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An Analysis of the Portrayal of Women of Color in Western Animation

Currently, only one of the top 100 highest grossing animated movies has a woman of color as the leading character (“Highest-Grossing Animated Films”). Well-written female characters (characters with agency, depth, and lack of stereotyping) are hard to find, and well-written female characters of color are almost non-existent. In Western media, female characters of color have been underrepresented and subject to stereotyping for centuries. Recently, Western animation has improved levels of inclusivity, incorporating more well-written female characters of color as protagonists. These depictions promote the humanity of women of color through the subversion of stereotypes, and pave the way for more inclusivity in the future. **The portrayal of women of color (WOC) in Western media has often been sparse and extremely prejudiced, perpetuating harmful myths and lasting negative perceptions of WOC. In animated media, they face stereotypical treatment in both character design and characterization. An analysis of works of animation featuring female characters of color in contrast to preexisting stereotypical depictions indicates that positive, accurate portrayals can be achieved through challenging historical stereotypes.**

Western animation rarely includes people of color (POC). If they are seen in animated media, it is often through the use of racial coding or stereotyping. Racial coding implies that characters, usually non-human, are of a certain racial or ethnic background through the use of mannerisms and accent (Rose). This coding contributes to a hierarchy often seen in animation: “white-voiced characters at the top (British [accents] just below mainstream American); other ethnicities below; darkest-skinned at the bottom” (Rose). Not only are racially coded characters often portrayed through stereotypical means, they mostly serve as comic relief, helping the non-racially coded protagonist (Rose). If characters of color (abbreviated as COC) are not serving the white protagonist, they act as antagonists and are villainized (Rose). When animated films do have protagonists of color, many transform into a non-human within the first 30 minutes and remain in that state for most of the movie (Tejada). Films which transform COC lose chances to represent underrepresented cultures and “deal with the individual issues and

challenges tied” to the protagonist’s identity (Tejada). The lack of human COC and their literal dehumanization raises startling parallels to the racist belief that POC are subhuman. Animation studios consciously and subconsciously stereotype COC due to the “slow, expensive, labour-intensive process of producing animation,” using racial shorthand to write and design their characters (Rose). Because “91 percent of the executives at major and mid-level studios” are white, these depictions continue to flourish (Rao).

The portrayal of WOC in animation intersects sexist character designs and racial or ethnic stereotyping, and often includes dichotomies between two extreme depictions of WOC. Like other female characters, female COC are often portrayed as conniving femme fatales, maternal caretakers, or as helpless love interests, all serving the male protagonist. Although WOC often play love interests, they are treated as expendable and inferior to white women, due to past miscegenation laws in film (Rajgopal). Depictions of women from diverse regions such as Asia or Latin America are often homogenized, as seen in the Standard Latina trope, portraying a woman of Latine descent only with certain features and ignoring the rich diversity of the region. Due to the long history of colonization of POC, many of the roles for WOC involve some form of servitude through domestic labor or a sexual means. The desexualized, matronly servant stereotype appears most often through the Mammy caricature and the domestic maid, or *doméstica*, stereotype applied to Black and Latina women, respectively. Primarily characterized as submissive sexual objects, WOC are reduced to their sexual ability and stripped of their agency, viewed as prizes to be won, spoils of war, or treasures to be saved. Cultures with histories of colonization are often subjected to the Spoils of War trope. Submissive roles are seen in the Asian Butterfly stereotype and the “Indian princess” stereotype in reference to Indigenous women. If the woman refuses submissiveness, she is vilified, called manipulative, seductive, and mysterious. Conquerable or used for comic relief, this defiant role discredits the culture of the woman portrayed. The Jezebel, Angry Black Woman, Spicy Latina and Dragon Lady stereotypes all involve villainized sexualization. These caricatures are also masculinized, which serves to discredit the humanity and femininity of WOC. These sexualized and dehumanizing caricatures all indirectly contribute to the sexualized violence against WOC, such as the 2021 Atlanta spa shootings (Rao).

Inaccurate portrayals of women of color demonstrate a failure in the Catholic Social Teachings of solidarity and dignity of the human person, and create harmful psychological

consequences. The cognitive dissonance between inaccurate stereotypes and the actual culture being misrepresented causes feelings of distress, especially in children (Lara-Cooper and Cooper). In middle childhood (ages 6-12), children begin developing senses of self esteem, evaluating themselves based on social comparisons (Lara-Cooper and Cooper). Highly influenced by “public regard or a society’s view of an individual or associated group,” self esteem is significantly impacted by negative or inaccurate depictions of one’s identity (Lara-Cooper and Cooper). Senses of low self esteem are “connected to depression, early substance abuse, dropout rates, teen pregnancy,” and other detrimental effects (Lara-Cooper and Cooper). Therefore, stereotype usage in animated shows and movies typically aimed at school-aged children, may hinder a child’s developing self esteem. The destructive effects of inaccurate portrayals harm WOC, and run counter to the teachings of the Catholic Church. As Catholics, we are called to treat all people with respect, and advocate for the dignity of those who are oppressed. By stripping the dignity of marginalized groups, stereotypical portrayals perpetuate the institution of racism and sexism present in American culture. Proper representation is critical in ensuring that all people are given their dignity.

Although Western media has been making strides towards diversity, there have been more calls for accurate representation, not just the inclusion of a woman or a POC. In order to accurately gauge diversity, many have attempted to create media evaluation systems, with varying degrees of success. One well-known evaluation system, the Bechdel Test, examines female representation in movies and television. In order to pass, a movie must have at least two women talking to each other about something other than a man (“How to Use”). However, as the test only accounts for women with speaking roles and not feminist portrayals, a movie can “still pass the Bechdel Test and be sexist” (“How to Use”). In order to analyze the realism and complexity of fictional female characters, writer JJA Harwood developed the Strong Female Character test (“Strong Female Characters”). Created in response to recent waves of so-called strong female characters in entertainment media, Harwood’s 10-question test determines whether a female character is actually strong, or if her fighting skills were marketed as character development (“Strong Female Characters”). Her test uses a point system with a 10-point maximum, the usage of half-points for certain questions, and an 8 out of 10 passing score (“How to Use”).

I have incorporated Harwood's test into my own analysis of the portrayal of animated female characters of color, with some slight alterations. The test includes a question regarding the character's relation to gender stereotypes, and although she emphasizes taking ethnic and cultural context into account, I found that her analyses focused more on gendered stereotypes than racial or ethnic ones ("How to Use"). I have added two questions to the test specifically examining the characters in the contexts of their animated medium and their race or ethnicity. The point evaluation system for the first 10 questions remains unchanged, however, in order to pass the modified test, the character must earn full points for questions 9, 11, and 12. I have used this test to analyze female protagonists of color in the following: *Encanto* (2021), *Turning Red* (2022), *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008), and *The Proud Family* (2001-2005). Through the analyses of these works, I hope to find that they challenge stereotypes and present a positive, accurate depiction of a woman of color.

Beginning with the first waves of colonization in North America, Indigenous stereotypes continue to pervade modern media, stemming from the exploitation and genocide of Indigenous people, especially in the United States (Lara-Cooper and Cooper). As non-Indigenous people portrayed them as savages and thieves, Indigenous people faced relocation, abuse, and the destruction of culture (Lara-Cooper and Cooper). Because of this destruction, "a depiction of the 'vanishing Indian' developed" to deny accountability and exploit Indigenous culture before it would supposedly disappear (Lara-Cooper and Cooper). This led to the development of fraternal societies with Indigenous themes promoting the wearing of "costumes" and playing "Indian," even though Indigenous people were "brutalized and massacred for conducting ceremonies and living their own way of life" (Lara-Cooper and Cooper). The bodies of Indigenous people were likewise exploited in conventions and expositions, along with their imprisonment in museums and the excavation of burial sites (Lara-Cooper and Cooper). Myths of the "vanishing Indian" formed a belief that Indigenous cultures, unable to "change or survive by their own merit," can only be saved from destruction by an outside, dominant group (Wood). Exploitative and savior attitudes extend to Indigenous women as well, through the "Indian princess" stereotype and sexualization (Lara-Cooper and Cooper). These portrayals of submissive, promiscuous Indigenous women, as well as the use of Indigenous caricatures as mascots or logos, all contribute to the dehumanization of Indigenous people (Lara-Cooper and Cooper). This dehumanization has dangerous consequences, as "one in three Indigenous women will be raped

in their lifetime and 70 percent of sexual violence against Indigenous women is committed by non-Indigenous peoples” (Lara-Cooper and Cooper).

Katara acts as the deuteragonist of the show *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008). In a world where people have elemental powers over earth, air, water, or fire, called bending, the Avatar creates balance between the four corresponding nations, and can bend all elements. Due to the Avatar’s disappearance, however, the Fire Nation has been able to wage war on the other nations for 100 years, committing genocide against the airbenders. When Katara and her brother Sokka discover the Avatar, Aang, in an iceberg, they decide to help him end the war and restore balance to the world. Katara, a waterbender, is a member of the Southern Water Tribe, which is based on Inuit culture. She passes the first portion of the test with flying colors, especially in relation to gendered stereotypes. As a Water Tribe woman, Katara is expected to be submissive and subservient, and to only use her waterbending for healing. However, Katara refuses to accept the limiting roles of the Northern Tribe, physically battling sexism in a duel against a waterbending master. After becoming a waterbending master herself, she still embraces her skills as a healer, merging both aspects of her bending culture and rejecting the limitations of stereotypes. Her level of agency contributes to the subversion of the ‘vanishing Indian’ myth, as *Avatar: the Last Airbender* explores the effects of colonization. Although the Southern Water Tribe is introduced as a society in decline with Aang as its supposed savior, the narrative gives Katara and Sokka the agency to help their people by fighting the Fire Nation, subverting the trope of the outside savior. When encountering the flourishing, opulent Northern Water Tribe, *Avatar: the Last Airbender* rejects the notion that indigenous cultures are a monolith, and most importantly, the idea that they must be saved in order to survive. Katara’s activism against some of the views in the Northern Tribe, such as women’s rights and their isolation from the war, and her adoption of Northern bending styles, gives her the power to create change in her culture on her own terms, rather than an outside force.

Stereotypes of Latinas in the United States revolve around the long history of colonization in the Americas. Imperialist movements such as Manifest Destiny promoted the conquest of both the land and people of Latin America, as well as ideas of white American superiority (Peña Ovalle). Colonization espoused the belief that Latinas were expendable and exploitable, and a group outside of the standards of whiteness (Peña Ovalle). Depictions of Latinas in the media often homogenize different nationalities, and portray them as racially

ambiguous (Peña Ovalle). Starting in the 1930's, depictions of Latina women in Hollywood have "hinged on an exotic look that could be read as 'ethnic' yet" accessible enough for white women to appropriate (Peña Ovalle). This formulaic Hollywood Latina Look incorporates "clear skin, a fair or caramel complexion, delicately dramatic facial features, and a trim but curvy figure," along with long, straight, dark hair (Peña Ovalle). These features closely align with white beauty standards, and presents an image of Latina women that ignores the vast diversity of Latin America, especially Afro-Latinas (Peña Ovalle). Stereotypes of Latinas often revolve around sexualizing these 'exotic' features, implying inherent promiscuity by emphasizing their bodies and movements (Peña Ovalle). Latina characters serve as temptresses seducing the white protagonist through dance, or as helpless victims to be saved from the men of their culture (Peña Ovalle). When not overly sexualized, Latinas are portrayed as matronly domestic servants, or *domésticas* (Padilla). This stereotype arose in the 1970s, when Central American immigrants entered the domestic service industry after the percentage of Black women working as domestic servants declined (Padilla). Most often seen as a maid, nanny, or cleaning lady, the *doméstica* character acts as a subservient perpetual foreigner, ostracized from the rest of the household or society (Padilla). Her desirability rests on "her ability as a worker," not her sexuality (Padilla). Framed through a eurocentric lens, these stereotypes present an incomplete, homogenizing view of Latina women, robbing them of their agency and humanity (Padilla).

A love letter to Colombia, *Encanto* (2021) journeys into the magical home of the Madrigal family, where each family member has a special power except for 15 year-old Mirabel. As the Madrigals prepare for the gift ceremony, where the youngest member of the family, Antonio, will receive his powers, Mirabel notices odd changes to the family's magic and decides to investigate. Mirabel earns full points for questions 1-10, particularly subverting gendered stereotypes, along with her female relatives. *Encanto* displays Colombia's diverse population through outstanding female character design. Completely avoiding the Hollywood Latina Look, all the female characters shown have a wide range of builds, skin tones, and hair types. The Madrigal family in particular, provides crucial representation for Afro-Latinas, with Mirabel's cousin Dolores, and Latinas with Indigenous features, like Mirabel's sister Isabela. In addition, the Madrigal girls embrace their different hair types, disregarding the notion of Latinas all having long, lightly wavy, dark hair. Mirabel's design particularly diverts from typical beauty standards, as she not only wears glasses, but also wears her natural curls in a short hairstyle. None of these

diverse features take away from the characters' femininity, not even their different body types, as seen with Luisa's muscular build, subverting the masculinization of women of color.

Stereotypes of Black women in Western media find their origins in the long history of slavery, especially in the United States. These stereotypes originally intended to justify the exploitation and subjugation of Black women, and maintain the order of white supremacy. These stereotypes were most often perpetuated in minstrel shows, advertisements, and other visual media (Loft). One of the most common stereotypes for Black women, the Mammy, originated directly after the abolition of slavery, in order to romanticize the past (Loft). A matronly caricature, the Mammy fulfilled the role of a domestic servant in a White household and was intended as an example for Black people to continue their submissiveness to white people (Loft). Caricatures of the stereotype often emphasized the hips and chest, making use of the "belief that Black women were better suited to nurse children" (Loft). This stereotype continued into the 20th century, with rebranding as the domestic servant and the Black best friend (Loft). The stereotype of the Mammy led to the trope of the Sapphire, named after "character Sapphire Stevens from the 1950's radio show Amos 'n' Andy" (Loft). Also described as the "Angry Black Woman" or "Sassy Mammy," this caricature originated as a housewife berating her husband, with irrational, combative, emotional responses to any situation (Loft). Used as comic relief, the Angry Black Woman serves to discredit Black motherhood and masculinizes Black women. The Jezebel, another often-masculinized stereotype, depicts Black women "as being inherently sexual" and framed them as being outside the white, pure standards of womanhood (Loft). Exaggerating the hips and bust, these caricatures had their roots in the sexual exploitation of Black women's reproductive ability "after the passage of 'The Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves'" in 1807 (Loft). All these stereotypes are still seen and used in the media today to discredit prominent Black women in society, such as politicians and celebrities (Loft).

Centering around the comical adventures of 14 year-old Penny Proud and her family, *The Proud Family* (2001-2005) follows Penny's friendships, relationships, and middle-school drama as she learns who she wants to be. Passionate, caring, and outspoken, Penny passes most of the questions on the list. Because of the show's format, the consistency of her character sometimes varies, and lessons that she learned in previous episodes sometimes need to be taught again. However, her cheerful, grounded personality still remains throughout the series. Although she is portrayed as being feminine, with interests in shopping and dating, these do not make up her

entire personality. A straight-A student, Penny plays on the football team, writes for the school newspaper, and tries her hand at singing, among other things. Her varied hobbies subvert the typical portrayals of Black women and teenage girls, even if she does have some stereotypical interests. Though Penny can display some stereotypical traits in out-of-character moments, she always reverts to her usual personality at the episode's end, learning an important life lesson along the way. Her mother often acts as a voice of reason and serves as a guiding figure for Penny throughout the series. As the main breadwinner of the Proud Family, Trudy Proud demonstrates a positive portrayal of modern Black motherhood. Penny learns to respect the work her mother does as a veterinarian, and often listens to her advice, albeit after some complaining. Present and caring while still rational and independent, Trudy Proud subverts the stereotypical portrayals of Black motherhood. She occasionally exhibits some traits in line with the Sassy Mammy trope, though these moments are extremely rare. Although Penny escapes stereotypical characterization and design, many of her friends do not, namely her best friend Dijonay. Boy-crazy, sassy, and inconsiderate, Dijonay matches the caricature of the Angry Black Woman, even acting as an indifferent mother figure when taking care of her multiple younger siblings. The show also incorporates underlying messages of colorism, as the more rational characters (Penny and Trudy) have lighter skin, whereas the inconsistent Dijonay and antagonistic Gross Sisters (a trio of middle school bullies) all have darker skin tones, or are said to be 'ashy.' Although both Dijonay and the Gross Sisters display positive traits throughout the series, their character design recalls negative stereotypes of people with darker skin. Though revolutionary for starring a Black woman as the main protagonist, *The Proud Family* falls short in the stereotypical depictions of the supporting characters, and colorist subtext.

Portrayals of Asian women have been affected by anti-Asian legislation, as well as Orientalism and xenophobia. Historically, Asian people in the United States have been met with xenophobia and suspicion, especially during the large waves of immigration in the mid-to-late 1800's. This racism fueled xenophobic legislation, such as the restriction of Chinese women immigrating to the United States in 1875, due to them being seen "as prostitutes and bearers of disease" (Rao). In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was signed, barring Chinese immigrants from the United States (Rajgopal). Almost immediately after that was signed, Asians were negatively stereotyped in American media. Asian cultures were portrayed "as backward, barbaric, and patriarchal" and completely contrary to the West (Rajgopal). In addition, distinct,

diverse Asian cultures are presented as monolithic. In the early days of Hollywood, Asian people were villainized, with the caricature Fu Manchu being the most popular symbol of this hate (Rajgopal). For Asian women, their stereotypes most commonly involve some type of sexualization, whether they are submissive and compliant, or evil and threatening (Rao). The stereotype of the Lotus Blossom, or “Madame Butterfly,” serves as a submissive and sexualized love interest, mostly to white men, who must be “rescued” from her culture (Rajgopal). Revolving her whole life around the male protagonist, she is always eager to serve, and often commits suicide or becomes despondent if parted from her lover (Rajgopal). In short, she has no agency whatsoever, and must turn against her entire culture if willing to be “saved” (Rajgopal). On the other hand, the stereotype of Dragon Lady is devious, evil, and dangerous because of her beauty (Rajgopal). Her characterization relies on the belief that Eastern cultures are dangerous and destructive to the West, and has its roots in Orientalism (Rajgopal). Cold and calculating, she either serves as a henchwoman, or an obstacle which the white protagonist must sleep with and/or overcome (Rajgopal). While not always a sexual object in contemporary media, the Dragon Lady “remains remote, exotic, enigmatic, and unfathomable” (Rajgopal). These stereotypes all contribute to the ongoing exoticizing and dehumanization of Asian women.

Turning Red (2022) follows Meilin “Mei” Lee, a 13 year-old Chinese-Canadian girl who must balance the struggles of growing up with the revelation that she can turn into a giant red panda. A confident high-achiever, Mei wants to be the perfect daughter for her mother, Ming, but once she gains her powers of transformation, Mei realizes that she needs to stay true to herself, even if that does not match her mother’s expectations. She learns to understand and adapt to unexpected changes, both physical (the red panda) and those in her relationships with her friends and family. A well-developed character, Mei Lee passes the first 10 questions of the test with flying colors, particularly subverting stereotypes associated with teenage girls, in regards to question 9. Like *Encanto*, *Turning Red* incorporates diverse female character design, presenting a wide range of skin tones, hair types, and body types. Much like real 13-year-olds, Mei and her friends and classmates have a wide range of styles and interests, particularly displayed through clothing. Though they are teenagers, their designs are not overly sexualized. Although *Turning Red* does feature a narrative of POC transformation, it subverts this trope by allowing Mei to gain control of her newfound power. She manages to turn back into a human soon after her first transformation, and remains human for the majority of the movie. As the first Pixar film directed

by a woman of color, *Turning Red*'s usage of transformations serves as empowerment and enhancement of Mei's cultural identity. Although she is told to get rid of the red panda due to its 'inconvenience,' Mei proudly chooses to keep her powers at the climax of the movie, embracing her full identity. Mei bridges both her Chinese and Canadian identities, saving her mother with the love of both her boy-band-loving friends and more traditional family. Her acceptance of her Chinese-Canadian identity rejects the notion of the perpetual foreigner myth, which characterizes POC as being outside of mainstream society (Rao).

For centuries, portrayals of women of color have been marred by villainization, sexualization, and myths of subservience. In animation, if included at all, they become one-dimensional caricatures or physically dehumanized, whether as racially coded non-human characters or through a transformation. Most importantly, these female characters of color are almost never the protagonist. They are not given the right to tell their own stories, or display their true dignity and humanity to the world. This has created disastrous real-world consequences, such as the high rates of sexual assault for women of color and decreased self-esteem. However, strong female characters of color are found as protagonists in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008), *Encanto* (2021), *The Proud Family* (2001-2005), and *Turning Red* (2022). Using the criteria of JJ Harwood's Strong Female Character Test, as well as my own analysis questions, I determined that these characters exemplified accurate, respectful portrayals of WOC. They subvert tropes of sexualized character design, submissiveness, and racial caricatures, presenting multifaceted stories rarely told by WOC. Their agency creates change both within their body of work and outside of it, forming a positive example for young viewers and improving self-esteem. Hopefully, these diverse animated works will usher in a new generation of animation with strong female characters of color telling their stories.

Appendix

1. Does the character shape her own destiny? Does she actively try to change her situation and if not, why not?
2. Does she have her own goals, beliefs and hobbies? Did she come up with them on her own?
3. Is her character consistent? Do her personality or skills change as the plot demands?
4. Can you describe her in one short sentence without mentioning her love life, her physical appearance, or the words 'strong female character'?
5. Does she make decisions that aren't influenced by her love life?
6. Does she develop over the course of the story?
7. Does she have a weakness?
8. Does she influence the plot without getting captured or killed?
9. How does she relate to stereotypes about gender?
10. How does she relate to other female characters?
11. How does she relate to stereotypical character design?
12. How does she relate to stereotypes about her race or ethnicity?

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