
DEPICTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE THROUGH JAZZ MUSIC IN DISNEY ANIMATED MOVIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Over the years of making animated movies, Disney has produced movies about the life of African-Americans, namely *The Princess and The Frog* (2009) and *Soul* (2020). As one of the greatest African-American cultural legacies, jazz music's elements can be found in these movies. The objective of this paper is to find the intrinsic elements where both movies inserted jazz elements as the cultural representation of African Americans. By using the qualitative method and comparative literature to conduct the analysis, this paper compares how both movies include jazz and African Americans to showcase the cultural representation. The results show that both movies have different ways of depicting jazz through the intrinsic elements. *The Princess and The Frog* depicts jazz as a culture through its settings, while *Soul* through its characters, mainly the protagonist.

Keywords: Cultural Representation; African American; Jazz

I. BACKGROUND

One of the greatest legacies African Americans have developed is jazz music. Jazz is known as a kind of music with a great number of improvisations. This type of music is estimated to emerge at the beginning of the twentieth century in a city called New Orleans in America. At the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, black musicians and other African Americans became engaged in modern life, leading to the existence of jazz. African Americans migrated from the South to the North and from rural to urban areas. Musicians of various social backgrounds in the urban areas built upon pre-existing vernacular forms and transformed them using the techniques of Western music through formal and informal educational networks. Black musicians created an astonishing array of secular, instrumental, and vocal musical styles by the early twentieth century. Music with elements such as syncopation, improvisation, blues harmony, melodic figures, and various tonal effects was developed by ragtime piano players, brass bands, string

bands, popular tunesmiths, "serious" composers, performers in minstrel and vaudeville shows, also members of large orchestras and dance bands. (Porter, 2002)

Through the years, Walt Disney Animation Studios began to show diversity in their films. Disney movies are popular with many people, ranging from children to adults. Even though animation is stereotypically related to children's movies, many adults still show interest in watching animations, particularly those who are produced by Disney. Displaying diversity of ethnicity, race, and culture has various aims. Still, the most obvious one might be to educate the audience that the people who are represented in the movie exist within us. As a minority race in America, African-Americans have been represented in some Disney movies, namely *The Princess and The Frog* (2009) and *Soul* (2020).

Both *The Princess and The Frog* and *Soul* have similarities. They are the movies that represent African Americans as the protagonists. Both movies also include jazz music as one of the elements that depicts African-

American culture. In this research, the writer aims to examine the depiction of African-American culture in the movies through jazz music. A comparative study method is utilized in this research to explain how jazz music represents African-American culture and how the music differs in both movies that have different intrinsic elements.

There are many studies conducted to investigate the representation of African-American people in literature, particularly in movies. A study conducted by Chouana (2022) analyzed the portrayal of the African-American community in the movie *Beats* (2019). Mainly concerned with its cinematic representation, the author aims to investigate the strategies used by the movie director in how he depicts the African-American community in Chicago's lifestyle to make a living. The next study is concerned with the application of comparative literature to analyze two or more different literary works. Syafinah and Susilowati (2021) researched the differences and similarities between the movie *Mulan* (1998) and its remake, *Mulan* (2020). This paper focuses on the intrinsic elements of both of the movies and finds several reductions, additions, and modifications from the earlier movie to the latest one. However, there hasn't been any study that aims to compare and analyze the representation of African Americans in Disney animated movies, particularly throughout the depiction of jazz music.

Comparative literature is a method for analyzing and comparing literary works between one another. Comparative literature is interdisciplinary, focuses on patterns of connection in literary works over both space and time, and involves the study of writings from a variety of cultures. (Bassnett, 1993). The content and structure of the comparative literature field are inherently designed to support the multidisciplinary and cross-cultural study of

literature and culture. (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 1999). He further argues that not only literature study was significantly affected by comparative literature but also cultural studies. When comparing works of literature, when the focus is not on the national literature as a whole, the comparisons usually focus on external issues such as origins and influences, reputation, and fame. These studies are primarily focused on two topics: the prehistory of a masterpiece, the migrations and the spread of its themes and forms, or echoes of a masterpiece, such as translations and imitations. (Wellek & Warren, 1956).

II. METHOD RESEARCH

This research utilized the descriptive qualitative method. The writer will explore and examine the characteristics of the phenomenon found in the data source. Cresswell (2014) argues that, unlike other approaches, the qualitative approach includes statements from the researcher about their perspective and the specific type of qualitative strategy being used. The primary data will be derived from the movies *The Princess and The Frog* (2009) and *Soul* (2020). This research will be conducted by 1) watching both *The Princess and The Frog* and *Soul*; 2) finding intrinsic elements that use jazz music as a cultural depiction; and 3) comparing how both movies use jazz as an African-American cultural representation.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG

In this movie, the story centered on Tiana, who aspires to be a restaurant owner as it was her dream with her late father. She worked as a waitress every day to save money to buy her own restaurant building. The rising

action is shown when Tiana meets a talking frog who actually is a prince called Naveen of Macedonia who had been cursed by Dr. Facilier, an evil witch doctor at a ball. To break the curse, he must kiss a princess. Thinking Tiana was a princess, they kissed. However, Tiana was not a princess, and therefore, after kissing the frog, Tiana transformed into a frog. The climax of this story is when both Tiana and Naveen finally defeat Dr. Facilier by destroying the talisman containing Naveen's blood with the help of other characters, such as Ray the Firefly and Louis the Alligator. Lastly, the denouement is when Tiana and Naveen turn back into their human form, and then Tiana finally opens her own restaurant.

The movie is set in New Orleans, a city in Louisiana, USA. New Orleans is known as the city where jazz first emerged. This can be seen in a number of dialogues performed by the characters. For instance, when Naveen sees a group of jazz performers in the street, he says "It's jazz. It's jazz music! It was born here." (16:37-16:40). The time setting is 1920s, known as "The Roaring Twenties" and the age of Jazz. In the 1920s, The popularity of records and sheet music, along with the radio, helped spread jazz. Jazz also introduced a new trend in dancing. Teenagers would dance to large dance orchestras consisting of up to twelve musicians, performing Charleston and Black Bottom dances. Once more, the chaotic and extravagant dance styles came to be associated with the more free-spirited, contemporary generation, emphasizing the 1920s' reputation as the Jazz Age (Lusted, 2014).



Fig. 1 Jazz in the 1920s as depicted in *The Princess and The Frog*

The center protagonist of this movie is African-American. The main protagonist is Tiana, an African-American woman who aspires to own her restaurant. Tiana may not be attached to the jazz image which is the main concern of this paper. However, Tiana is a depiction of a woman in the Roaring Twenties. Lusted (2014) wrote that as a result of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution, not only women were given the right to vote, but also work opportunities. When there were not enough men for jobs, women were already replacing them. Some women also worked their traditional jobs, such as teaching and nursing. Some women did office work, such as secretaries and typewriters. In *The Princess and The Frog*, in order to save money for her restaurant, Tiana worked as a waitress before finally being able to open her restaurant.

Another character the writer would like to pinpoint is Louis the Alligator. Louis was voiced by an African-American actor, Michael-Leon Wooley. The character first appears as a terrifying alligator but later reveals that he loves jazz and dreams of becoming a human jazz musician since humans are scared of alligators. In the end, he succeeded in fulfilling his dreams as a jazz performer, even though he is still an alligator. Other characters, including Prince Naveen, Dr. Facilier, Charlotte La Bouff, Mama Odie, and Ray, may not be attached to the depiction of jazz, but these characters play important roles in the storyline.



Fig. 2 Louis the Alligator

B. SOUL

Soul's story is primarily focused on Joe Gardner, a music teacher at a middle school who dreamed about being a professional jazz musician. When he found out a famous jazz musician Dorothea Williams was auditioning as a pianist as a member of her quartet in the jazz club, he showcased his piano skills and ended up being accepted. However, as he was too excited, he accidentally fell into a manhole and later found himself in strange surroundings. He later found out that he was transported into "The Great Beyond," which is an afterlife realm. Joe was shocked because he did not want to die and attempted to escape, but ended up in a before-life realm called "The Great Before." He was mistaken as a "mentor" for souls that are prepared to live in the real world, and he was assigned to a soul called "22" to find its spark, a badge that shows a soul is ready to live. 22 is a stubborn soul who does not have the will to go to earth. 22 took him to "The Zone" where both living souls who are facing euphoria of doing their passions and lost souls who are "lost" in life are gathered. The rising action is shown when an incident occurred that made both Joe and 22 transported back to real life. Unexpectedly, Joe entered a therapy cat's body while 22 entered Joe's body. 22 settled well in Joe's body as the soul was getting on well with Joe's acquaintances and even Joe's mother. As they find a way to relocate Joe's soul back to his body, 22 starts to enjoy life and refuses to give Joe

his body back. The climax of this story is when 22 runs away from Joe in his cat form, and they are transported back to "The Great Before." Joe is finally able to get back to his body after an argument with 22, where he claims the soul would not have a purpose in life. Joe was finally able to finish his piano performance at the jazz club, but he felt unsatisfied and looked back to the moments 22 spent with his body. Joe's resolution was to go back to "The Zone" by playing piano and discovered that 22 has transformed into a lost soul, obsessed with the thought of not having a purpose in life. Joe restored 22 back to a normal soul and convinced the soul to live. The denouement of the story is when Joe wakes up and sees life differently than he was before, he learns that what makes us spark is not our purpose in life, but the will to live.

The precise setting of this movie was never clearly mentioned, except for the fictional settings of the afterlife, which are "The Great Before" and "The Great Beyond". However, as it can be seen from some city landscape sceneries in the movie, the closest possible setting is in New York in the modern era. New York, aside from New Orleans, also played an important part in the development of jazz music as a result of the great migration of the Harlem Renaissance. It can be seen that the movie portrays the bustling situation of urban life. Most of the setting also portrays the African-American neighborhood from the scenes where Joe visits the barbershop, where the barber is already acquainted with Joe, and the customers of the barbershop, who are likely to be the black community in the city.

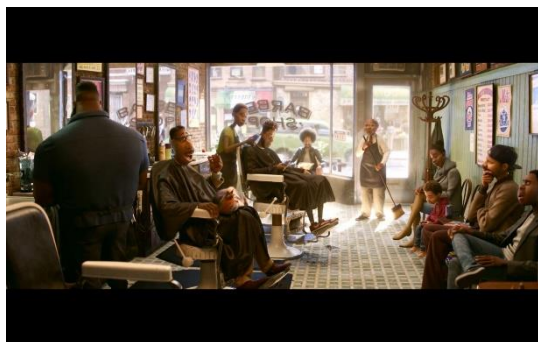


Fig. 3 African-American barbershop in *Soul*

One of the most important settings is the jazz club where Joe went to audition to join Dorothea Williams's quartet. The jazz club is a setting that represents Joe's identity as well as the place where Joe started developing a passion for music and dreaming of becoming a professional jazz music performer. The jazz club's setting is also shown when Joe enters a zone where his memories of living were collected and he finds a childhood memory with his father. In this memory, Joe is brought to a jazz club, and his father tells him that jazz music is their legacy in American culture "Black improvisational music. It's one of our (African-Americans) great contributions to American's culture" (23:44-23:48).



Fig. 4 Jazz Club in *Soul*

In this paper, the writer would only like to emphasize African-American characters that are related to jazz music. The first character is the main protagonist, Joe Gardner.

Joe appears to be a middle school teacher, teaching music at the beginning of the movie. However, deep in his heart, he aspires to be a professional jazz pianist. This dream first rose when his father brought him to a jazz club, Joe fell in love with jazz while seeing a jazz piano performance. Joe's dream and passion for jazz were initially opposed by his mother, Libba. She was concerned that being a musician would lead to financial instability since it is not a secure job and that he would end up like his father as she said, "You didn't see how though being a musician was on your father. I don't wanna see you struggle like that." (01:02:50-01:02:55). However, Joe later convinced his mother how important it is for him "This isn't about my career, mom. It's... It's my reason for living. And I know dad feel the same way. I'm just afraid that if I die today, then my life would have melted to nothing." (01:03:15-01:03:29). The other character is Dorothea Williams. Dorothea is a jazz saxophonist who is the leader of a quartet Joe auditioned for. Dorothea also plays a role as Joe's motivation as she is his idol.

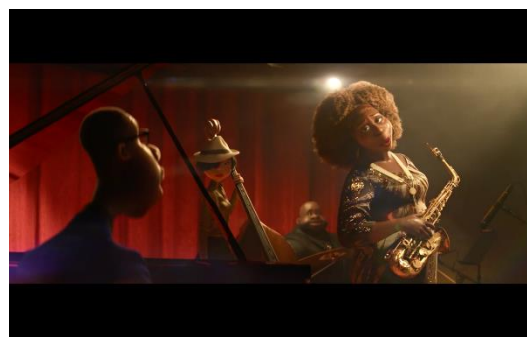


Fig. 5 Dorothea Williams

C. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The study aimed to examine how jazz music was depicted in both movies. *The Princess and The Frog* and *Soul* are two different movies with different main ideas. However, both movies were produced by Disney to

represent the existence of African Americans and add diversity to Disney movies. Based on the writer's observation, the two movies have different plots. However, the main characters do have similarities. Both characters are African Americans who have dreams and passions about life. Tiana with her restaurant, and Joe with his jazz, and they both are eager to achieve their dreams. The key findings that differ in both movies in terms of jazz as a cultural representation are the settings and characters where the movies emphasize jazz itself.

In *The Princess and The Frog*, the setting is the 1920s, which is also called "The Jazz Age", or "The Roaring Twenties". It was seen that jazz in this movie was performed in venues such as streets. The place where this movie was set is also believed to be the birthplace of jazz, which is New Orleans, Louisiana. The protagonist of this movie is not related to jazz. However, there is one character that has jazz as his passion, which is Louis the Alligator. Carrying a trumpet around even though he is not a human, Louis dreamed of being a jazz performer and therefore, this movie has a character associated with jazz.

As for *Soul*, the movie is set in the modern New York City and this movie emphasized the portrayal of African-American culture by using mostly black characters and characters that are related to jazz. Joe and Dorothea Williams are the characters who are both African-American and associated with jazz. The movie also brought glimpses of jazz-related settings such as jazz clubs. This movie also included jazz as an important part of the storyline as the protagonist, Joe is an aspiring jazz performer. His passion for jazz is what created a deeper connection to the genre in this movie. References to jazz music, such as improvisational technique and the essence of the genre itself, were also shown in several jazz

performance scenes. For instance, when Joe finally got to perform with Dorothea Williams's quartet.

D. CULTURAL VALUE

Jazz music holds significant value to the culture of America. It is a symbol of solidarity among African-Americans showing the resiliency and creativity of the community. Eric Porter (2002) writes that jazz's social role in black communities was strengthened by the development of black entertainment districts in urban areas and the flourishing markets for player pianos, sheet music, recordings, and, later, radio. These developments also increased jazz's status as a symbol of racial solidarity. Racial segregation was at its peak for black communities in the South in the 1920s despite movies trying to mask it. Black people were defined as second-class citizens and were denied many opportunities at the "Jazz Age" (Gregory, 2010). As time goes by, jazz amalgamates with other cultures as well as genres. Jazz rock, for instance. Jazz is also enjoyed not only by African-Americans but also by white Americans and even the whole world as the popularity of using jazz beats increased.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion from the comparison of the depiction of jazz music in two Disney animated movies, a difference in emphasizing jazz through intrinsic elements was found. The difference lies between the settings of both movies, as well as some of the characters. *The Princess and The Frog* (2009) is set in 1920s New Orleans, emphasizing the depiction of jazz through the time when jazz became popular in the city known as the birthplace of jazz. A character associated with jazz in *The Princess and The Frog* is Louis the

alligator, voiced by Michael-Leon Wooley. The character shows aspirations to perform jazz despite being an alligator.

Meanwhile, *Soul* (2020) highlights its depiction of jazz as African-American culture through the characters, mainly the protagonist. The main character Joe is an African-American man who is passionate about jazz. Similar to Louis the Alligator, both of them aspire to be professional jazz performers. This movie also showcases portrayals of the African-American community in modern America through supporting characters.

The writer suggests that future researchers who are interested in the study of jazz and the African-American community conduct studies about jazz elements in movies other than movies from Walt Disney Animation Studios. Further research on this topic could also analyze further of musical elements found in these movies. For instance, the analysis of the movie soundtracks. Overall, the writer hopes that this research could be useful for further studies related to the topic of jazz, African Americans, and comparative literature.

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