race and culture of Native Americans. “For this film Disney underwent sensitivity training for three years since production of the movie began. To assure an unbiased fair cultural portrayal of Native Americans, Disney sought counsel from actual decedents of Powhatan indians as well as incorporating resources from academics, historians, and the leaders of American Indian organizations” (Disney’s Portrayal of Culture And Race In Film). Disney truly did try to not be offensive to Native Americans when creating this film. They went above and beyond in trying to be as accurate as possible in the making of the production. Some Native Americans were not happy with how the film turned out because they claimed that it was not an accurate enough depiction of the story of Pocahontas, and that it was there for offensive. What these people do not understand is that Disney was trying to stay as accurate as possible while continuing their theme of romantic and fairy-tale themed productions. If it were truly an accurate depiction of the story involving a young child, Pocahontas, meeting an older Englishman, John Smith, no love or romance factor would be involved. Disney therefore went ahead and tweaked the story to their advantage a little to create another top seller. Although Disney may have not completely depicted the story as it truly was, they were not intentionally racist within this film, therefore demonstrating their transition from a racist company to a more sensitive and thoughtful one.
One of Disney’s most recent animated films is called *The Princess and the Frog*. This movie is about a young African American girl who falls in love with a prince and they eventually get married and live happily ever after. It is the typical story line of a Disney movie, except for one alteration; a black princess and a black prince. This movie went into uncharted waters by creating the first African American princess ever put into one of Disney’s films. “The company wants to vanquish once and for all the whispers of racism that linger from stumbles in the past” (Barnes). The article, in which this quotation comes from, talks about *The Princess and the Frog*. It explains that Disney recognizes their films were once very racist, such as *Dumbo*, but are now trying to turn things around and expel the rumors of the company still being racist to this day. They truly do care about every culture and want to demonstrate that. By creating this particular movie they were hoping to reach out to people and show them that Disney truly has changed. Of course, there are still people who find flaws and racial problems within this movie, but it is arguable to say that they are just searching for what they want to see, and not for what truly is. This movie truly shows Disney’s change into becoming a more sensitive company. Not only did they create an African American princess and prince, but also set the film within New Orleans; a place where black culture has thrived for many years now. Disney truly showed to people that they are no longer a racist company by creating *The Princess and the Frog*, and hopefully will continue on with their new attitude toward race.

From Disney’s music, television channel, films, parks, and merchandise, the company displays a whole new view toward race. Watching the Disney Channel, one
is able to see how respectful Disney has become to new culture and ideas. Incorporating ideas and different types of cultures into their shows, it is evident that the company has come a long way. A segment called *Around The World* shown on the Disney Channel displays life all over the world and the differences between cultures. It also explains how even though people may live differently, it is important to respect each other’s different lifestyles. Attending Disney’s them park, Disneyworld, a vast amount of different cultures are displayed. For instance, in Disney’s park, Epcot, there is a section where countries such as China, France, Mexico, India, and many more places from all over the world are accurately illustrated. They even hire people from these places to work in the Epcot attractions to make it even more authentic. Most importantly, Disney’s movies greatly show the drastic change within the company. From *Dumbo* to *The Princess and the Frog*, Disney has completely changed their attitude on racism. Back in the 1940’s when racism was very present, Disney followed with the times and incorporated such elements into their movies, but in today’s times racism has greatly decreased and Disney recognizes that fact. They almost completely expelled racism within their newest films. People who still see racism within their movies are capable of seeing it because that is what they are looking for. In truth, Disney really is trying to respect everyone and their ways of living. They understand that their earlier films showed many bad depictions of some races and cultures, but are doing everything they can to crush the idea that Disney is still that way. Overall, Disney truly has changed and has now become a very respectable and magnificent company.