of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt in gilded frames over their mantles. Capturing the tenor of the Great Depression moment better than any hat or lamp ever could—even a moderately priced one—a steel worker in Thomas Bell's 1941 novel *Out of This Furnace* assures his fresh-off the boat working-class neighbor in the late 1930s, "If you are a worker in America, you are in politics."

New Recession shopping doesn't do the same thing. Sure, in some ways it captures this uncertain moment. Yet it doesn't seem like a transition, not the way the 1930s did. As Obama's presidency starts to mark anniversaries, the hope of 2008 often feels like a distant memory. Faith in politicians, political institutions, and the political process continues to wane. "During the great moments of social reform," David Brooks noted in a *New York Times* column in early 2010, "at least 60 percent of Americans trusted government to do the right thing most of the time. Now, only a quarter have that kind of trust." This growing doubt breeds disengagement and renders references to the Great Depression little more than quotes and citations, strategies for marketing products rather than invoking the "real" past. In these depoliticized times we recognize the New Recession by putting on a textured dress or by watching a film, knowingly nodding our heads when Tom Joad delivers his powerful sermon about empathy and organizing in the last moments of *The Grapes of Wrath*. "I'll be there in the dark," he says, peeking out from under his wool newsboy hat,

> "I'll be ever'-where, wherever you can look. Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise, and livin' in the houses they build, I'll be there, too."

Perhaps we'll all be there like Tom Joad, wearing our hip wool newsboy hats. We'll be at the boutique downtown or at the mall when The Gap mainstreams this nostalgic trend of buying up the past. Shoppers of the world will unite and take over, but it won't really matter. There isn't much at stake in Depression Chic but more buying and maybe some innocence by association—distancing yourself from a problem by purchasing something that says you care and at least acknowledge that something is wrong, even if you don't know how to fix the problem. That lamentable tendency is what passes for politics in the age of the New Recession.

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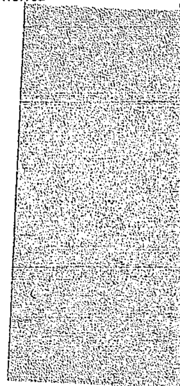

the princess and the frog

by moon charania and wendy simonds

Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* is a predictable attempt to cash in on the contemporary Obama-esque, color-blindish liberal landscape. In its deployment of fraught racialized and sexual stereotypes, and in its choice of New Orleans as the setting, we see Disney's difficulties in handling class, race, and gender intersectionalities.

This 20th century princess, allegedly Disney's first ever black princess, starts out a hardworking waitress who dreams of opening her own restaurant. She has inherited this dream from her idealized hardworking father, who dies before anything can come true for him. Through her antagonistic friendship with a degenerate prince and the help of her white princessy friend, Lottie, Tiana's dream comes to fruition, but only after a tour through Disney's racist and sexist ideological landscapes of the quasi-Southern life of New Orleans.

The Princess and the Frog opens with Tiana's mother (voiced by Oprah Winfrey) reading the classic, eponymous fairy tale to Tiana and the daughter of her white employer, Lottie. The hardworking mother is a seamstress, hailed by her employer as "the best seamstress in town." Tiana is a feisty little girl who disdains princess stories, but Lottie hangs her hat on this proverbial dream. This opening scene is reminiscent of antebellum America: a black mammy-ish character seemingly enjoys the space offered to her by her generous white master, a daughter benefits from her mother's hard (but unseen) work, and the daughter's white friend appears oblivious to the power dynamics which allow her—but not her friend—both fancy dresses and a belief in fairy tales.

This early scene sets the stage for the recurrent vacillations throughout the film, in which race and class are alternately made visible and then erased. Basically, both Tiana and her mother are like indentured servants to Lottie and her father. Disney dresses this up a bit, though, to not seem racist. Tiana and her mother both serve willingly as *artists*, not only through menial labor. They are friends with their masters, treated with

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respect and fondness. And, ultimately they'll all be equal, as everyone achieves wealth in the end.

But equality is elusive, and, in this movie, it requires a convoluted amphibian adventure. When Tiana, as a young adult dreaming of opening her own restaurant, is told by the real estate brokers of her dream property that "a woman of her background" should not strive so high, we see the euphemistic use of the term *background*. Here, background stands in for Tiana's race, an acknowledgment of her generally inferior position as an underprivileged, dark-skinned, fatherless girl. When Tiana triumphs, Disney erases the power of "background," offering up a fantasy color-blind, merit-based society; a world where haute bourgeois lifestyles are legitimized and all signs of racism and class inequality are rendered invisible.

In the meantime, Disney's depiction of Prince Naveen complicates matters. Prince Naveen is ambiguously raced (though clearly lighter than Tiana), and speaks in what seems like a French accent (that tends Spanish when he's a frog). In a film in which most of the characters are black, why *isn't* the prince? Is the idea of actual black hereditary royalty (not the accidental royalty-by-marriage Tiana achieves) too much? More likely, Disney knew it couldn't depict a hypersexual philandering prince without reifying racist colonial nostalgic stereotypes (even if the prince does ultimately reform his playboy ways and redeem himself).

The film still manages, nevertheless, to dabble with risqué racialized sexualizations. Take Dr. Facilier, the seductive and seedy, black/Creole, pimp-like voodoo master who starts the froggy magic and Lottie. Dr. Facilier is a dangerous, wild-eyed, bare-chested, irresistible demonic force, who seduces Prince Naveen with the promise: "I can read your future, I can change it round some too . . . make your wildest dreams come true." His character, in a sense, queers capitalist success by making it seem nefarious, dirty, and too easy.

Photo by Josh Hallett via Creative Commons

A figurine of Dr. Facilier, complete with bone necklace and feathered hat, on display at Disney's Hollywood Studios.

Lottie, on the other hand, is a caricature of conventional Disney princesses. She embodies a particular type of feminine citizenship, entirely dedicated to the pursuit of marriage. From her childish proclamation—*"I'll kiss a thousand frogs to find my prince!"*—onward, Lottie comes across as shallow, hyper-sexualized, stupid, and lazy. She wears heavy make-up, low-cut dresses, and speaks in a loud, obnoxious, Southern drawl—most notable in her constant references to her father, Big Daddy (yes, Big Daddy). By caricaturizing white, privileged, feminine subjectivity, Disney unconsciously mobilizes a reading of white, privileged, princess-wannabes as troubled, disfigured, and disrupted by the inevitable unruliness of their bodies and desires. The ambiguous relationship between fantasy and enjoyment surfaces here, where Lottie's fantasy (to be a princess) and Lottie *as* fantasy animate and structure the audiences' enjoyment, while simultaneously serving as a protective shield against Lottie's excess. Through Lottie, we see Disney parodying this feminized quest for wealth through matrimony, while simultaneously recognizing the power it has (always had) to construct troubling stereotypes. This conceit interpellates a hip, modern audience in Disney codes, while it simultaneously reassures them of who deserves to be the true princess. Lottie's over-the-top femininity establishes Tiana's heroic entitlement.

> At its best, Disney's latest princess flick bears traces of the growing ambiguity, complexity, playfulness, and feminist allusion of American life. At its worst, it merely reworks familiar tropes.

Throughout, Tiana appears elegant and modest in comparison to Lottie. Asexual in her self-conception, she's always single-mindedly focused on work, whereas Lottie is all about leisure. Indeed, even in a whimsical dream sequence, a scene in which Tiana twirls around at the grand opening of her lavish gourmet restaurant and jazz club, greeting guests, she wears a white bridelike evening gown. When we first see Tiana as an adult, she's a hardworking waitress, cheerfully serving her old friend Lottie and Big Daddy in a homey, bustling restaurant. Quickly, we become privy to the way race, class, and gender are melded into her figurative and literal movement in the film. She is underpaid and overworked. She is uninterested in marriage, men, and parties, as they may potentially distract her from her professional ambitions. She seems cognizant of her subaltern place in society, but determined to fight for her goals. She is a strong, smart, autonomous young woman who wants to bend if not break the rules of femininity and racial confinement. Can it be that Tiana is a feminist?

Numerous feminist scholars have articulated the ways (liberal) feminists' public identities too often rely on tropes of visuality that carefully contain sexual and racial excess. This is accomplished in two ways. First, by strategically projecting sexual excess onto wannabe-princess Lottie, Disney makes her the repository of sexual and gender excess. She functions as the perfect foil to Tiana, who then seamlessly sanitizes the heteronormative, raced and classed space with her workaholic dedication. Second, Tiana's transformation into a frog for the majority of the film takes love and sex out of a raced and classed context (though the frogs' gender remains, via the usual Disney techniques applied to animals—longer lashes, and a curvier frog figure for Tiana). Species bond together here against adversity; maybe it's a metaphor for multiculturalism, Disney's way of valuing diversity.

How could have Disney managed Tiana's (liberal) feminist body and subjectivity without turning her into a slimy, mucus-dispensing, green frog for most of the film? Black Entertainment Television, along with other critics of the film, has lambasted Disney for keeping the characters amphibians for most of the story. The depiction of the pleasures and joys Tiana experiences as a frog (in contrast to the working class reality of her human life) disrupts the possibilities of a politicized feminist and black self at which the film occasionally hints.

The friendship between Tiana and Lottie is pivotal to Tiana's success—as is a flashy, older, Creole "good witch" (to counterbalance the pimp-like Dr. Facilier) who is instrumental in Tiana and the Prince's defrogging. Her role is minor, though. Instead, Like a fairy godmother, Lottie is Tiana's most influential benefactor and ultimately provides the resources for Tiana to accomplish everything she desires: the prince and the restaurant. Tiana deserves everything she gets, so it may appear that she earns it herself. But she couldn't do it without Lottie's assistance and support. Their relationship would appear to be a tribute to the strength of women's friendship, except that Lottie is rendered as such an exaggerated stereotype of a dumb blonde it's hard to understand what someone as smart and serious as Tiana would see in her. This is no cinematic coincidence. Disney has a long history of annihilating the possibilities of female friendships through the trope of hyper-feminine competition (often for men). Here, *The Princess and the Frog* opens up an interesting possibility for appreciating woman-centered loyalty, but relegates it to a sub-plot.

Photo by Anna Fox via Creative Commons

Tiana's Showboat Jubilee, a parade and performance at Disneyland in California, features both Tiana and her froggy doppelganger.

Finally, we suspect that setting the film in New Orleans was a decision that rested on the opportunity to portray race ambiguously. Many of the dark-skinned characters speak in Creole accents, and Tiana's special art is making Creole food. It may be that Tiana isn't actually Disney's first black princess, but actually a Creole one—an exotic, pan-ethnic Pocahontas for the 21st century. It's disturbing, then, that this American dream has been set in a city where recent ruination so clearly highlighted the divisions between haves and have-nots. How ironic is the film's recognitition that, *"freedom takes green,"* when considered against the backdrop of the real losses the people of New Orleans have suffered? How incongruous is the emphatic meritocratic message—delivered in part by Oprah, the richest black woman in the world—knowing what we know about the racial politics of post-Katrina New Orleans?

Maybe we shouldn't object so much to a children's cartoon... No, of course we should. Will these heteronormative, hyper-feminine fantasies never lose their appeal? At its best, Disney's latest attempt at modernizing the princess genre bears traces of the growing ambiguity, complexity, playfulness, and feminist allusion of contemporary American life. But at its worst, *The Princess and the Frog* merely reworks and recombines familiar tropes and disguises them with a shimmery screen of all too familiar political correctness.

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