

A White Savior, Savagery, and Criminality in the City of “Multitudinous Opportunity” in

*Zootopia*

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Everyone comes to Zootopia thinking they can be anything they want, well you can't. You can only be what you are.

(Nick Wilde, 2016, *Zootopia*)

The Disney company is distinguished for being the frontrunner in profit and popularity for animated movies worldwide. In 2016, Walt Disney Animation Studios released a film called *Zootopia* (Spencer, 2016). Not only did *Zootopia* win an Academy Award for best animated feature film, but the film also received a high score of 98% from the popular online movie review website *RottenTomatoes*, and made more than three hundred million dollars at the box-office (*RottenTomatoes*, 2016). The animated film is such a success that the Shanghai Disneyland theme park is getting its own *Zootopia*-land, which will be a replica of the city from the film that people will be able to walk-through and experience (Frater 2019).

### **The Case of the Missing Animals**

*Zootopia* follows a small bunny named Judy Hopps who becomes the first bunny cop in Zootopia. Zootopia is a city in which animals of prey and those who are predators are able to put aside their hunting differences, and live together in harmony, until various predators start to go missing and become in touch with their more savage, “primal,” and violent instincts. Judy Hopps, along with a shady fox named Nick Wilde, take on the case of the missing animals. The missing animals are all predators. Being the first and only Bunny cop on the police force, Judy tries to solve the case of the missing animals in order to prove her worth to her police chief, or else she will be fired. However, things take a turn when Judy Hopps solves the case of the missing animals, but blames the predators’ lashing out in savagery on the predators’ genetic code during a news press conference. Animals of prey make up 90% of the animals in Zootopia, and animals of prey start to lash out in fear of all predators, even though only some have gone savage. Tensions being to rise within Zootopia, and predators are discriminated and profiled. In

the end, Officer Judy Hopps solves the case, with the help of Nick Wilde, and the harmony of Zootopia is restored.

### **Racial Regression**

Scholarship suggests that contemporary media contributes to the myth of post-racism (Gomez, McFarlane, 2017; LeBlanc, 2018; Haynes, 2016; Thornton, 2011). The myth of a post-racial America suggests that, after the Civil Rights Movement in the sixties, racial equality was achieved, since segregation was abandoned, and because America had their first Black president (Maurantonio, 2017). Post-racist rhetoric sustains the American Dream as a belief system that anyone can do anything with hard work, ignoring systemic barriers of racial marginalization (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Joseph, 2009; Löwstedt & Mboti, 2017). According to Bonilla-Silva (2015), one non-overt systematic barrier to eradicating racism is colorblindness. This is a liberal perspective of equality, but equates differences among people as being no difference at all, but disparities among communities for people of color are left behind. The myth of post-racism is supported by representation of difference in media (Dubrofsky, 2013), tokenism, and a small amount of people of color, mostly African Americans, achieving high statuses of wealth, fame, and power (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Joseph, 2009).

A trend in media that reflects post-racial rhetoric is representations of white people who recognize the racial disparities in society, especially towards African Americans, and... Bineham (2015) labels such white characters as anti-racism "heroes." Anti-racism hero narrative suggest any person of color is able to succeed in life academically, socially, and transcend any social class limitations with the assistance of an anti-racist empathetic White female (Bineham, 2015; McFarlane, 2015). In two movies, *The Help* and *The Blind Side*, both of the white main characters of the film save the Black characters from poverty and racial discrimination, which

leaves the Black characters deemed as helpless and in need of saving (Bineham, 2015; McFarlane, 2015). White superiority is then further sustained and diminishes the consciousness of systematic barriers for people of color (Bineham, 2015). Media sources sanitize racist ideologies with anti-racist white heroes, and construct ideas that racism can be destroyed with little effort (McFarlane, 2015). These white heroes, or saviors, in media are fabricated symbols for the current American climate of views on racism.

Disney is one popular media source that has exhibited many themes of racism. Müller-Hartmann (2007) argues that Disney films have a reputation for being “kid friendly,” and parents do not hesitate to think about the need to monitor their children if they are watching a Disney film, even though they include implicit, underlying themes of racism. The morals or lessons that Disney films perpetuate may become an ethical outline for how children think about issues such as race and racism (Müller-Hartmann, 2007). Underlying themes of racism in Disney films, especially Disney animated films, occur when there is a lack in diversity of race among the all-white actors who are providing their voices for the film (Müller-Hartmann, 2007). To further detail the problematic use of voices in Disney animated films, when people of color are cast to voice characters, they typically portray animals. For instance, in *The Jungle Book*, a Black actor voiced the character of King Louie, a monkey who is an allegory for working class African Americans and the famous African American jazz singer Louie Armstrong (Ciha, Joseph, & Martin, 1994). In addition to *The Jungle Book*, the Walt Disney animated film, *Dumbo*, has five crows who have an African American dialect, and also “depicts stereotypically negative characteristics often associated with racist depictions African Americans, such as being poor, unintelligent, and naïve” (Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund & Tanner, 2003, p. 32).

According to Towbin et al. (2003), characters of color in the Disney films are also seen as villainous, menacing, thieving, and sometimes depicting savagery.

Harris (2006) argues popular media depicts black masculinity through two dominant tropes: exceptionalism and criminality. Representations of criminality portray Black men as perpetuating a masculinity that is concentrated in violence and crime, which upholds racist stereotypes that all Black men are violent, sexual, and aggressive criminals Latino masculinity is similarly portrayed by U.S. media as violent, lazy, thieving, and hyper-sexual (Alcalde, 2014). According to Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner (2003), Disney films similarly perpetuate racist stereotypes of men of color: Middle Eastern men are represented as lazy, Black characters are appreciated only for their physical bodies, and Latino characters are shown engaging in violence and chasing women.

Disney has also created a new type of masculinity within their animated films. In Disney/Pixar films, male protagonists are more accepting of characteristics or personality types that are considered more “feminine.” Male characters in films, like *The Incredibles* and *Toy Story*, are supportive of each other and rely on a strong intimate friendship with other men, instead of enacting violence (Gillam & Wooden, 2008). This is a diversion from past films in which compassionate same-sex relationships would seem like a weakness, or as a threat to the male character’s masculinity and sexuality. Gillam and Wooden (2008) also note that this “new” Disney masculinity includes characters who show more emotion, which is depicted as a strength.

In 2016, the Disney animated film *Zootopia*, directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore, was released. According to Beaudine, Osibodu, and Beavers (2017), *Zootopia* is a children’s Disney movie that exposes systematic racism and racist stereotypes through the narrative of animals. This is crucial to evaluate because Disney films, again, contain values and lessons that

remain as treasured guidelines for children on how to act and think, whether it be implicit or explicit (Müller-Hartmann, 2007). The animal characters in the film are separated into two groups: predators and prey, and are racialized and constructed as either white characters or black characters (Sandlin & Snaza, 2018). With the increasing spotlight and consciousness on racial disparities in the United States, and the ongoing myth that we are living in a “post-racist” society, *Zootopia* acts as an important allegoric critique of the current racial tensions in the United States. The film is a cornerstone in racial progressiveness for Disney films, which have exhibited racist stereotypes in the past. However, even though it is progressive in its own way, *Zootopia* is also regressive in the sense that it prizes an anti-racist White hero and because of its racist depiction of Black and Latino masculinity through their categorization of animals going “savage.”

### **Predator, Prey, and the Anti-Racist White Bunny**

At the beginning of the film, *Zootopia* seems like a beacon of hope for young Judy, until the egalitarian myth that Zootopia is a place where anything can be achieved with hard work shatters. In the above quote, Nick Wilde explains how *Zootopia* is not what it seems, and it is actually a place where some animals face systemic barriers or stereotypes that villainize them. One particular flashback scene shows a young adorable Nick Wilde joining a junior scout troop, but then he is deceived by the other troop members. Nick Wilde is the only predator in the troop, and the others pin him down by force and place a muzzle on him, because they do not trust predators, more specifically, foxes. Foxes face the reputation of being sneaky bullies, predators are stereotyped as being violent savages because of their genetic code. In these ways, *Zootopia* presents as a progressive allegoric critique for the current racial tensions in the United States. Even though the film is progressive, *Zootopia* still prizes a White hero to save all of the

predators. The predators of the film represent people of color. This leaves people of color helpless and needing a white person to save them.

Society in *Zootopia* is divided into two. In the opening scene of the movie, a young Judy Hopps is in a school play about Zootopia's past. She describes the world as being separated into "vicious predator or meek prey." The predators are described in the beginning as vicious, even when none of the animals have yet gone savage. The film constructs predators as people of color, and the prey as white people. The key here is the word "savage," which is used to describe the animals violently lashing out throughout the film. According to Underhill (2016), ideas of savagery and violence have been used to describe people of color, especially during the colonization of the Americas and Native Americans, as well as the enslavement of Blacks. Through the use of words like "savage" and "vicious," the predator animals are racialized as being people of color, specifically, Blacks and Latinx members.

*Zootopia* is an allegory for the post-racism era in America. In the opening scene, young Judy Hopps says that animals have evolved. She claims that animals have "moved beyond our primitive savage ways. Now predator and prey live in harmony, and every young mammal has multitudinous opportunities." The city of Zootopia is depicted as a city where both the vicious predator and the meek prey are able to get along and succeed in whatever dreams they want to achieve, like being the first bunny cop. In contemporary America, despite claims of post-racism, people of color still face systemic barriers that prevent them from acquiring their dreams, just like the predators of Zootopia. During a school play at the beginning of the film, a young Judy Hopps explains that through peace and change, "every young mammal has multitudinous opportunities," and all animals are equal. Judy Hopps says that at the center of this peace between mammals, "Just two-hundred and eleven miles away stands the great city of Zootopia,

where our ancestors first joined together in peace, and declared that anyone can be anything.” Later in the movie, after a police conference, Judy Hopps declares to Nick Wilde, “I mean it’s not like a bunny could go savage.” Nick Wilde questions Judy Hopps on her statements that she made against predators going back to their savage ways, and Judy Hopps pleads with Nick Wilde that he is “not like them... not that kind of predator.” The U.S. is in deep with this type of climate because of post-racial prejudice. This type of prejudice in the film towards predators and foxes mimic the prejudice people of color face within the U.S.

While being a film that allows its audience to think on a more human level about the so-called “post-racial” America, the film is also regressive in that it prizes a White savior for people of color. Bineham (2015) argues that, in media, whites, even though they do not go through racism themselves, are still focused on and become forefronted as anti-racist “White heroes.” Thus, racism is downplayed. Judy Hopps is an animal of prey and, thus, is categorized as a White character, while Nick Wilde, and other predators, lash out in violence or are savage. In the beginning of the film, Judy Hopps sees a fox, Nick Wilde, walking into an elephant owned ice cream bar. Judy Hopps proceeds to follow him into the bar, and unlatches her fox repellent spray, which is a symbol for pepper spray or even a police gun. Officer Judy Hopps hears Nick Wilde pleading with the store owner that he “simply wants to buy a jumbo pop for my little boy.” Judy Hopps, out of shame and compassion, argues with the store owner. She then helps Nick Wilde purchase the jumbo pop for his son. Another crucial example of the film marking Judy Hopps as the White savior is seen when she saves the day and discovers the reason as to why the predators are going savage. Judy Hopps makes it her goal to exterminate the fear prey animals have for predators, and also amend ties with Nick for assuming that he is an untrustworthy, stereotypical fox. In one scene, a female otter named Mrs. Otterton pleads for

help in finding her missing husband at the police station. Mrs. Otterton is a predator animal and classified as Black. Later on, you find out her husband, who is also an otter, went savage. Judy Hopps then interjects and says, “I will find him.” Judy Hopps is the character that restores the reputation of the predators. Without Judy, there would still be prejudice and fear among the prey on the attitudes of predators. This then proceeds into the idea that the predators, or people of color, need the assistance of prey, or White people, in order to achieve equality. With these messages of white saviors, the film sends degrading messages about masculinity for men of color.

### **On Masculinity: “I’ll Bite Your Face Off!”**

The film characterizes several characters as being of color. While such a representation seems like a step forward in animated Disney films, these characters are characterized through racist tropes, which is regressive in terms of Disney’s portrayal of Black and Latino masculinity.

Harris (2006) claims that popular media characterize Black male characters as criminals. For example, *Zootopia* depicts Finnick the fox as Black through the trope of criminality. Finnick is Nick Wilde’s partner in crime before Judy Hopps “saves” Nick from his life of crime. Finnick is a short, tiny, tan fox that seems harmless and even pretends to be Nick Wilde’s son during one of their hustles. However, the film also give Finnick a Black gangster persona. Behind his innocent and short guise, Finnick has a very low-pitched voice and is much older than one would first think. With Nick’s help, he uses this advantage to hustle other animals’ money. Finnick is also violent. In one scene, Nick Wilde antagonizes Finnick after they are done pretending that Finnick is Nick’s infant son. Nick Wilde says, “No kiss bye-bye for daddy?” Finnick then threatens Nick in his deep voice saying, “You kiss me, tomorrow I’ll bite your face off!” Then Finnick proceeds to drive away in a beaten up van with rap music playing. Young Black men are

stereotyped to be associated with rap music, especially violent rap music (Johnson & Trawalter, 2000). By the end of the film, Judy Hopps goes to Finnick's van for help in finding Nick after their fallout. Finnick opens the van door and yells, "Who is it?!" while holding a baseball bat. Not only does the audience assume that Finnick is living a life of hustling, but Disney further pushes this racist criminal characterization of Black men by also giving Finnick a life of poverty. A false stereotype in the United States is that Blacks are often living a life of poverty and are on welfare (Dyck & Hussey, 2008). Finnick's life of poverty includes him living out of his van, and also him hustling money. Then there is Finnick's aggressive and violent actions of slamming the door open with a baseball bat. Finnick the fox is characterized as a Black character through his life of violence, crime, and poverty.

An important character that is characterized as Latino is Mr. Manchas, the black jaguar. Not only is Mr. Manchas stereotyped as a working class limo driver, but he also reaffirms the stereotype of Latinos as violent (Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, Tanner, 2003). Mr. Manchas lives in the tropical rainforest section of Zootopia. He also has what appears to be a Latinx accent. As with other predators, he is classified as a character of color, and, given where he lives and his accent, he is specifically characterized as Latino. In his only major scene in the film, Mr. Manchas is tricked into giving information to Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps. So not only is Mr. Manchas portrayed as gullible, but, then a few seconds later, he goes "savage" and violently attacks Judy and Nick. This two minutes and twenty seconds, dark, and violent scene, further stereotypes Latino men as being violent. The scene ends with Judy chaining Mr. Manchas's leg with her handcuffs. Although at the end of the film we find out that Mr. Manchas lashed out in violence because of a plant he was exposed to that causes all animals to be violent,

there is no other interaction between Judy, Nick, and Mr. Manchas that allows for closure about Mr. Manchas' violence.

Alcalde (2014) argues Latino men are also hyper-sexualized in media. At the end credits of the film, there is a musical number sung by a character named Gazelle who is voiced by Shakira, a famous Columbian singer. Dancing around Gazelle are four male tigers that are characterized as sexual through their smirking and facial expressions, which the camera zooms in on. The tigers are also bigger, more buff, shirtless, and only wearing short silver-sparkly boxer-briefs. Earlier in the film, Judy Hopps goes to an animal spa and is shocked to see that animals at the spa are not wearing any clothes and proceeds to say how the animals are shockingly naked. Clothes are normal for animals in *Zootopia*. Disney is further perpetuating this hyper-sexualization, and violence of Latino men.

When these tropes are perpetuated within media about masculinity, they shape our conceptualization of what it means to be a man (Zeglin 2016). In the case of *Zootopia*, the perpetuated tropes conceptualize that masculinity for men of color, specifically Black and Latino men, are violent, hyper-sexual, engaged in a life of crime and savagery is in their blood. Sandlin and Snaza (2018) explain that relating this savagery back to genetics in the film misleads the audience to believing that these stereotypical tropes are in the DNA of Blacks. While at the end of the film, it is explained that all animals can go savage if they are being exposed to a plant called a "night howler," multiple messages are stated in the film about Black and Latino men and violence. During a televised police conference, Judy Hopps explains that, "Savagery is in their (predators) DNA," so they are simply "reverting to their primitive, savage ways." Another character named Mr. Big, who is a small arctic shrew, explains to Judy, "We may be evolved, but deep down, we are still animals." While the animals' savagery was only activated because of

their exposure to the “night howlers,” these messages claim that savagery and violence are in men of colors’ blood. This makes it seem like men of color, specifically Black and Latino men, are okay in society, but, at any moment, they may lash out in violence, since it is in their blood. The explanation of the predators going savage in the film still perpetuates notions of men of color as violent, but disguises the acts of aggression by saying there is a catalyst that activates this “savageness” in their blood.

### **Regressive & Implicit Racism**

The city of Zootopia constructs an allegory that represents the United States’ false post-racism era. Through the racialization of predators and prey in the film, people of color and whites are separated. All animals are believed to get along within the city, but it turns out foxes and other predators are stereotyped by animals of prey. While the film explicitly argues for peace on racial relations within the United States, the film also holds implicit messages about people of color, specifically, those who are Black and Latinx are told they can only be “saved” by an anti-racist white hero.

In the film, the white savior is represented through Judy Hopps. Black and Latinx members are stripped of any power in fighting against prejudice and racism. This prizes anti-racist whites as being the forefront runners in deciding what is racism, how to fight it, and reinforces that Black and Latinx members need saving.

The film also perpetuates messages of masculinity for Black and Latino men. The fox character Finnick is a racist depiction of how Black men are criminals and live in poverty. Once their masculinity is compromised, they must reclaim it through acts of violence. Racist Latino masculinity is constructed through Mr. Manchas and the backup dancer tigers. Mr. Manchas reaffirms corrupt depictions that Latino men are violent, and the tigers maintain the hyper-

sexualization of Latino men in media. These characters confine Black and Latino men to the racist and stereotypical bounds of depictions of Black and Latino masculinity.

Through the narratives of Judy Hopps, Finnick, and Mr. Manchas, *Zootopia* shows a regressive and implicit type of racism by prizing an anti-racist White hero, and depicting Black and Latino masculinity as “savage”. In this allegorical world, “anyone can be anything” as long as you are white.

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