**Disney Needs to Keep POC “Soul”s in POC Bodies**

By Annette Stonebarger

Released on March 4th, 2021, Disney’s most recent film *Raya and the Last Dragon* features the first princess of South-Asian heritage, Raya, and her spunky shape-shifting dragon sidekick Sisu.

While on this surface this may be another triumph for Disney’s diversity count, Raya’s story is hardly revolutionary and relies heavily on the tokenizing tropes Disney has used before. Namely, one of the main characters, Sisu, transforms from her true dragon form into a human throughout the film to disguise her identity.

Sisu isn’t the first Disney animated POC to change from human to animal. There is a historical pattern of Disney transforming characters of color into non-human entities. While the first concrete example isn’t until 1992 in *Aladdin*, Disney has been alluding to the likeness of POC to animals since their earliest films. After 80 years of relying on a racist trope which has only gained notice since the 2020 release of *Soul*, Disney needs to keep POC “Soul”s in POC bodies.

Disney has been transforming their non-white characters into animals since their earliest films. The first person of color seen in a Disney animation is in *Fantasia* (1940). The character Sunflower is a black centaur who is the slave to the lighter skinned centaurs. She is depicted as less human than her white counterparts and performs demeaning tasks such as rolling out carpets and shining shoes. Sunflower has been removed from all versions of the film since 1969 after public outrage demanded her censorship.

While blatantly racist characters such as Sunflower are no longer as obvious, Disney has continued to serve harmful stereotypes to their audience. One of the other main references to POC as animals is in *The Lion King* (1994). In their only film set on the continent of Africa, Disney chose to tell the story using animals rather than human bodies, unlike their other films which center around non-white cultures. This repeated portrayal has roots in images of POC being associated with animalistic qualities.

Specifically the Black figure portrayed as animalistic was a common trope in mid-20th century America. Figures such as the “brute caricature” were popular in books and television programs for adults, however Disney was the first to introduce the idea to children through animation. [The brute caricature is defined as](https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/brute/) “portray[ing] black men as innately savage, animalistic… deserving punishment, maybe death.”

More recent and obvious instances of POC to non-human transformation occur in the early 2000s, with *The Emporer’s New Groove* (2000), *Brother Bear* (2003), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Moana* (2016), *Coco* (2017), and now *Soul* (2020). Some of these films feature these transformations as only small parts of the plot (the character of Maui in *Moana* is a shape-shifter), while others barely recognize the human character at all (Kenai from *Brother Bear* is human for only 16 minutes of the film).

Almost all of the characters in Disney films who transform from human to animal are taken out of their human bodies as some sort of punishment or lesson, a reminder that there is an animal who lives within them that they must learn to control. This is more obvious with the POC characters because there is a deeply rooted notion of POC being less civilized and therefore more animalistic than white people.

Spectators have been able to ignore and excuse the transformations as a storytelling device for children’s films. Disney has been able to get away with this repeated storyline because animals are common characters in children’s tales. The use of animals as main characters in children’s stories has been common for centuries as a way of simplifying complex ideas for children. With films such as *The Lion King* or any instance of human to non-human transformation, Disney is able to provide an air of innocence by citing the many children’s tales told through the lens of animals as justification for their racist portrayals.

Despite their problematic execution, Disney and Pixar are responding to the call for more diversity. *Soul*, [recently nominated for three Oscars including Best Animated Feature Film](https://abc.com/shows/oscars/news/nominations/oscar-nominations-2021-list), features the first Black protagonist in a feature-length Pixar film. A record for similar Disney films, Joe departs his human body only 9 minutes into the film. However unlike his predecessors, Joe’s human body returns to the screen at 36 minutes of the 90 minute total.

It would appear that Disney has finally gotten the memo to stop pushing this repeated storyline, however viewers have still found issues in the portrayal of the first black protagonist: while a black body is finally seen on screen for the majority of a Disney film, his soul is misplaced.

Joe’s soul, voiced by Jamie Foxx, is put into the body of a cat, Mr. Mittens. His body is inhabited by the voice of his side-kick character Twenty-Two, voiced by Tina Fey. For over one third of the movie, the audience sees a black body on stage with the voice of a middle-aged white woman. It is clear that Pixar has tried to break the pattern, however they still put a black man’s soul into an animal and replaced him with Tina Fey.

Diney’s next animated film, *Encanto,* is scheduled to release in November 2021. This movie is rumored to follow the story of three Colombian sisters with magical powers. While little is known about the movie at this early stage, the one clear thing is that Disney needs to respond to audience demands for physical representation in its complete form. Many other Disney fans- myself included- are eagerly waiting to see how Disney acknowledges recent criticism and incorporates it into *Encanto*.