

UC Riverside

UCR Honors Capstones 2019-2020

Title

"When We're Human": An Intersectional Look at Speciesism and Racism in the Disney Animation Studios Film "The Princess and the Frog"

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0jk6h12b>

Author

Vargas, Grisel

Publication Date

2019-10-01

Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are within the manuscript.

"WHEN WE'RE HUMAN"
AN INTERSECTIONAL LOOK AT SPECIESISM AND RACISM IN
THE DISNEY ANIMATION STUDIOS FILM "THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG"

By

Grisel Vargas

A capstone project submitted for
Graduation with University Honors

December 4, 2019

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

Dr. Vorris Nunley
Department of English

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair, University Honors

Abstract

The research paper examines the Walt Disney Company's use of speciesism by analyzing Ray the firefly, a character from their 2009 film "The Princess and the Frog". When looking at Ray's story alongside the story of Tiana as a princess in the franchise itself, I clarify parallels between Disney's treatment of the insect and Disney's first black princess. In discovering cases of speciesism specific to the Disney Princess franchise, I make the connection between Disney's use of speciesism and racism. This conclusion is reached via analysis of the film in question, other films in the Disney oeuvre, articles written about "The Princess and the Frog", and papers that define animal studies, speciesism, and anthropocentrism. Understanding that there is animal in the human is significant towards understanding the needs of both humans and animals. The results are useful in analyzing how Disney's portrayal of human and animal relationship affects the popular culture's understanding of animals. Beyond that, the research also helps in furthering our own understanding of racism.

As of November 12, 2019, Disney officially debuted a new streaming service: Disney Plus. This service provides subscribers with content created by Walt Disney Studios and Walt Disney Television accompanied by additional content from other properties they have purchased over the years – including 20th Century Fox, Lucasfilm, and Marvel. With almost a hundred-year history, net worth estimated at one hundred thirty billion dollars, and control of about forty percent of the movie and television industry in the United States, the Walt Disney Company influences millions of viewers. Therefore, the Walt Disney Company's treasure trove of images is crucial to understanding the effects of its images and representations on popular culture. More specifically, this essay will explore the fictional, anthropocentric representation of Ray the firefly in the 2009 Walt Disney Animation Studios film: “The Princess and the Frog.”

Disney based “The Princess and the Frog” upon the fairy tale The Frog Prince popularized by the Brothers Grimm. The film was an attempt to ameliorate past mistakes. It performed well with an overall 7.1/10 on IMDb, an 85% on Rotten Tomatoes, and a 73% on Metacritic. It is part of the franchise owned by Disney known as Disney Princess. Yet, “The Princess and the Frog” has been criticized due to its abysmal, representational past. Specifically, in relation to issues of racism, sexism, and the primary emphasis of this research – speciesism. Speciesism is one of three concepts crucial to this analysis of “The Princess and the Frog”: animal studies, speciesism, and anthropocentrism.

Before beginning the analysis of the film, a synopsis will prove useful. The movie centers around Tiana, a young, hardworking, and focused African American woman, living in 1920s, Louisiana. Unlike most princess movies, Tiana's dreams do not revolve around romantic love. Instead, she wants to own and manage a successful restaurant. Prince Naveen, a foreign traveler who loves money and women, ends up being transformed into a frog after an encounter

with Dr. Facilier, a sleazy, dangerous character referred to as the shadow man. Tiana kisses Naveen after he promises her money to buy a restaurant. However, because she is not a princess, the kiss transforms her into a frog. Tiana and Naveen journey across the bayou and befriend a jazz-loving alligator named Louis and a hopelessly romantic firefly named Ray. Ray helps guide them to Mama Odie, the voodoo woman who is Tiana and Naveen's only hope at discovering how to become human again. Ray, the firefly, provides the perfect bridge to animal studies.

According to the Wesleyan University Animal Studies course department website, animal studies is an interdisciplinary field which "investigate[s] past and present relations between human and non-human animals, the representation of those relations, their ethical implications, and their social, political, and ecological effects in and on the world." Because Disney produces a large number of films, which include animals, it has a significant influence on how audiences perceive human-non-human relationships. However, instead of viewing human-animal relations as a means to explore commonalities, Disney seems to focus on human-animal differences. Differences in desires and needs. Further, the film suggests that to be human is not to be animal. A position challenged by scholars in animal studies. Afterall, human physiology remains tethered to our animal forebearers.

Fictionalized or not, if Disney films acknowledged this connection, then it would recognize that many animals have feelings and needs apart from human concerns. Indeed, "the fact is that a difference between the content of two interests need not imply a difference between their significance" (Horta 249), whether due to species or race. The distinction between the animal and the non-animal is not as natural nor as clear cut as Disney and humans tend to believe. Yet, we often treat hierarchal classifications (humans are more valuable than animals, and both more valuable than insects) as if they are handed down from nature. As if such

classifications were immutable. These distinctions are as prescriptive as they are descriptive. Political as scientific. This can lead to speciesism. Animal studies informs speciesism.

Speciesism refers to the derogatory and unequal treatment of animals based on the species to which they belong. Two definitions of speciesism are crucial to this analysis of the film. The first definition is from Oscar Horta, a philosophy and anthropology professor who is an animal activist. In his essay "What is Speciesism," Horta picks apart and attempts to define speciesism: "speciesism is the unjustified disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more of a particular species" (247). This definition is useful for the analysis of the 2009 animated film because it includes the possibility that there can be more than one species that is "in." The use of the phrase at the end of Horta's definition – "not classified as belonging to one or more of a particular species" (247) – creates room for the idea that there are multiple species that receive unjustified, disadvantageous treatment. Horta also informs readers about the importance of speciesism because "speciesism is not suffered by species as such, but by their individual members" (250). Horta's argument allows the analysis to focus on Ray the firefly as an individual character rather than as a metaphor for the entire species. Horta's definition of speciesism also provides the opportunity to explore how this film discriminates specifically against the insect as a lower form of animal while privileging other creatures in the film: the frogs and the alligator.

The second definition informing this analysis is from Paul Waldau, a retired professor and prominent figure in the field of animal studies. His definition of speciesism includes an aspect of morality that compliments the surrounding context of Ray's ultimate death. He defines speciesism as "the inclusion of all human animals within, and the exclusion of all other animals from the moral circle" (38). This definition is useful because it illuminates how, one, that the

human carries the animal within; and two, the animal is placed outside of morality, allowing for the mistreatment of animals as non-human. Waldau's definition recognizes that how humans are treated as inherently superior to animals. He also breaks down what he means by the term "moral circle." He explains that creatures are in the moral circle if these three fundamentals are protected for them:

an opportunity for continued life [...], freedom from interruption of that life by captivity, enforced work, or any other form of harmful instrumental use [...], and freedom from direct, intentional infliction of negative consequences such as harm, pain, or suffering that is unnecessary and not inflicted for the benefit of the biological individual receiving these consequences (39).

In a movie where human protagonists are transformed into frogs, Disney's decision to devalue the animal, then place Ray the insect even further outside of the moral circle displays their speciesism. Disney then functions as the all-powerful cultural institution that takes away the aforementioned fundamental principles, specifically in "The Princess and the Frog." The notion of the moral circle also extends to an analysis of the circulation of Tiana's character within Disney's retail stores and within the Disney Princess franchise as a whole.

The last term relevant to this film analysis is anthropocentrism. As Horta explains, anthropocentrism "denotes, in general, the view that considers humans as central" (258). This definition is useful as a basis for whose life, what life, matters most in "The Princess and the Frog." Horta further defines anthropocentrism as "the disadvantageous treatment or consideration of those who are not members (or who are not considered members) of the human species" (258). He discusses anthropocentrism in response to Waldau's definition of speciesism, specifying that humans are the standard as to what belongs in the moral circle. Again, his

definition of speciesism allows discrimination against non-humans. So, by defining anthropocentrism, Horta allows room for speciesism not involving humans and discrimination based on the fact that some other creature is non-human. He further explains that anthropocentrism frequently occurs "because the production of several goods or services that many humans want to enjoy entails [the routine harming of animals" (261). In the world of "The Princess and the Frog," the joys of the human trump those of Ray the firefly. Furthermore, Disney animals – albeit animated ones – including Ray, receive disadvantageous treatment. They are viewed as less worthy than humans and placed outside of Waldau's moral circle. Tiana, the princess, who becomes fully human in the conclusion of "The Princess and the Frog," is temporarily transformed into an animal character, placing her in the same position as the actual animals.

Princess Tiana is a member of the Disney Princess franchise, an exclusive, all human club. The existence of Disney Princess proves that Disney values its human creations over that of their animal characters. According to the official Disney Princess website, there are currently twelve Disney Princesses: Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, Rapunzel, Merida, and Moana. YouTuber Jonathan Carlin, one-half of the YouTube duo Super Carlin Brothers, explains how this franchise works and how a Disney female can be named a Disney Princess in his video "Top 5 Snubbed Disney Princesses." The three primary qualifications in order to be named a Disney Princess are that the ladies in the running must have a primary role in the movie, they must be human, and they cannot have been introduced to the audience in a sequel (Carlin). Of the twelve princesses, half of them are women of color: Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, and Moana. However, at the time of Tiana's creation, there were only eight princesses, with Tiana being the ninth total and the fourth

princess of color. Brittani Tuttle explains that "until they are officially added to the lineup [other princesses who are the intellectual property of Disney] are not Disney Princesses." Tuttle's explanation illuminates why other Disney characters with royalty in their backgrounds are not part of this franchise, such as Anna and Elsa from "Frozen," Nala from "The Lion King," or the titular character from "Anastasia" which was owned by Fox who Disney now owns. In order to be a Disney Princess, *one of the qualifications* is that the character must be human, which is why Nala – a lioness – is not a princess. Nala's exclusion from the franchise is an example of speciesism within Disney: she is a member of a species who suffers from "unjustified disadvantageous treatment" (Horta 247) because she is a lion. The exclusivity of the franchise promotes speciesism. There is no franchise with such equally strict qualifications for a higher tier of Disney animal movie characters – there is no animal royalty in Disney. It is disadvantageous because it makes it easy for such animal characters to disappear and dilutes the possibility of longevity for their movies. "Snow White" is still relevant even though her film premiered in 1938. Meanwhile, more recent Disney animal films, such as "101 Dalmatians" which premiered in 1961 is not a popular or culturally relevant film today. As I mentioned earlier, "The Princess and the Frog" was an attempt on Disney's part to fix all of its previous wrongs regarding animals and people in their Disney Princess films.

Tiana was intended as a response to the racist and sexist representations of princesses that preceded her. While Tiana was not the first Disney princess of color, she was the first black princess in the franchise. Mari Ness, in her article "The End of an Era: Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*" believes that the film is "arguably one of the most cynically, market-driven Disney films in *conception*." One way to read this is that Disney was trying its best to create a black character that would bring success to the company, the franchise, and help people forget how it

treated black characters in the past. In Brooks Barnes' New York Times article regarding the movie, he writes that Disney "had been lambasted by some parents for not having a black princess." Although Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan already existed, none of them were black. Having a black princess would be a smart move on Disney's behalf specifically because it would help them "vanquish once and for all the whispers of racism that linger from stumbles in the past" (Barnes). The highest form of relinquishing that past would be to create a character who would be granted access into the most exclusive tier of Disney – a Disney Princess. While there was no guarantee that the movie would be a box office hit, there was indeed hope that it would be. The movie did not do nearly as well as other Disney films, grossing only 207 million at the box office. The lowest of any of the Disney Princess films, according to the research of David Opie. Although she is a Disney Princess, she "remains less visible than the other Disney Princesses" (Ness).

In addition to the lack of relative success "The Princess and the Frog" has when compared to the other princess movies, toy line marketability of the movie's characters is lower than the other princess movies. Ness writes that "the film was largely inspired by the hope of marketing merchandise to small children" but it's difficult if not impossible to find plushies of Ray or Louis the way one can of Flounder from "The Little Mermaid." However, the failure of the movie's merchandise to sell extends beyond the animals of the film. Tiana sales were negatively impacted. Ness found that "Tiana merchandise is often harder to find" because "most of the merchandise focuses on other Disney Princesses." Demonstrating that while "Disney has made huge strides in depicting race" (Barnes), the creation of Tiana appears to be purely for the sake of creating a black princess in order to be forgiven for the past.

Another aspect of Tiana's character that was intended to correct previous mishaps is found in her specific character traits and her romance story in the movie. Part of Tiana's appeal is that she is in a Disney movie that has something "relatively rare for Disney films: complex characters" (Ness). Tiana is quite unlike her predecessors. The Classic Era princesses - Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora - are women characterized by their passivity and by their dependency on men. The Renaissance Era princesses - Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan - include women of color and are depicted as women who are independent thinkers. Women who know how to take action. All of those women in the Renaissance Era, with the exception of Mulan, have stories whose plots are focused on romantic love. Tiana is meant to be the exception: she is a woman of color whose story does not focus exclusively on romance.

Throughout the film, audiences are treated to Tiana's determined and hardworking persona. Although the opening musical number in "The Princess and the Frog" encourages ideas about the external forces needed to make dreams come true, it accompanies the following lyrics: "The evening star is shining bright / So make a wish and hold on tight / There's magic in the air tonight / And anything can happen" ("The Princess and the Frog"). Lyrics that reinforce the idea of magic and fantasy that is central in many of the Disney Princess films. The song encourages the message that wishing is all that is necessary in order to make dreams come true. Tiana's entire character rejects that notion. She works two jobs to make enough money to buy a restaurant, she is a kind customer service employee who gets the job done, and she even rejects invitations to social outings in order to pick up more shifts at work. Tiana has a goal and does everything in her power to achieve it because from a young age her father instills the mentality in her that in addition to wishing, she needs to do "some hard work of [her] own and then [...] [she] can do anything" ("TPATF"). She exhibits the traits of independence that the Renaissance Era

princesses display, but unlike them, she has realistic, tangible goals and has no interest in romance.

Romantic love does become part of her story. At the end of the film, she marries Prince Naveen - the human turned frog turned human again whom she spent two days with and for whom she decided to postpone her dreams. So while the plot required her to stumble into the same trap of romance for which all of its other princesses fall, her love story strays from the others because her love is portrayed as a product of time spent together, extended communication, and prior relationship experience. Prior to *The Princess and the Frog*, romance in Disney Princess movies were shallow portrayals of the most romanticized version of love. In a traditional Disney Princess movie, love occurs inevitably when a man and a woman meet and fall in love at first sight and share true love's kiss. In Tiana's life, she has male friends and coworkers who are not her love interest, and she does not immediately fall for Naveen even after sharing a kiss.

The basis for Tiana's romantic life – time spent together, extended communication, and prior relationship experiences – are derived from Disney's animated animal films. Their 1955 film “Lady and the Tramp,” is a perfect example of all three in action. That movie shows a couple composed of two dogs, named Lady and Tramp, who go through issues more typical to a human relationship in real life. Tramp is known around the pound and the streets as quite a player – there is a whole song dedicated to outlining this fact entitled “He’s a Tramp.” This musical number is where Lady first learns about Tramp's love life and she is upset to find that he “breaks a new heart every day” (“Lady and the Tramp”). This later leads to an argument between her and Tramp where she confronts him regarding all the other girls he's been with: “That reminds me, who is Trixie? ...And Lulu and Fifi and Rosita Chiquita wh –whatever her name is.

As far as I'm concerned, you needn't worry about your old heel" ("Lady"). This compares to the nuances in Tiana and Naveen's relationship. Like Tramp, Naveen has his own romantic history – Tiana is not the first woman he has been involved with. Naveen is characterized as a fun loving, womanizing prince. He's known for partying and women fawning over him. During one musical number in "The Princess and the Frog," Naveen sings out a description of the type of life he had as a human: "a great big party every night / ... / A redhead on my left arm / A brunette on my right / A blonde or two to hold the candles / Now that seems just about right." Because they spend three days together as well, there is plenty of opportunity for Tiana and Naveen to get to know each other.

Unlike the princesses before her, Tiana gets to learn about her partner, and share moments of romantic intimacy with him before deciding that she indeed loves him. This process of Tiana's romantic story is an example of othering that she experiences because the differences of her story, and the origins of those differences, animalize her in the eyes of Disney. The treatment of these animals – and often humans – as nothing more than, at best, sidekicks in Disney Princess films, is where race and animal studies intersects. Devalued characters due to race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, are often othered as animals or beasts. Racism and sexism are often practiced through the animalization of characters. This connection between speciesism and racism is emphasized in the story of Ray.

While the romance between Tiana and Naveen takes cues from romances in Disney's animal centric animal films, it fails to take into full consideration how much more positively these films treat their animal protagonists. While the movie did address some aspects of correcting speciesism through Ray's character and life, it turns to anthropocentrism in its efforts to make him look like a hero. The history of speciesism in the Disney Princess franchise is not as

damning as it is in “The Princess and the Frog.” All the princesses before Tiana had animals in their films. There is no definitive switch in the movies between when animals were used as named characters versus animals as a device used to demonstrate the docility of the princesses and then eventually nothing more than their sidekicks. Those animals from previous Disney Princess films were victims to speciesism because their lack of character agency and character arcs demonstrates an “unjustified disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more of a particular species” (Horta 247). The particular species in this case is the human species.

Disney Princess films are the exact types of films that are characterized for their magic, their singing, and their “Disnature” (Wills 114). John Wills briefly explains the term “Disnature” in his book *Disney Culture* by writing that “nature has undergone a process of Disneyfication [...] a cartoon version of the wild that is loved and adored by its audience” (114). This is why some of the animals in Disney films can talk, why some can sing, and why the princesses can befriend them in the first place. It’s not as if these Disney princess films can’t give these animal characters a thoughtful character arc, they have it in their power to do so because of the Disnature they are known for. The fact that they choose not to – due to a logic informing how Disney tends to devalue the animal (excluding the film “Beauty and the Beast”) – is speciesism. Disney fixed it’s speciesism in the Disney Princess franchise by making him a full character: someone who has a family, someone who has a love interest, and someone who exists independently of Tiana. Yes, Ray is his own character with his own character arc; however, he does not exist beyond his use and utility for the humans in the film and in the audience.

By the end of the film, Disney resorts to anthropocentric tactics with Ray that undermine their attempts to fix their previous wrongs. Disney as a company is no stranger to treating

animals to anthropocentric ends. Its mascot is an anthropomorphic mouse named Mickey Mouse. It is possibly the most recognizable face of the entire company – even the silhouette is iconic. Horta writes that the harming of animals happens at such a systematic degree due to “the production of a number of goods or services that many humans want to enjoy” (261). Having Mickey as the mascot of Disney might not cause any harm to any real and living creatures, but it does establish the fact that Disney has no issues using animals in order to entertain humans. According to Travis Bean, an entertainment writer for the Forbes website, the 1994 version of *The Lion King* – with adjusted inflation – is the highest grossing animated movie of all time. Additionally, in 2019, the remake of *The Lion King* became the highest grossing animated film of all time. Regardless, both are counted as the highest grossing animated films of all time. Both are stories that center around animals. Wills is correct in his claim that audiences love Disney animal content. Again, there is no harm being caused to real animals from this. However, it is anthropocentric since they are being used for the entertainment of humans.

While Disney may have given Ray character depth and a love interest, his ultimate fate in the movie is a sign of anthropocentrism used to harm animals for the benefit of humans. From his first appearance in the film, he is established as prey. Forty three minutes into the film, audiences are introduced to Ray as he lands on a dandelion and looks up at the night sky. At 00:43:06, viewers see Tiana and Naveen’s tangled frog tongues come into frame as they both attempt to eat him. This initial interaction establishes Ray as prey. After all, he is a firefly. Frogs eat fireflies. In this case, the frogs who are attempting to eat him are humans that were transformed into frogs. So, this is not him being part of the cycle of life, rather it is Ray being used to serve humans – in this case as food. Horta’s definition of anthropocentrism, unlike his definition of speciesism, does not include the word “unjustified.” This means there is nothing

wrong per say with Tiana and Naveen trying to eat him. It is justified – they are hungry and he appeals to their new found animalistic instinct to eat insects. While Tiana herself seems not to want to eat him, she cannot help herself. The fact that they never try to eat him again after this is symbolic of the humanity left in them. He proceeds to help untangle their tongues immediately afterwards. They never try to eat him again. His offer and willingness to help once again shows that he is useful to them, which might explain why they choose not to eat him. He proves to be useful to them throughout the film beyond this.

His main use throughout the movie is in his connection to Tiana and Naveen’s love story. Ray’s first segment of dialogue in the movie as he approaches the tongue tied couple is: “Well, looky here! Girl, I guess you and your boyfriend got a little carried away. Am I right” (“TPATF”). This establishes him early on as someone who recognizes the romance between Tiana and Naveen, and as he proceeds to untangle them, as someone who is going to be pivotal in their ending up together. By using the word “boyfriend” despite the fact that at this point in the movie Tiana and Naveen are not in a romantic relationship, viewers understand that Ray has some foresight. By identifying them as a couple, his use is cemented as someone who recognizes something between them that they are currently unable to see. And by helping them untangle their tongues, he is physically made out to be someone who will be responsible for helping them navigate through their feelings and eventually get them to realize they like one another. Although viewers do learn more about Ray as the film progresses, it is clear from the beginning that his character was created solely for the benefit of the reluctant couple. Speciesism in its most blatant, but cute, form.

It is in Ray’s ultimate death where audiences are compelled to experience the deep speciesism informing the film. Ray seems more human through Disney’s anthropomorphism, but

is ultimately denied the privilege of living. Ray is squashed after trying to fight off Dr. Facilier's malicious shadow friends chasing after Tiana. Ray's death is not surprising as far as Disney animal films go, but it is shocking as far as Disney Princess films go – no sidekicks in its previous princess films die. His death is quite gruesome – although viewers don't directly see Ray get squashed, they hear a loud crunch as Dr. Facilier steps on him. While Disney has no qualms killing off human or animal characters in its animated films, the way it presents these deaths is quite distinct. In Disney Princess movies, it is not uncommon for one or two of the parents to be absent from the life of one of the leading ladies. An absent parent does not guarantee a dead parent, but in the cases where it does, the death does not typically occur on screen. The onscreen human deaths in Disney films tend to be reserved for the villain.

However, when it comes to animals, no one is safe: Bambi's mother from "Bambi," Tod's mother in "The Fox and the Hound," Mufasa and Scar (a good and villainous character respectively) from "The Lion King," and Coral from "Finding Nemo." These deaths are quite jarring for viewers: death by stampede, death by gunshot, and being eaten alive. Although these characters are just fictional creations, they are clearly being hurt for the purpose of creating entertainment for humans. The death of Ray is taken to another level because Ray is killed trying to help the humans in the film. The other animal deaths mentioned happened for reasons independent of them trying to help people. With the exception of Scar, most of these animal deaths are known for making audiences cry. It is clear these animals are being used and harmed for the benefit of humans. Ray's death makes his character appear disposable – he is only alive until Tiana and Naveen no longer require his existence.

The speciesism aspect of his death lies in the fact that aside from Dr. Facilier, who is not killed necessarily, rather just taken to "the other side," Ray is the only person who does not get to

continue living. Louis is the other animal present in the film. While he also expresses a desire to be human because he wants to play in a jazz band, he is not human to begin with like Tiana and Naveen are. He does not die and does end up achieving his dream of playing jazz. Tiana and Naveen do not die. They get married and open up Tiana's restaurant. The fact that the frogs and alligators – characters who all express a desire to be human, oddly enough – get to live but Ray does not demonstrates speciesism as is simply because of disadvantageous treatment to him based off his species alone. It is also speciesism because he is denied access into Waldau's moral circle. He suffers "intentional infliction of negative consequences such as harm, pain, or suffering that is unnecessary" (Waldau) which is inflicted upon him without any benefit to him or his species. During Ray's funeral, the main cast of characters look up to the sky where Evangeline, the star Ray is in love with, is. A small star appears next to her and it is heavily implied, seeing as this is Ray's funeral, that the star is Ray. It is some type of reward: Ray gave up his life trying to help Tiana and Naveen, and so he is allowed to be with the love of his life. This would almost make it look as if the intentional harm he suffered is in fact for "the benefit of the biological individual receiving these consequences" (Waldau). However, the reality is that Ray died – died for the good of Tiana and Naveen.

Toni Morrison, in her speech "Cinderella's Stepsisters," makes a point about what it means to be free. Although her speech is about women helping women, the stripped down version of her belief is about those who have been oppressed or not in positions of power finally being given power and how they should use that power. She believes that "the function of freedom is to free somebody else." Ray, as a character independent of the film, exemplifies this belief. As far as Disney is concerned, they failed to execute this ideal properly. Looking at Morrison's speech in the context of animal studies, to treat someone as a "stepsister" is to treat

them as less than human. Ray is an insect – the most othered creature on the planet – yet he goes out of his way to help the animals who tried to eat him and even loses his life up trying to help them. Meanwhile, Tiana is a black princess who is turned into a frog. She is literally animalized and is treated differently from the other princesses.

In attempting to right their previous wrongs regarding black characters and female characters, Disney made Tiana: a strong, independent, clever African American woman. However, in order to do so they had to restrict the freedom of someone and so they went after the creature lowest on the food chain: the insect. By using Ray to elevate Tiana's own story and killing him off once he is no longer needed, Disney shows that they are far from learning how to change their ways. Animal studies matters because it helps us understand racist and sexist othering in a new light. And consequently, racism, homonormativity, and sexism can be understood more comprehensively through animal studies. In one modern movie made in 2009, Disney manages to other an insect and a human being at the same time even if their efforts began as a way to redeem their past regarding animal treatment and race in Disney Princess. In "The Princess and the Frog," Ray's life and his needs should not be superseded by the needs of the humans in the film and in the world outside of the film, Tiana's needs should not be superseded either.

Works Cited

“Animal Studies.” Wesleyan University Animal Studies, Wesleyan University,

<https://www.wesleyan.edu/animalstudies/>.

Barnes, Brooks. “Her Prince Has Finally Come. Critics Too.” *New York Times*, 29 May 2009,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/31/fashion/31disney.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=8A4F4C2A221ACEC1D8AE35264C187A6B&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL>.

Bean, Travis. “Box Office: Will ‘The Lion King’ Top the Original Cartoon?” *Forbes*, 25 July

2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbean/2019/07/25/box-office-will-the-lion-king-top-the-original-cartoon/#7817243944ca>.

Carlin, Jonathan. “Top 5 Snubbed Disney Princesses.” Super Carlin Brothers, YouTube, 7 April

2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uocz5J3pJ8&t=216s>.

Horta, Oscar. “What is Speciesism?” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, Volume

23, Issue 3, Springer Netherlands, 13 August 2009,

<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs10806-009-9205-2.pdf>.

“Lady and the Tramp.” Dir. Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske. Walt

Disney Animation Studios, 1955, Film.

Morrison, Toni. “Cinderella’s Stepsisters.” *The Source of Self-Regard*, Kindle, Knopf Publishing

Group, 2019.

Ness, Mari. “The End of an Era: Disney’s *The Princess and the Frog*.” *Tor*, 2 June 2016,

<https://www.tor.com/2016/06/02/the-end-of-an-era-disneys-the-princess-and-the-frog/>.

- Opie, David. "Which Disney princess made the most at the box office?" *Digital Spy*, 26 November 2018, <https://www.digitalspy.com/movies/a871265/disney-princesses-box-office-ranked/>.
- "The Princess and the Frog." Dir. Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2009, Film.
- Tuttle, Brittani. "What makes a princess a Disney Princess?" *Attractions Magazine*, 21 March 2019, <https://attractionsmagazine.com/disney-princess-fox-lineup/>.
- Waldau, Paul. *The Specter of Speciesism: Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals*. Oxford University Press, 2002, pg. 38-39.
- Wills, John. *Disney Culture*. Rutgers University Press, 2017, Print.